

First Prisoner Release Is Completed; 142 Men in 'Reasonably Good' Health

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Arrival at Clark
Base Is Filled
With Emotion
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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Tuesday, Feb. 13 — The first released American prisoners of the Vietnam war were greeted with cheers of welcome and tears of joy here yesterday as they stepped off military evacuation jets. They looked in better physical condition than most onlookers had expected, and the hospital commander here pronounced their general health "reasonably good."

The last of four evacuation planes touched down here at 11 P.M. (10 A.M. Monday, New York time), carrying 19 military men and seven civilians released in South Vietnam. Three others, carrying 116 prisoners released in Hanoi, had arrived yesterday afternoon.

The first prisoner to step onto the red carpet was Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton of the Navy, the ranking officer aboard the first plane back from Hanoi. Captain Denton, in captivity for nearly eight years, stepped to a microphone and said:

"We are honored 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!"

Alvarez Arrives

He was followed by Lieut. Comdr. Everett Alvarez Jr. of the Navy, a prisoner for more than eight years and the first American pilot shot down and captured in the Vietnam war.

By 11:45 P.M. all the men were in the Air Force hospital here. The earlier arrivals from Hanoi held reunions with one another in the wards and were allowed to choose their own rooms. After preliminary medical checks — which found their conditions "reasonably good," in the words of the hospital commander, Col. John W. Ord — the men were offered steak, chicken, baked potatoes, French fries, corn on the cob, cream puffs and strawberry shortcake.

Maj. Miriam W. Fortune, the hospital's head dietitian, said steak, eggs and ice cream were the most popular items.

"Many ate ice cream in the line before they got their main dishes," she said.

Because of their late arrival



Associated Press

Air Force Capt. David E. Baker of Huntington, L.I., being carried on a stretcher from the jet plane that took him from Saigon to Clark Air Base. He was released at Loc Ninh.

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time, the prisoners from South Vietnam — whose release was delayed because of a dispute over an exchange of Communist prisoners — were fed a light meal before going to bed, military spokesmen said.

Many of the arrivals from Hanoi telephoned their families in the United States and met military escort officers assigned to accompany them back to Travis Air Force Base, Calif., after medical examinations and debriefings here.

From Travis, the men will fly to local military hospitals to meet their families.

[Some of the prisoners could be returning to the United States "in a matter of days," according to a Reuters dispatch from Washington that quoted the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim. Reuters said that while Mr. Friedheim would not be more specific about the timing of the flights home, he did say that many of the men were well enough to leave now.]

Yesterday's arrivals here completed the first phase of the prisoner repatriation. Similar numbers of prisoners are to be released by the Communists at intervals of about 15 days, in proportion to the American withdrawal of troops from South Vietnam. The protocol on

prisoners in the Paris agreement of Jan. 27 said that all prisoners of war must be released within 60 days.

Only four of the released prisoners — three from the North and one from the South — had to be carried off the

