Vietcong Chain a Captive Mind

By Denis Warner
Special to The Washington Post

MELBOURNE — For nearly nine months, Australian businessman Keith Hyland, who runs a multimillion-dollar commercial enterprise in South Vietnam, lived in chains in a Vietcong prison camp under total surveillance and constant interrogation. Now, in a Melbourne sitting room, far from Vietnam, we were talking about his experience and the National Liberation Front's techniques of thought control.

Hyland spoke about the first Vietnamese senior officer whom he met after his capture in Cholon, Saigon's Chinese suburb, during the 1968 Tet offensive. "He was a man of about 38—35 to 38," he said, "a very hard-featured man, obviously a military man of long standing, tough, precise, and, I would think, very competent. He spoke with a very socialistic manner and terminology . . ."

"Communist, you mean," I said.

"Socialistic," he corrected me. "I do not know Communistic. I am told they are Socialists, not Communists. I asked them how I was to describe them. They said you will describe us as Socialists. This is what they told me and I have a right to say this."

A Vietcong interrogator would have been pleased. For the "right" Hyland spoke of was conferred by the Front. Earlier, he had talked of the Front's "clear and precise knowledge of how to destroy the mental strength of anyone."

"Did they destroy yours?" I asked.

"Yes, in part they did," he said. "You can't help yourself. Unless you constantly take careful stock of yourself and keep on saying to yourself, 'this part of me they have destroyed: this part of me I will keep alive.'"

Hyland was released on Nov. 26 after starving himself into a serious state of ill-health. Earlier, Prince Norodom Sihanouk had interceded on his behalf and the Front apparently decided to let him go rather than have him die on their hands from dysentery and low blood pressure. Aware that he would probably want to return to live in Saigon, however, they attempted to impose guidelines on what he might want to say publicly about this captivity. They succeeded—but only in part. Hyland does not pinpoint his prison camps and he keeps on talking about "Socialists," but his observations about the techniques and controls of the Front are striking.

Search for Sister

ON THE MORNING of Feb. 6, 1968, when Cholon was still ablaze, Hyland left his apartment in downtown Saigon to drive towards the fighting in the hope of hearing some news of his sister who had been missing since the beginning of the offensive. She had been living in an apartment in Cholon not far from the duck feather processing factory which, since 1953, has been the center of Hyland's commercial complex.

As he was to learn many months later, his sister had remained safe in her apartment after the Vietcong took control of her neighborhood.

Hyland was much less fortunate. Not far from his factory, which had been partly destroyed in the fighting, he ran into a Vietcong patrol. They ordered him to drive some distance to a canal where they bound his arms and led him to a house that was still standing intact in the middle of a burned-out squatter area.

Hyland found the people living in the house were clearly members of the Front, or in sympathy with them. They showed no fear, or hesitation. Although this was close to his factory in the middle of the industrial section of Cholon, where Hyland was known to many people, no attempt was made to hide him. "They must have felt that the whole of the people around were in sympathy, otherwise they would have tried to conceal me," he said.

"Was this a surprise to you?"

"No, I felt the Front had strength in the area, though I had never felt intimidated by it. I don't think the government had the strength to wipe it out, or to change the people's attitude toward it. People working in my factory used to say there was considerable Vietcong strength in the area.

"I never had any reason to fear that they wanted to have any reaction against us, or the factory, or the people who worked for us. That didn't seem to be their policy and this was confirmed later when I was a prisoner. At least three senior cadres told me it was not the policy of the Front to interfere with commercial activities in Vietnam."

Not long after he had been captured, the local Vietcong company commander came to see Hyland. He told Hyland that if he had been an American he would have stood a good chance of being killed, but since he was an Australian he would be released. Twice during the first evening, once just before dusk and later after dark, the Vietcong planned to release him. On both occasions, just after he had left the garden surrounding the house, helicopters appeared overhead and fired close by. Each time the Vietcong troops retreated to the house, taking Hyland with them.

Called a Spy

HIS LUCK HAD BEGUN to run out. Vietcong patrols had picked up an American contract painter named James Rollins.

