

Coming Out With the

AP Special Correspondent
 Peter Arnett recently re-
 turned from a visit to Hanoi.

By Peter Arnett
 Associated Press

New York

Vietnam is the first foreign war where Americans have regularly gone behind enemy lines to see what is happening and to write about it. Many had been to North Vietnam before me, but I was still not prepared for what I found.

Maybe this was because I had spent nearly ten years looking at the North from the vantage point of South Vietnam. My ten-day visit was often unnerving.

I had to resist a compulsion to run whenever People's Army soldiers came by in their baggy green uniforms, their Ho Chi Minh rubber-tire sandals, their oversized pitch helmets emblazoned with the red star.

PLANES

I also had the compulsion to run away from the American war planes that sometimes wheeled high in the sky above.

Many a night I had sat in the ward rooms of Seventh Fleet carriers in the South China Sea, or balanced drinks in the officers' clubs of U.S. air bases in South Vietnam, and heard the pilots talking animatedly of their air attacks that day against the North.

Now I was a visitor to the target area. At one point I traveled a slow-moving ferry across a river near Nam Dinh with its bridge destroyed and I started thinking about what would happen if U.S. aircraft came over and bombed us. I could visualize the bland announcement later that day at the military press briefing in Saigon: "Targets today included strikes against a ferry north of Nam Dinh. Damage heavy..."

The planes didn't come near, but I could see that the awareness of their destructive potential was shared by my three travelling companions — Air Force Major Edward Elias and Navy Lieutenants Mark Gartly and Norris Charles, prisoners of war just released by the North Vietnamese.

FARMER

As combat officers, they had been much more conditioned to viewing the North Vietnamese as enemies than I was. The first Vietnamese Gartley ever saw in his life was the farmer who captured him after he was shot down four years ago.

Now they were guests of the enemy, comfortably riding old Russian sedans and sipping warm beer as the ruins of bombed railway sidings and factories slid by the windows. When children started cheering the pilots at hamlets along the way I felt that the North Vietnamese sense of forgiveness knew no bounds, until I discovered that everyone thought we were Russian technicians heading south to help the war effort.

If the sense of forgiveness was naturally enough restrained, the sense of hospitality was not. The food was sumptuous. Three egg breakfasts served with Hanoi-canned pineapple juice, black bread and coffee from the highlands began each day.

Three meat courses came with each lunch. Dinner at night in the once-ornate but now faded dining room of the Hoa Binh Hotel was usually more of the same French cuisine, or a Vietnamese banquet of a dozen courses.

Ad this in a country that allows each person only a little more than an ounce of meat a day.

RICE

The bevy of Vietnamese interpreters, guides and police agents who danced constant attendance on everyone most of the time retired at mealtimes to a back room where I saw them once, tucking into a meal of boiled rice and thin fish soup. I felt embarrassed for our gargantuan appetites.

When I confessed my guilt to an Indian diplomat from the International Control Commission standing languidly at the bar, he told me, "The Vietnamese can

Freed Pilots

get along on virtually nothing, minimum food, minimum clothing. That is the secret of their ability to wage war despite great hardship."

In the same theme, a Hanoi official told me one day, "My people are like the grass. They have so little." The tension of war, and the austerity, prematurely aged the Vietnamese.

One of our interpreters, a pretty girl called Lien with long plaited tresses down to her waist, said she was 22, but her facial bones were stretching her skin like that of an old woman. Lien said she was practicing the three delays: delay love, delay marriage, delay babies.

That is the slogan the North Vietnamese use to keep the female work force at full strength, and it seems to be working. Women were carrying rifles, digging mud

to fill shell holes, working in the fields. We saw no miniskirts or lipstick on the streets of Hanoi.

Toward the end of the Hanoi stay it became apparent

to me there were three forces at work. One was the pilots, anxious to leave for home. The second was the North Vietnamese government, also eager for us to

depart because the world was beginning to wonder about the delay. The third and most important force was the escort delegation of anti-war activists who want-

ed to make the most of the affair for two reasons — to get more prisoners out later, and to reinvigorate the anti-war movement in America.

For this reason the pilots did not fly out of Hanoi via Vietiane, Laos, the logical route. A determined U.S. Defense Department could have whisked the pilots away from the escort group at the airport.

Instead, delicate negotiations were made to fly to Moscow and Copenhagen via Peking. When I filed a dispatch to that effect, my Hanoi guide censor told me, "You can't write that. The American planes will force you from the sky when they discover where you are going."

I wrote it, and the planes left us alone.

The Defense Department revealed itself at Moscow Airport where a party of official American welcomers included a Major Ronald F. Walker, who said he was the embassy doctor.

Walker joined us for the ride home and later appeared from the first class lounge an hour out of New York with uniformed soldiers at his elbow. Tempers at this point in the journey were hot, with the peace group claiming the Defense Department was breaking its promise, and Walker insisting the pilots were under military jurisdiction.

As I raised my camera, Walker turned on me, and flailing his arms he cried loudly. "No pictures!"

I took the picture anyway. In Hanoi if I had disobeyed such a command I would have had my film confiscated. All Walker could do was glare.

I knew I was back in the West.

SFChronicle

OCT 5 1972

Views of a Freed POW

Montgomery, Ala.

A recently released American prisoner of war says he feels "dealings about war" and POWs should be conducted between "government to government and not between a diverse bunch of individuals."

Air Force Major Edward Elias talked with newsmen yesterday about his release and treatment by the North Vietnamese. The news conference was held at Maxwell Air Force Base, where Elias has been undergoing medical examination since returning to the United States last Thursday.

Elias, 34, is one of three American pilots who were held captive in North Vietnam and were released in Hanoi to members of an anti-war group.

'FEELING'

"I have a very strong feeling and have always had this feeling that dealings of prisoners of war, that dealings about war are things that should be conducted between government to government and not between a diverse bunch of individuals," Elias said.

He said he did not want to be quoted as an authority



AP Wirephoto

MAJOR EDWARD ELIAS
'Leave it to the governments'

because he has been out of the country since last year. He was captured after his plane on a reconnaissance flight was shot down last April 20.

He also told newsmen that anything he might say about prisoners is based on his own experience and does not necessarily apply to all prisoners.

ISSUES

"These issues about the war, and about the prisoners of war issues, I feel have always been, and are now in the best hands that they could possibly be in. And that is the government of the United States of America," Elias continued.

The Air Force pilot, joined on the platform by his wife, Georgia, said he did not want to make any statement which might jeopardize the remaining prisoners and their possible release. Several times during the questioning, he declined to give answers about conditions, treatment and facilities in North Vietnam.

Cora Weiss, one of the anti-war group that accompanied the prisoners on their return, said they had been "recaptured" by American military authorities.

Associated Press