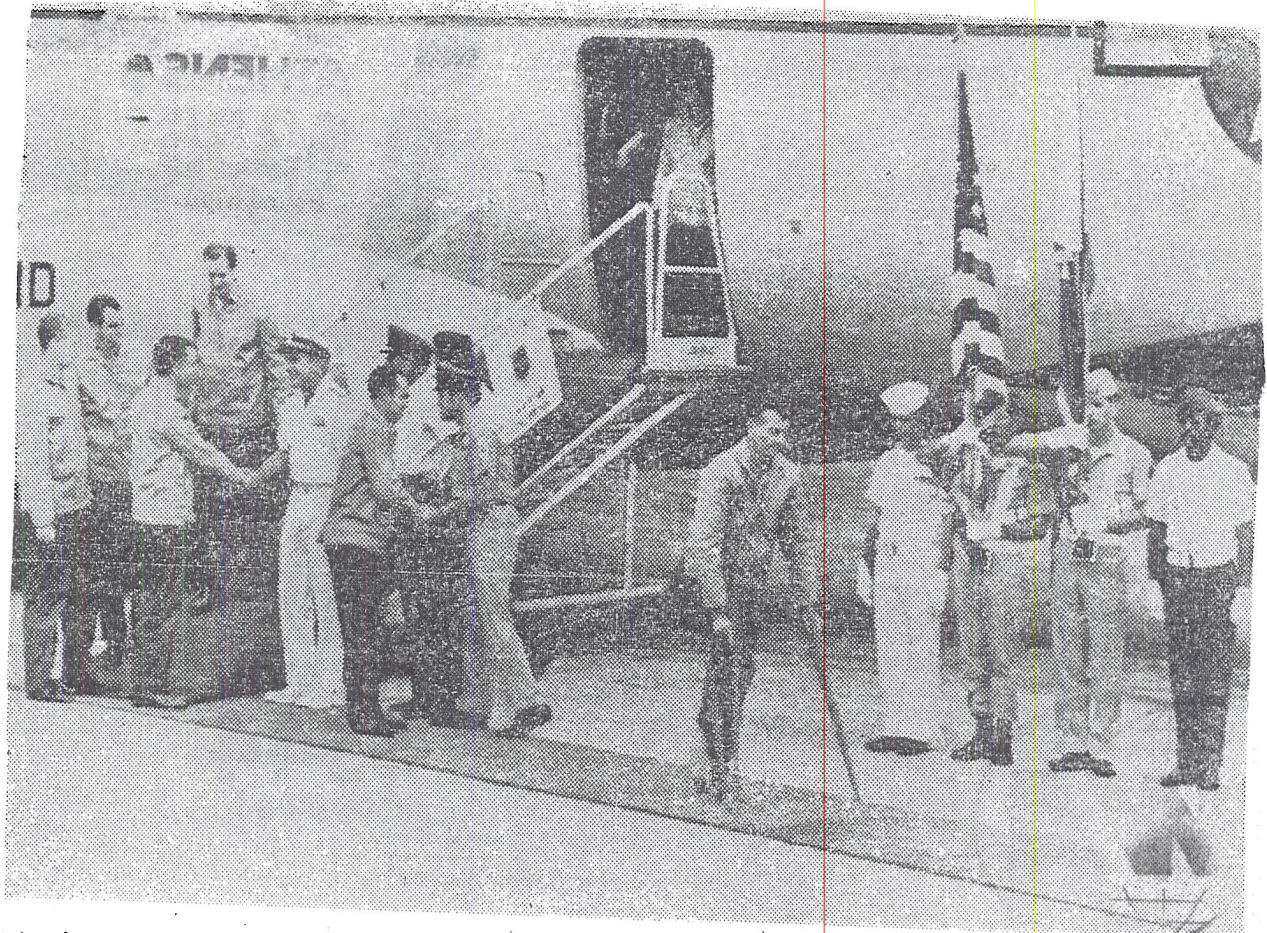
planes initters. The rest walked down a ramp, and over a red carpet to waiting ambulance bases. For a few it was difficult, and the expressions of determination to do it by themselves brought tears to the eyes of many of the military officers and newsmen.

Some of the prisoners stepped briskly out of the planes, smiling and pointing their thumbs up.

Chants of "Welcome Home!" by spectators from the base greeted the prisoners as they stepped from their planes. More than 1,000 base residents — boys in baseball and Boy Scout uniforms, women sitting on lawn chairs, babies, airmen with movie cameras — looked on.

Many people wept. John Ward, a 13-year-old sixth grader, said, "I was crying and they were real tears. I just felt very emotional." He was wearing a prisoner-of-war bracelet bearing the name of Leonard C. Eastman, a Navy commander who arrived on the third plane from Hanoi.

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Returning American prisoners of war being greeted by military commanders as they debarked from one of jet evacuation planes from Hanoi to walk along the red carpet at Clark Air Base, the Philippines. A color guard stood at attention as the men passed on their way to ambulance buses for the trip to the base hospital.

Some Ailments Obvious

The first plane from Hanoi carried 40 repatriated prisoners, 29 of whom the North Vietnamese had listed as sick or wounded. Some of their ailments were obvious as they walked off—stiff legs, shriveled arms, joints that did not work. One man came out on crutches he has been using for more than five years. There was little color in most of their faces.

Spirits, however, were extremely high. A public affairs officer accompanied each plane from Hanoi and later described

some of what went on during the flights.

"After we got onto the airplane and closed the doors, there was hugging of each other and hugging of nurses and a tremendous elation on their faces," said Richard Abel, an Air Force lieutenant colonel who accompanied the first plane back from Hanoi.