"He was an unusual fellow and I think he may have said something to make them suspicious," Hyland said. "I was interrogated again and accused of being an American spy." Instead of offering to release Hyland, the decision now was to send him to prison camp with Rollins. The two were roped together, photographed, fed and left in the custody of two guards who got drunk.

See CAPTIVE, Page B5, Column 1

CAPTIVE, From Page B1

"This was a night of considerable anxiety," Hyland said. "The guards indicated to us that they were going to shoot us. They were having a game. I think they were local boys, country fellows. We never saw anything like this again, or had any experience of this nature again."

The following evening Hyland and Rollins were moved to another house, where they were handed over to five new guards armed with submachine guns. Later that night they set out on their month-long march to a prison camp "close to the Cambodian border."

They walked through paddy fields on the outskirts of Saigon. Soon Hyland and his captors were only a mile or so from Tansonnhut airport. He was surprised by the Vietcong's freedom of movement. Many groups were about—and all operating in open country. "They were all quite obviously local people who knew where they were and what they were doing. And they were all Vietcong," he said.

Cookies and Wine

AT A FARMHOUSE Hyland and Rollins were given cookies and offered rice wine. "Obviously these people had been working with the VC for a long time and they were happy to be told they had prisoners," he said. "The farmers, themselves, wanted to show us they were kind and generous and to show us goodwill."

The arrival of prisoners was clearly a big occasion and here and at two other farmhouses they were exhibited to the local population.

Later that night the captives came to the banks of a river, some 10 to 15 miles from Saigon. The guards were reduced from five to two—a heavily armed man and a frail looking youth who carried a rifle. They crossed the river in a sampan.

Next morning on the far side of the river, Hyland and Rollins were again photographed. The pictures subsequently appeared in a Chinese newspaper in Phnom Penh.

During the journey by sampan the following day, Hyland and Rollins probably moved from Giadinh province into Haunghia, which has always been regarded as under Vietcong control. Hyland saw no evidence of government authority. "There was total, total, total, Vietcong control here," he said.

At every settlement Hyland and Rollins were paraded for the villagers' inspection. "We had to sit with our arms tied while the villagers came to look at us. The people were curious but friendly. The officer in charge of us obviously had great control over the local people."

Thoughts of Escape

DURING THIS PERIOD Hyland saw the Front cadres at work among the people—and was impressed. Unlike military officers, who could be identified by the pistol carried at the waist, the cadres wore ordinary black homespun peasant clothing. Their only identification was a black satchel which they carried slung over a shoulder, or sometimes concealed under a shirt. Invariably, the cadres were well received by the villagers, he said.

He was no less struck by the poverty of the hamlets and villages. Everything in the huts that he saw was home-made. Nothing was manufactured. There was no sign of any sort of amenities. This was true quite close to Cholon, but the degree of poverty increased as he moved west. People had enough to eat, but that was all.

As the sampan reached the swamplands, Hyland thought more and more of escaping. He was increasingly disturbed that he had not met a cadre senior enough to arrange his release. His apprehensions increased when he and Rollins were moved one night into a straw hut with two other American prisoners, Richard Utecht and Norman Brookens, both U.S. AID employes.

For more than two weeks the four men lived in this hut. At night they were shackled together with buffalo irons. Hyland became preoccupied with the thought of escape. He succeeded one night in breaking the end off the buffalo iron but did not have a chance to get away. Other chances occurred later when the prisoners reached what Hyland believed to be Cambodian territory. The prisoners had been transferred to an oxcart and for a week traveled across the paddy fields, bound together and obliged to lie on their backs. Since they traveled at night and not by day, the men did not suffer from the sun, but the cart had no springs and the dust was suffocating.

One night what Hyland assumed to be Cambodian guards shone lights on one of the carts. He blames himself now for not having called out, but the Americans were afraid that the Cambodians would have been unfriendly and gave this as a reason for not attempting to escape.

Near this area, Hyland determined to go. He had managed to hide his razor blade. Hyland got out the blade and started cutting the cords. He ran some distance but was soon caught.

