THE STORY OF MICHAEL BENGE, BETTY ANN OLSEN AND HENRY BLOOD

All three were POW's in Vietnam. But only Mike Benge survived. This is his story as he tells it today.

By CORTEZ F. ENLOE, JR., M.D.

Michael D. Benge of Heppner, Oregon, was a thirty-year-old civilian area development adviser of the Agency for International Development working in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam teaching farmers how to improve their crops when he was captured. He was taken on January 27, 1968, by the North Vietnamese when they overran the Ban Me Thuot area of south central South Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Mike was freed on March 12, 1973, five years and two months later. Betty Olsen, of Nyack, New York, a nurse of the Christian and Missionary Alliance working among the lepers in the Ban Me Thuot hospital, and the Reverend Henry F. Blood, a member of the Wycliffe Bible Translators were captured nearby five days later on February 1, 1968. They died in captivity, starved by their captors. Benge survived by iron-willed determination to live his life "in day-tight compartments" until the day of freedom arrived. It is a grim tale of disease, malnutrition, and coercion . . . "extensive coercion" . . . and fortitude, extensive fortitude, we would add.

It took negotiations with three giant departments of the federal government for me to gain access to the small, private elevator in the Navy's Medical Center at Bethesda leading to the tower where many of the POW's were kept secure from the press in very unhospitallike quarters in the first few weeks of freedom. The Departments of Defense, State and Navy appear to have been so surprised, not to say disarmed, that someone wanted to discuss nutrition with one of their precious patients that they granted my request to talk to the POW's before the last man was out of Hanoi. Mike Benge seemed delighted at the prospect of my visit, however, because he knew the significance of his ordeal to students of nutrition and he was eager to report. It is extraordinary that although he had been seen by many armed forces physicians since his release in Hanoi, I was the first to show any interest in his story of the nutritional aspects of his long captivity. "That's *the* story," he said. "And I'm glad someone is finally interested."

Mike Benge struck me as a quiet, thoughtful person who usually has himself quite well in hand. He is soft-spoken and explicit in what he has to say. He is reserved yet jovial. When, after we had been talking for ten minutes, I turned and for the first time noticed half-finished bottles of Canadian Club and Chivas Regal on the dresser of his hospital room, somehow I was surprised. They didn't seem to fit with him and yet they did. At first, Mike struck me as only serious and cold, but then, during our long visit, he received several telephone calls and from the way he spoke to his callers, who were usually strangers wishing him well or inquiring about their loved ones, and I knew differently. I learned that he is a man of solicitude and warmth. This gave me a deeper understanding of the story of the past five years of his life that came out. By the time I left Bethesda, I had decided that Mike Benge is just the sort of man I'd like to have as a fellow prisoner if I were ever a POW.

Mike is not the picture of the introverted, vegetable sort of personality the psychiatrists said the returning POW's would be. In fact, none of the several prisoners I have seen and talked to even remotely resemble the psychotic wrecks we had been led to anticipate. Mike is, on the other hand, well integrated in his thinking. He is an engaging and tireless man who has studied and dissected each infinite detail of all that has happened to him. He is not euphoric or rambling when he talks to you, but matter of fact, with a clear memory of all he has been through. The psychiatrists who studied him as a returnee and were supposed to readjust him so he could handle the problems of freedom must have been bored stiff by the encounter.

Benge, once a marine, worked in South Vietnam from 1963 until 1965 as a volunteer for the International Voluntary Services, a church-financed group. Then he joined the Agency for International Development (AID) of the U.S. State Department as an expert in agriculture, teaching Vietnamese farmers how to improve their crops. In the process he became a specialist in the culture of the Montagnard tribes, the rather independent people who live in the hills of central North Vietnam and who have not become assimilated with the other Vietnamese. He is one of the few Westerners who learned to speak Rhade, their language. He also is fluent in Vietnamese. These talents were to come in handy during his years as a prisoner of war.

Mike was captured as he was driving alone to a

They didn't lift a finger to save Hank Blood. He was a civilian, and useless as a political hostage.

Illustrated by Richard Schlecht

Michael Benge

Betty Olsen

Henry Blood

neighboring village to evacuate the missionaries and four International Voluntary Services staff members because North Vietnamese troops had been seen in the vicinity. On a lonely stretch of the highway armed soldiers suddenly rushed out of the woods in front of him. Mike started to turn around and looked back only to see he was surrounded. He quickly recognized the soldiers as North Vietnamese. Being unarmed and not being one to waste time or be shot resisting the inevitable, he stopped and waited for them to come up to him. The way he tells it, the capture was all very orderly and peaceful. Thus began Mike Benge's five years as a prisoner of war.

The first year of captivity was a period of seemingly aimless wandering through the jungles, rice paddies, swamps and mountains of the Indochina peninsula. Buffeted by the winds of war, he and his noncombatant captors were like Flying Dutchmen always going somewhere but never seeming to arrive anywhere. The trail along which his captors took him wound through South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and finally North Vietnam . . . sometimes retracing their steps, sometimes going in circles. Only finally did it lead him to Hanoi and to the gates of a prison, an unwelcome sight to most people but at least a certain haven for Mike.

The second year Benge spent as a prisoner in a jungle fortress in Cambodia. The third year he spent alone . . . utterly alone because he was held in absolute solitary confinement and he still doesn't know why. During the last two years before his release this past March, he was on several occasions tortured and placed in solitary confinement.

Mike wants you to keep in mind as you read this story the fact that he was always a prisoner of the North Vietnamese Regular Army. It was they who captured him. When they handed him over to the Vietcong for temporary custody they made it clear that their allies knew their hostage was "Michael Benge, important official of the U.S. State Department," and even then the North Vietnamese supervised his custody. This is an important point to remember, Mike says, because the North Vietnamese have tried to cultivate the idea that the only POW's who were mistreated and starved were those held by the Vietcong. That's just not true.

Five days after Mike was taken, the soldiers brought in two more prisoners. One was a tall, gaunt man and the other was a trim, good-looking young woman. She had been a nurse working at a mission hospital, and he was a missionary who was translating the Bible into the local idiom. The two were captured when the North Vietnamese army overran Ban Me Thuot where they were working.

The man was Henry F. (Hank) Blood, fifty-three, of Portland, Oregon. As a missionary of the order of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, a nondenominational Protestant organization that spreads the word of Christianity by translating the Holy Scripture into the unusual languages used by tribesmen in remote parts of the world, Hank had been sent to Vietnam to begin the translation of the Bible into the dialect of the local Muong tribal people.

Betty Ann Olsen was thirty-three when she was led away from the mission hospital by the soldiers. She was the only woman who had not been killed or wounded in the battle that surged around the village. Betty came into the world of the missionary naturally. She was born in a mission on the Ivory Coast of Africa where her parents are still working. When she grew up, she trained to be a nurse at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Doctors and nurses on the medical staff of our military hospital who read this will remember Betty. Prior to going to Ban Me Thuot, Betty worked at a mission in Da Nang. She also freely gave her time and talents to the military hospital there, a gesture that got her the name "The Belle of Da Nang" from the American GI's.

The description of the way Betty and Hank were taken prisoner conjures up a picture of two nights and a day of terror punctuated every few hours by the cold-blooded murder of helpless, innocent men and women whose only wish was to do the work of God. Like the obvious and revealing clues that foretell doom in a Greek tragedy, the manner of their capture signaled what lay ahead for Betty Olsen and Hank Blood as they were led away from the carnage.

Ban Me Thuot is a small town 180 miles northeast of Saigon. There were thirteen American civilian men, women and children in Ban Me Thuot when the North Vietnamese soldiers arrived. They were all missionaries and a missionary family. There appears to have been little fighting between armed troops, yet when it was all over, one missionary had been killed when his house was blown up, two were murdered when the soldiers threw grenades into the shelter where they knew they were, one died later of her injuries, and five, a severely wounded woman and a mother and her three children, were spared. Only Betty and Hank were taken prisoner.

The first inkling the missionaries had that the war was coming their way was at 3:30 on Tuesday morning, January 30, 1968, the first day of the Tet offensive, when the house in which Leon Griswold and his daughter Carolyn were living was suddenly struck in a deliberate attack by a North Vietnamese rocket launcher or satchel charge. The Griswolds were from White Plains, New York. Carolyn was a graduate of the Nyack Missionary College, in Nyack, New York. She was working with the young people in Ban Me Thuot as a Christian teacher and was preparing a Rhade reader. Her father was not a missionary in the real sense. He was a retired businessman who had gone to Vietnam to be with his daughter and to make himself useful by managing the little hospital in Ban Me Thuot. Leon was killed outright when the house was hit, and Carolyn was severely injured.

Not wanting to abandon their patients and thinking the soldiers would not harm them because they were so obviously peace-loving civilians, the missionaries decided not to leave the village in spite of the trouble all around them. But they were wrong. This was a different kind of war.

The North Vietnamese soldiers knew what they were doing. Next day they blew up the house belonging to Ed and Ruth Thompson, also missionaries from Nyack, who, luckily, were not in it at the time. They, along with Bob and Marie Ziemer, had taken refuge in a shallow bunker which the men had hastily dug for shelter until

the end of the bombardment, hoping against a hit.

On hearing the blast of the explosion that wrecked the Thompsons' house, Bob Ziemer, an evangelist for the Christian and Missionary Alliance from Toledo, Ohio, ran out of the bunker with his hands up only to be shot down by a rifleman. Ruth Wilting, a nurse, another Ohioan from Mansfield, was dressing poor Carolyn's wounds in a nearby shed during the commotion and, when she heard the shots that killed Ziemer, she ran out thinking she might be needed and she, too, was murdered. Noting that Bob had come from a shelter, the soldiers then calmly went over and tossed grenades inside, killing both the Thompsons and wounding Marie Ziemer, a fact that, as matters turned out, probably saved her life. She was let go the next morning because, as she said, she was so badly wounded the soldiers must have thought she'd be a nuisance as a captive.

