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NMOTC-REMC-021



Operator Insights from Enemy Captivity

By

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Operator Insights from Enemy Captivity

The capturing of American servicemembers by enemy forces has been a distressing occurrence of every U.S. conflict from the Revolutionary War to the Invasion of Iraq. While the treatment of American prisoners of war (POWs) has dramatically differed across these conflicts, understanding their experiences affords an opportunity to best prepare today's fighting force.

The following work intends to generate insights from the operator's perspective during their time in enemy captivity. To do that, 35 former POWs participated in one-time, semi-structured, interviews lasting an average of 53 minutes (SD = 21 min). These interviews were held in-person at the Mitchell Center for Prisoner of War Studies aboard Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, from November 2022 to July 2023. During interviews, participants were asked a set of predetermined questions focused on their captivity experience (see Appendix. A). A thematic analysis was conducted to find common themes expressed across participants.

All data were collected by the researcher through extensive hand-written notes taken during interviews and transferred to a secure electronic record immediately after the end of each interview. This method of data collection was selected over audio recording interviews due to the perceived sensitivity of the content discussed. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) recommend the use of hand-written notes over audio recording when discussing sensitive topics to avoid adversely impacting participant responses.

The following data are those collected, categorized, and distilled from these interviews. Section topic and order reflect the format in which questions were asked during interviews. Each topic domain is listed in bold, underneath each are component(s) that make up this domain, accompanied by an example quote. Additionally, a subset of topics 1) Leadership Behaviors and 2) Humor are discussed in further detail after initial theme analysis, as both topics were noted as being highly influential to the captivity experience for many participants.

Basic demographics are provided to give a sense of sample characteristics, however detailed information was omitted to ensure anonymity. The average time in captivity for this sample was 1,085 days (2.97 years). Branches represented include Air Force, Navy, Army, and Marine Corps.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis

Topic Domain	Example Quote
Understanding of Life as a Former POW	
Being a POW had a major effect on their lives, shaping and solidifying their perspectives and beliefs	<p>“Changed it [life] completely – I had a fixed way of thinking and when I interacted with my cellmates, and others who were smarter than me in the camps, I had to defeat my thoughts, and this helped shape new ways of thinking.”</p> <p>“I don’t know if the experience necessarily changes you, rather it amplified who you are at your core.”</p>
The importance of receiving emotional support and care upon returning from captivity was highlighted, as it had a significant impact on individuals' subsequent well-being.	<p>“Most guys just needed some tender, love, and care when they got home.”</p>
Sharing one's story was seen as a form of self-reflection and a way to cope with and better understand their experience.	<p>“I use it [my story] to provide others with a source of inspiration, but I am still telling my story to work through some survivor’s guilt.”</p>
Thoughts During Captivity	
Imagining life upon return and detailing with mental imagery what that life would look like.	<p>“I built my house nail by nail in my head, calculated all the cost of material too. When I got home, I built that house and got the cost pretty close too.</p>
Deep belief in country and fellow service members.	<p>“I dwelled on the fact that there were people like me trying to get me out.”</p>
Expectation management	<p>“The real world is very unforgiving and know that it is unfair – do not expect things to be fair.”</p>

Found humor offered a defense against boredom, annoyance, and the enemy's attempts to understand their culture.

"Laughter is more powerful and more important than feeling like shit."

"If I could make people laugh the evil spirits would just fly away."

"I remember it was Christmas time and I was sitting next to a guard in the quiz room [interrogation room] as he smashed open peanut M&M with a hammer. When I asked, 'what are you doing?' the guard said, I know the CIA puts microphones in peanuts. It was at that time I thought I would have a little fun with him, so I grabbed two of them [peanut M&Ms] and put one to my mouth and the other to my ear and pretended to call in an airstrike. The guard's eyes got big, and he jumped across the table and stared choking me and I couldn't stop laughing."

"Humor breaks the tension. We Americans use humor to get through challenging situations to structure a new narrative and establish control. Humor seems to be a particularly American trait, perhaps it is because it is a display of freedom in thought and speech apparent almost nowhere else in such abundance."

