

S. Viet Frees Prisoners

Crippled Brigade Goes Home

BIEN HOA, Vietnam (AP) — North Vietnamese prisoners leaving their prison compound today after years of captivity carried only their bandages and their crutches home to Hanoi.

"They refused to take any personal baggage or souvenirs of any kind," said an American adviser as the war prisoners were loaded onto trucks for the journey to the airport. "These are real hard-core guys."

Heads bowed under floppy hats or sometimes an enormous bandage, they were marched out of the barbed wire enclosure and down the road five abreast at a limping pace in the scorching noonday heat.

Several carried crippled buddies on their backs. Others

were blind or had an empty sleeve or pant leg.

FOURTEEN 2½-TON trucks and four large ambulances took them to C130 transport planes waiting to fly them to Phu Bai, the airport near Hue, for release at Quang Tri.

The 200 North Vietnamese all wore faded maroon prison fatigues, some with the letters T.U.-Vietnamese for POW, stenciled in black ink on the back.

In one limping rank came a man with his head swatched in bandages, another with his right eye bulging grotesquely two inches lower than the left, two hobbling on crutches and the last with his arm in a sling.

This was the spirit of '73: no bands playing, no crowds

cheering. The South Vietnamese military police in their immaculate starched fatigues and lacquered helmets refused to lend a helping hand as the wounded helped each other into the trucks.

FOR HOURS these maimed and crippled leftovers of war held up the long-awaited release of U.S. prisoners by staging a sitdown strike in their compounds.

South Vietnamese officials said the 200 North Vietnamese and 735 Viet Cong prisoners scheduled for release steadfastly refused to believe that the Communist members on the four-party Joint Military Commission were "for real."

"They think we are trying to harm them," said a South Vietnamese major. "But we

think it is a last trick they are playing on us. What is one day longer to them? Maybe they know they are better off here than hurrying back to the jungle."

Members of the Joint Military Commission hurried over from their headquarters at nearby Bien Hoa Air Base.

AS THE SEDANS rolled through the prison gates, the South Vietnamese guards on duty gave snappy salutes to the cars carrying U.S. and South Vietnamese delegates. But they ignored the black sedans with the Viet Cong colonel wearing his pith helmet and the North Vietnamese lieutenant colonel in a garrison cap.

The Communist prisoners, after three hours of consultations, agreed to board the planes headed north if members of the Joint Military Commission came along with them, according to an American source.

"This was a put up job engineered by the hard-core North Vietnamese in camp," grumbled an American major. "These guys haven't lifted a finger to fix up their barracks since they came here. It's all just a show to let the people back home know how firm they are."

Finally aboard the trucks, the prisoners sat quietly with their crutches, waiting for their names to be called by a South Vietnamese lieutenant with a clipboard. They steadfastly ignored the microphones, cameras and tape recorders stuck in their faces by the large contingent of newsmen.

THE FIRST GROUP to leave the Bien Hoa prison, which mainly holds wounded and maimed prisoners, were 200 North Vietnamese headed for Quang Tri. An hour later came 735 Viet Cong en route to Loc Ninh, 75 miles north of Saigon, where the Americans were also to be released.

"Would you believe not one of them dudes said good-bye?" an American GI said, shaking his head. "After all the nice times we had together."