

Pass Fecteau Richard
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Downey John T.
T/S 3-04.8 Cheon (Fecteau)

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CPYRGHT



Reading With Other Prisoners

Richard Fecteau of Lynn

'Very Special Category' 7 Years to Go in Red China Prison

By WILLIAM G. MILLER

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Ts'ae Lan Tze Ht'ung—the Lane of the Grass Green Mist.

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The address: C/o National Red Cross Society of China, Peking.

The recipient: Richard George Fecteau, 38, of Lynn.

No. 13 has another name—Grass Basket Prison, where Fecteau has been held 13 years, ever since he and John T. Downey, 41, of New Britain, Ct., were captured as agents of the Central Intelligence Agency.

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For 22 hours they are confined in their separate cells with nothing to do except read and think about lost years.

They are accused of training and parachuting Chinese Nationalist teams into Red China for espionage.

The Americans were captured in 1952, when according to Peking, their plane was shot down over Manchuria while attempting to pick up an agent and drop supplies to others.

The United States contends the two are merley civilian employees of the Defense Department who were hitching a ride on a plane that vanished on a flight from Korea to Japan.

The Red Chinese, who induced confessions from the two at their spectacular 1954 trial, clearly regard them as no ordinary prisoners.

In 1960, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai snapped that "as airborne secret agents" the two are in "a very special category."

In Grass Basket 200 to 400 political prisoners undergo interrogation and "thought reform" prior to their formal trial. For most it is a stop on the road to larger jails.

The attitude of the Chinese toward their "special prisoners" has two sides.

At first rigid and forbidding, Peking has become more lenient in later years. Several times the Americans have been taken on tours of the country—apparently for propaganda purposes.

Twice, Fecteau and Downey have seen the Great Wall of China, visiting communal farms en route.

In 1956, a tour took them through Hangchow, Harbin, Chenyang, Nanking, Wuhan and Shanghai.

Fecteau had visited Shanghai before as a merchant seaman when the street children were in rags.

This time he said: "If you notice the kids now, they look well taken care of. Their clothes are not from Kennedy's, but they all have clothes."

Last Fall, Fecteau and Downey were given a four-day tour of historic spots in Peking, including the ancient Ming Tombs in the outskirts.

For Fecteau, former Lynn Classical High football co-captain and grid star at Boston University, special highlight.

He and Downey were allowed to watch a basketball game between Canton and Peking Universities.

"You don't know how pleased I was," Fecteau says in a letter home.

Yet these unexplained and infrequent excursions spread over 13 years are mere breaks in a pattern of prison life marked by boredom and inactivity.

Fecteau's days are long and tedious though not as harsh as his first two and a half years when he was held in solitary confinement. Then he was not even allowed to shave.

"That was pretty tough," he says. "There was no one to talk to and nothing to read and nothing to do. I got a nervous tick, but that's gone now."

From his solitary cell he wrote to his mother, Mrs. Philip Fecteau, 15 Wyman st., Lynn: "You know I can't stand that, Mother. I have to have someone to talk to."

Today, Fecteau has someone to talk to — a Chinese cellmate who speaks English. Fecteau himself is now fluent in both speaking and reading Chinese.

Several times, Fecteau has requested that he and Downey share the same cell, but this has been denied.

However, the Americans get together for two hours each afternoon during the exercise period in the prison court-

yard. There they swap reading material and food sent from home.

Unlike the main prison, Grass Basket has no machine shops or mills, so Fecteau is not permitted to work.

The only physical diversions are cleaning out his 12 by 15 ft. cell and washing his clothes (activities prohibited while in solitary confinement) and digging in a small garden within the prison yard. On the "farm" prisoners grow vegetables such as eggplant and cucumbers.

Fecteau's only real contact with the outside world is his mother who visited him in 1956 and is permitted to

The Massachusetts man in turn can only write once a month, his letters home often including a separate note for the twin daughters he has not seen since they were 18 months old.

The girls, 15-year-old Sid-nice and Suzon, live in Lynn with Fecteau's ex-wife, Margaret. His second wife died in a Maryland fire after his capture.

To his children he wrote one Christmas: "If I were home, I'd put a bike in each of your stockings. Where I am, I couldn't get you a bag of jelly beans."

Each month, his mother is allowed to send two 11 lb. food parcels. A must item is coffee — six ounce jars of instant.

Fecteau greeted the last batch with: "Now I can pay back the coffee to Jack which I owed him and build up a small reserve."

Another mandatory item is tea bags — something that no doubt amuses the Chinese, a tea-drinking people.

Fecteau also looks forward to jars of peanut butter, cheese, tuna fish and cookies. Currently en route is a fruit cake that should arrive in time for Thanksgiving.

The Lynn man weighed 205 lbs. on his 5 ft. 11 in. frame when captured in 1952. Today, he says he's putting on weight.

The exact nature of his prison diet is unknown, but he has some meat and at one time said he was getting bread instead of rice. Recently he wrote asking for a jar of honey to spread with his Chinese pancakes.

Prison fare includes three measures of boiled water a day. This makes tea or coffee and in Summer is mixed with fruit compounds and in Winter with jello sent from home.

In the enforced inactivity of prison life, food becomes a central thought. It results in the tragically humorous picture of an accused "super spy" debating the merits of peanut butter by brand name.

Fecteau survives the years aided by an unimpaired sense of humor.

In the Summer mugginess of his cell he can still say:

"Here a glass of cold beer or even water is something to dream about. If I could get to the water I'd sit up to my neck all day. Submarine

And watching his receding hair. Jack and I are both losing our hair. It won't be long before we look like gold-domed Buddhas."

Reading helps fill the prison years, but all material is closely screened. From his mother he receives the New Yorker, National Geographic and the sports pages from the newspapers.

Readers Digest, Time and other news and opinion sheets are prohibited as anti-Communist. A Chinese newspaper is provided.

Fecteau's only books have been the works of Marx, Engels, Stalin, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung and the Western classics of Dickens, Mann and Cervantes.

One of the primary functions of Grass Basket Prison is the "thought reform" of prisoners. In processes that often last several years prisoners are induced—by study and self-examination—to arrive at a feeling of repentance and develop a political awareness.

Fecteau has never mentioned any lectures in his letters home. And as late as 1957, Downey said no educational programs had been offered since his imprisonment.

Fecteau's mother managed to send her son a Bible which he has read from cover to cover.

There are no church services in the prison, so Sunday becomes the day Fecteau listens to classical music on the radio.

And — in one of those unexplained Chinese gestures — Fecteau and Downey on their four-day tour last Fall were allowed to enter a Peking store and buy sheets for their cots.

Will Fecteau ever get home? His mother's eyes cloud. She sees the gathering storms on the international horizon. "Seven years is a long time. Anything can happen. Mean-while we can only pray and wait."

After 13 years, Fecteau seems clear-witted, unbeaten and resigned to the seven years ahead.