

Prisoners' Ordeal 'Not in Vain'

SAN CLEMENTE, Calif. (AP) —President Nixon said today that America is solidly behind its returning Vietnam prisoners of war and declared, "All they went through was not in vain."

Nixon said settlement of the war was not "an abject bug-out" and added, "We got peace with honor."

The President, who watched on television as the prisoners reached Clark Field in the Philippines, made his comments as he began a meeting with Teamsters Union President Frank Fitzsimmons.

He told Fitzsimmons that one of the First Family's aides, Fina Sanchez, was watching too and was "really ecstatic" when she watched the first prisoner step from the plane.

"It was the greatest thing," agreed Fitzsimmons, who was chatting with the President as photographers recorded the start of their meeting.

"They are strong men," the President said, adding that to be held captive for years "and not be broken shows great character."

Nixon kept a close watch Sunday on developments relating to the first release of U.S. prisoners since the Vietnam cease-fire. After he was informed Sunday night that the airlift of prisoners from North Vietnam had begun, the Western White House issued this presidential statement:

"As the first group of Americans held as prisoners of war in Vietnam arrives home, the whole nation would like to be there to welcome them back to the country they have served so well.

"Let us remember, however, that this moment belongs above all to the returning men themselves and to the families waiting to welcome them. We can join most fittingly in that welcome, not with fanfare, but with quiet respect for their fortitude in the ordeal that is now ending and for their privacy in the time ahead.

"On the Veterans Administration Building in Washington

are the words of Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we are about to observe, reminding us of our obligation "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." Let us mark this special Sunday with a prayer of thanks for all who have borne this battle — and have made peace with honor possible. And let us resolve anew to be worthy of the sacrifices they have made."

The presidential statement reiterated an appeal Nixon made earlier Sunday after attending services at Palisades United Methodist Church in Capistrano Beach: "After what they've been through, they deserve some time to themselves, and they should not be exploited."

He suggested that all Americans — townspeople planning homecoming welcomes, officials at the Clark Field Evacuation Center in the Philippines and the press — let the POWs alone as they are reunited with their families and adjust to freedom.

The President told reporters outside the church that he had no plans to see any of the returning POWs.

"Let's let them see their families again; and then, if they want to see anybody, the secretary of defense or the President, we will be available," he said.