

Stars and Stripes Greet First POW'S

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CLARK AIR BASE, Philippines (AP) — A total of 143 prisoners of war came back today under the Stars and Stripes, the flag some had not seen for eight years.

Most of the men flown to this base after release from Communist captivity in North and South Vietnam were reported in good physical condition as they checked into a U.S. hospital.

"We are honored at the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances," said the first prisoner to step out of the first returning hospital plane, Navy Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. of Virginia Beach, Va. "God bless America."

MORE THAN 60 doctors on duty at the base hospital began examining the freed prisoners.

The first to arrive were 116 from North Vietnamese prisons, ferried on the 2½-hour flight from Hanoi by three U.S. Air Force Starlifter hospital planes.

"No emergency medical treatment was required and did not seem necessary," a spokesman said later. "On the most part the men were ebullient."

A second contingent of 26 men arrived here from South Vietnam. They were released north of Saigon following a daylong dispute that delayed their departure. A 27th prisoner released with them remained behind at a Saigon hospital.

Spokesmen at Clark said large numbers of the returned prisoners requested a regular American dinner instead of the bland diets doctors had planned to nurse their digestive systems. And most got it.

The prisoners in South Vietnam — 19 servicemen and eight civilians — were turned over at Loc Ninh 75 miles north of Saigon and flown to Saigon in U.S. helicopters for transfer to hospital planes and the two-hour and 15-minute flight to Clark Air Base.

THE RELEASES AT Hanoi and Loc Ninh left 341 American prisoners in North Vietnamese hands, 72 in South Vietnam and seven in Laos, according to Hanoi's count supplied to the United States. The remainder are to be released at two-week intervals in groups about the same size as today's.

The first group of released prisoners

stepped out into freedom with sharp salutes, cautious smiles and their heads held high — their emotions thinly concealed behind the formality of the moment.

In gray jackets and dark gray trousers provided by their North Vietnamese captors, the men released from the "Hanoi Hilton" made their first con-

tact with home as emotionally charged crowds chanted, "Welcome home. We love you."

The applause and cheers from the excited crowd of several thousand military personnel, dependents and newsmen were steady as the POWs, some of them limping, walked off the hospital planes at this base, their first stop on their 12,000-mile trip home.

ADM. NOEL GAYLER, commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific, shook hands with each man and received a snappy salute. Some saluted several times — the American flag outside the plane, Gayler, the cheering crowd.

A few individual gestures drew loud shouts of approval. One man produced a handkerchief-sized blue-lettered sign and held it up so the crowd and newsmen could see it, "God bless America and Nixon."

Another produced a similar sign, a brightly colored American flag superimposed over a map of the United States.

A tough-looking Marine major wiped his eyes. A two-star Air Force general waved both his arms high, the fingers on both hands forming the V-sign.

OUT OF THE GLARE of the welcoming brass and the television cameras, the POWs seemed like an excited group of school boys — kids on their way to a high school football game, hanging out of the bus windows, waving and shouting at exuberant people who lined the one-mile drive from the flight line to the 250-bed base hospital.

Reporters were not allowed to interview the men, but one newsman shouted, "How does it feel to be back?"

"Great," yelled back a prematurely gray-haired man with a bright smile of yellowed teeth. "Wonderful," beamed another hanging out of the next window.

Lt. Cmdr. Everett Alvarez, held nearly nine years, appeared trim and fit. He was the pilot with the longest experience.

"WELCOME BACK YOU guys," shouted a group of airmen along the

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route. "Thank you," the POWs yelled back, thrusting their arms and fists out of the windows to give a thumbs-up sign.

At the hospital arrival, one of the men recognized someone he knew

standing outside. "Ernie," he yelled.

"How are you doing?" was the reply. "Okay," he shouted before he disappeared like the others into the hospital to begin a long series of medical tests.

Officials of Operation Homecoming here first said that one American prisoner gave up his place to another, whose mother was reported gravely ill, but later announced that both had arrived here.

A spokesman said Lt. Col. Robert B. Purcell of Louisville, Ky., "is here, he's on the fourth floor of the hospital. His condition is fine."