While these tragedies were being played out, the soldiers came upon Betty Olsen and soon discovered Hank Blood and his wife Evangeline in their house nearby. With them were three of their four children: David, six; Catherine, five; and Carolyn, three. Cindy, seven, the oldest child, was in school in Kontum, northeast of Saigon. They quickly decided to make prisoners of Betty and Hank. They didn't bother Evangeline and the children. She says she thinks they were left alone for, like Marie, they too would have been a burden as captives. Evangeline and the children are now in a remote province in the Philippines carrying on Hank's work.

Eventually, after the fighting passed on, Marie Ziemer managed to get away and take Carolyn with her. However, Carolyn Griswold died before she could get to the U.S. Air Force Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay. Marie, fully recovered, is now in New York working at the Missionary headquarters, "As God has willed it," she says ever so softly.

Michael Benge was turned over to a support group, who rarely engaged in combat, shortly after he was captured. Knowing there was fighting around Ban Me Thuot, he was not surprised when Betty and Hank were brought into the camp where he was the sole prisoner. It was at this time that their fatal ordeal began.

"The first ten months wandering around South Vietnam were the worst from a nutritional point of view, I suppose," Mike said as he recounted their experience. "We'd be on the trail for several days and then we'd make camp. Sometimes we'd stay in one place for a week or two and then our captors would set out again. The soldiers kept us chained together, I suppose so we wouldn't escape. The route we took never made any sense to me.

"Our food was terrible and we slowly began to starve. Most of the time the three of us managed somehow to keep going on a diet of manioc (cassava) and rice. Manioc is, as you know, a rich source of starch in the form of tapioca. Once in a while we'd get pieces of meat. Of course, we rarely knew what kind of animal it came from, but it was meat. One time, I know we had sika deer but it wasn't much. After all, the nickname of the little beast is 'mouse deer.'

"We had almost no food at all during the first two months, February and March," Mike continued. "Finally, in the spring we came to a river and stayed there for several weeks. Our diet improved to the extent that we got some fish. We were given a few pieces of carp to eat on three different occasions in those two months."

But if the trio benefitted by reaching the river camp, they paid for it dearly, for the area was malarious. Mike's first warning that he had malaria came when he was suddenly seized by a violent chill, profuse sweats and high fever. His two companions told him he was delirious for some time. He has no idea how high his fever climbed, but, having seen the virulent malaria from the lowlands of the Orient, I can say that Mike would have "run the mercury out the top," as we used to say in Burma. The only notice of his illness his guards took consisted of adding bowls of rice gruel heavily larded with salt and sometimes with sugar to his ration. To make matters worse, Mike, of course, ate even less than usual because of his illness. To him, most disconcerting of all was the suddenness with which the attacks came on. "I was weak. Oh, was I weak. I might be sitting, chained to a tree or to Betty and Hank and all of a sudden *everything* would go white. Not black, white. A blinding white. I'd hear a loud rustling noise, like someone was squirting a hose in my ears, and then whoosh! . . . and that'd be it. I'd keel over. I might lie there unconscious for several hours. When I'd wake up I'd be completely exhausted *only to have the same* experience a short time later. I was blind off and on for thirty-five days."

As time went on the seizures subsided as they sometimes do in acute, malignant tertian malaria, if one survives without treatment. Most patients die in the first few days of this type of malaria, which is caused by the *Plasmodium falciparum*. This is surely what Mike had. It is the worst there is. "The only thing I recall is the food I had during this time. I don't know how I remember so vividly, but twice during this period the three of us were given terrapin, iguana, and gibbon, which are quite tasty.

"In June we moved on, going southwestward. Hank was visibly ill by this time. Oh, he had malaria and so did Betty, but Hank was sick, really sick. Among

other things ugly ulcers began breaking out on his arms. He was the first to notice them. We, too, itched, but neither Betty nor I was as bad off as Hank. I knew he was very sick. The odor from his arms reminded me of burnt beans. The sores were wet, too. It was then that I became aware of the steady decline in Betty's health. She never complained, but she was losing ground. The troops showed her no sympathy and made absolutely no allowances for her as a woman. We three might as well have been dogs which they didn't want to keep and didn't dare lose."

To add to the misery, if that were possible, the three became infested with lice. The deliberate refusal of their captors to permit the pitiful, harmless prisoners to rid themselves of their lice is still another example of bestiality.

Listening to this stalwart American—my lifeboat companion if ever I have a choice—tell how he and Betty and Hank became infested with lice, one suddenly glimpses another example of the desperate conditions to which they had sunk, or, more accurately, been pushed. In reality, the trio accepted the lice as the lesser of two evils, the other being the penetrating cold of the damp jungle at night.

Let Mike tell it. "From time to time, the troops we were with would bring in native prisoners. One day in June, 1968, they brought in a group of Montagnards, the proud tribesmen of the hills whom the communists hate. Having worked among them, I liked them, and I suppose they think I'm okay. I speak their language, too, and that helps. Anyway, one night I was sleeping next to a Montagnard. It was very, very cold and I began to shiver. The tribesman heard me and invited me to share his blanket but not before warning me that he was infested with lice. I didn't care. 'I'll share your blanket and your lice. I'd rather have lice than be cold.' " The following day the Montagnard gave Benge the blanket, which he in turn shared with his companions. They repeatedly asked their guards to let them boil the blankets and their clothes, but the guards refused. Thus, to heap misery upon misery, Betty, Mike and Hank were soon home for a horde of lice. Apparently the parasites didn't carry typhus for, other than the incessant itching and the sores, they seemed little worse for their experience.

By this time, the Americans had weeping ulcers over all exposed parts of their bodies. They had also become emaciated and seriously ill in various and ill-defined ways.

On one occasion, their suffering was greatly relieved when a guard gave them leaves of hot peppers and some beans and eggplant. Later they got a small round fruit which was too hard to eat raw but which became "quite chewy once we softened it up over a fire. I haven't any idea what it was. It had a bitter taste and offered diversion.

"Hank's health seemed to fail at a faster pace than Betty's and my own. He had courage and will. He was a man of strong character that one could be proud of but his health was against him. I felt all along that he might not survive the starvation and hardship. I kept thinking, and I kept it to myself, 'one severe blow, one serious illness and we'll lose Hank.' That blow struck in July when Hank developed a severe chest condition. Betty, a nurse, diagnosed it as pneumonia. The three of us knew it probably meant the end for him. And it was. The Vietnamese could plainly see how sick Hank was, and even though they could have got a doctor or a paramedic with drugs if they'd called for help, they didn't lift a finger to save Hank Blood. He was a civilian and useless as a political hostage."

The Reverend Henry F. Blood, who devoted his life to the Christian mission of sacrifice for others, today lies buried in a shallow grave along a jungle trail in southwestern Vietnam.

The starvation ration for Betty and Mike remained unchanged. In August, they were given some corn which they cooked and a melonlike fruit that tasted like cucumber. As they walked along with the troops, they sometimes found pieces of buffalo hide which they chewed endlessly just as Magellan's sailors ate portions of the rigging when they starved as their ship lay becalmed in the middle of the Pacific. Once in a while the pitiful prisoners would grab wild nuts as they trudged along the trail. "They must have

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something in them. We felt better each time we ate them. They were quite nourishing."

As August dragged on toward September and they moved through dense jungle drenched by the monsoon rains, leeches, "armies of leeches appeared in our path. At times the whole surface ahead of us and the foliage on both sides would be blanketed with the shiny black creatures. They were huge, too. There was no way to avoid them. Of course, we trampled hundreds, but I think hundreds more got on Betty and me. Like pneumonia for Hank, for Betty, the repulsive bloodsucking leeches were the last straw."

I can attest that in the jungle man's worst enemy is not snakes, tigers, elephants or any other such predator. These creatures are as fearful of man as he is of them. Given half a chance, each will give the other a wide berth. The implacable enemy is the leech. Man with his thin skin offers an inexhaustible banquet of salubrious, warm blood. Against them man is helpless . . . as were Betty and Mike. The leeches got into their clothes. Got all over them. Even today Mike carries dime-sized blue-black scars from the leeches on his body that fascinated the doctors at Bethesda.

Although she had not menstruated in the eight months since being captured, it was obvious to Mike that Betty was becoming acutely anemic. "She was white as a sheet," he says. She also suffered amebic dysentery constantly, which made the vitamin deficiencies she surely had worse. Like Mike's, her hair had turned white and began coming out in handfuls. She was weak, had severe pains and cramps in her legs, which were edematous. "Yet," Mike says, "that was one wonderful, brave girl. She didn't complain once. Not a whimper. Our guards could see that she was dying. I pleaded with them saying she would die if she didn't get some food, drugs and a doctor, but they paid no attention."

Thus did Betty Ann Olsen, The Belle of Da Nang, vivacious, selfless, a pretty, young woman, die in September 1968. She was one who, as Mike Benge describes those months, seems to have had about her all the saintly qualities of beauty, courage, selflessness and inner peace.

"Each of us certainly had scurvy during that time. Fortunately for me," Mike continued, "I knew enough about nutrition to recognize the symptoms of some of our diseases. I used the word 'fortunately' because I got some satisfaction out of trying to recognize the symptoms of malnutrition. I had studied general agriculture and agricultural engineering when I was a student at Oregon State in Corvallis. As I'm sure you know, they emphasize nutrition there so I had several courses in animal and human nutrition. Having some understanding of what was happening helped me get through those days.

