

AIRCRAFT LEAVE TO PICK UP P.O.W.'S

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Two Hospital Jets Arrive in Saigon but Bad Weather Delays Hanoi Operation

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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Monday, Feb. 12—Operation homecoming—the repatriation of American prisoners of the Vietnam war—began here today.

United States Air Force planes took off in the early morning hours for Saigon and Hanoi to retrieve the first 142 prisoners to be released by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese.

Two Air Force hospital jets arrived in Saigon on schedule, an hour and a half before the scheduled repatriation of 19 American soldiers and eight American civilians at the Communist-held plantation town of Loc Ninh, 75 miles north of Saigon.

But bad weather delayed the repatriation in Hanoi. Military spokesmen here said the North Vietnamese Government requested a two-hour delay because of rain and morning ground fog in Hanoi. They were confident, however, that all 115 American military men scheduled for release would be out of Hanoi today.

One-Fourth of Total

The repatriation was the first phase of prisoner exchanges due to be completed within 60 days of the signing of the four-party Vietnam cease-fire agreement on Jan. 27 in Paris. Approximately one-fourth of the 592 prisoners that the Communists said they were holding were included on today's repatriation lists. Those remaining were to be released in installments in proportion to the withdrawal of

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remaining American troops from South Vietnam during the 60-day period.

Some 1,300 Americans listed as missing in action or believed to have been captured remain unaccounted for.

Two high United States Gov-

ernment officials in charge of prisoner matters unexpectedly left Clark Air Base for Hanoi this morning with an 18-man advance team of medical, maintenance and communications men. They were Roger E. Shields, assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense on war prisoners, and Frank A. Sieverts, special assistant to the Deputy Secretary of State for prisoners or war matters.

Meanwhile, security was tightened throughout this huge base today, especially around the runway where the returning prisoners were scheduled to land and at the hospital where they will be housed and examined for three or four days before returning to the United States for reunions with their families.

The hospital was closed to all emergency cases and serious illnesses. Births, however, were outside the purview of military planning, so the obstetrics ward will remain open.

As four C-141 medical evacuation planes with iridescent red crosses taped on their tails awaited the take-off signal for Hanoi, a red carpet was put into position near the flight terminal. It will be unrolled so that the first repatriated prisoners can use it to get to ambulance buses standing by to carry them to the base hospital.

Preparations Completed

The mechanics of the prisoner pick-ups were completed here early yesterday evening.

A C-9 hospital jet would take off from Clark, followed by a back-up plane, and both would arrive at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base an hour and a half before the scheduled release of the 27 prisoners at Loc Ninh.

Six planes would depart for Hanoi at staggered intervals during the morning. First off would be a C-130 propeller-driven cargo plane carrying the 20-man advance team of officials, doctors and medical aides, and ground communications and maintenance men. It would be followed within minutes by a back-up plane.

The first of three C-141 medical evacuation jets was due to arrive in Hanoi two hours later. It would load and take off, then a second jet would land, load and take off, followed by a third jet — at one-hour intervals. A fourth evacuation jet would circle in the vicinity in case of trouble with any of the first three.

Two of the huge four-engine C-141's could easily hold all 115 prisoners, but spokesmen said that three planes would go into Hanoi so the prisoners would be more comfortable on the flight back.

The prisoners were to fly out facing backward in seats and stretchers. Officials said this seating arrangement was normal for medical evacuation

flights in the relatively noisy converted cargo plane. Most of the prisoners would not be able to see out because there are only two small windows in the cargo section.

Each plane has special medical equipment, two toilets and a flight kitchen. Only liquids—juices and a rather tasteless nutrient drink — were to be served. Cigarettes would not be offered, but would be provided upon request, a flight nurse said.

On Hanoi's list for release are many of the longest-held captives of the war. Only 18 of the men were captured after 1966, and half of those have been held only since they were shot down during the year-end raids that preceded the January agreement.

For 97 other men on the list, today's pick-up will mean freedom after six or more years in captivity. Of them, 36 were captured in 1966, 60 in 1965, and one—Lieut. Comdr. Everett Alvarez Jr.—was the first man captured, in 1964.

