

Hospital Seeks Smooth P.O.W. Return

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SAN DIEGO, Feb. 8—At the Naval Hospital here yesterday, a local garden club was hauling in a load of plants to decorate the rooms set aside for returning prisoners of war.

One young sailor examined a plant with narrow, serrated leaves and commented, "That's really freaky looking; it looks like grass."

A visitor laughed and suggested that perhaps the Navy wanted the prisoners to become accustomed to the youth culture that had developed in their absence. A Navy officer who had been listening to the conversation suddenly blanched. "Oh, that kind of grass!" he exclaimed.

It was a case of mistaken identity, of course. The Navy is not putting marijuana plants in anybody's room. But at the Naval Hospital here, and at 30 other hospitals around the country, the military is doing just about all else it can to smooth out the readjustment period for the prisoners and their families.

Local communities are also pitching in, offering a variety of services to families who will be flying in to greet

loved ones. In San Diego, so many volunteers have offered to help that there may be six baby-sitters for every child and a private chauffeur for anyone who has to travel more than a block.

The Naval Hospital here, situated in the middle of lovely Balboa Park, expects about 50 prisoners, one of the largest contingents. Before they left for the war zone, many Navy pilots were posted at bases in this area, and it is here that their families have awaited their return for as long as eight years.

When the men are released they will be flown directly to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. After medical checks and intelligence interviews there, they will be sent to military hospitals near home. The men will return in several groups over a 60-day period, and each man's hospital stay will be determined by his condition, so no one knows how many patients will be here at any one time.

But 40 rooms and seven solariums, or lounges, have been set aside on the hospital's sixth floor, which is normally reserved for sick officers. All the rooms have been converted into private

quarters, and the hospital has hastily added several pieces of new furniture in each one to provide a small sitting area.

From the windows, many of the prisoners will be able to see the Coronado Bridge, a sweeping span that has been added since many of them left.

Paintings have been donated by local groups to enhance the decor, and, understandably enough, the subjects include a lot of ships and seascapes. The Crown Garden Club of Coronado has provided plants, and, as Mrs. A. S. Goodfellow, the wife of a retired admiral, put it, "We have telephone committees, station wagon committees, watering committees. We're organized."

A man could remain hospitalized for several days or several weeks, and while most immediate families live in the area, many "secondary dependents," to use military jargon — parents and siblings — will come here from other places. The city of San Diego, the Navy League and the Chamber of Commerce have organized an effort to provide these relatives with free meals and hotel rooms.

"Anyone who is married, and has had a bunch of relatives arriving at one time, knows how helpful this can be," Kenneth All of the Chamber of Commerce said.

Other free services include scrip to use in taxis, beauty parlor treatments, and tickets to recreational facilities and athletic events.

This is a military town. The community raised \$20,000 in 1968 to help families of the Pueblo crewmen returning from captivity in North Korea, and the prisoners from Indochina play a special role here.

"There's a feeling, 'There but for good fortune go I,'" explained Mr. All, a former Navy pilot himself. "So many P.O.W. families in this area are our neighbors. Their children play with our children. It transcends any political situation."

The Pentagon has urged that all welcoming activities be kept in a low key, and the only civic function now scheduled is a prayer meeting this Sunday. With more than 45,000 men killed in action, and 1,300 more missing and still unaccounted for, the return of 562 prisoners is a somber event.

"It isn't really a brass band type of occasion," Mr. All said.