

Wk Stars News

Return of the 3 POWs

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NEW YORK—Navy Lt. (j.g.) Norris A. Charles, 27, a champagne glass in his hand and his wife and child nearby, was back home after nine months in a Hanoi prison.

He put down the half-finished glass and stared at his 3-year-old daughter, Kirsten, at play with a young nephew. "Isn't she beautiful," he said gravely.

Charles had good reason to be happy last night, but he wasn't.

Three celebrated ex-prisoners of war landed at Kennedy Airport, but instead of getting a joyous welcome they were quickly surrounded by military and government officials. They were to be taken by waiting military transportation to military hospitals in Alabama, New York and California.

Pentagon and State Department officials had said yesterday before the arrival that the airmen would be free to hold a press conference at the airport if they wished, and that representatives from the Navy, Air Force

and State Department would act mostly as a greeting committee.

But at least 20 uniformed men of the services and numbers of plainclothesmen, police and New York Port Authority detectives quickly surrounded the airmen when they landed and shooed newsmen away when they attempted interviews.

A 25-minute shouting match had erupted before the men debarked from the big jet at the airport, the New York Times reported.

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Navy Lt. Markham L. Gartley, 28, a prisoner for four years, had asked for two days to visit his family before returning to service. Dr. Roger Shields, the Pentagon's prisoner specialist who was aboard the plane, told him the request wouldn't be approved.

'Want Him to Ourselves'

Gartley's mother, Mrs. Minnie Lee Gartley of Dunedin, Fla., who had gone to Hanoi for her son's release, insisted, "We just want him to ourselves, free of the government, free of the Navy, free of the press, free of the North Vietnamese, and now we're not going to get it," the Times quoted her as saying.

Mrs. Garley then sobbed, "I haven't cried since the day you called me and said my son was shot down."

She will visit her son at a military hospital in New York today.

But only Charles, whose plane to San Diego apparently was delayed, made it back to the comfort of the International Airport Hotel for an hour and a half, where his wife and friends had found a bottle of champagne. They laughed and cried while he stiffly tried to share their mood.

Tug-of-War

Perhaps it was exhaustion from the two-day trip—Hanoi to New York via Moscow and Copenhagen—or the muddling confusion of what has seemed like a tug-of-war between the government and a group of anti-war activists over custody of Charles, Gartley and Air Force Maj. Edward K. Elias, 34.

Half a dozen Navy officers and enlisted men stood in the narrow hallways outside the hotel door, patiently waiting. When it was time to leave, Charles said only that he was going to San Diego "not against my wishes."

Charles Out First

Charles had been the first man out of the Scandinavian Airways jumbojet at the airport. His sister, Mrs. Charles Shannon, rushed up the steps to greet him wildly. Then something happened that is not yet explained.

The three young fliers slowly climbed down, surrounded by officials, as the press elbowed each other behind a steel fence 50 yards away. They were lost to sight for a moment. Navy and Air Force cars with a police escort stood nearby, the group swirled and eddied and suddenly was gone.

Only Elias, who spent five months in prison, made it to the microphones for a few seconds to say he was glad to be home. Then he too was gone,

to a medical examination at Maxwell Air Base in Alabama.

Members of the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam reacted with fury, claiming the three had been "whisked away" to avoid government embarrassment. Military officials insisted the men required immediate medical examinations.

The Rev. William Sloan Coffin of Yale University, a member of the committee, claimed the men had been double-crossed, their requests to spend their first days in private with their families denied.

Mrs. Cora Weiss, liaison committee cochairman said "we have just witnessed another recapture scene — one incarceration replacing another."

Given Uniforms

Mrs. Weiss described a scene aboard the jet flying into New York. She said the three servicemen, then in civilian clothes, were ushered up to the lounge of the aircraft, where Navy and Air Force uniforms were pulled from two suitcases and the men were asked to put them on out of sight of the anti-war group.

(The Associated Press reported that the three men voted to don the uniforms when they were about 90 minutes outside New York).

After the three dressed, Coffin, Mrs. Weiss and Dellinger charged, the attitude of authorities, who had been on the plane since it left Copenhagen at 10 a.m., suddenly became less conciliatory.

At least one of the airmen, Elias, was happy to put on his uniform and told the liaison group that "it felt great," according to Mrs. Weiss. Elias' attitude apparently caused bitterness among the anti-war partisan.

"Elias deceived us and deceived the press and deceived the world," Mrs. Weiss charged. She said he had made strong anti-war statements in Hanoi and then reversed himself as soon as the jet left Europe, and even expressed a wish to return to his branch of the service.

Elias said aboard the plane that he felt the men had fulfilled the conditions of their release set by Hanoi by remaining with the peace group until they reached New York, the Associated Press reported.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers told the AP in New York, "We are pleased that the prisoners of war are back in the United States and we hope very soon that all the prisoners will be returned."

In Los Angeles, the chairman of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia criticized the peace group chaperones for "using our loved ones as propaganda."