

# Military to Ease Reentry for POWs

By Don Oberdorfer

CLARK AFB, The Philippines, Jan. 31—If everything goes as planned, the first large group of American prisoners of war will fly out of Hanoi in the next few days to a carefully controlled environment here—the first stop in a meticulously planned transition from captivity to a semblance of normal life.

They will be whisked from incoming medical evacuation airplanes to private and semi-private rooms at a military hospital, examined by specially briefed doctors, and each POW will be counseled and attended by a full-time military escort of his own rank and branch of the service—quite possibly one of his old friends.

Everything possible is being done at this sprawling military installation to cushion the "culture shock" which may be in store for the 555 American military men and 32 American civilians who are to be returned from Communist POW camps under the provisions of the Vietnam cease-fire agreement.

The Pentagon and its medical advisers have decided that such a gradual reentry is best. Like a starving man suddenly

confronted with a sumptuous feast, the returned POW might find that an abundance of what he has been lacking is too much for his system to take, the experts believe.

At the modern five-story military hospital where these men will spend 72 hours or more before flying on to other hospitals in California and around the United States, copies of Playboy and other racy popular magazines have disappeared from the racks in the wardrooms. Instead Air Force magazine, Sports Illustrated and old copies of the Reader's Digest are much in evidence.

Red Cross volunteers, many of them attractive young ladies drawn from among the 14,000 American dependents and civilians living here, will be banished from their usual duty stations in the hospital recreation lounge. The official reason is to "protect the privacy" of the returned POWs, but the indications are that someone on high also has their equilibrium very much in mind.

Shortly after his arrival, each "returnee"—as he is delicately and formally referred to here—will be permitted a free 15-minute telephone call from a private room at the

hospital to his family back in the United States.

Nobody could say here to day just when the Air Force would get the signal to send its big jet planes back over North Vietnam—this time to pick up U.S. prisoners rather than to bomb targets.

There is considerable speculation that the first major POW release, probably involving 100 men or more, could come Friday or Saturday, but Air Force officials here insist they know nothing of the timetable.

This morning, two specially equipped C-141 Starlifters roared off the runway at Travis AFB, Calif., and headed westward across the Pacific to take up places on the flight ramp here. It seems increasingly likely that these two planes, which will arrive here early Thursday, will be assigned to pick up the POWs.

According to the C-141 squadron commander, Col. Ralph I. Leslie, who was himself a prisoner of war in World War II, these jets can

make the flight to Hanoi in 2½ hours.

In addition to the flight crew of about seven headed by a flight surgeon is expected to be aboard each plane, ready to deal with any medical emergency. As might be expected, many Air Force fliers, doctors and nurses here are hoping to be tapped to take part in the epochal mission.

The more serious medical conditions which they expect to encounter—including malaria, dysentery, parasites and vitamin deficiencies—can only be given hasty attention during the short flight from Hanoi.

When the hospital tests begin here, doctors will also give close attention to such potential disorders as depression, extreme anxiety and insomnia during the psychological phase of the initial examination.

It is also likely that they and the military authorities will be keenly interested in the political views and preoc-

cupations of the former prisoners in the Communist camps—but this is a topic no one here will discuss frankly.

For medical, humane and possibly political reasons, it is unlikely that the American public will hear much from the POWs in the first hours and days after their arrival from the Communist camps. While Air Force officials have relaxed a previous absolute ban on press interviews and statements by the "returnees" during their stay here, no "in-depth" interviews are envisioned under new Pentagon guidelines.

Among the reasons for the press restrictions, newsmen were informed today, is a desire to avoid any possibility that statements by POWs released in the first wave could jeopardize the return of men to follow. Another reason, military officers said, was the fear that press reports about the condition or experiences of particular POWs could alarm their families back home.