

Freed U.S. POWs Rejoin Families

By The Associated Press

Dressed in military uniforms and wearing combat decorations, three American prisoners of war have returned to the United States, separated from the peace group that escorted them from Hanoi and scattered to different parts of the country.

The arrival at New York's Kennedy International Airport last night ended a 12-day trip that was followed with political controversy at home. The end of the trip, however, did not bring an end to the dissension.

The three POWs had rejected offers to turn themselves over to U.S. government officials at various points along their journey, which included stops in Peking, Moscow and Copenhagen. One of the three, Maj. Edward Elias, said aboard the plane that he felt they had fulfilled the conditions of release set by Hanoi by remaining with their accompanying peace group.

Elias, 34, an Air Force officer held prisoner for five months, joined his family and flew to Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala., aboard a military C9 medical evacuation plane, the Defense Department said.

The other two men are Navy Lt. (j.g.) Mark Gartley, 24, a prisoner for four years, and Navy Lt. (j.g.) Norris Charles, 27, captive nine months.

Gartley went to a family reunion at the U.S. Naval Hospital at St. Albans in New York City, the department said. Charles met with his family in New York and then flew to a naval hospital in San Diego aboard another C9, officials said.

After a physical examination this morning, the hospital's chief of medicine, Dr. E. D. Kaufmann, said Charles had lost 16 pounds since his capture but appeared to be in good condition.

does not feel it was one of military deprivation."

A Navy spokesman said Kaufmann "hoped it would be just a few days" before Charles was released from the hospital. He said Charles has a private room and is seeing his family but no other visitors.

Cora Weiss said she and the other three chaperones, David T. Dellinger, 56, Richard A. Falk, 41, and the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., had been deceived by Elias. She said the major had indicated anti-war sentiments in Hanoi only to change his attitude once they departed.

"We have just witnessed a recapture scene, one incarceration replacing another," Mrs. Weiss said after the three men and their families drove away from the airport in government cars.

Gartley's mother, Mrs. Minnie Lee Gartley, broke down aboard the airplane when she failed to convince a Defense Department officer to let her take her son on a prearranged vacation.

"I didn't cry when you told me four years ago that my son had been captured in Vietnam, and I haven't cried since until tonight," she told the officer, Roger Shields.

"Your son is also an officer in the U.S. Navy," Shields interjected. He also told her that Gartley was being promoted to full lieutenant.

"I just wanted a few days of freedom for him," she said. "Freedom from the military, freedom from the press, freedom from the North Vietnam just a few days to be alone with Jerry (his father) and me."

The question of whether the three released POWs would wear their uniforms apparently was settled aboard the Scandinavian Airlines System 747 jetliner en route to New York. The men were said to have voted on whether to don the uniforms, which had been given them in Moscow. They did so about 90 minutes out from New York City.

Dellinger said Defense Department officials led the men to different parts of the plane to put the uniforms on.

"It's quite clear the Pentagon and State Department want men released only if they are in uniform and speaking their lines," said the Reverend Mr. Coffin.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers said 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." Mrs. Stephen Hanson told a news conference that the group had remained silent prior to the return of the three, but felt "we can no longer remain silent." She called the release a token and political one and said "You must remember that over a thousand families are not even told whether or not their sons, fathers, husbands or brothers are even alive."