

Nixon Made Appeal To China to Release American Captives

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ANGRA DA HEROISMO, the Azores, Dec. 13—The White House said today that President Nixon had sent a personal appeal to Peking on behalf of American prisoners, including the three granted clemency by the Chinese Government.

The Presidential press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, informed newsmen who came here for Mr. Nixon's meeting with President Pompidou that Mr. Nixon had had several days' "advance knowledge" that the Chinese would release Richard G. Fecteau and Mary Ann Harbert and would reduce the life sentence of John T. Downey. Mr. Ziegler said the information had come through the usual White House channels for secret communications with Peking.

Said to Be in C.I.A.

Mr. Fecteau, who is 43 years old and is from Lynn, Mass., had served 19 years of a 20-year sentence on charges that he and Mr. Downey, 41 of New Britain, Conn., were Central Intelligence Agency operatives. Both listed as civilian employees of the Army, they were captured after a military plane on which they were passengers was shot down on a flight from Japan to South Korea during the Korean war in 1952.

Miss Harbert, 26, of Menlo Park, Calif., was on a yacht seized in Chinese territorial waters near Hong Kong in 1968. Peking said that Gerald R. McLaughlin, also a Californian and the owner of the yacht, who was seized with her, committed suicide in 1969.

While President Nixon welcomed the favorable response to his appeal, the White House refused to discuss the chances

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for the release of two Air Force pilots still in Chinese hands. A third pilot may also be held.

"The President welcomes the act of clemency of the People's Republic of China in commuting the life sentence of John T. Downey to one of five more years and releasing Richard G. Fecteau prior to the completion of his sentence," Mr. Ziegler said. "He also welcomes the release from detention of Miss MaryAnn Harbert. The fact that Mr. Fecteau and Miss Harbert will now be able to spend Christmas with their families is a matter of particular pleasure to the President."

Mr. Ziegler refused to discuss the situation of the missing Air Force men, Capt. Philip Smith, 37, who was shot down during a reconnaissance mission in 1965, and Lieut. Robert Flynn, 33, who was downed during a mission over North Vietnam in 1967. Another officer, Lieut. Joseph Dunn, who was shot down in 1968, is missing and may be on the mainland.

It is believed that Peking is reluctant to release military men involved in armed actions in or over North Vietnam.

On the two occasions that Henry A. Kissinger, the President's advisor on national security affairs, visited Peking this year, Mr. Ziegler related, he discussed the prisoners with Premier Chau En-lai.

It was not clear whether Mr. Kissinger had carried the President's appeal during his first visit, last July, or during his second in October.

American officials suggested that Peking might have timed its clemency announcement Mr. Nixon's consultations with allies prior to his trip to China on Feb. 21. He arrived last night from Washington.

Americans Are Sped to U.S.

By TILLMAN DURDIN

Special to The New York Times

HONG KONG, Dec. 13—The two Americans released by China passed through here today and departed by plane for the United States. The British authorities kept them from contact with the press.

A British military helicopter picked them up at the border and flew them to the international airport, where they were rushed aboard an American military plane bound for the United States.

The United States Consulate refused to answer questions about them. A spokesman, who explained that this was on instructions from Washington,

said that all information about them would be disclosed there.

Mr. Fecteau and Mr. Downey were imprisoned in Peking. Miss Harbert had been jailed in the Canton area.

Mr. Fecteau's release represented a slight gesture of clemency, coming a few months before the end of 20 years' imprisonment.

Came as a Surprise

There had been no positive knowledge that Miss Harbert and Mr. McLaughlin had been seized by the Chinese. They had simply disappeared after sailing for Manila in 1968. The United States Consulate had no record on them when Miss Harbert appeared.

Mr. Fecteau was dressed in Chinese padded clothing. Miss Harbert wore a western-style dress. Both were reported to look well.

Hsinhua, the Chinese Communist press agency, made an announcement about the Americans today that reached here almost simultaneously with the appearance of Mr. Fecteau and Miss Harbert.

The Hsinhua dispatch, from Peking, said Mr. McLaughlin had "behaved badly" during detention, "resisted investigation and, taking the warders unawares, committed suicide on March 7, 1969." Miss Harbert was said to have "admitted her mistakes."

In announcing the suicide the Peking Government followed the precedent set when the Most Rev. James Edward Walsh, an American Bishop, was freed from a Shanghai prison on July 1970, after serving 12 years of a 20-year sentence for alleged espionage. Simultaneously Peking announced that another American imprisoned for life in Shanghai for alleged espionage, Hugh F. Redmond Jr., had committed suicide.

Hsinhua said that Mr. Downey had had an alias, Jack Donovan, and that he and Mr. Fecteau had dropped 11 special agents they had trained in Japan into Manchuria in 1952 to engage in espionage and sabotage. Later, it said, they "intruded into China's territorial air on a spy plane in an attempt to make contact with and provide supplies to the air-dropped special agents."

The plane was shot down and the two men were captured, Hsinhua related, adding that in view of the fact that Mr. Fecteau and Mr. Downey "admitted their crimes during the trial and their behavior was not bad while serving their terms, China "decided to grant them leniency."

At least one other American, Sydney Rittenberg, is known to be a prisoner. He had worked for the Chinese Communists for many years before his arrest in 1968 on charges of "ultraleftist activities."

They Reach Hawaii

HONOLULU, Dec. 13 (UPI) — Mr. Fecteau and Miss Harbert arrived here today en route from Hong Kong to an undisclosed destination. They did not leave the plane.