

U.S. Planned More Gradual Homecoming

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North Vietnam's release of selected United States prisoners of war into the custody of American antiwar activists has complicated and possibly frustrated a Pentagon plan for the gradual and cautious return of the captives to their families.

The plan—known as Operation Egress Recap—was drawn up in anticipation of the negotiated large-scale release of American prisoners, rather than the arbitrary delivery of a small number directly to their families through the intermediary of antiwar groups.

It evolved from a crash program of research and interviews begun six months ago by an interservice team of 16 medical men, psychiatrists and psychologists at the Defense Department's Center for Prisoner of War Studies here.

Prepared for the Worst

The project is part of the Navy's neuropsychiatric research center, which occupies an old World War II structure overlooking the Pacific at Point Loma and which is headed by Capt. Ransom J. Arthur, 46, who came to the Navy from Harvard Medical School.

In direct charge of the studies is Dr. John Plag, a civilian, who explained that there was no way of knowing in what condition the liberated men would be when they were returned "but we're preparing for the worst and hope that things will turn out to be considerably better."

The center's computer-controlled memory banks, according to Captain Arthur, is already the world's largest repository of P.O.W. research. It includes the experience of other wars as well as the most intimate details about each of the 518 Americans listed by the Pentagon as prisoners of war in Southeast Asia.

The goal is what has been called the "slow decompression" of the released men. By delaying family reunions and emotional encounters—or even any requirement for the simplest acts of decision-making—it is hoped to provide the isolation needed for effective medical and psychological treatment.

A Stay in Hospital

Released prisoners requiring medical attention would be held for perhaps a month, longer in some cases, aboard hospital ships at sea or in military hospitals in Guam, the Philippines and Hawaii. Later their transfer to hospitals and rehabilitation centers near their homes would allow for controlled family visits.

Much the same procedure

have lasted eight years or longer. The idea is to ease the shock of a sudden and bewildering return to freedom and family.

Many of the prisoners, although appearing to be physically fit, are believed by the center's staff to be suffering from acute "concentration camp syndrome," with its symptoms of fatigue, anxiety, suspicion, faulty memory, timidity and loss of initiative.

Since the North Vietnamese Government first announced its intention to release the three American pilots who arrived back in the United States last night by way of Peking and Moscow, the Defense Department has refused to give out information about Operation Egress Recap.

"I am no longer permitted to say anything about the matter," said Captain Arthur.

From others involved in the project, however, it was learned that the refusal of North Vietnam to release the three men on a normal government-to-government basis, and its warnings that any "interference" with the men by United States military authorities could jeopardize further releases, have caused the Pentagon to order a re-evaluation of the entire plan.

Wives' Reaction a Factor

Officials at the Center for Prisoner of War Studies are known to feel that Operation Egress Recap may become ineffective if Hanoi continues to release prisoners in small groups into the custody of members of the Committee of Liaison, the antiwar group that was asked by the North Vietnamese to escort home the three released pilots this week.

Many prisoners' wives, who in lengthy interviews with the center's staff had previously been won over to the idea of gradual rehabilitation, may now insist that their husbands also be returned directly to them once they are released. Some wives may turn to the Committee of Liaison for direct action.

"It is important," said a Navy doctor, "for the wives to realize that the three pilots who came back this week in good physical condition and seemingly without emotional scars may not be at all typical of the great majority of the prisoners. These men were

for P.O.W.'s

handpicked for release, for their propaganda value."

Nor can Hanoi's warnings against United States military "interference" with the returning prisoners be completely ignored.

Operation Egress Recap involves extensive interviews with returning prisoners to probe their emotional problems and learn as much as possible about the condition of men still in enemy hands. It also involves according to one source here, debriefings to "put in proper balance" Communist accounts of the extent of antiwar feeling in the United States.

If Hanoi, or American antiwar groups, were to make an issue of these procedures, the Defense Department would likely be accused of sabotaging the further release of American prisoners.

Other P.O.W.'s Interviewed

The Center for Prisoner of War Studies has interviewed in detail nine other Americans previously released by the Vietnamese, in 1968 and 1969. The three pilots released this year are expected to be interviewed by the center's staff in the same manner.

One expected problem is the hostility probably held by many men still in captivity toward companions who received better treatment for one reason or another and were released. The ending of this hostility will be essential to the men's recovery and rehabilitation, an official explained.

The manner of returning the prisoners has been debated within the Administration for more than two years. The

Center for Prisoner of War Studies was set up originally as a small independent Navy project at a time when the Pentagon envisaged the quickest possible return of the men to their families once their release had been arranged.

The Air Force, in fact, at one time had plans for a huge airlift to return the men to their homes, and where necessary to nearby hospitals, within 72 hours of their release.

The Center for Prisoner of War Studies, supported by medical men and psychologists, challenged the wisdom—and the humanity—of such swift homecomings. They argued that a precipitous transition from prison cell to family could undermine the average P.O.W.'s chances of rehabilitation.

As the controversy widened, the Defense Department last March enlarged the staff of the Navy's center here and directed it to produce a plan for repatriation dealing with the problems to be faced not only with the released men but with their families as well. Assistant Secretary of Defense G. Warren Nutter assumed overall direction.

Much of the work of Operation Egress Recap has involved measures for dealing with the emotional scars of imprisonment, some of which are difficult to detect. As the research progressed and prisoners' wives were interviewed, it became evident that group therapy involving wives, children and other family members would often be needed to restore normal family relationships.

A number of prisoners' wives have obtained divorces of which the husbands may not yet be aware. Other wives have indicated that they are only awaiting their husband's return to break the news that they want a divorce. There are children who no longer remember their father.

Lieut. Comdr. Everett Alvarez, a Navy pilot who has been a prisoner of war longer than any other American in any war—more than eight years—may not yet be aware that his wife Tangee divorced him earlier this year. His parents have written ten to him about the divorce but some of their letters have not reached him and in the six letters they have had from him he has not mentioned the break-up of his marriage.