Flight crews, specially selected for their experience, received final briefings yesterday afternoon and early this morning.

The smaller hospital jet to Saigon carries a four-man flight crew and a medical staff of seven, including two flight surgeons and two nurses. Crews of the bigger jets into Hanoi consist of a nine-man flight crew, including an interpreter, and a medical staff of seven.

The commander of the first pick-up jet—No. 60177—was Maj. James E. Marrott, 38 years old, originally of Provo, Utah. His navigator was Lieut. Col. James C. Warren, 49, originally of Chicago. Both flew reconnaissance and electronic warfare planes over South Vietnam during the war. Both have friends who were scheduled to

be released in Hanoi today.

Major Marrott went to flying school with Lieut. Col. William H. Means Jr., who was captured on July 20, 1966, after his plane was hit by a missile over North Vietnam.

Major Marrott has flown more than 7,000 hours, but this flight, he said, was the most important of his career. His crew agreed.

Colonel Warren used to borrow the flight helmet of Lieut. Col. Fred V. Cherry, who is also on the list for today's release. They knew each other in Germany. Colonel Cherry was on a bombing run over the North on Oct. 22, 1965, when his F-105 was shot down.

Flight surgeons aboard the pick-up planes said no examinations were to be conducted en route but that they would ask the prisoners about their health and about any medical difficulties and give preliminary treatment, if necessary. The nurses wondered at a briefing

last week whether to recite normal take-off instructions about equipment, use and emergency landing measures. Capt. Kenneth Green, the 36-year-old commander of the medical crews into Hanoi, told newsmen he preferred that the freed prisoners simply be told, "welcome aboard. Get comfortable. Let's go home."

At Clark Air Base, the winding two-mile road from the runway flight line to the hospital passes a snack trailer, the mortuary, storage sheds, motel-like dormitories, expansive lawns and athletic fields. It is a ride of 10 to 15 minutes in the blue, slow-moving buses.

Col. William I. Truesdell, the base commander, put out word earlier to the 26,000 airmen and families here that a nice way to welcome the prisoners back would be to line up along the route to the hospital.

Posters and Banners Pop Up

Because few people here expect to have any contact with the hospitalized prisoners, posters and banners have popped up as a means of communication.

A 25-foot banner of welcome hanging above the hospital's basement unloading ramp, where the prisoners enter, shows a smiling face with the Philippine word "Mabuhay," meaning "welcome," above it. Below, in big letters, it reads, "Welcome back. Have many nice days. You are not forgotten. From your loved ones." The banner carries the monogram of its sponsors—the 523rd Tactical Fighter Squadron and the 405th Fighter Wing.

The posters made by youngsters attending the local school here appear to be the only compromise in the otherwise totally controlled homecoming operation.

"Celebrate your existence," reads one. Others say, "I'm glad you're back. From Judith to you. I love you." and "Love, Wendy, Rm 53." and "We dig

ya'll" and "Today is the beginning of the rest of your life."

One crayon poster, signed Dianne Olsen, reads: "Some think you've spent your years in vain; some believe it's true. But I believe the peace we've gained is because of men like you."

The 270-bed hospital, where the prisoners will be confined for at least three days, was thoroughly searched yesterday for contraband. Hospital officials were worried about reports that hospital staff members may have smuggled in unauthorized beer or liquor, cigarettes and other gift items.

They were also reported to be concerned that some of the 171 reporters, photographers and television crewmen here to cover the prisoner return may have hidden cameras or tape recorders inside. The hospital staff has been sternly warned against speaking to

newsmen. Some said they were forcefully reminded that their military careers were at stake. After the warnings, a few nurses broke dinner dates with newsmen but some agreed to meet them secretly, but off the base.

All statements and opinions by people here are authorized only when made in the presence of one of 66 public relations officers and enlisted men who have been flown in from throughout the Pacific to

deal with the press. Flight crews, medical staff members and others directly involved in the prisoner-return operation have been coached on what to say and what not to say before they meet newsmen.