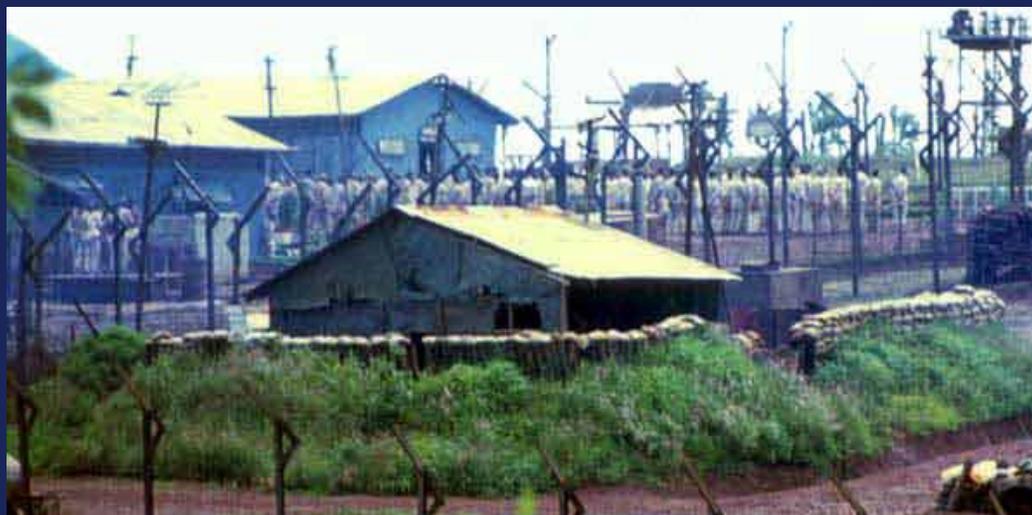


Biên Hòa AB
3rd SPS

Stool Pigeon I

POW Interrogation
(Near Biên Hòa)

by Paul Kaser
1969-1970
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While with the 3rd SPS, Biên Hòa, 1969-1970 I helped transport POW's to the big (but seldom seen by our guys) POW camp outside of Biên Hòa, where I observed interrogation (not torture) sessions. -- Paul Kaser

When I shoved the first of three prisoners into the jeep for transportation to the big POW camp near Biên Hòa, I felt I could smell his fear and hatred. (Okay, maybe it was just the "nuc mam" fish sauce on his breath.) Elbows bound behind his back and in dusty purple POW pajamas, he gave me that black "I'd-kill-you-if-I-could-get-lose" stare.

To get off base and see a little of the country, I had volunteered to help our 3rd SPS Intel liaison captain from CID transport the three prisoners, captured in the Long Binh area to the big camp (pictured below). The captain had also agreed to let me listen in, unobserved, on a prisoner interrogation session. The year was 1969.

This particular memory from my first tour at Biên Hòa came back vividly to me recently when, with my nineteen year old son, I saw Rules of Engagement, in which a marine officer shoots a POW in order to save his buddy. Naturally my son had some questions about the old controversies over U.S. treatment of their Vietnam POW's.

Experiences with captured enemy varied widely in-country. Interrogations at the CID center and the prison were conducted more carefully than those under fire and often resulted in more accurate and detailed information on unit strength, recruiting, and movements of the enemy, especially of the Đồng Nai regiment that posed a continuing threat in the Biên Hòa-Long Binh area. The "interviews" I observed were conducted quietly and efficiently in cubicles in a trailer.

Some of the prisoners at the big camp had been captured and others had surrendered with the hope of getting to safety. Thousands were surrendering after the massive tactical failure of Tet 1968. Many had been NVA.

The luckier ones, former VC mostly, had "come over" through the Chieu Hoi (literally "Open Arms") amnesty program and many were housed with family members at the III Corps settlement where they were retrained and protected--to some degree--not far from Biên Hòa. There I saw them learning trades such as auto mechanics. At least in the daytime the Chieu Hoi site was a safe haven, but at night it became a favorite target for vengeful VC rockets and mortars. I remember once giving some wide-eyed "third" lieutenants from the Air Force Academy a tour of the site and wondering if these young Americans could get any sense of what the locals had suffered. In any case we were not eager to have these Academy visitors in harm's way. If one of the cadets had been killed or wounded in-country, it would have been a major political scandal back home and powerful ammunition for the anti-war protesters.

Of course, visitors from stateside were kept strictly out of sight of the regular POW camp. Frankly, some of the prisoners seemed quite happy to be there, where they tended large garden plots within the walls. They begged to be

allowed to stay. Many were missing limbs and I remember seeing one old soldier who had contrived to make a false leg out of shell casing strips. I wanted to take a photo of this ingenious fellow but photography in the camp was absolutely forbidden.

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