"Tears in some eyes, yes, but they were certainly tears of happiness," Colonel Abel said. "Their spirits were just fantastic. They were alive, they were happy to be home, they talked and talked and talked some more."

Men Offer Prayers

He said the men were glad to get American cigarettes, that they avidly read stars and stripes, the military newspaper, and news magazines, and that they liked the rather tasteless nutrient drink they were served because it was cold.

There were prayers, Colonel Abel said, adding that one of the senior men on board told him, "You know, Dick, I couldn't have made it if it wasn't for Jesus Christ, and being able to look up and see Him in some of the trying times."

Colonel Abel said he asked Captain Denton, as senior man on board, to make a brief statement on landing at Clark but that he did not brief the captain on what to say.

Each of the three senior officers made statements when they arrived here from Hanoi.

Col. Robinson Risner of the Air Force, senior prisoner on the second plane, said: "It's almost too wonderful to ex-

press. On behalf of all the other men who have been prisoners, I would like to thank you all. I would like to thank our President and the American people for bringing us home to freedom again. Thank you ever so much."

And Capt. James A. Mulligan of the Navy, senior officer and spokesman on the third plane from Hanoi said, "It has been our privilege to serve you Americans these many years and during this time our faith in our God, our country and in our families has never wavered. Today I'd like to thank the President of the United States and our families for maintaining their faith with us and making this wonderful day possible. Thank you."

Maj. Raymond C. Schrupp of the Army, the first man off the final plane, from Saigon, said simply, "It has been a long time. I want to thank each and every one of you for such a very, very fine welcome."

Solemnity to Elation

While the prisoners released from South Vietnam wore Vietnamese sandals and hospital garb issued during the flight, those returning from Hanoi wore clothes that they had received from the North Vietnamese shortly before they were released—blue trousers, light blue shirts, brown belts, black shoes, and light gray-green jackets. The North Vietnamese had also given each man a black flight bag.

All but the three litter patients released by Hanoi today lived in the Hoa Lo prison camp. Officials did not say where it was, other than near Hanoi.

Describing the departure of

the second plane to leave Hanoi, Lieut. Comdr. Milton S. Baker, said of the men he accompanied, "They were rather solemn as they were escorted up to the aircraft. Once inside the aircraft they really became elated. The reaction on take-off—shouts, cheers, thumbs up, that sort of thing, elation generally."

Commander Baker said medical treatment on the flight was limited to two aspirins and some nosedrops. The men drank coffee, tea and the nutrient drink, smoked, read, and asked dozens of questions on subjects ranging from sports to women's liberation.

The first thing the prisoners who boarded the third plane noticed was the perfume of the flight nurses, according to a military spokesman who was on the plane.

"Wow, smell that perfume!" he quoted some of them as having said. There was also a contraband copy of Playboy magazine aboard that was thumbed through avidly, although some prisoners were said to have been taken aback by photos of totally nude women. Most of the men have been in prison since the days when the nudity was less than total.

Frank A. Sieverts, the State Department's specialist on prisoner-of-war affairs, went into Hanoi along with the advance team this morning. He said several of the prisoners asked him who had won the war. He said his answer was: "The South did not lose and the North did not win."

Roger E. Shields, the Pentagon's prisoner-of-war expert, who also went to Hanoi for the pick-up, said he was satisfied with today's operation even though it was delayed two hours by bad weather in the North and more than 12 hours by disputes in the South. He said the prisoners from Hanoi "said they have some things they want to tell us and they are very concerned about giving us information on other prisoners on our lists." Some 1,300 Americans are listed as missing in action.

On the first flight to the Clark base, Captain Denton said, he told the men that on arrival he intended to salute the flag and fellow officers and to shake hands with military dignitaries there to greet them—Arm. Noel A. M. Gayler, Commander in Chief of United States forces in the Pacific, and Lieut. Gen. William G. Moore Jr., commander of the 13th Air Force. He said that he did not tell the men they also had to do so, but that each did.

When the payload of 27 prisoners from South Vietnam landed late tonight, completing the pick-up, Col. Leonard W. Johnson Jr., commander of the evacuation mission into Saigon, turned to Roger Shields of the Pentagon and said, "Well, we got them back."