A Hole in the Ground

AFTER HIS RECAPTURE, he was kicked several times and tied to a tree. That night, when the oxcart journey resumed, he was lashed to the side. Thirty days after his capture Hyland reached the prison.

The jungle cell into which the four captives were crowded consisted of a large hole in the ground covered at ground level by three layers of logs. This, in turn, was covered by a pointed roof of plastic camouflaged with branches. Two of the top logs were movable and gave access to the cell underneath. This was less than six feet high, about 15 feet wide and 9 feet long. On one side was a platform made from the branches of a tree. This was divided by sections of plastic frame, one for each man.

For the first time their wallets and other personal possessions were taken from them. They were given, in exchange, two sacks, which served as mattresses, mosquito nets and pieces of cloth to serve as blankets.

Four chains completed the prisoners' equipment. These were about a yard-and-a-half long and weighed 8 to 10 pounds. The chains were fastened to the platform in front of each cubicle—and to each prisoner's right leg.

So began a period of interrogation and indoctrination. In Hyland's case, it was to last for more than eight months.

"The guards had instruction to report every single movement of any description that any of us made," he said. "If you looked at something, that was reported. If you asked permission to stand up, that was reported. One of the Americans did not like to have the hot water they gave us to drink at the end of every meal poured into a dirty bowl. They noted that, and when he did something wrong they would pour all his hot water into the bowl so that he couldn't wash it.

"I could give you a thousand examples of this type of thing. They knew that you knew that they were watching you. This was all part of the mental torture. The chain was part of it, too. The ankle soon became accustomed to the chain because the skin and nerve went numb. After about two months I became accustomed to it, so they changed the chain and gave me a heavier one. I was never allowed to take it off. It had a lock for both the right leg and the left leg. The company commander always kept possession of the key to the left leg. When you were interrogated you were chained to the leg of the chair in the interrogation hut. I was chained for the whole time. There was never a moment in the camp when I was not chained."

A Proud Australian

I ASKED HYLAND whether he complained about this.

"Of course not," he said. "The others did, but I didn't. I realized quickly what they were trying to do to me. At the end the senior cadre told me I had been very clever—I had obeyed all the camp rules and understood what was being done. Whenever they asked me about my treatment I used to say, 'I don't mind, I don't mind.'

"I took a completely negative attitude towards everything, so that they couldn't understand what my feelings were. For the first two weeks I thought I would play the part of the proud Australian and show these people how tough Australians were. The Americans thought they would do the same thing. They were going to be strong, too. I did my exercises strongly. I ate my food and I walked strongly and proudly until I realized that I was just being stupid. I was trying to change the whole dogma and principle of the camp.

"After that I was cooperative but negative. I didn't complain at any time. They were bewildered and didn't know how to handle me. This certainly contributed to my release. If I had been difficult it would have been easier to find reasons to hold me.

"Once, for instance, I was very sick. I had dysentery. I also had a very serious migraine-type headache and could hardly lift my head. I was taken out of the cell and one of the very aggressive cadres told me to sweep around the camp with branches, which we were often required to do. These branches had been worn down to just a few sticks and were almost useless. I indicated that I was sick in the head and stomach. The cadre indicated that he didn't care. So I went ahead and swept the camp."

Indoctrination, interrogation and prisoner behavior were all closely linked. On their first day in camp the prisoners were taken from their cell, chained to trees and lectured by the camp commandant. He told them that the National Liberation Front had a humane policy towards prisoners of war and that if they understood and practiced the camp regulations they would benefit.

Interrogation sessions, which began at 7:30 a.m. and lasted until 11 a.m. and continued in the afternoons, began immediately. The interrogation center formed part of the main camp. Later, when Hyland and his guards were on the move, it was reassembled at each stop. It consisted of a low bench for the prisoner and high stools for the interrogators under a canopy of camouflaged plastic. At each session Hyland was chained to the leg of his chair.

All About Duck Feathers

AT THE BEGINNING of every session he was told: "Confess that you are an American spy and what you have done, and we will forgive you."

