

War Crimes in Vietnam

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NEW YORK (LNS) — An ex-GI has charged that electrical torture of prisoners and civilians is official U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Peter Martinsen, 25, interrogated prisoners-of-war for the 541st Military Intelligence Detachment. He was trained for his job at Fort Holabird, Md., and was stationed in Vietnam from Sept. 1966 to June 1967.

At a New York press conference on Dec. 11, Martinsen said that during the time he was in Vietnam he witnessed the torture of numerous “detainees” by U.S. officers and enlisted men.

“The officers were always involved in the most severe forms of torture,” Martinsen said. The most common device used against “detainees” was the standard Army field telephone, which runs on batteries and a generator.

Interrogators attached it to “any body extremity, ears, fingers, genitals,” Martinsen said. “You crank it and it gives a nasty shock, a very nasty shock, quite painful.”

Martinsen said the standing joke during interrogation training at Fort Holabird was, “Wire him up on the telephone and ring him up. He always answers.”

Martinsen said that although he never saw any written orders authorizing torture, it was “just understood” to be all right. He said that Major Cornelius Gray, commander of the 541st, was “directly aware of tortures of detainees.”

In addition to electrical tortures, U.S. interrogators used bamboo splinters, driven under fingernails, to loosen the tongues of suspected NLF soldiers. Bamboo splinters were frowned upon by the brass, however, because they left marks.

“You could do anything you wanted,” said Martinsen, “as long as it didn’t show.”

During Operation “Cedar Falls” in January, 1967, Martinsen saw a man tortured to death.

When Martinsen asked an American captain who had supervised the interrogation how the man died, the captain replied: “I was wiring him. He was just about to break. He was just about to break. He was on the verge of telling me something when he died.”

Martinsen said that when he got back to the United States he tried to tell people about what he had been doing but nobody would believe him. “My mother still thinks I’m a liar,” he said.

In November 1968, Martinsen was visited by the elite of the military police—the Criminal Investigation Detachment (CID)—after he had made public statements about the torturing.

The CID promised an investigation. Then an Illinois congressman denounced Martinsen as a liar after hearing his accusations and promised an investigation that would prove U.S. officers had nothing to do with torturing prisoners in Vietnam.

If there ever was an investigation, its findings have never been made public.

Another ex-GI, Jan Crumb of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, said at the New York press conference that there were over a million GIs back from Vietnam who had participated in and witnessed the killing of enemy prisoners and civilians. But most GIs won’t tell what they know because they fear prosecution by the government.

“They are picking out scapegoats like Calley,” said Crumb, “when the real criminals are the people who sent Calley there in the first place.”

Crumb said that Civilian Commissions of Inquiry would be set up across the country to give ex-GIs a chance to come forward with what they knew.

Text box/Sidebar

Last issue the *Fifth Estate* [FE #97, January 22-February 4, 1970] published a list of demands from the American Serviceman's Union in an article about the formation of an ASU chapter at Selfridge Air Force Base. Since that time the GI group has issued a revised set of demands which are published below:

1. The right to refuse to obey illegal orders—like orders to fight in the illegal, imperialist war in Vietnam.
2. Election of officers by vote of the men.
3. An end to saluting and siring of officers.
4. The right of black and brown-skinned servicemen to determine their own lives free from the oppression of any racist whites. No troops to be sent into black or Spanish-speaking communities.
5. No troops to be used against anti-war demonstrators.
6. No troops to be used against workers on strike.
7. Rank-and-file control of court-martial boards.
8. The right of free political association.
9. Federal minimum wages.
10. The right of collective bargaining.

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