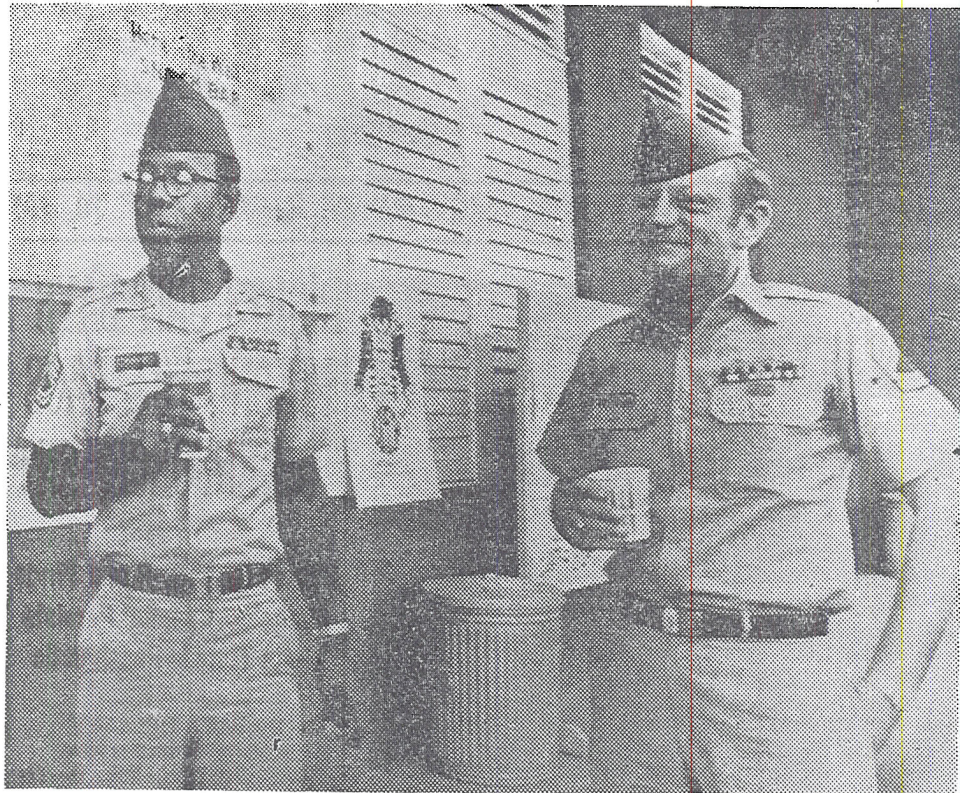


G. I. 'Escorts' Await the Prisoners



The New York Times/James P. Sterba

Horace Purifoy, left, and Robert L. Cutting, both sergeants first class, at Clark Air Base, the Philippines, where they will serve as escorts for returning American prisoners of war. There are 380 officers and enlisted men, who were hand-picked.

By JAMES P. STERBA
Special to The New York Times

CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Feb. 9—A few days ago, Sgt. 1st Cl. Horace Purifoy and Sgt. 1st Cl. Robert L. Cutting of the Army walked over to the base uniform store to polish buttons and other brass belonging to two men they have never met but already know.

The buttons are being reserved for an Army helicopter crew chief shot down in South Vietnam in 1968 and a transportation sergeant lost in 1969. Both are prisoners of war, and Sergeants Purifoy and Cutting have been waiting here for two weeks to meet them and take them back to the states.

The sergeants are among 380 officers and enlisted men—all career military men—who have assembled here to serve as personal escorts for the smooth returning of American prisoners of war to their families and society. Many consider it the most important and delicate assignment of their military careers.

Like Computer Dating

The escorts were hand-picked months ago in a complex screening process that in some ways resembles computerized dating back home. Escorts for the 26 marines known to be prisoners of war are all personal friends. Many of the 324 Air Force and 136 Navy P.O.W.'s will have friends or fellow pilots as escorts. All the escorts

were chosen because they have similar backgrounds, were in the same specialty in the service and are about the same age.

Among the escorts assigned to the 76 Army P.O.W.'s, only one or two know their man personally, but each knows his man's personal and family history well, according to Maj. Emmett R. Conrow, the 44-year-old officer in charge of Army escorts here.

"We're going to be relaxed and the idea is to let him make friends with you," Major Conrow said. "You must keep in mind, however, that comradeship among the returnees will be much greater than we can hope for it to be with escorts during the few days we are with them."

How It Will Work

Each escort will meet his man at the Air Force hospital here after preliminary medical tests. He will help him through a series of briefings, debriefings and other procedures and then accompany him on a medical evacuation plane to Travis Air Force Base, California, where another escort will take him on to the military hospital nearest his home for further tests. There are 31 such hospitals.

Sergeant Purifoy, 34, of Birmingham, Ala., was asked in Okinawa three months ago if he wanted to be an escort. "By all means I was interested," said the sergeants, a

veteran of 17 years' service.

Sergeant Purifoy said that he does not know the prisoner he will escort. In fact, he said, he has not seen a photograph of the man and he is not in the same Army specialty. But both men are from the South and share another thing in common—"he's black, and I am too."

On Round-the-Clock Call

Sergeants Purifoy and Cutting, both Vietnam veterans, and about 30 other Army escorts based on Okinawa began undergoing special training on how to handle their assignments. They listened to taped interviews made by some of the prisoners released while the war was still going on. One former P.O.W., now based on Okinawa, gave them lectures on what to expect.

Each was also briefed on his man's finances and family matters and on the psychology of dealing with men confined for long periods.

The escorts will be on round-the-clock call while their returnees are in the hospital. If a man wants to talk about something at 3 o'clock in the morning, the escort will be available to listen. If his man wants to discuss other P.O.W.'s, his escort will ask him to tell it to a debriefing officer who will be collecting information that might be helpful in finding out what happened to some 1,300 men listed as missing in action and not on Hanoi's list of captives.