For the first two weeks, thinking, as he put it, that he would "make himself out a good fellow and show that he was a friend of Vietnam," he told his interrogators everything about the operations of his company, the development of the duck feather industry and the export of manioc, kenaf, soya beans and other agricultural products.

"We are the only firm that has exported any of these crops on world standards to world markets," he said. "I walked right in with my big mouth open. I told them that the only way to provide the peasants with money is to export more of these crops and that I was going to do it."

What Hyland had to say, however, only convinced his interrogators that he was working for the U.S. "They told me constantly that I was an American agent, constantly," he said. "They insisted that I must have been working for the Americans because I went there in 1953. No one else would have gone at that time unless directed by the Americans, who were preparing to take over as neo-colonialists from the French."

Each day during the interrogation Hyland's guards sat with their rifles at the ready, bayonets fixed, beside him. Each day the interrogators concentrated their efforts on the confession they wanted him to make.

Conversation with his fellow prisoners was forbidden, and, because there were penalties attached to it, they gave up attempting to communicate with each other. After interrogation the prisoners were returned to the underground cell. They were told not to move. Permission to make use of the sauce jar which served as a lavatory bowl at the end of the cell had to be obtained from the guards. Twice small snakes fell into the cell near Hyland. A guard killed one and Hyland another. Scorpions were even more frequent visitors.

After ten days Rollins and Brookens were moved from the cell into a cage. For a month he shared the cell with Utecht. They were then transferred to a cage. After 15 days Utecht was taken away—Hyland believed to be released—and his solitary confinement was complete.

No Water, No Toothbrush

HIS NEW PLACE of confinement was a cage made of wood, measuring 12 feet by 10 feet by 9 feet. In the center was a foxhole which served as an air raid shelter. The chains remained, of course, and, worse, any movement was apparent to the guards.

In July Hyland was blindfolded and moved from the camp. He was in high hopes that he was about to be released. Instead, when he returned, he found that the captors apparently had had advance warning of a B52 strike, since there were now gaping craters on either side of his cage.

With little water available for washing, with no toothbrush, and in constant mental torment, Hyland lay in his cage hoping to retain his sanity by concentrating his mind on work problems in Saigon.

Food, he soon learned, was used for punishment and for reward. If the guards saw the prisoners speak, the food would be reduced.

Letters from Hyland's American wife, Lisa, who was expecting her first baby at the time of his capture, also formed part of the mental torture. Mrs. Hyland's letter to Prince Norodom Sihanouk was produced for his inspection, but only so that he could identify the signature. The rest of the letter he was not allowed to read because, his interrogator said, it contained considerable information that would help in understanding him.

"I am not condemning the guards," Hyland said, "but we must realize we are dealing with people who don't think as we do. This is one of their characteristics. Another is their understanding, and clear understanding, of how the smallest thing is of importance to a man when it is denied to him.

"You can't understand what it means not to be able to clean your teeth in the morning. At first you feel you become accustomed to it, but you never are. Initially, I got a tooth brush but they took it away from me. They gave it to me in the first camp and then took it away. But everyone else had one. They used to clean their teeth in front of me, but I couldn't get a brush myself." It was not just the inability to clean his teeth that worried Hyland. For a month he was not allowed to wash either himself or his clothes. By all means his captors tried to humiliate him and to deprive him of individuality, with always the exhortation to confess, and always the rewards in food for acquiescence.

Chained in a Hammock

TOWARDS THE END of July, as repeated B52 raids occurred in the vicinity, Hyland's captors broke camp and took to the jungle. Instead of the cage he now slept in chains in a hammock. Although the unit was constantly on the move, interrogations did not cease.

In September Hyland had his first visit from a senior official from a much higher headquarters. Before the visitor arrived the camp was spruced up.

"I don't know who he was, but he was a very competent young man, very confident in what he had to say and very clear. He wore a blue-gray suit much better tailored than the others. The senior cadres in the unit wore something like a bush jacket."

Hyland got on well with him, especially when the official produced pictures of Lisa and their infant daughter. He said there was a letter, also, and that Hyland would get it one day. All of this had the usual intention—to squeeze from the prisoner the last drop of information.

