

For POWs -- A Dry Russian Wine and the Sweet Taste of Freedom

By PETER ARNET

COPENHAGEN (AP)—Somewhere far below under the fluffy clouds the Communist world was receding. U.S. Navy pilot Mark Gartley looked across the aisle of the Soviet Aeroflot jet and caught the eye of Maj. Edward Elias of the U.S. Air Force.

"I'd say we are in the free world now," said Gartley. "Let's drink a toast to that."

They raised glasses of dry Russian wine and silently put the rims to their lips.

For bachelor Gartley the flight from Moscow to Copenhagen was his re-entry to the West after four years in a North Vietnam prison camp. He had been held four months after his plane was shot down earlier this year.

With them was Navy Lt. Norris Charles, nearly one year in a prisoner of war camp. Tonight they would be home in the United States, but now as the plane swept through the sunny morning sky the men were savoring the sweet taste of freedom.

ALL THREE pilots had officially been released in Hanoi 12 days ago. Gartley's mother, Minnie Lee, was in Hanoi to receive him. Olga Charles was there to meet her husband, Norris.

The political implications in the release plagued the trip back home and were not resolved until an uneasy confrontation with American officials at Moscow airport Wednesday night.

At stake after their emotional relief in Hanoi was not their freedom, but the nature of the journey home. The North Vietnamese had made it clear to an escort group of four American antiwar activists led by Cora Weiss and David Dellinger that they expected the pilots to be flown all the way back to the United States by civilian aircraft.

The Pentagon had made it clear it disapproved of the nature of the release, and sporadic news reaching the escort delegation in Hanoi was that preparations were being made by the U.S. government to intervene with the pilots somewhere en route and fly them home by military aircraft.

"This will destroy the base we have established for future releases," Mrs. Weiss complained. She sent a cable to President Nixon urging that the original routing be allowed to stand. The pilots also sent him a cable affirming that they wanted to fly home with the delegation.

BUT UP TO the final moments of the Moscow airport confrontation the escort delegation did not know exactly what to expect — from the pilots or from the American authorities.

"It will be touch and go," said Prof. Richard Falk, acting as legal adviser to the group, when they held a meeting in Novosibirsk after learning from the Soviet Intourist organization that American officials would meet the plane in Moscow.

For the antiwar activists the basis of the problem was the possible nature of U.S. government action. Everything from a forcible abduction to verbal threats against the pilots to direct orders to the men was considered in a series of conferences between the escort delegation and the pilots that had begun as far back as their release Sept. 17.

From the beginning, Mark Gartley had been steadfast in his resolve.

"Mum came over here to get me, and I'm going home with her," he told this reporter many times. "If the government wants to intervene they will have to drag me off the plane. I hope it does not come to that."

NORRIS Charles made no secret of his antiwar views after his release, but like Maj. Elias he was not certain of the military procedures involved. Both Charles and Elias said repeatedly they wanted to go right back to New York with the delegation so as not to jeopardize the chances of release of the nearly 400 other Americans in North Vietnamese prison camps.

But they also were reluctant to refuse military orders. Right up to the Moscow arrival, Elias made it clear that he would tell American officials that he wanted to return with the others, but if they ordered him to do so he would leave the party and go with them. Elias is a career military officer.

Charles was not quite sure at that point how he would react. Only Gartley was steadfast in his resolve to stay with the group.

The fears of the escort party were to prove groundless, but they did not know this until the last moments.

The Moscow airport scene was chaotic. Reporters pushed and shoved. American Embassy officials were chest to chest with the antiwar party in what at times deteriorated into angry confrontation.

"I INSIST on talking with my fellow Americans," said Charge d'Affaires Adolph

Dubs.

Falk asserted: "You have no legal right to order these men around on foreign soil."

Dubs at one point went up to Norris Charles and demanded; "Identify yourself." But Charles did not even hear him as the reporters closed in.

Finally, some kind of order was restored and the antiwar activists, the pilots, the American officials, including an embassy doctor, and this reporter closeted themselves in a small room.

Dubs explained he had been instructed to offer the pilots the use of a medical evacuation aircraft waiting at Copenhagen airport, lodgings for the night at the ambassador's residence in Moscow, plus anything else the embassy could provide, including telephone calls home.

It became the pilots' turn to speak up. Olga Charles looked silently across at Norris, clinched her teeth and slowly shook her head as though her husband might be yielding to the tempting embassy offers. But Norris was resolved.

"It is in the best interest of all of us to return the way we had planned — on a civilian plane with everyone else," he declared.

ELIAS AND GARTLEY agreed with Charles. No direct military order to accompany the American officials was given them.

Dubs looked somewhat disappointed with their response, but he tried to maintain his composure.

"Well, I will respect your wishes and inform Washington of them," he said before leaving.

Inside the little meeting room the tensions that had accumulated over 18 hours of flight that had begun early that same day in Peking, melted away.

Cora Weiss broke into a broad smile.

"I'm just so proud of you guys," she said, shaking hands all around. "You came through."