

Bob Considine

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Drama-Laden POW Return

What a sweet-bitter-beautiful-ugly scene that was when the three POWs came marching home!

It was wrung partly from every Hollywood script that has dealt with homecoming troops, and it was laced with the discordant mood of a custody fight over the kids and the Buick. There were some scenes from the Civil War in there, brother against brother and sister vs. sister.

A good-looking black girl nearly knocked her relative, Lieutenant (jg) Norris Charles, off the steps of the SAS 747 with a jumping bear hug. Inside the big jet, the mother of Lieutenant (jg) Mark Gartley wept softly.

Klieg lights klieged, the media barked sometimes hostile questions, the returned POWs blinked and smiled wanly, relatives cheered behind barricades, cops and military police shoved.

It was difficult to hear a coherent sentence until Mrs. Cora Weiss, whose anti-war organization had reason to believe it would keep the three men in tow for a round of U.S.-based end-the-war-now appearances, was ushered to the microphones.

Mrs. Weiss cleared her voice and claimed a foul.

She cried out that her group had been led down the garden path, particularly by Maj. Edward K. Elias USAF. "He deceived us," the anguished peace activist said, as the military firmly took possession of the men.

Minnie Gartley, who had been flown to Hanoi to be reunited with her son, a prisoner for four years, was inconsolable as he was resolutely nudged toward the car that would whisk him to St. Alban's, a military hospital in the New York area.

(Somebody at the Pentagon had issued dispersal orders for the three. Charles was peremptorily flown to a naval hospital in San Diego. Elias — who seemed the most ill-at-ease of the trio — was jetted to a hospital at Maxwell AFB, Montgomery, Ala. It appeared to be a move to break up any possibility of mass conversion by the true believers of the peace group.)

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MRS. GARTLEY had been assured she could take her long-gone son home for 48 hours to see his family and relatives, before he fell back into the muscular arms of the Navy. The news that this was not to be was broken to her brusquely by Dr. Roger E. Shields, chief Pentagon specialist for prisoner affairs.

The poor lady sobbed, "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?"

"He's an officer in the United States Navy!" Shields explained.

Gartley stepped in and, instead of flattening Dr. Shields, said "My mother hasn't cried in years. You may have pushed this a little too far."

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THE PEACE GROUP had good reason to believe it had been presented with three men who would co-operate with its efforts. Otherwise why would Hanoi have sprung these particular three? Also, the men were in good physical condition, or had been fattened up for the release.

The men made no immediate objection about having the peace group handle everything, including inviting Mrs. Gartley and the wife of Lieutenant Charles to come over. (The father of Major Elias declined the invitation at the last minute.)

Lieutenant Charles was quoted in Hanoi as saying he wanted to get back home, get out of uniform, and work on Senator McGovern's end-the-war program. Apparently, Elias also saw eye-to-eye with, at least, Mrs. Weiss.

Something obviously happened on the eight hour flight between Copenhagen and New York. It could have been the new uniforms (and fresh ribbons) somebody — probably a Pentagon psychologist — had placed aboard the jet, along with a tailor to fit them properly.

Whatever, the men discarded the box-shaped suits they had been given in Hanoi and climbed into uniforms. Obviously, they liked what they saw in the mirror.