"But let me tell you more about scurvy. Before he died, Hank commented several times that his teeth felt loose. Later on, Betty and I experienced the same sensation. Our bodies were covered with what we called 'serus sores' that itched terribly. Then one day Betty noticed that her gums were bleeding and mine were too. Every time we bit down on anything, we were sure we were going to knock out a tooth. Once, for no apparent reason, a guard gave us a tube of toothpaste and we rubbed it on our gums. It left a refreshing taste I'll never forget, but it didn't stop the bleeding.

"There is another fact of nutritional significance I noticed that summer which I should tell you about. It is that Hank and I had an insatiable thirst all the time. We couldn't get enough water. At the same time, I couldn't get enough salt. Whenever I could get it, I'd eat it despite the fact I would urinate copiously ten or more times a day.

"Shortly after Betty died, the pains along my shinbones became worse and my legs swelled up more than ever. My food ration did not double or triple when my friends died. If anything, the food was worse. We had all noticed that in walking on the trail we'd have difficulty lifting our legs. To step over a log, for instance, I'd have to lean down and with my two hands lift each of my legs over one at a time. The situation got so bad that when we stopped to rest, we'd always

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sit next to a small tree because, unless we had a tree to put our arms around and pull ourselves up, we'd be forced to crawl.

"Strangely enough," he continued, "although I guess I was as sick as could be, I felt comparatively strong in the upper part of my body. In fact, I carried my back pack containing what few things I owned: food, rudimentary utensils and my lice and their blanket without difficulty.

"By this time my hair or what was left of it had turned grey and as I looked around at the rest of me I estimated that I weighed about a hundred pounds. I was not disoriented. I had no feelings of being another person. I had no bad dreams. I was coherent and I was bound and determined I was going to survive. The death of those two wonderful people, Betty and Hank, created in me an iron will to live. I kept telling myself that all I had to do on any day was to live until the next. I lived each day in a 'day-tight compartment' as the saying goes. Each morning I'd look at the sunrise and see it as a signal of success. 'One more day,' I'd say. 'I've beat 'em one more day!' Why, it made me positively happy. I did not fret. I did not think about anything that would cloud my determination to see that sun come up the next day. I made up my mind and somehow stuck to it. I guess that's why I am here talking to you now.

"After Betty died we continued our trek. For all I could see and learn it had seemed like aimless wandering but then I know this was not so. After all, I was the captive of a trained unit of soldiers who were under the direct control of the North Vietnamese Army. I want to make that clear to everyone who reads this story. I wasn't held by some ragtag bunch of bandits. I was held by the Regular Army of the North Vietnamese Government. That's the message.

"By October we reached Cambodia and turned northward. In a few days we came into a large military camp that was obviously very important. It meant that things were surely going to look up for me. I was certain it meant some change in my fate and any change, no matter what, could only be for the better.

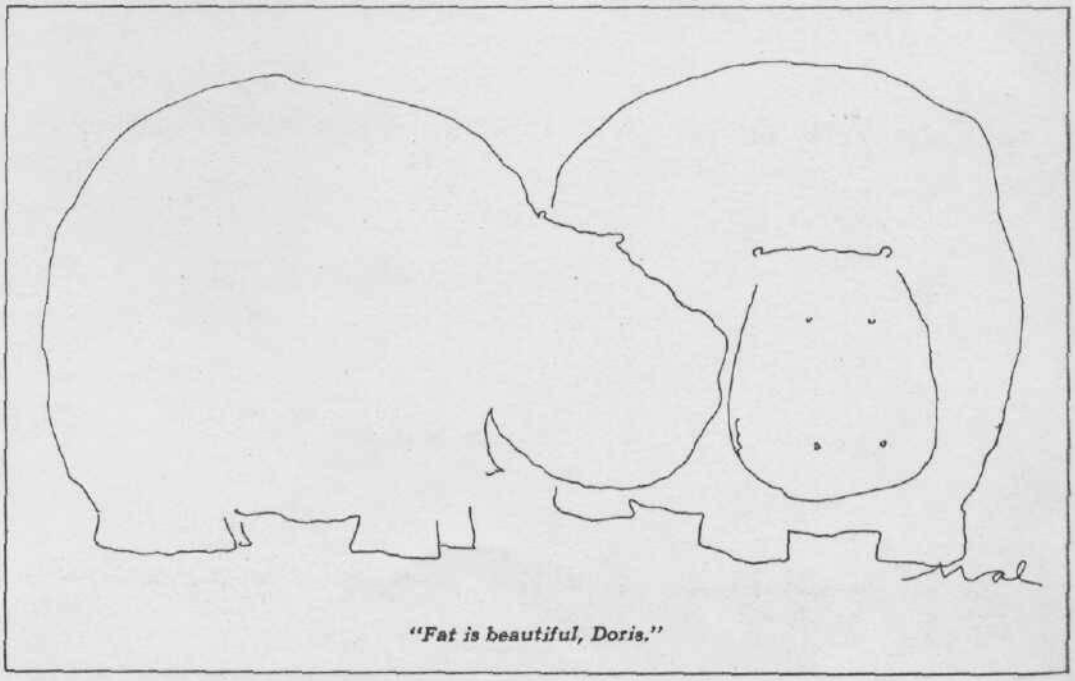
"My first reaction upon entering this large, well-organized military base was one of sadness that Betty and Hank could not have lived until that day. It had been ten months since our capture, ten months on the trail, and if they could only have held on till October they might be with us today.

"Shortly after my arrival I was seen by a physician for the first time in ten months. He seemed to be competent. He immediately diagnosed my condition as advanced beriberi and severe scurvy. He gave me the works. I got repeated intravenous injections of the B vitamins and vitamin C. Then, not being content with that, they began giving me vitamins subcutaneously at the same time. Also, I was so emaciated they attempted to feed me with continuous injections of glucose, but for some reason it would not work so I just drank the solutions."

Benge was held in the North Vietman army compound for a year. His diet improved greatly. However, while he was no longer in danger of starving to death, he was still undernourished and forced to live on what we'd regard as little better than scraps. Yet infrequently the guards gave him milk and peanut soup and a green consommé. Occasionally he got more rice and bamboo shoots. The medical care didn't follow any pattern either. "Sometimes a doctor would pay attention to me; then for weeks I wouldn't see him. If they felt like it," as Mike puts it, "they'd give me some chloroquin and quinine for my malaria. Then they'd forget me. I never knew what system I was a victim of. But anyway, I can tell you that after three months I began to feel myself again. While the care I got, when I got it, was reasonably good and the circumstances of my imprisonment improved, now that I was the captive in a well-established Army base, the periodic kindnesses, if you can call them that, and the moments of brutality, which you *can* call them, were less haphazard and better organized.

"Really, as I look back on it, it seems strange that I haven't much to tell you about that year—that is, much about me, my general health and my nutritional health. That's all we're supposed to talk about. (Ed. *This interview was granted on the condition that the subjects discussed be restricted to nutrition and medical care.*) The days ran together. I was reasonably well taken care of and suppose I have no great reason for complaint. After all, I was seeing the sun come up every day and that meant I was winning."

When the year ended and November 1969 came, Mike Benge found himself once more on the trail . . . the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He has no idea who decided to move him or why. In fact, during five years of cap-



"Fat is beautiful, Doris."

tivity, even when they gave him the worst punishment of all a few months hence, he was not told where he was going, why he was being moved, or why he was being treated as he was. He only knew that now he was headed northward with what appeared to be army units who were returning home to North Vietnam. Although this was long before the allied "invasion" into Cambodia, Mike wants me to stress the point that he saw an unending line of North Vietnamese troops moving southward on this main supply route. For weeks at a time, he says, the stream of men and material was unending. (This mammoth influx, discounted by many in the U.S.A., was the major reason for the move into Cambodia.)

In describing his trek to Hanoi, Mike commented especially about our concern over the use of drugs by American soldiers. "You think we have a problem with our GI's?" he said. "You should see what I saw as I walked to North Vietnam! All the truck drivers along the trail and troops at missile sites I passed were high on marijuana or opium."

The entire journey was on foot. Although he was in pretty good condition when he left the base camp, he soon recognized the symptoms of beriberi and scurvy with which he had become so familiar. His diet returned to dependence upon a catch-as-catch-can routine with rice and cassava and bits of meat now and then. During these (and other) months it cannot be said that Benge was partially starved because his captors were starved. They weren't. They received food supplies regularly and enjoyed a diet that was adequate and varied by their standards. He attributes their neglect of him to the fact that he was "a prize of war . . . a prize of victory . . . an individual who was the enemy and, therefore, to be despised." The soldiers taking him north appeared to believe that their only obligation was to keep him alive until they got him to Hanoi—and nothing more. And they did nothing more. Sometimes when they would stop, Mike would be displayed by his guards to fresh troops going southward on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and mocked as "an example of Americans who are so used to riding in airplanes and soft living that they cannot walk." Benge said that on such occasions, and it happened all the time, "I'd counter-propagandize in Vietnamese by telling them that I was suffering from deliberate maltreatment. I don't think I sold anybody but they sure were surprised when I sounded off in Vietnamese. That made me feel real good."

As he trudged on, the beriberi and scurvy symptoms returned. Once again his gums began to bleed, his legs cramped and ached and he could barely keep up. Skin ulcers reappeared and, worst of all, he had something new to worry about. His shoes had rotted and the skin began to peel off the soles of his feet.

Finally, after more than two years in captivity in the open, Michael Benge arrived at a formal prison on the outskirts of Hanoi. He now finds it hard to say what he expected to be his lot in Hanoi. His life was so filled with a determination to live it in day-tight compartments that he spent little time worrying about what lay ahead. Yet one thing occurred that he was completely unprepared for. Shortly after he entered the prison he was taken to a cell and pushed in. The room, when he measured it, turned out to be nine feet square, eight feet high and with two round holes in the wall. One with crossed bars in it was near the ceiling and thankfully it let in a small ray of sunlight. Another was in the floor and through it came the rats, Mike's only companions. He didn't see another soul but the guard and he did not talk. The door closed and did not open to let him out until the winter of 1971 . . . only a few weeks short of a year.

"I don't know why I was placed in solitary confinement. There was no altercation, never a word of explanation. I suppose it was punishment—not punishment for me individually—but punishment for being an American. Anyway, I tried not to think of it. After all, so long as I could tell when that sun came up each day, I had it made."

There is a seeming contradiction in this fiendish treatment and it was in the food they gave him. The meals he got in solitary, "flying solo" as the POW's called it, were the best Mike had during his entire captivity. That is, it was the best until the communists began to fatten up all the prisoners of war for the U.S. propaganda market. Instead of the bitterly deficient diet he endured during the two years or so on the trail, each day while he was in solitary he was given a small loaf of white or brown French bread twice daily, accompanied by soup made of cabbage, greens or pumpkin. With relative frequency he got potatoes and sometimes even a few scraps of meat of unknown origin.

He was still very sick. He urinated as frequently as fourteen times a night. He had diarrhea, but that was nothing new. After eight months in prison his "symptoms of beriberi" became so severe that they had to send a doctor to see him. Finally in November 1971, he was taken out of solitary confinement and placed with two other American prisoners. For him that was the next best thing to complete freedom.

Then the sun began to rise each morning without waiting for Mike to take notice. And it continued to do so until March 1973 when the prison gates finally opened and Michael D. Benge came home. Notification of his release was the first news his parents had had of him since his capture. ☒

CSONKA AND KIICK

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first two years in the Orange Bowl, there was grass in there. But it's a city stadium. With the Dolphins, the college teams and the high school teams, it has about forty football games a year. So the city decided it would be less wear and tear on the field if Poly-Turf was installed.

But it turned out to be more wear and tear on the players.

Like last season when Bob Griese dislocated his ankle. If it had happened on grass, there would've been more give. He probably would've had a bad sprain, but not a dislocation.

Nobody really tested artificial turf. They just put it in.

They're testing it on the players. We're the guinea pigs.

It wasn't bad the first year in 1970, but the next year, it was so worn, it was slippery. Watching films of a game against the Jets, our coaches counted fifty-nine slips and falls. Last year they put in a new rug, but this one was slippery when it was wet. They're still experimenting with it. The thing that typifies the whole situation is what happened when the Rams played the Cardinals in St. Louis on a cold day late last season. To make sure the AstroTurf didn't get icy, they put a chemical on it to keep it from freezing. Great, except that the chemical was so strong, it burned some players right through their jerseys. Nobody thought about how strong the chemical was, they just used it. Almost everything in our society is tested before it's used. But nobody ever tested artificial turf over a period of time to see if it was hazardous to football players. In the meantime, the players are getting busted up, burned, bruised. What the people responsible for installing artificial turf in each stadium really have been saying is, "Let's test it on the players." If it happens to end your career, too bad. But the most expendable part of the NFL is the players. The owners always can get new players. Every year the owners draft 442 players, like they were harvesting a crop of wheat or corn.

Not that we're really complaining. There are people in this world with really serious injuries. People in hospitals who'll never get out.

I got a perspective on injuries when I went to Vietnam after the 1971 season with a group of NFL players. In the hospitals there, I saw guys with more than injuries. Maimed guys with their legs blown off, their arms blown off. Some were

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1973 Vietnam - Persons Mike Benge

In a Big War, One Man Does His Small Part . . .

Yank POW Special to Montagnards

By HUGH A. MULLIGAN

SAIGON (AP) — A Montagnard family in Vietnam's central highlands will shoot arrows at the moon and barter for a water buffalo to sacrifice when word reaches their long hut that Michael Benge is to be set free by the Viet Cong.

He is their son and blood brother in the Rhade tribe.

Benge, 33, a civilian agriculture specialist from Corvallis, Ore., was taken prisoner by North Vietnamese troops in Ban Me Thuot on the second morning of the 1968 Tet offensive. He was last seen racing out the gate of the U.S. aid compound, headed southeast toward the Rhade village of Buon Kram, which had adopted him as a member. His friends are certain he was trying to warn them of the gathering attack.

"The American missionaries called out to him to turn back, but he drove on past the burning APCs (armored personnel carriers) and gutted tanks," recalls anthropologist Gerald C. Hickey, who was Benge's roommate the previous night in the U.S. villa. "They saw him stopped by NVA troops and led away. We think we know where he was going.

"Mike took the alliance ceremony into that Rhade family very seriously. They had exchanged blood together and slaughtered a buffalo, a tribe's most valuable possession. He looked upon them as his people; they called him son. There had been heavy fighting near Buon Kram. Mike must have been hurrying to help them."

That was Jan. 31, 1968.

Five years later, Benge will learn sooner or later that his forest family survived the war as refugees, but the lovely chieftain's daughter whom he shyly romanced under the disapproving eyes of the missionaries has married a Rhade tribesman and moved to another village.

"Mike," recalls Hickey, "was an eastern Oregon farm boy who came out to Vietnam in the early '60s and fell under the spell of the highland people. He was what the Special Forces called a Montagnard freak."

An ex-Marine pilot who never looked upon himself as anything but a farmer, Benge was one of the bright, dedicated young men who arrived on the scene when the war was small and there was still time for idealistic dreams about bringing people a better life.

Determined to give someone less fortunate the benefits of his agriculture degree at Oregon State University, Benge signed on for Vietnam in 1962 with International Voluntary Services, a small Peace Corps-type operation trying to extend help and expertise at hamlet and village level.

Two years later, he joined U.S. AID as an assistant development officer in Saigon but soon badgered his bosses into sending him back among the impoverished, primitive tribes.

These were the war's most forsaken, longest suffering victims: kidnaped and used for porters by the Communists along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, pushed into battle first and often cheated of their lands by the South Vietnamese.

History has always dealt harshly with these smiling, swarthy people whom the Vietnamese contemptuously call "moi" — savages — because of their dark wavy hair and mongoloid faces. With primitive hand tools, they scratched out a bare living on dry mountain rice, and peddled charcoal, wild cinnamon and rhinoceros horn to passing hunting parties.

Benge longed to lift their burden by even so fundamental a step as showing them how to drain their land. The language barrier was almost insurmountable. Most of the tribe spoke only what Mike called "Green Beret English: Cut bamboo, fill sandbag." He set about mastering the difficult language of the Rhade, one of the few among the dozen distinct tribal languages with a written alphabet. He lived the life of the long hut, with its malevolent spirits hovering in the darkness and its matriarchal society where women ruled the roost and the cook ate first.

* * *

The village which adopted him was only nine miles from Ban Me Thuot and a comfortable villa, but it was worlds away. Friends who visited him at the long house on stilts in Buon Kram never forgot how just before supper one night the female head of the household addressed him like a child: "Son, we will eat now. You know you must bathe first."

Benge nodded obediently and walked down to the river in the moonlight with his Rhade brothers.

The Protestant missioners in town, engaged in translating the Bible into Rhade, disapproved of his friendship with the beautiful Montagnard princess. The Roman Catholic nuns who had raised her were even more adamant. Mother Superior counseled her against marriage, that she would never be happy away from her forest people. They conspired to keep them apart, but Mike Benge never openly resented their interference.

Ironically, they tried to save him at the last minute, and they shared his fate.

The 1968 Tet offensive came to Ban Me Thuot one day ahead of the rest of the country. The lovely highland capital where Teddy Roosevelt once hunted for elephants and tigers bestrode a main Viet Cong supply route. Mike Benge, returning late from Buon Kram, heard from his forest friends that the road south was clogged with North Vietnamese troops getting ready to attack the town. There had been fierce fighting already, and the Rhade had sacrificed a dog to assuage the spirits of the soldiers killed defending key Highway 14.

The attack on the highland capital began at dawn on the first day of Tet, the lunar new year. Hickey, Mike Benge and a small team of U.S. military advisers crouched behind sandbags in a villa listening to the overhead crossfire of North Vietnamese artillery and South Vietnamese tanks.

* * *

At 9 a.m. next morning, the firing ceased for a time and people began drifting toward the house from the less protected missionary settlements. A U.S. jeep was burning in the driveway and the sky was dark with the smoke of shellwrecked tanks and armored vehicles.

Then they saw Mike drive out the gate and heard the Catholic nuns across the road call out to him. Henry Blood, the chief Bible translator, was captured that morning, too. So was Betty Olsen, a missionary nurse. Both died in captivity. Blood's wife and five children were led away, too, but at the last moment the enemy let them go. They were the last to see Mike Benge.

"They had to walk back up Highway 14 with all that artillery and mortar fire exploding all around." Hickey speaks of that morning like one of life's permanent yesterdays. "I don't know how they ever made it back to the villa.

"Until Mike's name showed up on that prisoner list, not many of us thought he would make it back either. The Montagnards consulted their sorcerers and never abandoned hope. They loved him as much as he loved them."

The criticism has often been made that America's big-war approach to the tragedy of Vietnam left little time or inclination to get to know the people.

Mike Benge — and there were others like him — emerges from five years of jungle captivity as a noble exception.

1973

THE CRUEL YEARS

Two Exclusive Reports

These are the stories of Betty Olsen, Hank Blood, Mike Benge and Doug Ramsey, two American missionaries and two State Department officials who were prisoners of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong for many years. They are tales of gripping pathos and brave endurance in the face of unbelievable misery. They are also instructive personal accounts of what it's like to suffer and die of malnutrition. The student of nutrition will have read nothing like them.

In ordinary wars the status of civilians in enemy hands is well-defined. If they are not spies, behave themselves and do not interfere with military operations non-combatants are usually left pretty much alone. But the Indo-China conflict was not an ordinary war. It was one in which a Western, civilized nation opposed North Vietnam, a nation whose concepts of the treatment deserved by prisoners of war are those of the Dark Ages when the soldier or civilian, black or white had only to be from an enemy country to be enslaved, depraved, and, if he survived the ordeal, to be treated as a hostage. The latter may be the only reason all Americans weren't shot the moment they fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese. As for the Vietcong, their treatment of captives seems to have been erratic. Having no prisons, as such, how one fared depended largely on the unit one was held by.

Two American civilians who were captured, one by the North Vietnamese, the other by the Vietcong, lived to tell the story of the cruel years which they and the two missionaries captured with one of them endured. Their accounts are not only worth reading as true stories of adventure and tragedy, they also provide unusual firsthand descriptions of what it's like to suffer beriberi, scurvy, pellagra, night blindness and the many and varied sequelae of malnutrition . . . malnutrition that at times became frank starvation. Seldom have we who are now engaged in studying the young science of nutrition been privileged to read such gripping reports that detail even the minor symptoms of the diseases that are the ultimate expression of poor nutrition.

The editors of *Nutrition Today* are deeply honored in being chosen to bring to you these reports.

The Story of Michael Benge, Betty Ann Olsen and Henry Blood

Henry F. Blood and Betty Olsen, the two missionaries, died in captivity probably because they were not physically strong when they were captured. That Mike Benge survived suggests that grim determination, which is food for the soul, can make the crucial difference in withstanding disease, malnutrition and deliberate starvation . . . As told to the Editor.

Michael D. Benge of Heppner, Oregon, was a 37 year old civilian area development adviser of the Agency for International Development working in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam teaching farmers how to improve their crops when he was captured. He was taken on January 27, 1968 by the North Vietnamese when they overran the Ban Me Thuot area of south central South Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Mike was freed on March 12, 1973, five years and two months later. Betty Olsen, of Nyack, New York, a nurse of the Christian and Missionary Alliance working amongst the lepers in the Ban Me Thuot hospital, and the Reverend Henry F. Blood, a member of the Wycliffe Bible Translators were captured nearby five days later on February 1, 1968. They died in captivity, starved by their captors. Benge survived by iron-willed determination to live his life "in day-tight compartments" until the day of freedom arrived. It is a grim tale of disease, malnutrition, and coercion. . . "extensive coercion" . . . and fortitude, extensive fortitude, we would add.

It took negotiations with three giant departments of the federal government for me to gain access to the small, private elevator in the Navy's Medical Center at Bethesda leading to the tower where many of the POWs were kept secure from the press in very unhospitaly quarters in the first few weeks of freedom. The Departments of Defense, State and Navy appear to have been so surprised, not to say disarmed, that someone wanted to discuss nutrition with one of their precious patients that they granted my request to talk to the POWs before the last man was out of Hanoi. Mike Benge seemed delighted at the prospect of my visit, however, because he knew the significance of his ordeal to students of nutrition and he was eager to report. It is extraordinary that although he had been seen by many armed forces physicians since his release in Hanoi, I was the first to show any interest in his story of the nutritional aspects of his long captivity. "That's *the* story," he said. "And I'm glad someone is finally interested."

Mike Benge struck me as a quiet, thoughtful person who usually has himself quite well in hand. He is soft-spoken and explicit in what he has to say. He is reserved yet jovial. When, after we had been talking for ten minutes, I turned and for the first time noticed half finished bottles of Canadian Club and Chivas Regal on the dresser of his hospital room, somehow I was surprised. They didn't seem to fit with him and yet they did. At first, Mike struck me as only serious and cold but then, during our long visit, he received several telephone calls and from the way he spoke to his callers who were usually strangers wishing him well or inquiring about their loved ones, and I knew differently. I learned that he is a man of solicitude and warmth. This gave me a deeper understanding of the story of the past five years of his life that came out. By the time I left Bethesda, I had decided that Mike Benge is just the sort of man I'd like to have as a fellow prisoner if I were ever a POW.

Mike is not the picture of the introverted, vegetable sort of personality the psychiatrists said the returning POWs would be. In fact, none of the several prisoners I have seen and talked to even remotely resemble the psychotic wrecks we had been led to anticipate. Mike is, on the other hand, well-integrated in his thinking. He is an engaging and tireless man who has studied and dissected each infinite detail of all that has happened to him. He is not euphoric or rambling when he talks to you but matter of fact, with a clear memory of all he has been through. The psychiatrists who studied him as a returnee and were supposed to readjust him so he could handle the problems of freedom must have been bored stiff by the encounter.

ON A LONELY ROAD

Benge, once a marine, worked in South Vietnam from 1963 until 1965 as a volunteer for the International Voluntary Services, a church-financed group. Then he joined the Agency for International Development (AID) of the U.S. State Department as an expert in agriculture, teaching Vietnamese farmers how to improve their crops. In the process he became a specialist in the culture of the Montagnard tribes, the rather independent people who live in the hills of central North Vietnam and who have not become assimilated with the other Vietnamese. He is one of the few westerners who learned to speak *Rhade,* their language. He also is fluent in Vietnamese. These talents were to come in handy during his years as a prisoner of war.

Mike was captured as he was driving alone to a neighboring village to warn the missionaries and everyone else

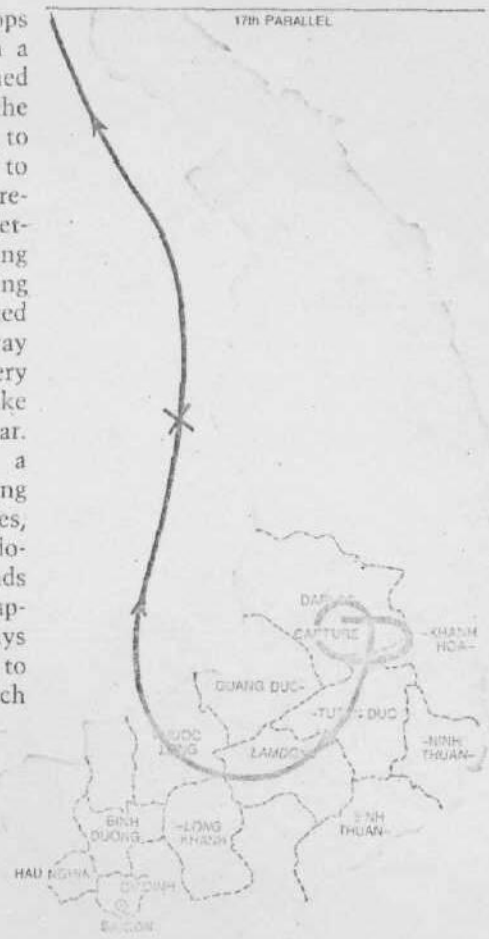
Betty Ann Olsen, 33, of the Ivory Coast, West Africa

Henry F. (Hank) Blood, 53, of Portland, Oregon

Michael D. Benge, 37, of Heppner, Oregon

there that North Vietnamese troops had been seen in the vicinity. On a lonely stretch of the highway armed soldiers suddenly rushed out of the woods in front of him. Mike started to turn around and looked back only to see he was surrounded. He quickly recognized the soldiers as North Vietnamese. Being unarmed and not being one to waste time or be shot resisting the inevitable, he stopped and waited for them to come up to him. The way he tells it, the capture was all very orderly and peaceful. Thus began Mike Benge's five years as a prisoner of war.

The first year of captivity was a period of seemingly aimless wandering through the jungles, rice paddies, swamps and mountains of the Indo-China peninsula. Buffeted by the winds of war, he and his non-combatant captors were like Flying Dutchmen always going somewhere but never seeming to arrive anywhere. The trail along which



Only after nine months of aimless wandering did Mike Benge finally reach Cambodia and the relative comfort of an established camp. Then, after a year at the North Vietnamese base southwest of Kontum, he began the 1000 mile trek up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Hanoi and the gates of a formal prison.

his captors took him wound through South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and finally North Vietnam . . . sometimes retracing their steps, sometimes going in circles. Only finally did it lead him to Hanoi and to the gates of a prison, an unwelcome sight to most people but at least a certain haven for Mike.

The second year Benge spent as a prisoner in a jungle fortress in Cambodia. The third year he spent alone . . . utterly alone because he was held in absolute solitary confinement and he still doesn't know why. The last two years before his release this past March he was imprisoned with other Americans and treated just as they were.

Mike wants you to keep in mind as you read this story the fact that he was always a prisoner of the North Vietnamese Regular Army. It was they who captured him. When they handed him over to the Vietcong for temporary custody they made it clear that their allies knew their hostage was "Michael Benge, important official of the U.S. State Department," and even then the North Vietnamese supervised his custody. This is an important point to remember, Mike says, because the North Vietnamese have tried to cultivate the idea that the only POWs who were mistreated and starved were those held by the Vietcong. That's just not true.

MURDER AT THE MISSION

Five days after Mike was taken, the soldiers brought in two more prisoners. One was a tall, gaunt man and the other was a trim, goodlooking, young woman. She had been a nurse working at a mission hospital, and he was a missionary who was translating the Bible into the local idom. The two were captured when the North Vietnamese army overran Ban Me Thuot where they were working.

The man was Henry F. (Hank) Blood, fifty-three, of Portland, Oregon. As a missionary of the order of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, a non-denominational protestant organization that spreads the word of Christianity by translating the Holy Scripture into the unusual languages used by tribesmen in remote parts of the world, Hank had been sent to Vietnam to begin the translation of the Bible into the dialect of the local Mnong tribal people.

Betty Ann Olsen was 33 when she was led away from the mission hospital by the soldiers. She was the only woman who had not been killed or wounded in the battle that surged around the village. Betty came into the world of the missionary naturally. She was born in a mission on the Ivory Coast of Africa where her parents are still working. When she grew up, she trained to be a nurse at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Doctors and nurses on the medical staff of our military hospital who read this will remember Betty. Prior to going to Ban Me Thuot, Betty worked at a mission in Da Nang. She also freely gave her time and talents to the military hospital there, a gesture that got her the name "The Belle of Da Nang" from the American GIs.

The description of the way Betty and Hank were taken prisoner conjures up a picture of two nights and a day of terror punctuated every few hours by the cold blooded murder of helpless, innocent men and women whose only wish was to do the work of God. Like the obvious and revealing clues that foretell doom in a Greek tragedy, the manner of their capture signalled what lay ahead for Betty Olsen and Hank Blood as they were led away from the carnage.

Ban Me Thuot is a small town 180 miles northeast of Saigon. There were 13 American civilian men, women and children in Ban Me Thuot when the North Vietnamese soldiers arrived. They were all missionaries and a missionary family. There appears to have been little fighting between armed troops yet when it was all over, one missionary had been killed when his house was blown up, two were murdered when the soldiers threw grenades into the shelter where they knew they were, one died later of her injuries, and five, a severely wounded woman and a mother and her 3 children were spared. Only Betty and Hank were taken prisoner.

The first inkling the missionaries had that the war was coming their way was at 3:30 on Tuesday morning, January 30, 1968, the 1st day of the Tet offensive, when the house in which Leon Griswold and his daughter Carolyn were living was suddenly struck by a mortar shell or grenade. The Griswolds were from White Plains, N.Y. Carolyn was a graduate of the Nyack Missionary College, in Nyack, N.Y. She was working with the young people in Ban Me Thuot as a Christian teacher. Her father was not a missionary in the real sense. He was a retired business man who had gone to Vietnam to be with his daughter and to make himself useful by managing the little hospital in Ban Me Thuot. Leon was killed outright when the house was hit, and Carolyn was severely injured.

Not wanting to abandon their patients and thinking the soldiers would not harm them because they were so obviously peace-loving civilians, the missionaries decided not to leave the village in spite of the trouble all around them. But they were wrong. This was a different kind of war.

The North Vietnamese soldiers knew what they were doing. Next day they blew up the house belonging to Ed and Ruth Thompson, also missionaries from Nyack who, luckily, were not in it at the time. They, along with Bob and Marie Ziemer, had taken refuge in a shallow bunker which the men had hastily dug for shelter until the tide of battle passed.

On hearing the blast of the explosion that wrecked the Thompsons' house, Bob Ziemer, an evangelist for the Christian and Missionary Alliance from Toledo, Ohio, ran out of the bunker with his hands up only to be shot down by a rifleman. Ruth Wilting, a nurse, another Ohioan from Mansfield, was dressing poor Carolyn's wounds in a nearby shed during the commotion and, when she heard the shots that killed Ziemer, she ran out thinking she might be needed and she, too, was murdered. Noting that Bob had come from a shelter, the soldiers then calmly went over and tossed grenades inside, killing both the Thompsons and wounding Marie Ziemer, a fact that, as matters turned out, probably saved her life. She was let go the next morning because, as she said, she was so badly wounded the soldiers must have thought she'd be a nuisance as a captive.

While these tragedies were being played out, the soldiers came upon Betty Olsen and soon discovered Hank Blood and his wife Evangeline in their house nearby. With them were three of their four children, David 6, Catherine 5, and Carolyn 3. Cindy, 7, the oldest child, was in school in Kontum, northeast of Saigon. They quickly decided to make prisoners of Betty and Hank. They didn't bother Evangeline and the children. She says she thinks they were left alone for, like Marie, they too would have been a burden as captives. Evangeline and the children are now in a remote province in the Philippines carrying on Hank's work.

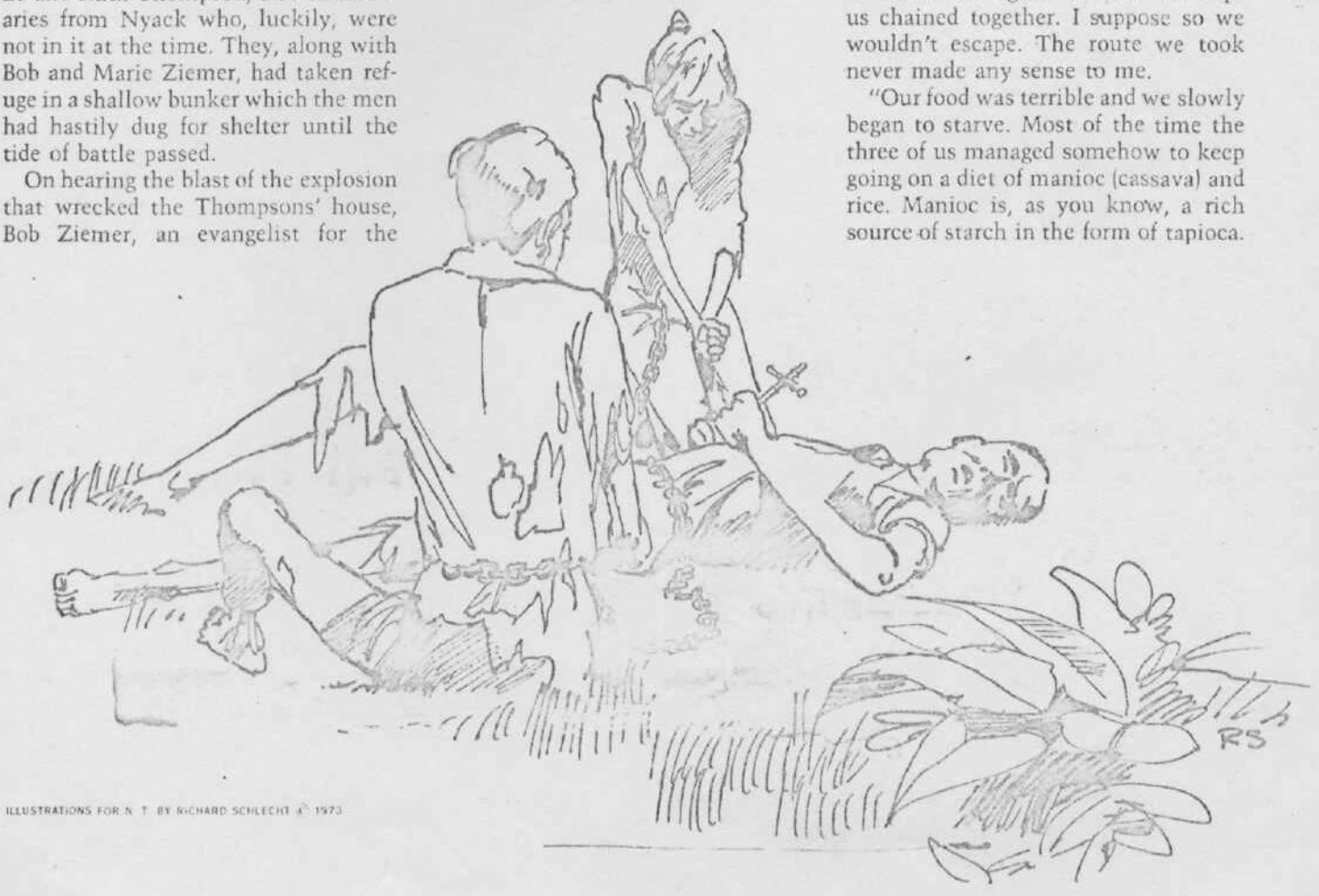
SLOW STARVATION BEGINS

Eventually, as the fighting passed on, Marie Ziemer managed to get away and take Carolyn with her. However, Carolyn Griswold died before she could get to the U.S. Air Force Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay. Marie, fully recovered, is now in New York working at the Missionary headquarters, "As God has willed it," she says ever so softly.

Mike Benge was turned over to a support group, who rarely engaged in combat, shortly after he was captured. Knowing there was fighting around Ban Me Thuot, he was not surprised, therefore, when Betty and Hank were brought into the camp where he was the sole prisoner. Then their fatal ordeal began.

"The first ten months wandering around South Vietnam were the worst from a nutritional point of view, I suppose," Mike said as he recounted their experience. "We'd be on the trail for several days and then we'd make camp. Sometimes we'd stay in one place for a week or two and then our captors would set out again. The soldiers kept us chained together. I suppose so we wouldn't escape. The route we took never made any sense to me.

"Our food was terrible and we slowly began to starve. Most of the time the three of us managed somehow to keep going on a diet of manioc (cassava) and rice. Manioc is, as you know, a rich source of starch in the form of tapioca.



ILLUSTRATIONS FOR N. T. BY RICHARD SCHLECHT © 1973

Once in a while we'd get pieces of meat. Of course, we rarely knew what kind of animal it came from, but it was meat. One time, I know we had sika deer but it wasn't much. After all, the nickname of the little beast is 'mouse deer.'

"We had almost no food at all during the first two months, February and March." Mike continued, "Finally, in the spring we came to a river and stayed there for several weeks. Our diet improved to the extent that we got some fish. We were given a few pieces of carp to eat on three different occasions in those two months."

But if the trio benefitted by reaching the river camp, they paid for it dearly for the area was malarious. Mike's first warning that he had malaria came when he was suddenly seized by a violent chill, profuse sweats and high fever. His two companions told him he was delirious for some time. He has no idea how high his fever climbed but, having seen the virulent malaria from the lowlands of the orient, I can say that Mike would have "run the mercury out the top," as we used to say in Burma. The only notice of his illness his guards took consisted of adding bowls of rice gruel heavily larded with salt and sometimes with sugar to his ration. To make matters worse, Mike, of course, ate even less than usual because of his illness. To him, most disconcerting of all was the suddenness with which the attacks came on. "I was weak. Oh, was I weak. I might be sitting, chained to a tree or to Betty and Hank and all of a sudden everything would go white. Not black, white. A blinding white. I'd hear a loud rustling noise, like someone was squirting a hose in my ears, and then whoosh! . . . and that'd be it. I'd keel over. I might lie there unconscious for several hours. When I'd wake up I'd be completely exhausted only to have the same experience a short time later. I was blind off and on for thirty-five days."

As time went on the seizures subsided as they sometimes do in acute, malignant tertian malaria, if one survives without treatment. Most patients die in the first few days of this type of malaria which is caused by the *plasinodium* falciparum. This is surely what Mike had. It is the worst there is. "The only thing I recall is the food I had during this time. I don't know how I remember so vividly but twice during this period the three of us were given terrapin, iguana and gibbon which are quite tasty.

"In June we moved on, going southwestward. Hank was visibly ill by this time. Oh, he had malaria and so did Betty, but Hank was sick, really sick. Among other things ugly ulcers began breaking out on his arms. He was the first to notice them. We too itched but neither Betty nor I was as bad off as Hank. I knew he was very sick. The odor from his arms reminded me of burnt beans. The sores were wet, too. It was then that I became aware of the steady decline in Betty's health. She never complained but she was losing ground. The troops showed her no sympathy and made absolutely no allowances for her as a woman. We three might as well have been dogs which they didn't want to keep and didn't dare lose."

THE WORST ENEMY ATTACKS

To add to the misery, if that were possible, the three became infested with lice. The deliberate refusal of their captors to permit the pitiful, harmless prisoners to rid themselves of their lice is still another example of bestiality.

Listening to this stalwart American—my lifeboat companion if ever I have a choice—tell how he and Betty and Hank became infested with lice, one suddenly glimpses another example of the desperate conditions to which they had sunk, or, more accurately said, been pushed. In reality, the trio accepted the lice as the lesser of two evils, the other being the penetrating cold of the damp jungle at night.

Let Mike tell it. "From time to time, the troops we were with would bring in native prisoners. One day in June 1968 they brought in a group of Montagnards, the proud tribesmen of the hills whom the communists hate. Having worked among them, I liked them, and I suppose they think I'm

okay. I speak their language, too, and that helps. Anyway, one night I was sleeping next to a Montagnard. It was very, very cold and I began to shiver. The tribesman heard me and invited me to share his blanket but not before warning me that he was infested with lice. I didn't care. 'I'll share your blanket and your lice. I'd rather have lice than be cold!' The following day the Montagnard gave Benge the blanket which he in turn shared with his companions. They repeatedly asked their guards to let them boil the blankets and their clothes, but the guards refused. Thus, to heap misery upon misery, Betty, Mike and Hank were soon home for a horde of lice. Apparently the parasites didn't carry typhus for, other than the incessant itching and the sores, they seemed little worse for their experience.

By this time, the Americans had weeping ulcers over all exposed parts of their bodies. They had also become emaciated and seriously ill in various and ill-defined ways.

FIRST REVEREND BLOOD†, NURSE OLSEN†

On one occasion, their suffering was greatly relieved when a guard gave them leaves of hot peppers and some beans and eggplant. Later they got a small round fruit which was too hard to eat raw but which became "quite chewy once we softened it up over a fire. I haven't any idea what it was. It had a bitter taste and offered diversion.

"Hank's health seemed to fail at a faster pace than Betty's and my own. He had courage and will. He was a man of strong character that one could be proud of but his health was against him. I felt all along that he might not survive the starvation and hardship. I kept thinking, and I kept it to myself, 'one severe blow, one serious illness and we'll lose Hank.' That blow struck in July when Hank developed a severe chest condition. Betty, a nurse, diagnosed it as pneumonia. The three of us knew it probably meant the end for him. And it was. The Vietnamese could plainly see how sick Hank was and even though they could have got a doctor or a paramedic with drugs if they'd called for help, they didn't lift a finger to save Hank Blood."

The Reverend Henry F. Blood, who devoted his life to the Christian mission of sacrifice for others, today lies buried in a shallow grave along a jungle trail in southwestern Vietnam.

The starvation ration for Betty and Mike remained unchanged. In August, they were given some corn which they cooked and a melon-like fruit that tasted like cucumber. As they walked along with the troops, they sometimes found pieces of buffalo hide which they chewed endlessly just as Magellan's sailors ate portions of the rigging when they starved as their ship lay becalmed in the middle of the Pacific. Once in awhile the pitiful prisoners would grab bamboo shoots as they trudged along the trail. "The bamboo must have something in it. We felt better each time we ate it. It must be quite nourishing."

As August dragged on toward September and they moved through dense jungle drenched by the monsoon rains, leeches, "armies of leeches appeared in our path. At times the whole surface ahead of us and the foliage on both sides would be blanketed with the shiny black creatures. They were huge, too. There was no way to avoid them. Of course, we trampled hundreds but I think hundreds more got on Betty and me. Like pneumonia for Hank, for Betty, the repulsive bloodsucking leeches were the last straw."

I can attest that in the jungle man's worst enemy is not snakes, tigers, elephants or any other such predator. These creatures are as fearful of man as he is of them. Given half a chance, each will give the other a wide berth. The implacable enemy is the leech. To them, man with his thin skin offers an inexhaustible banquet of salubrious, warm blood. Against them man is helpless . . . as were Betty and Mike. The leeches got into their clothes. Got all over them. Mike still carries dime-sized blue-black scars from the leeches on his body that fascinated the doctors at Bethesda.

Although she had not menstruated in the eight months since being captured, it was obvious to Mike that Betty was becoming acutely anemic. "She was white as a sheet," he says. She also suffered dysentery constantly which made the vitamin deficiencies she surely had worse. Like Mike's, her hair had turned white and began coming out in handfuls. She was weak, had severe pains and cramps in her legs, which were edematous. "Yet," Mike says, "that was one wonderful, brave girl. She didn't complain once. Not a whimper. Our guards could see that she was dying. I pled with them saying she would die if she didn't get some food, drugs and a doctor, but they paid no attention."

Thus did Betty Ann Olsen, The Belle of Da Nang, vivacious, selfless, a pretty, young woman, die in September 1968. She was one who, as Mike Benge describes those months, seems to have had about her all the saintly qualities of beauty, courage, selflessness and inner peace.

SCURVY, ETC.

"Each of us certainly had scurvy during that time. Fortunately for me," Mike continued, "I knew enough about nutrition to recognize the symptoms of some of our diseases. I used the word 'fortunately' because I got some satisfaction out of trying to recognize the symptoms of malnutrition. I had studied general agriculture and agricultural engineering when I was a student at Oregon State in Corvallis. As I'm sure you know, they emphasize nutrition there so I had several courses in animal and human nutrition. Having some understanding of what was happening helped me get through those days.

"But let me tell you more about scurvy. Before he died, Hank commented several times that his teeth felt loose. Later on, Betty and I experienced the same sensation. Our bodies were covered with what we called 'serus sores' that itched terribly. Then one day Betty noticed that her gums were bleeding and mine were too. Everytime we bit down on anything, we were sure we were going to knock out a tooth. Once, for no apparent reason, a guard gave us a tube of toothpaste and we rubbed it on our gums. It left a refreshing taste I'll never forget, but it didn't stop the bleeding.

"There is another fact of nutritional significance I noticed that summer which I should tell you about. It is that Hank and I had an insatiable thirst all the time. We couldn't get enough water. At the same time, I couldn't get enough salt. Whenever I could get it, I'd eat it despite the fact I would urinate copiously ten or more times a day.

"Shortly after Betty died, the pains along my shinbones became worse and my legs swelled up more than ever. My food ration did not double or triple when my friends died. If anything, the food was worse. We had all noticed that in walking on the trail we'd have difficulty lifting our legs. To step over a log, for instance, I'd have to lean down and with my two hands lift each of my legs over one at a time. The situation got so bad that when we stopped to rest, we'd always sit next

to a small tree because, unless we had a tree to put our arms around and pull ourselves up, we'd be forced to crawl.

"Strangely enough," he continued, "although I guess I was as sick as could be, I felt comparatively strong in the upper part of my body. In fact, I carried my back pack containing what few things I owned: food, rudimentary utensils and my lice and their blanket without difficulty.

"By this time my hair or what was left of it had turned grey and as I looked around at the rest of me I estimated that I weighed about a hundred pounds. I was not disoriented. I had no feelings of being another person. I had no bad dreams. I was coherent and I was bound and determined I was going to survive. The death of those two wonderful people, Betty and Hank, created in me an iron will to live. I kept telling myself that all I had to do on any day was to live until the next. I lived each day in a 'day-tight compartment;' as the saying goes. Each morning I'd look at the sunrise and see it as a signal of success. 'One more day,' I'd say. 'I've beat 'em one more day!' Why it made me positively happy. I did not fret. I did not think about anything that would cloud my determination to see that sun come up the next day. I made up my mind and somehow stuck to it. I guess that's why I am here talking to you now.

"After Betty died we continued our trek. For all I could see and learn it had seemed like aimless wandering but then I know this was not so. After all, I was the captive of a trained unit of soldiers who were under the direct control of the North Vietnamese Army. I want to make that clear to everyone who reads this story. I wasn't held by some rag-tag bunch of bandits. I was held by the Regular Army of the North Vietnamese Government. That's the message.

"By October we reached Cambodia and turned northward. In a few days we came into a large military camp that was obviously very important. It meant that things were surely going to look up for me. I was certain it meant some change in my fate and any change, no matter what, could only be for the better.

"My first reaction upon entering this large, well-organized military base was one of sadness that Betty and Hank could not have lived until that day. It had been ten months since our capture, ten months on the trail, and if they could only have held on 'til October they might be with us today.