"I initiated the Laugh a Day (LAD) program. Jokes were something we could all offer, they were a medicine you could not put a price on."

Achieving small victories over your captor

"We learned how to torment our captors. We would each take turns asking them to take us to use the bathroom, making the same guard get up over and over again, until he finally knocked over our water and said, 'No more bathroom!' We knew we got under his skin then."

Puts day-to-day stressful experiences in perspective – there is very little to get upset about.

"Nothing in the damn world is critical."

Changes Over Time

The understanding and interpretation of the time spent as a POW varied to a degree among individuals. Most stated that their perspective of what happened did not change over time, but rather that they slowly

"Life goes on. More of my life has happened since I returned than the time I spent as a POW."

"The story, the facts haven't changed, but the presentation has been toned down."

outgrew the experience, suggesting a gradual adaptation or integration of the past events into their lives.

Retrospectively, disassociation was mentioned as a coping mechanism when sharing one's story, helping to regulate emotions and prevent adverse reactions.

Some mentioned falling into different categories, such as celebrity status, neutral, or withdrawn, which affected their perception of the experience.

"It is part of history now. In some ways it isn't my story at all, but a story that I know about something that happened a long time ago."

"The reception when we got home - I had never seen anything like it. We went to the White House for dinner. I met the President."

"Some guys came back and made being a POW their career, but I didn't want to do that, I wanted to get back to living my life."

"I keep to myself; I don't have any friends and I don't do anything for fun. I am fine with that."

Impact of Hearing about Fellow POWs' Experiences

Some felt emotionally affected and empathized deeply, while others used it as a source of inspiration, believing that if others could make it through, so could they (vicarious encouragement).

"If all the others can make it (Francis Gary Powers, John Borling) so can I."

"If Alvarez was here for 3 years already, I can do this."

Value of the Experience

The experience of being a POW was often seen as character-building and a test of resilience.

Keep living, keep pushing. Life is going to throw things at you, and you must get through. You do not have a choice – keep going."

The POWs saw the experience as a transformative moment that helped them distill the most important things in life and commit to meaningful actions.

"It provided a centering moment to distill the most important things in life. It illuminated the things I am committed to doing and doing differently."

"It was invaluable and taught me so much about myself – all my flaws. But it gave me a guide for happiness. All you must do is keep in balance your mind/body/spirit."

Readjustment Practices

Having ample time off (6-12 months) was cited as a helpful period to reestablish family relationships after captivity.

“Being around family was helpful. They gave me 9 months of leave when I returned, but I really wanted to get back to work.”

“We had six months to recuperate and that was helpful.”

Continuation of meaningful military service or educational and other professional pursuits were noted as valuable to acclimating back to life.

“Getting back to flying and being at top gun. Because if I could not compete, I was going to get out.”

“I had the chance to go back to school and being in an academic environment was helpful to giving me structure and intellectual stimulation.”

Ensuring access to professional support for substance abuse, mental health, and physical health

“For the first six months I would wake up in a sweat from bad dreams about the experience, and then that went away.”

“I also felt for a period highs and lows, depression and elation, and that ‘squiggle’ because less and less over time.”

“I had issues when I returned. I would pass out when my anxiety spiked. One doctor told me I had an overactive vagal function. I went to VA mental health services and after 2-3 years of talk therapy, I was able to be in crowds and understand how-to live-in peace.”

Leadership Behaviors

Effective leaders were stated to be those who set realistic examples of defiance and understood the breaking points of individuals while encouraging their best efforts.

“They cared about us; they showed interest in people that were not themselves. They monitored those who needed support, understanding that everyone has different levels of health and optimism.”

Providing suggestions rather than giving orders was mentioned as an effective approach to maintain group cohesion.

“Give people simple info/instruction when enduring change and new experiences.”

Maintaining structure, discipline, and open communication were considered important leadership behaviors in the POW context.

“Maintaining a high degree of structure and discipline was helpful. All men had duties, which kept our minds occupied.”

