

Humor and Resilience: Lessons from the Vietnam POWs

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

When the Vietnam Conflict drew to a close in 1973, 566 military prisoners of war were returned from captivity in North Vietnam. Over 30 years later the medical and psychological tests of approximately 300 of these repatriated prisoners show few medical, social, and psychological problems. How can this be when other groups in history who have experienced captivity have often shown extreme aftereffects? The answers are varied and complex, but one thing seems clear. The Vietnam prisoners of war had a system that worked, a system for human connection based on control and grounded in the effective use of humor.

Psychologists tell us that human beings want power and authority over their futures. We want to feel that we have a say in how things will go for us. When we perceive that our actions will make an outcome likely, we feel optimistic and secure. When we don't, we feel insecure. We feel like victims. Sometimes people stay in a victim's frame of mind after a loss or disappointment. They doubt their capacity to make their lives happen according to their own aspirations, so they wait to be rescued or blessed by good fortune. They start to feel undermined and overwhelmed; and they can become totally immobilized.

But the POWs weren't victims. They were certainly *victimized* by their captors, but they never saw themselves as victims, no matter what was done to them. They weren't victims because they took *control* of the few things they could control. They were told when and what and if they could eat; they were told if and when they could shower, sleep, and use the toilet. They had no say about parts of their lives that people normally take for granted. But they did have control over one thing, and that was their humor perspective.

Their need for control served as a framework for the POWs who created and maintained a system of strong interpersonal relationships and group affiliation that helped them survive over seven years in captivity and thrive during the years since repatriation. Humor was one of the elements of that system. The POWs taught each other how to use humor as a weapon for fighting back and as a tool for building cohesion.

The POWs, on the other hand, did form groups and relied on their *system* to help them overcome some of the adversity of the situation. These prisoners, like the Nazi prisoners, were treated like children. Satisfaction of their basic physiological needs was also determined by their guards; however, one significant difference is apparent. The Vietnam prisoners had a *system* for resisting. They were forced to submit and comply with many of the guards' demands, but because of their system of human connection, their group, they were able to rebel when prisoners in other captivity situations had not been able to.

The Vietnamese captors, like the Nazi captors, tried to break the power of the group, but the Vietnamese were not so formidable. The Nazis were successful in controlling the prisoners

because the prisoners had no system for resisting the coercion. When the North Vietnamese tried to impose a rule similar to the Nazi's rule of saying "thou" to one another, they were met with unexpected resistance. For example, the VPOWs refused to give into the captives' demands that they refrain from addressing each other by rank.

The VPOWs also created humor among themselves, and in so doing, exercised control in another sense. Humor has its basis in the individual, but it manifests itself in interpersonal relationships. When responding to what helped them make it through, the research respondents described humor from both an intrapersonal and interpersonal perspective. That is, they reported a sense of humor within themselves and the laughter they shared with each other. One participant's observation that, "The larger the group, the more lighthearted things were. The smaller the group, the more intense things were" reflected the comments of many.

As one man stated, "Believe it or not, even under the almost worst of conditions over there, under the right circumstances, we could laugh." They would say, "Well, boy, we're going to look back on this and laugh, but boy, it sure does hurt now." Another participant added, "The first five months I didn't have a sense of humor. I was having great difficulty finding anything very funny about the situation, and then I discovered by living with other people and the way we interacted, that we eventually started being awfully funny."

He went on to clarify the kind of humor he often found valuable. He remembers, "I lived next to a guy in late '67 who had been beaten very severely." After several days of being beaten on a routine basis, the friend reported he had been threatened that he would have both arms broken if he did not answer the questions the next day. When asked what he intended to do, he replied, "I don't know. I suppose I'll tap with my cast tomorrow." The participant described this as an "almost morbid sense of humor." Another participant called this a type of "in-house humor. "Those who have not experienced it could not understand how two men could find a discussion about the honey bucket so funny. Taking off the lid and commenting that one had diarrhea and one was constipated when they had both eaten the same thing was truly funny, but the humor is lost on outsiders."

A third participant called this "had to be there humor." In explaining what he meant, he mentioned an incident that the VPOWs found humorous. He had passed a worm of substantial length, so he gave it to the guard, thinking the guard would take it to a doctor and request medical attention for the parasites he obviously had: "So I handed it to him through the bars in the door on a piece of bamboo stick, and the water girls were on the cell block at the time, and I thought, 'Hey, he's going to take it to the doctor,' you know, and 'I'll get some medicine here.' So he closes the door and the starts chasing the water girls with it, screaming and laughing, and the water cans tipped over." He further commented that he too remembers mocking the situation to find humor. He mentioned that one of the VPOWs with whom he was communicating tapped to him that when he gets out and "he fills out his critique sheet," he will tell them "The exercise is real and it lasted too damn long."

According to some VPOWs, the importance and the value of a sense of humor was first and foremost. "Humor allows you to get up every morning and think this isn't the end of the world, so one's sense of humor is pretty critical." One VPOW reported that even after being beaten the

men ended up telling jokes to each other in spite of the miserable conditions of the cell. Some others on the other side of the wall, who had also been beaten, tapped the question, “What’s so funny?” The response was, “If you don’t have a sense of humor, you shouldn’t have joined up.”

One repatriated VPOW remarked on the link between humor and control. The value of order and self-control is best appreciated in the light of the prisoner uncertainties and required compliance's. In other words, taking charge of *anything* allowed a perception of some degree of control (Naughton, 1975). Researchers Rahe and Geneder (1983) echoed Naughton’s observations. They found that the use of humor was a way of exercising some control as well as a means of coping. “Use of humor has an immense coping value. Getting the best of one’s guards, on occasion, not only provides humorous remembrances that can be savored later, but gives captives a moment of control in what otherwise is a totally uncontrolled situation” (p.580).

Human Connection at Work

To prevent a disjunction of the self and to find meaning in a situation void of meaning, the VPOWs relied on resources many of them did not know they had. Their internal sense of mirth and humor, their reliance on one another, and their group interactions all combined to create a system for survival. Their humor perspective provided the framework for discovering how to cope with their captivity, and their commitment to one another other gives an important perspective about what coping is made of. The role humor can play in bouncing back from adversity, especially when we are linked to others who will help us laugh, seems critical.

Groups operate as systems anytime people come together and communicate with one another over a period of time to achieve a goal, but few groups rely on the system as much as a group in crisis does. The VPOW system, with its related use of humor, acted as a type of anchor in humanity for the VPOWs. Because they were cemented in a strong social structure, they had a buffer against fragmentation of self or of the system. Humor within oneself and with others allows for taking control of a senseless situation and for the establishment of groups.

Conclusion

The VPOW accounts indicate these men formed a system that defined and encouraged humor among the group's members. These men relied on humor not in spite of the crisis but *because* of it. The VPOWs' system was a powerful civilizing force that discouraged any antisocial slip into a kind of jungle mentality. Control is central to individuals’ health, their personal benefits, and in the case of the Vietnam POWs, their actual survival.

REFERENCE LIST

- Bethelheim, B. (1953). Individual and mass behavior in extreme situations. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 34. 417-452.
- Naughton, R. (1975). Motivational factors of American prisoners of war held by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Naval War College Review, 27. 2-14.
- Rahe, R. & Geneder, E. (1983). Adaptation to and recovery from captivity stress. Military Medicine, 148. 577-585.
- Schutz, W. (1966). Interpersonal underworld. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavioral Books, Inc.
- Schutz, W. (1992). Beyond FIRO-B--Three new theory-derived measures--Element B: Behavior, element F: Feelings, element S: Self. Psychological Reports, 70. 915-937.