

'The Greatest Mission': Airlift Begins

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Washington Post Foreign Service

CLARK AFB, Philippines, Feb. 12 (Monday)—The most long-awaited mission of the Vietnam war—the repatriation of American prisoners held in Communist hands—began today.

The first repatriation plane, a sleek C-9A jet outfitted as a flying hospital ward, roared off the runway here in darkness at 4:45 a.m. headed for Saigon to bring back 19 U.S. military men and eight civilians held for years by the Vietcong.

Four minutes later, at 4:49 a.m., a C-130 propeller-driven transport climbed into the skies headed for Hanoi. It was bearing a 20-man advance team scheduled to arrive two hours ahead of the main group of jet-powered hospital evacuation ships. Departure of Hanoi-bound flights was delayed two hours at the request of the North Vietnamese because of "bad weather"—reported rain and fog in the landing area.

Three big C-141 Starlifters were assigned to pick up the 115 American military men being released Monday by the North Vietnamese authorities. The pilot and navigator of the first of these Hanoi-bound evacuation jets, as luck would have it, are close personal friends of some of the men on the list to be brought back from Hanoi today.

"I'll be glad to see ole Fred . . . He's a real cool dude and a terrific fighter pilot," said Lt. Col. James C. Warren, the navigator, of his longtime friend, Lt. Col. Fred V.

Cherry of Portsmouth, Va., who was shot down on a bombing run over North Vietnam in October, 1965, and has been a prisoner since.

Similarly, Maj. James E. Marrott, the repatriation aircraft commander, embarked with hopes of personally flying back his former aviation school classmate Lt. Col. William H. Means Jr. of Sumter, S.C., a prisoner in North Vietnam since he was shot down by a missile in July, 1966.

In a sentiment that was widely shared, Navigator Warren called today's homecoming flights "the greatest mission I'll ever go on . . . (which) means more to me and the country than any other mission I'll ever fly."

The prisoners being returned by North Vietnam and the Vietcong today are almost exactly one-fourth of the total number of American POWs which they have listed as being in their hands. As promised in Paris to presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger—who was in Hanoi today for consultations with North Vietnamese officialdom—the remaining prisoners are expected to be returned in three additional installments of roughly equal size over the next 45 days.

The list of the initial returnees supplied in advance by North Vietnam reveals that the Hanoi regime is sticking closely to a policy of returning its longest-held prisoners first. All but 24 of the first 115 prisoners in today's repatriation group have been held by Hanoi since mid-1966 or before. It is believed that some of the recently captured

See CLARK, A4, Col. 1

men being returned today are among the sick or wounded who are given priority under the prisoner exchange agreement.

The man held longer than any other in North Vietnam, Lt. Cmdr. Everett Alvarez Jr., will be coming out of captivity today, ending a confinement which began when he was shot down during a bombing mission against a North Vietnamese port on Aug. 5, 1964—eight and a half years ago.

During his years in prison, Alvarez was promoted two ranks in the Navy (from Lt. j.g.), piled up many thousand dollars in pay and special allowances and was divorced

by his wife, whom he married only two months before being shot down.

The longest-held prisoner of the Vietcong, Army Capt. (now Major) Floyd J. Thompson—captured in South Vietnam six months before Alvarez was shot down in the north—is not on the list to be returned today. A study of the Vietcong's list of initial returnees disclosed no obvious pattern of selection.

The eight U.S. civilian prisoners being released by the Vietcong include Foreign Service Officer Douglas K. Ramsey, captured in January, 1966, and nearly all the other American civilians being held except for those captured at the former imperial capital of Hue during the early days of the 1968 Tet offensive. The Hue captives are believed to have been kept together as a group during their five years in custody, and according to some reports, may actually be imprisoned in North Vietnam.

Teams of military doctors and nurses were on board each of the Air Force jets dispatched on the repatriation missions today, and a separate six-man medical team was aboard a C-130 transport plane which flew from here to Hanoi ahead of time bearing an advance party to smooth the way for the North Vietnam prisoner release.

The heavy emphasis on medical evaluation and treatment will continue at the U.S. Air Force hospital here, where each former POW will spend three days or more before flying across the Pacific to one of 31 military hospitals in the United States.

The returning men will take over most of the 270-bed hospital here, which has been augmented with extra doctors from other bases to make up a 60-member medical team. To shield these special patients from all contact with the general population of this base—and especially from the press—many usual hospital services and activities have been curtailed or transferred elsewhere.

Although the obstetrical wards and the emergency room will continue in operation, it was announced last night that fathers of newborn babies will be permitted only one visit to the maternity ward and only the next of kin will be permitted to visit intensive-care patients.

As the arrival time approached, a physical search was carried out at the hospital for cameras and tape recorders which might somehow bring out a trickle of officially unauthorized news about the returning men.

Military authorities have created an extensive security and public relations network, including a press office staff of 62 officers and men, to channel and restrict the flow of detailed information from and about the former prisoners during their stay here. The authorities say they fear harsh statements about their captors by the first groups of returning men could affect the treatment or release of those scheduled to come out later.

Intensified security precautions—including searches of incoming autos—were carried out at this vast 129,000-acre base, the largest overseas U.S. military installation in the world. With a population of 42,000 military personnel, dependents and Filipino employees, Clark resembles a 1950s small town which has been mysteriously set down in a foreign land. Feelings of support for the U.S. prisoners of war is strong here, as evidenced by posters and bumper stickers. Some of them, at this moment in the process of being dramatically outdated, say "POWs Never Have a Nice Day."

The interim stop at this military base in the Philippines—once the westernmost colony of the United States—was considerable symbolic as well as medical implications. The repatriation flights in sleek, well-equipped aircraft today swoop down over part of the route of the infamous Bataan "Death March" in which more than 600 American prisoners of war perished at the hands of their Japanese captors in early 1942.

Today's flights from captivity bring the Americans to the soil of a formerly democratic state which has come

under martial law and one-man rule as American power, involvement and influence recede from Asia, largely as a result of the agonizing experiences of the Vietnam war.

Clark has been an important logistical center for the buildup, the pursuance and now the withdrawal phase of the Indochina war. Vietnam combat missions were never flown from here because of the lukewarm attitude toward

the war of the Philippines government, but millions of tons of supplies and ammunition as well as many thousands of fighting men passed through here on their way to the war. Moreover, many of the seriously wounded and a large number of the bodies of the war dead stopped here on the way back home.