"Isn't there some piece of information you have not given us which you might tell me and which might hasten your release?" the official asked.

Part of the interrogation sessions were devoted to questioning, part to indoctrination. Sometimes in the afternoons Hyland was told the news from Hanoi and even given a radio to listen to Hanoi's news broadcasts.

Food for Thought Control

HYLAND DOES NOT believe that the Australian communist journalist Wilfred Burchett played any part in his release. "I was often questioned about Burchett, whether I knew him and what I thought of him," Hyland said. "I replied that I didn't know him but only of him."

From Aug. 10 until his release in Vietnam, Hyland went on a near-starvation diet, thereby cutting himself off from the inflence of food as a means of thought control.

He ate only eight spoonfuls of rice for breakfast, eight for lunch and six for dinner, although much more was offered.

"You might have died," I said.

"I know that, but I might as well have been dead the way I was. I thought I had something to tell and I wanted to get out and tell it. I wanted to tell the Americans to develop the agricultural exports of South Vietnam because this is the only way to get the peasants."

When he went on his diet, Hyland was already suffering from low blood pressure, dysentery and migraine headaches. He had become deaf and his eyesight was weak. His excuse for not eating was that he had a nervous stomach, an explanation that the medical officer attached to the unit accepted.

Sometimes when he was feeling very sick he did not eat for two or three days. The treatment for this was a vitamin injection. "If you've ever had a vitamin injection you must know that it makes you very hungry, and so it was hell for me to try not to eat," Hyland said. "Sometimes I used to chew a piece of wood to curb the hunger pains."

By this time Hyland was also suffering from a protein deficiency. If he had remained in prison, and on his self-imposed diet much longer, he would have become seriously ill, a fact that must have been apparent to the Front doctor.

Call Us 'Socialist'

ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS he was told he would be released. Then the senior cadre whom Hyland had first seen in September arrived. He asked Hyland if he had any questions he wanted answered before he was released. Since he planned to resume his activities in Saigon—and therefore run the risk of recapture—there were plenty.

That the Front was to be called "Socialist," not "Communist," was one answer. The others covered the range of what might be expected of him.

"Am I to pay money to anyone?" "No."

"Will the Front come to me for contributions?" "No."

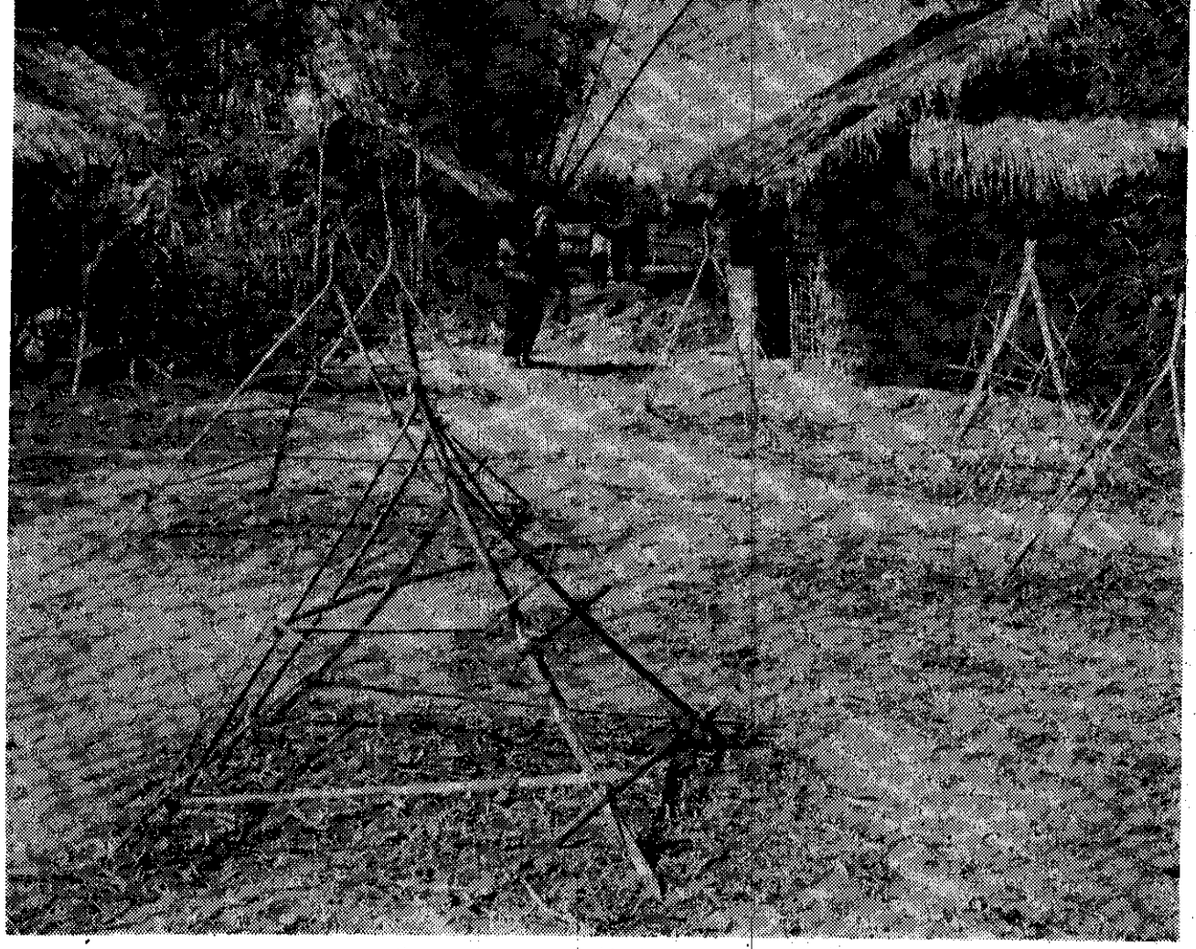
"If anyone asks me for money can I regard it as blackmail?" "Yes."

