

## A Dramatic POW Encounter

By Peter Arnett  
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### New York

Seven men. All dressed in simple blue denim prison garb. All crewcut. All American. All with a powerful desire to come home.

I could reach out across the table and touch their hands. Yet the gulf between us was immeasurable. I was a free man, about to board a plane within the hour and wing back to the United States.

Not these men. One of them, Navy Commander Eugene Wilbur, from Columbia Cross Roads, Pa., had sat across that table a dozen times in the past 4½ years, watching faces of free men flit by as he waited for his turn.

### HOME

Wilbur and the six others were all U.S. pilots shot down over North Vietnam and held in prisoner of war camps. I was with a delegation of four American anti-war activists in Hanoi to escort home three pilots released by the North Vietnamese.

At the last moment of our ten-day visit we were summoned to a government building in downtown Hanoi. We were ushered into a long room and saw tables crowded with beer bottles and glasses.

A few seconds later they came in, seven men with hands outstretched and faces beaming. They were more eager to see us than any other men I had ever met.

### CAMERAS

Two North Vietnamese officials sat in the room with us. Reporters and television cameras flooded in for the

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*AP special correspondent Peter Arnett, just returned from a visit to Hanoi, described a dramatic unexpected meeting with seven American prisoners of war.*

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first five minutes. The affair was obviously carefully orchestrated by the North Vietnamese, the pilots hand-picked for the meeting.

But only a master impresario could have created the spontaneous burst of feeling that had the pilots in bear hugs with their American visitors.

The anti-war statements the seven made apparently were part of the scenario of the meetings, the price of admission. Some of the 12 American pilots released by the North Vietnamese over the years reversed their anti-war statements after they returned to America. Others didn't.

The anti-war rhetoric came thick and fast. Wilbur has met with other visiting groups and he repeated what he had said then.

"Tell my wife and family you have seen me. Tell her to use every facility to help you and the anti-war movement," he said. "Tell her I am working at this end."

### WIFE

Lieutenant Peter Callahan, from Bellmore, N.Y., said, "I don't know how you can talk with my wife without giving her mental anguish in choosing between the peace movement and the

government. If there is ever a group of men duped by the government, then here we sit."

Then there were the personal asides. Callahan said he was shot down on June 21 this year, and at the time his wife was nine months pregnant. She has made no reference to it in her letters. "Am I a father or aren't I," he wanted to know.

Lieutenant Donald Karl Logan of Northridge, Calif., said, "Tell my wife to stop typing her name at the end of her letters. Tell her to write it out so I know it's her."

"Say hi to Patty for me," said bachelor Air Force Lieutenant Greg Hanson,

from Thousand Oaks, Calif., in a personal message.

"Just don't play games with the packages," said Lieutenant Richard Fulton, from Mesa, Ariz., when told by the visitors of North Vietnamese charges that spying devices were being sent into the camps from America.

Captain David Hoffman, from San Diego, Calif., mentioned the names of several other POWs and said, "Those people have not received any mail from their families since the day they were shot down."

And all the men bemoaned the continued air war against the north.

"I think we are in more danger from our own air-

craft dropping bombs than we are from the North Vietnamese," said Captain David Hoffman, from San Diego, Calif.

### BEER

The conversation flowed on. The beer glasses clinked and you could almost forget that these men were prisoners and you were free. But not for long.

One of the North Vietnamese officials stood up and announced to the visitors, "You have a plane to catch," and the talk was over. The pilots sucked at the dregs of their beer glasses.

Callahan crushed my hand as he went out. "Get us out of here, will you?" he said, and then they were all gone.