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Free Pilots Flying Home

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COPENHAGEN (AP) — Three U.S. fliers liberated from North Vietnamese prison camps flew home today, happy to be within hours of the land they left to fight a distant war, concerned about the hundreds of prisoners of war they left behind.

Lt. Norris Charles put it succinctly shortly before he and two colleagues released by Hanoi took off for New York.

At a Copenhagen news conference he said the American people were in fact bringing the trio home. Then, concerning the remaining prisoners, Charles told Americans:

"If you really want to bring these men home you can do it. If you really want to end the war you can do it. Call on me to help bring the men home . . . I can't feel too free when I

consider the men who are left behind in North Vietnam."

CHARLES, his fellow Navy lieutenant junior grade Mark Gartley and Maj. Edward Elias of the Air Force appeared to be in fine shape as they arrived in Denmark after an overnight stay in Moscow. They had flown from Hanoi via Peking and Moscow, traveling on commercial planes in the company of a group of American antiwar activists. That was an effort to avoid any attempt by U.S. authorities to take the pilots into custody while en route.

In Washington, Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim said the three fliers will be met on their arrival in the United States by a team of military officials, including physicians and led by Dr. Robert Shields, special assistant to Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird for POW-MIA affairs.

Friedheim said their return to military control would come likely at that time.

At the New York airport, the men will be reunited with members of their families and will have a chance to talk with the press "if they desire to do so," Friedheim said.

He said the doctors also would want to see if they require any immediate medical treatment and if so would be sent to a military hospital in the New York area.

However, Friedheim indicated that they will be given time to see their families before they are sent to military hospitals near their homes for complete medical checkups and intelligence debriefings in which they will be asked the fate of other prisoners held in Communist hands.

Elias is scheduled to go to Maxwell Air Force Base Hospital, Montgomery, Ala., Charles to the San Diego Naval Hospital, and Gartley to the Naval Air Station Hospital at Jacksonville, Fla.

Charles had been a prisoner of war almost a year, Gartley four years and Elias four months.

Charles' wife, Olga, is from New Orleans. She is returning with him from Hanoi.

They shunned political statements.

Gartley observed that the situation was "not good" and he was "not happy."