

Freed Woman Is Home at Last

By Don West
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PALO ALTO — Mary Ann Harbert today began trimming her first Christmas tree in three long, excruciatingly boring years.

She returned here to the heartfully happy embrace of her family yesterday for the first time since being released from a detention area in Red China, where she had been held from mid-1968 to last week for "trespassing."

"They don't celebrate Christmas in China. I tried to keep track of the days, but sometimes I would forget and miss the day," she told reporters as she arrived from Valley Forge, Pa., where she had undergone medical examinations.

The frail girl, looking much younger than her 26 years — she celebrates her birthday tomorrow — has been pronounced medically sound, but her mother insisted she has lost too much weight.

"She's simply beautiful,

but too thin," said Mrs. Polly Harbert, who met her daughter at San Francisco International Airport accompanied by Mary Ann's father, Gene, a civil engineer with the U.S. Geodetic Survey, and older sister, Sue, 29.

She had been held by the Chinese government until a thaw in relations between China and the United States prompted her release.

Sailing

While on a 1968 sailing trip from Hong Kong to Manila with a friend, Gerald McLaughlin, 41, she fell into Communist custody.

McLaughlin had had the boat built in Hong Kong and she flew out to join him on a sailing trip through the South China Sea to Manila. She had a Pan Am airline ticket to go on to Australia and finally home.

"We found ourselves surrounded by these three Chinese junks, fishing boats, and they started waving a gun and so we cooperated when they threw us a fowling

line," she said.

The two were charged with trespassing and an investigation begun. They were separated immediately and Mary Ann was not told until two weeks ago that her sailing companion had died after a year's internment.

"I asked about him often, but they did not tell me until they released me," she said.

She was kept in a rural area, but not allowed to make contact with the local people or any foreigners.

"My average day would be to get up in the morning, eat breakfast, take a nap, eat lunch, walk around a bit, eat dinner and go to bed," she recalled.

Propaganda

The only reading material furnished had little information about the world outside China. A photo magazine and a propaganda magazine were her staple reading items.

Interpreters were about the only people allowed to talk to her during her three-and-a-half year incar-

ceration.

She never gave up hope she would be released, but there were times she grew extremely discouraged, especially in the early days when living conditions were so poor.

"After living conditions became better and the food improved, I had more hope," she said.

"I did prepare myself to stay a long time," she said.

When President Nixon's planned trip to China was announced, her captors asked her opinion of this new development in international relations.

Politics were discussed "all the time" with her, but she would not define Chinese educational efforts as "brainwashing."

Neither the Chinese nor U.S. government spokesmen placed any restrictions on what she could talk about after her return here.

There were several hints early this month that she might be released, because

"they started asking what I wanted, if I needed any clothes or anything," said Mary Ann, who was notified Dec. 11 she would be home in time for Christmas.

Hospitals

She went first to a hospital in Valley Forge, she insisted, because she wanted to be certain of her physical condition. She had spent the last six months in Chinese hospitals.

While her life was never threatened by her captors, her existence under guard was one long stretch of "nothing to do," said the University of Utah graduate. Her plans are no further in the future than a search for a job.

As for her first Christmas celebration in three years, she said with a giggle to her folks with an old family joke: "All I want is a kitchen."

Her family had always travelled as Harbert's job took him from post to post and a cat was never allowed in their apartments.