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Saigon Returns Marines' Bodies

By Lewis M. Simons
Washington Post Foreign Service

BANGKOK, Feb. 22—The remains of the last two Americans known to have been killed in the Vietnam war were released in Saigon today and flown here en route to the United States. Congressional aides accompanying the bodies said that the repatriation is evidence of Saigon's desire for normalization of relations, pointing out that the return of the bodies was carried out directly between Vietnam and the United States. In the past, such cases have been handled through third parties, usually the United Nations.

"I think they want to tell us that they want to talk to us," one of the aides said.

The two dead servicemen—Cpl. Charles McMahon Jr. and Lance Cpl. Darwin Lee Judge, both U.S. Marines, were killed April 29, 1975, the day before the U.S. embassy evacuated, when Saigon's Tansonnhut Airport was shelled.

McMahon, of Woburn, Mass., was 21 when he died.

Judge, of Marshalltown, Iowa, was 19. In the confusion of the final U.S. pullout from the besieged capital, the bodies of the two young men were left behind.

The bodies were released to two aides of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) following an exchange of letters between Kennedy and the foreign ministers of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (of South Vietnam).

The aides, Dale de Haan and Gerald Tinker, flew into Saigon from Bangkok this morning aboard an Air France jet chartered by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.

According to de Haan, the party remained in Saigon about an hour and a quarter, all of the time at Tansonnhut Airport. When the aircraft returned to a Thai military airport on the outskirts of Bangkok this afternoon, it was met by a handful of Americans, mostly military officers and journalists.

Four uniformed U.S. military pallbearers carried the two flag-draped aluminum coffins off the plane and transferred them to a camouflage-painted C-130 transport plane. The plane carried the bodies to the Joint Casualty Resolution Center at Sattahip, Thailand, for positive identification.

Winter-uniformed officers and enlisted men, sweating heavily in the brilliant midday sun, saluted in silence as the plane lumbered past them to the runway.

The efficiency and lack of ceremony here was evidently matched at Saigon. According to de Haan, the chartered plane was met by Trinh Van Anh, the director of South Vietnam's Special Operations Search for Missing Persons.

"It was a solemn occasion," de Haan said in reply to a reporter's question. "Given that, they were very friendly."

He said the South Vietnamese authorities allowed them to drape the two wooden boxes in which the remains had been stored

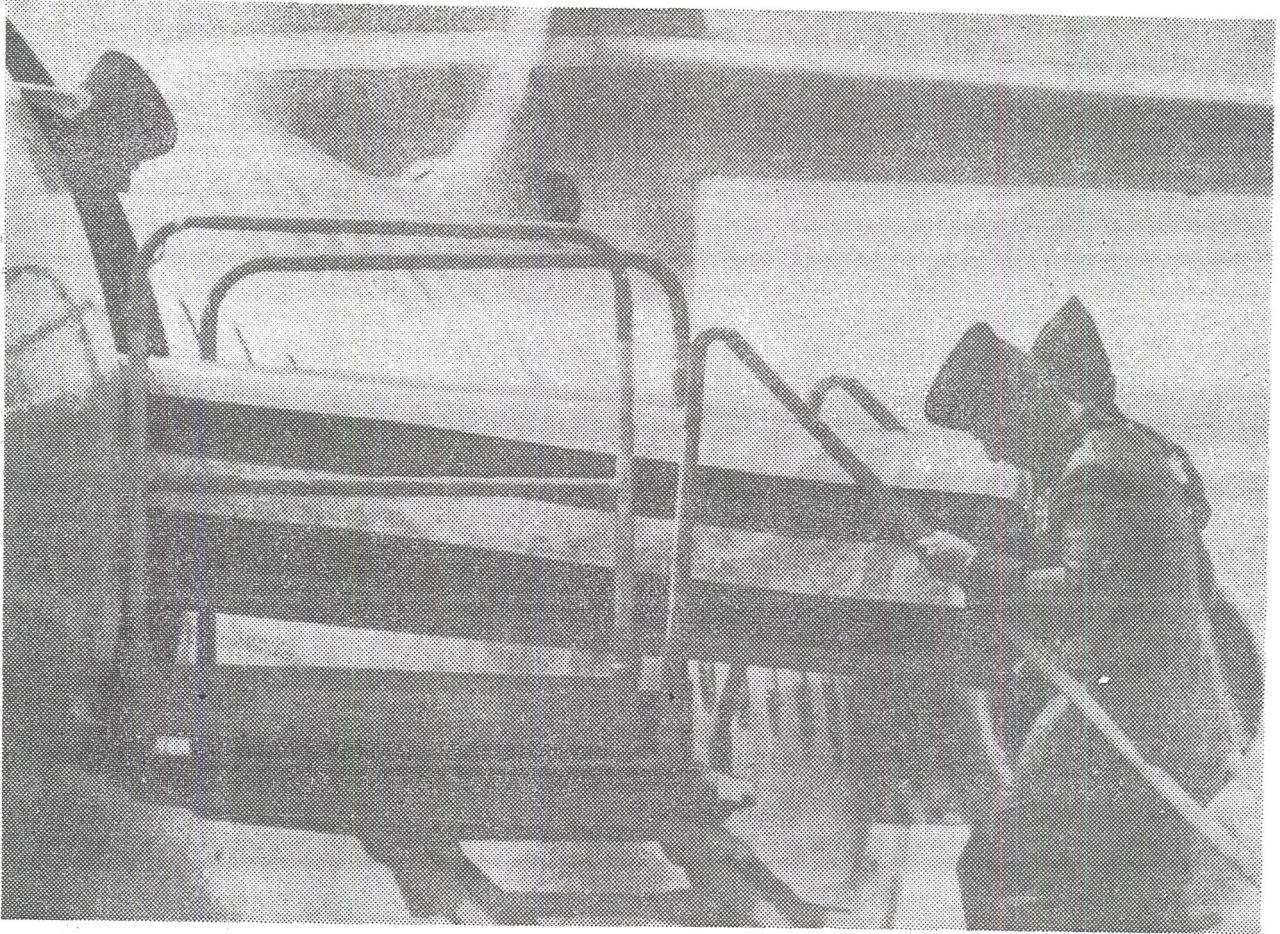
with American flags. Aboard the chartered plane, the remains were transferred to standard military coffins.

Asked whether the question of the 820 Americans officially listed as missing in action in Vietnam and the rest of former Indochina had come up, de Haan said:

"The DRV and the PRG have indicated willingness to undertake searches under certain circumstances. This repatriation is the latest step."

He added that the Vietnamese "would like normalization of relations" with the United States "and we feel that this repatriation has contributed to the process of normalization."

"The gestures of goodwill are piling up," Tinker added, "and there has to be some response by the United States at some time." He mentioned the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo, an end to travel restrictions, repatriation of Vietnamese in the United States to their homeland and economic aid as possible areas of U.S. response.



Associated Press

An honor guard removes a flag-draped casket from the plane which brought remains of two Marines from Saigon.