"What is my position to be in the future? I have been in Vietnam a long time. I don't want to lose this position with the Saigon government, or with your government." "When we come to power we will guarantee you every assistance to carry on your work."

Hyland was asked to say that the Americans and Australians had committed atrocities in Vietnam. He refused, but he agreed that they were not fighting the war correctly.

The chains were struck off. He was taken to the Cambodian border, passed over to Cambodian authorities who, in turn, gave him back to the National Liberation Front office in Phnom Penh for release last Nov. 26.

Hyland's plans are to restore his health and then go back to South Vietnam to push the diversification and export of agricultural crops that, he is now more certain than ever, hold the key to the country's economic and political future.



United Press International

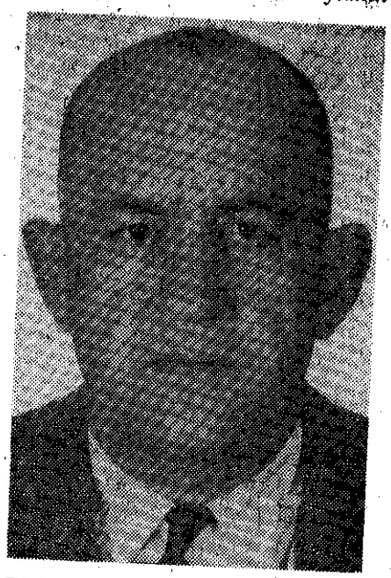
This photo released by an official Communist source shows a Vietcong fighting village, part of whose defenses include camouflaged pits lined with sharp stakes—traps for unwary invaders. Here the pits are topped with bamboo markers, but if Allied troops attacked, the markers would vanish.

Associated Press

An emaciated Keith Hyland with his wife after his release.

AID Photos

Norman J. Brookens, an employe of U.S. AID, was captured by Vietcong in Saigon and put in a jail cell with Keith Hyland.



Richard W. Utecht, an AID colleague, shared Brookens' fate. Both men are still prisoners of the Vietcong.

United Press International

Armed Vietcong guerrillas cross a river in this photo released by an official Communist source.

Associated Press

These Vietnamese prisoners of the Vietcong told the U.S. paratroops who rescued them that they had been beaten and starved.