

# Old Friends Set To Greet POWs

## Familiar Faces

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CLARK AIR FORCE BASE, The Philippines, Feb. 4—Between combat missions over Indochina last fall, Maj. J. H. (Buck) Buchanan was asked by his commanding officer if he knew a fellow U.S. Marine aviator we shall call Jimmy Hull—for the past seven years a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

Buchanan and Hull had been friends since their days as junior officers. They'd gone through amphibious warfare school together, and Hull had known Buchanan's wife in dating days. He'd thought about his friend a great deal, Buchanan told his boss, and wondered whether and when he would ever return from captivity.

Within a few hours—unknown to Buchanan—this seemingly casual conversation was being reported to Third Marine Division headquarters on Okinawa, and within a few days the rugged, 36-year-old pilot was being signed up for a highly confidential mission involving his old friend.

Before the end of September, Buchanan had flown to Japan to examine the dossiers on what the Marine Corps knew of his fellow aviator's life in North Vietnam and of the life of his family back home in the

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United States. Buchanan was instructed to pack away a suitcase with clean uniforms suitable for any season and any climate, and he was given a special set of orders permitting him to travel anywhere in the world on a moment's notice to assist in the repatriation of Jimmy Hull.

Every month or two, a Marine Corps courier traveled to Buchanan's duty station at Nam Phong, Thailand, to acquaint him with any new developments in the prisoner life or family status of his friend.

At 6 a.m. on Jan. 25—shortly before the Vietnam cease-fire agreement was signed in Paris—Buchanan was summoned to this Air Force base north on Manila for last-minute conferences and briefings by doctors, physiologists, chaplains, and former prisoners, and to await the release of his designated charge.

If all goes as expected, Marine Capt. Jimmy Hull—whose real name cannot be used at the present time because of military restrictions—will be among the first of the U.S. prisoners released by North Vietnam in the next few days, and thus among the first to land here in the big medical evacuation planes which will fly to Hanoi and back on the repatriation mission.

On arrival here, Hull will be taken immediately to the base hospital for the beginning of medical evaluations and treatment. Within an hour or two—as soon as the doctor gives the word—Hull will look up from his hospital bed and see "Buck" Bu-

chanan, a familiar face from out of the past, ready to act as his friend, adviser, valet and handyman in the first phase of the often-difficult adjustment process between captivity and normal life.

The story of Jimmy Hull and "Buck" Buchanan, which could be duplicated for many of the 562 U.S. military men scheduled to be released by North Vietnam and the Vietcong, tells something of the extensiveness of the preparations for the long-awaited release of American prisoners from the Indochina war.

According to plans which have been nearly four years in the making, each returned prisoner will have such an assigned escort—handyman—an old friend, if possible—to smooth his transition here and accompany him on the long flight back to California and beyond that, if necessary, to his hospitalization in the continental United States.

When the United States got its prisoners back at the end of World War II, camps were opened by the

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victors and most former inmates were simply hospitalized or sent back home. In the Korean War, the first time the United States faced the problems of Communist internment and indoctrination, the 4400 men returned in major prisoner exchanges were met by counter-intelligence teams and batteries of psychiatrists. Large numbers of these former prisoners encountered difficulty in adjusting later to normal life.

This time, circumstances as well as official thinking are quite different. The number of returning prisoners is small compared to previous wars, but many of the prisoners have been in captivity for a much longer time. Moreover, this time the American prisoners have been pawns in the political maneuverings and propaganda on both sides and the subject of massive public interest in the United States.

Vietnam has often been called "a war without heroes," and to a large degree that has been true in the eyes of the public. Whatever their views on other aspects of the war, however, nearly every American considers the long-suffering prisoners to be authentic heroes. They are being received as such by the U.S. military, and treated with unusual care and consideration.

A considerable number of the American prisoners have made statements or broadcasts while in captivity which may go well beyond a strict interpretation of the military "Code of Conduct" for such situations adopted by the U.S. government in 1955. Given the widespread antipathy to the Indochina war in the United States, however, such potential violations are being ignored by government officialdom, at least for now. The overwhelming emphasis, as senior officials here and in the Pentagon have related it, is the medical treatment and adjustment of the men who are coming back.

To head off any possible legal complications in the returnee-escort relationship, escort officers have been instructed to change the subject if his charge begins to accuse other prisoners of misconduct or to make confessions of misconduct on his own part.

Some "debriefing" interviews by intelligence officers will be conducted here at Clark, according to re-

sponsible officials, but with the sole aim of learning more about the fate and whereabouts of other Americans considered captured or missing in action whose names were not included on Hanoi's recent lists.

So far as the U.S. military can arrange it, the returning prisoners will be carefully shielded from press contacts which might lead to detailed statements of their views on their captivity or other subjects.

Official sources here indicate that men in the first groups to return probably will be flatly ordered not to say anything that could conceivably affect the release of the last man scheduled to come out. "And don't forget, these are still military men," said a senior officer of the returning prisoners.

The 35 civilian prisoners scheduled to be released as part of the Indochina settlement are not under military discipline and thus cannot be ordered by the military to hold their tongues. "They can certainly be acquainted with a thing or two, however," commented a military officer involved in the preparations here.

The clampdown on substantive public statements is just one of the problems confronting the planners of "Operation Homecoming," as the Clark Field reception program is officially named. Others problems which are expected in the initial phases include:

- The health of the men who have been living for years under trying circumstances on minimal diets. Each man will be subjected to a battery of tests lasting at least 72 hours here before flying on to the United States.

- Bad news for some prisoners whose wives may have divorced them or whose loved ones may have been taken seriously ill or died. The escort officers will probably break any bad news, in company with a chaplain or physician, prior to the returnee's free 15-minute telephone call from Clark Field to his folks at home.

- The difficult adjustment to the speeded pace and unfamiliar tensions of normal life. Experts say that men who have spent years in relative isolation with nothing to do but kill time cannot tolerate confusion, clatter, or conflict, and often are unable to make simple decisions. The escort officers

have been instructed to speak slowly and calmly, and to avoid arguments in the presence of their charges.

Regardless of the difficulties and uncertainties ahead,

the specially selected service escorts—and nearly everyone else here, it seems—are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the first flight of prisoners from Hanoi.

"I'm sure it is going to be a trying time for both of us," says Maj. Buchanan of his forthcoming reunion with his old friend. "But I

couldn't care less what burdens it brings. Practically any Marine officer I know would do the same for me."