“They never stopped passing communication.”
“We established the ‘b.a.c.k.u.s.’ acronym – Bow, but not in public, don’t go on Air waves i.e.,

radio, tv, don't commit any Crimes, don't Kiss them good by when you leave, Unit before Self.

Interpersonal Dynamics and Support

The POWs highlighted the importance of camaraderie, friendship, and staying connected to others while in captivity.

"We were all we had. We became everything to each other. Brothers, who knew everything about you and you them."

Family support and reunions played a significant role in readjustment upon returning home.

"It was helpful to come home to family and especially a wife, many guys didn't come back to a wife. Talking about it [captivity] with friends and family really helped."

They found solace in the shared experiences of fellow POWs, admiring the older generation, and drawing strength from their stories.

"I would often defer to the older guys. I had a major admiration for them. It was like reading about history and then seeing it in real life."

Subset topics of 1) Leadership Behaviors, and 2) Humor are highlighted in further detail, to better understand the utility of each in a captivity scenario.

Table 2

Leadership Behaviors

Theme Identified	Value Interpretation
<i>Clarity of Role and Structure</i>	Effective leaders provided clear structure and expectations, allowing followers to understand their roles within the group. This clarity helped boost morale and provided a sense of direction.
<i>Communication and Unity</i>	They mentioned the value of staying connected, sharing knowledge, and maintaining a unified story with their fellow captives. The ability to communicate effectively and work together as a team played a significant role in their survival and resilience.
<i>Setting Behavioral Norms</i>	Leaders who established clear behavioral norms were highly regarded. The POWs appreciated having specific guidelines on how to operate and behave in their challenging circumstances. This allowed them to know exactly what was expected of them and helped them navigate through difficult situations.

Table 3

Humor

Theme Identified	Value Interpretation
<i>Morale Booster</i>	Humor was mentioned as a vital to morale during captivity. Finding moments of levity and being able to laugh helped interviewees cope with the difficulties of their situation.
<i>Temporary Escape</i>	Humor provided a temporary escape from the challenges of captivity. By focusing on funny moments and suppressing the negative ones, interviewees were able to find some relief and respite from their circumstances.
<i>Psychological Coping Mechanism</i>	Humor acted as a psychological coping mechanism. It helped interviewees exercise a degree of control over their situation and stay mentally engaged. By finding humor in situations, interviewees were able to reframe and reinterpret their experiences.
<i>Bonding and Camaraderie</i>	Sharing humor with fellow captives created a sense of camaraderie and strengthened bonds between them. Laughing together helped foster a sense of unity and provided a support network within the captive environment.

Note: Individual experiences and perspectives varied, but these themes emerged as common threads throughout the interviews. Based on the data provided, humor was seen as a valuable aspect by interviewees to cope with the stress of captivity.

Conclusion

Through a semi-structured interview approach, this work highlighted perceptions and experiences of former American POWs from their time in enemy captivity as well as their return and reintegration. The domains covered during these interviews represent those of both scientific and operational relevance as to how one endures and recovers from captivity. The insights generated here add a layer of contextual richness to the study of factors that impact individual and group dynamics during wartime captivity, and practices that support readjustment upon release and return.

References

- Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M., & Seeley, J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: a comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research: QR*, 20(5), 565–581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806>

Appendix A. Interview Questions

Speak out: I have a set of questions I would like to ask you, some about your time as a POW and some more general about your life. These questions are designed to shape future research efforts. Everything you discuss in here will remain confidential. Does that sound okay? Do I have your permission to take notes?

Name:

Service:

1. How did your experience as a POW shape your life?
2. What was helpful to think about while in captivity?
3. Has the way you think about your POW experience changed overtime? How so?
4. Does hearing about the experience of fellow POWs impact your perspective? How so?
5. What was the value of that experience?
6. Were there any practices you engaged in when you returned home that were particularly helpful in readjusting?
7. What leadership behaviors did you find to be important in your situation as a prisoner? Why?
8. What was the value of humor during your experience?

Additional Notes: