



Cold Days in Hell: American POWs in Korea (Williams-Ford Texas A&M University Military History Series)

William Clark Latham Jr.

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Prisoners suffer in every conflict, but American servicemen captured during the Korean War faced a unique ordeal. Like prisoners in other wars, these men endured harsh conditions and brutal mistreatment at the hands of their captors.

In Korea, however, they faced something new: a deliberate enemy program of indoctrination and coercion designed to manipulate them for propaganda purposes. Most Americans rejected their captors' promise of a Marxist paradise, yet after the cease fire in 1953, American prisoners came home to face a second wave of attacks. Exploiting popular American fears of communist infiltration, critics portrayed the returning prisoners as weak-willed pawns who had been "brainwashed" into betraying their country.

The truth was far more complicated. Following the North Korean assault on the Republic of Korea in June of 1950, the invaders captured more than a thousand American soldiers and brutally executed hundreds more. American prisoners who survived their initial moments of captivity faced months of neglect, starvation, and brutal treatment as their captors marched them north toward prison camps in the Yalu River Valley.

Counterattacks by United Nations forces soon drove the North Koreans back across the 38th Parallel, but the unexpected intervention of Communist Chinese forces in November of 1950 led to the capture of several thousand more American prisoners. Neither the North Koreans nor their Chinese allies were prepared to house or feed the thousands of prisoners in their custody, and half of the Americans captured that winter perished for lack of food, shelter, and medicine. Subsequent communist efforts to indoctrinate and coerce propaganda statements from their prisoners sowed suspicion and doubt among those who survived.

Relying on memoirs, trial transcripts, debriefings, declassified government reports, published analysis, and media coverage, plus conversations, interviews, and correspondence with several dozen former prisoners, William Clark Latham Jr. seeks to correct misperceptions that still linger, six decades after the prisoners came home. Through careful research and solid historical narrative, *Cold Days in Hell* provides a detailed account of their captivity and offers valuable insights into an ongoing issue: the conduct of prisoners in the hands of enemy captors and the rules that should govern their treatment.

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