"Shortly after my arrival I was seen by a physician for the first time in ten months. He seemed to be competent. He immediately diagnosed my condition as advanced beriberi and severe scurvy. He gave me the works. I got repeated intravenous injections of the B vitamins and vitamin C. Then, not being content with that, they began giving me vitamins subcutaneously at the same time. Also, I was so emaciated they attempted to feed me with continuous injections of glucose but for some reason it would not work so I just drank the solutions."

Benge was held in the North Vietnam army compound for a year. His diet improved greatly. However, while he was no longer in danger of starving to death, he was still undernourished and forced to live on what we'd regard as little better than scraps. Yet sometimes the guards gave him milk and peanut soup and a green consomme. Occasionally he got more rice and bamboo shoots. The medical care didn't follow any pattern either. "Sometimes a doctor would pay attention to me, then for weeks I wouldn't see him. If they felt like it," as Mike puts it, "they'd give me some chloroquin and quinine for my malaria. Then they'd forget me. I never knew what system I was a victim of. But anyway, I can tell you that after three months I began to feel myself again. While the care I got, when I got it, was reasonably good and the circumstances of my imprisonment improved, now that I was the captive in a well-established Army base, the periodic kindnesses, if you can call them that, and the moments of brutality, which you *can* call them, were less haphazard and better organized.

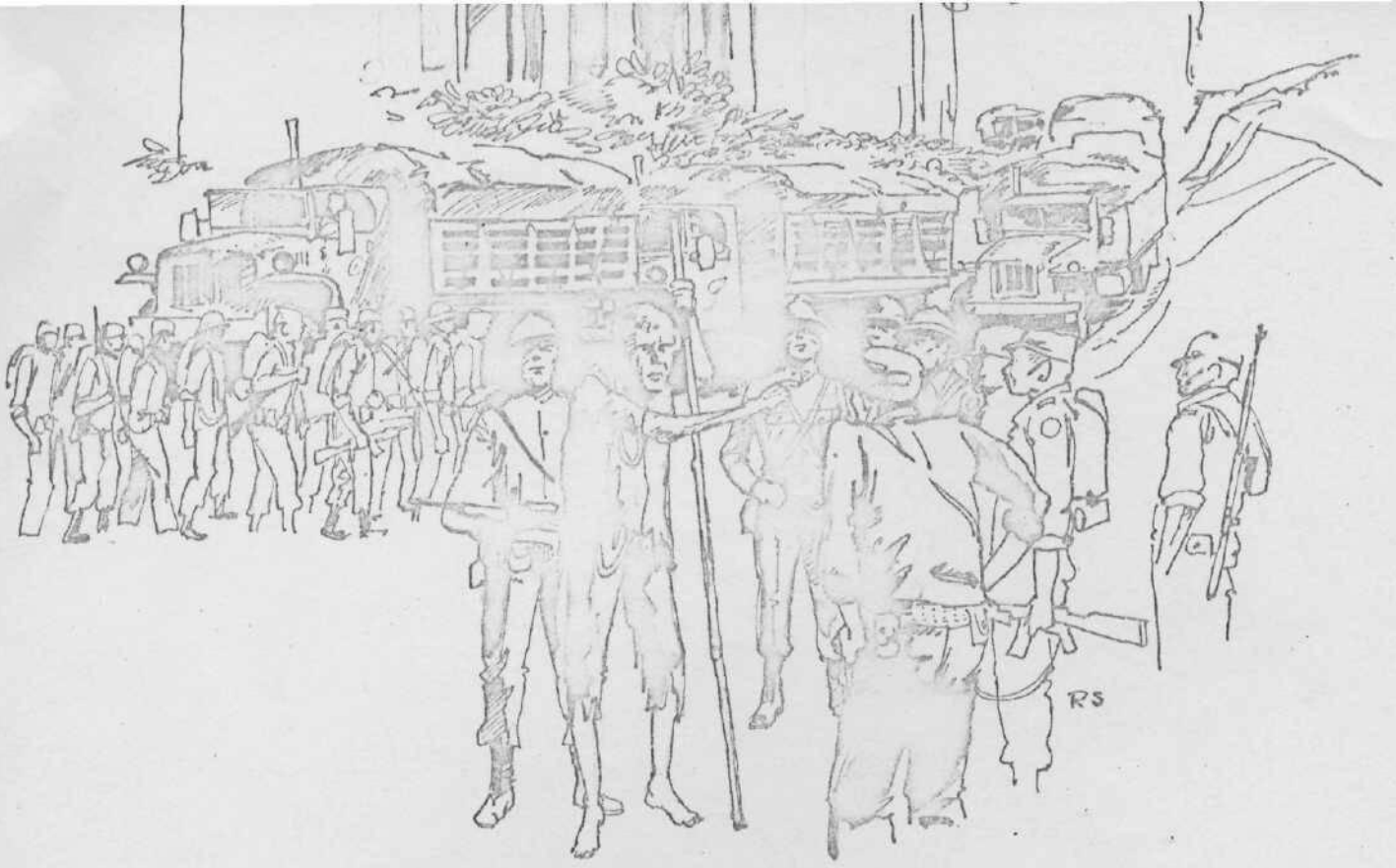
"Really, as I look back on it, it seems strange that I haven't much to tell you about that year—that is much about me, my general health and my nutritional health. That's all we're supposed to talk about (Ed. *This interview was granted on the condition that the subjects discussed be restricted to nutrition and medical care.*). The days ran together. I was reasonably well taken care of and suppose I have no great reason for complaint. After all, I was seeing the sun come up every day and that meant I was winning."

LECTURES ON THE HO CHI MINH

When the year ended and November 1969 came, Mike Benge found himself once more on the trail . . . the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He has no idea who decided to move him or why. In fact, during five years of captivity, even when they gave him the worst punishment of all a few months hence, he was not told where he was going, why he was being moved, or why he was being treated as he was. He only knew that now he was headed northward with what appeared to be army units who were returning home to North Vietnam. Although this was long before the allied "invasion" into Cambodia, Mike wants me to stress the point that he saw an unending line of North Vietnamese troops moving southward on this main supply route. For weeks at a time, he says, the stream of men and material was unending. (This mammoth influx, discounted by many in the U.S.A., was the major reason for the move into Cambodia.)

In describing his trek to Hanoi, Mike commented especially about our concern over the use of drugs by American soldiers. "You think we have a problem with our GIs?" he said. "You should see what I saw as I walked to North Vietnam! All the truck drivers along the trail and troops at missile sites I passed were high on marijuana or opium."

The entire journey was on foot. Although he was in pretty good condition when he left the base camp, he soon recognized the symptoms of beriberi and scurvy with which he had become so familiar. His diet returned to dependence upon a catch-as-catch-can routine with rice and cassava and bits of meat now and then. During these (and other) months it cannot be said that Benge was partially starved because his captors were starved. They weren't. They received food supplies regularly and enjoyed a diet that was adquate and varied by their standards. He attributes their neglect of him to the fact that he was "a prize of war



. . . a prize of victory . . . an individual who was the enemy and, therefore, to be despised." The soldiers taking him north appeared to believe that their only obligation was to keep him alive until they got him to Hanoi—and nothing more. And they did nothing more. Sometimes when they would stop, Mike would be displayed by his guards to fresh troops going southward on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and mocked as "an example of Americans who are so used to riding in airplanes and soft living that they cannot walk." Benge said that on such occasions, and it happened all the time, "I'd counter-propagandize in Vietnamese by telling them that I was suffering from deliberate maltreatment. I don't think I sold anybody but they sure were surprised when I sounded off in Vietnamese. That made me feel real good."

As he trudged on, the beriberi and scurvy symptoms returned. Once again his gums began to bleed, his legs cramped and ached and he could barely keep up. Skin ulcers reappeared and, worst of all, he had something new to worry about. His shoes had rotted and the skin began to peel off the soles of his feet.

PRISON AT LAST

Finally, after more than two years in captivity in the open, Michael Benge arrived at a formal prison on the outskirts of Hanoi. He now finds it hard to say what he expected to be his lot in Hanoi. His life was so filled with a determination to live it in day-tight compartments that he spent little time worrying about what lay ahead. Yet one thing occurred that he was completely unprepared for. Shortly after he entered the prison he was taken to a cell and pushed in. The room, when he measured it, turned out to be nine feet square, eight feet high and with two round holes in the wall. One with crossed bars in it was near the ceiling and thankfully it let in a small ray of sunlight. Another was in the floor and through it came the rats, Mike's only companions. He didn't see another soul but the guard and he did not talk. The door closed and did not open to let him out until the winter of 1971 . . . only a few weeks short of a year.

"I don't know why I was placed in solitary confinement. There was no altercation, never a word of explanation. I suppose it was punishment—not punishment for me individually—but punishment for being an American. Anyway, I tried not to think of it. After all, so long as I could tell when that sun came up each day, I had it made."

There is a seeming contradiction in this fiendish treatment and it was in the food they gave him. The meals he got in solitary, "flying solo" as the POWs called it, were the best Mike had during his entire captivity. That is, it was the best until the Communists began to fatten up all the prisoners of war for the U.S. propaganda market. Instead of the bitterly deficient diet he endured during the two years or so on the trail, each day while he was in solitary he was given a small loaf of white or brown French bread twice daily, accompanied by soup made of cabbage, greens or pumpkin. With relative frequency he got potatoes and sometimes even a few scraps of meat of unknown origin.

He was still very sick. He noticed that he urinated as frequently as fourteen times a day. His legs swelled up frequently and he was nearly blind. He had diarrhea but that was nothing new. After eight months in prison his "symptoms of beriberi" became so severe that they had to send a doctor to see him. Finally, in November 1971, he was taken out of solitary confinement and placed with two other American prisoners. For him that was the next best thing to complete freedom.

Then the sun began to rise each morning without waiting for Mike to take notice. And it continued to do so for two more short years, until March 1973 when the prison gates finally opened and Michael D. Benge came home.