Purcell was reported to have given up his place to Cmdr. Brian Dunston Woods, 40, of Lemoore, Calif. A spokesman said both men are here, bringing the total of men released by Hanoi to 116.

"Unfortunately there was an erroneous report. But fortunately Col. Purcell was not replaced and is with us," the spokesman added.

The POWs freed by Hanoi arrived in three U.S. Air Force Starlifter hospital planes at Clark Air Base in the Philip-

ines. There were 40 men aboard the first plane, 39 on the second and 37 on the third.

The 19 servicemen and eight civilians freed by the Viet Cong were flown by U.S. helicopters from Loc Ninh, 75 miles north of Saigon, to the South Vietnamese capital where they transferred to an Air Force hospital plane for the flight to Clark Base.

THEIR RELEASE left 341 American prisoners still in North Vietnamese hands, 72 in South Vietnam and seven in Laos, according to information furnished by the North Vietnamese. Those still held in North Vietnam are expected to be freed at two-week intervals in groups of about the same size as today.

"We are happy to have the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances. We are profoundly grateful to our commander in chief and to our nation for this day. God bless America," said the first POW to step down on Philippine soil, Navy Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. of Virginia Beach, Va.

The second man out of the C141 was the first American flyer downed in North Vietnam, Lt. Cmdr. Everett Alvarez Jr. of Santa Clara, Calif., who had been a prisoner since Aug. 5, 1964. Despite his long captivity, he walked briskly down the ramp and smiled broadly as he shook hands with Adm.

Noel Gayler, the commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific.

Greeting the men with Gayler was Lt. Gen. William G. Moore Jr., commander of the 13th Air Force, and several thousand base personnel and their families were on hand to cheer the arrivals.

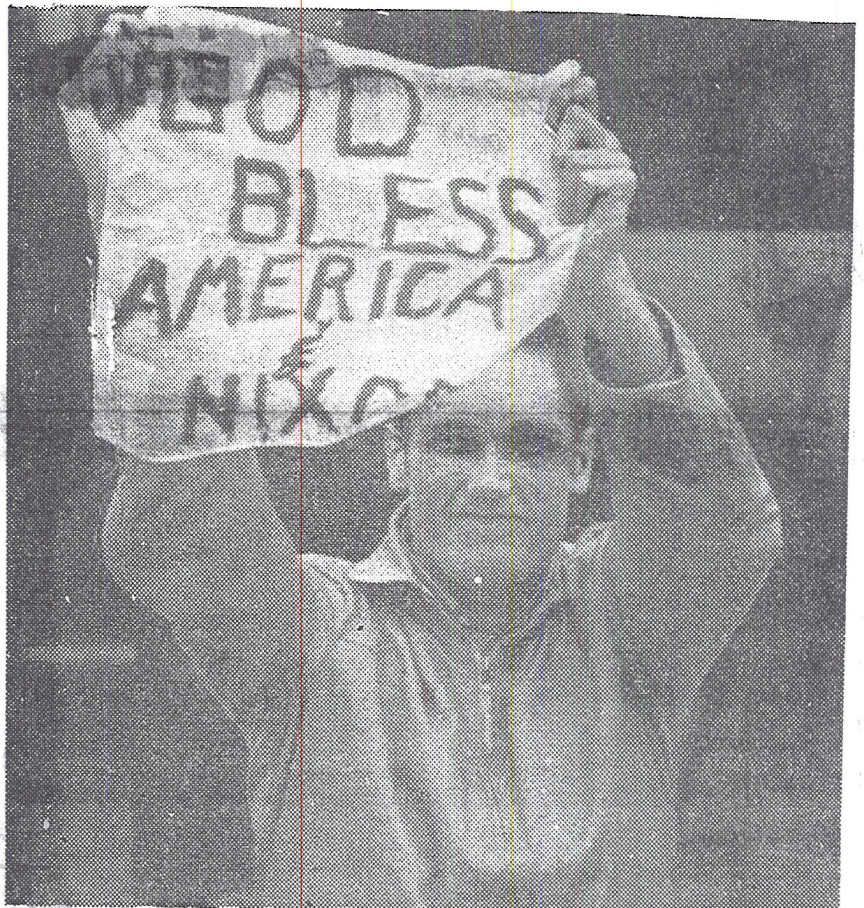
ONE OF THE POWs limped as he walked from the plane. Another had his arm in a sling. But many of the spectators agreed that the men seemed in surprisingly good shape considering the years they had spent in captivity.

As each plane arrived, the men were quickly loaded into hospital buses and taken to the base hospital for a thorough checkup. A special medical task force was on hand to look after them, along with a corps of "escorts" from the armed services who will shepherd them through their first days out of captivity.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile, the Viet Cong delayed the promised release of 19 U.S. servicemen and eight civilians after North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prisoners of the Saigon government balked at leaving their prison compound for four hours.

The Communist POWs finally gave in about noon and moved out of their prison compound. But the Americans were not released until shortly after dusk.

The Saigon government went ahead



Air Force Capt. Garland D. Kramer of Tulsa, Okla., holds up a handmade sign immediately after stepping off the C-141 plane from North Vietnam to The Philippines. (AP Wirephoto.)

with its part of the prisoner swap. A spokesman said 200 Vietnamese POWs were flown to Phu Bai, in the northern part of South Vietnam, for release just below the demilitarized zone, and another 735 were being flown to Loc Ninh.

They were to be exchanged for 1,035 South Vietnamese prisoners of the Viet Cong.

The senior U.S. representative on the Joint Military Commission, Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, refused to attend an afternoon meeting of the four-party commission in protest against the Viet Cong's failure to deliver the American POWs. He said he would boycott the meetings of the commission — whose other members are the North and South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong — until the Communists assured him the POWs would be released as agreed and the Viet Cong would live up to its commitments.

By contrast with the delay in South Vietnam, the release of the prisoners in Hanoi went off without a hitch.

FIRST A C130 Hercules transport plane took an 18-man advance party to the North Vietnamese capital this morning to set up radio equipment for the incoming hospital planes and to make final arrangements.

The advance party included Washington's two top men on POW matters, Roger Shields of the Defense Department and Frank A. Sieverts of the

State Department.

Three hours and a half later the hospital planes began taking off from Clark. They were to have arrived in Hanoi at hourly intervals, but the North Vietnamese asked that the schedule be speeded up and that only 30 minutes elapse between them.

The third plane was on the ground only 37 minutes.

Lt. Col. Richard Abel, an information officer who made the trip to Hanoi, said the men arrived at the airport in buses, about 20 Americans to a bus. The North Vietnamese had put up a 3-foot fence around a rectangular area with tables and chairs inside the enclosure.

"As the Vietnamese read off the names of each of our men, they got off the bus and walked over to the aircraft. They winked and smiled at us, but the emotional display was not obvious.

"But once on the plane they were shaking hands, hugging each other and hugging the nurses. I told them, 'Welcome home, glad to see you.' They replied to me, 'You bet.'"

Relations with the North Vietnamese officials at the Hanoi airport were "correct and cordial," Abel said. He reported that 300 to 400 people were at the field, half of them military.

Abel said that on the 2½-hour flight to the Philippines, the men asked what they could eat, talked about politics,

women's fashions and sports, and read the Stars and Stripes, the military newspaper.

The three big C141s landed at Clark about 45 minutes apart. The first man off each plane made a brief statement into a microphone standing on the runway.

Col. Robinson Risner of Oklahoma City, who was shot down Sept. 16, 1965, spoke for the second plane. Looking fit and smiling jauntily, he said: "On behalf of all of us here, the men who were prisoners, I would like to thank you all, the President and the American people, for bringing us home to freedom again. Thank you ever so much."

The spokesman for the 36 men in the third plane was Navy Capt. James A. Mulligan of Lawrence, Mass., who was shot down on March 20, 1966. Mulligan said: "It has been our privilege to serve America these many years. During this time our faith in God, our country and our families never wavered. We would like to thank the President of the United States, the people of the United States and our families for making this wonderful day possible. Thank you very much."

President Nixon hailed the release of the first POWs and urged the nation to "mark this special Sunday with a prayer of thanks for all who have borne this battle—and made peace with honor possible."