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South Vietnamese Prisoners Joyous on Return

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Special to The New York Times

BIEN HOA, South Vietnam, Tuesday, Feb. 13.—The first 140 South Vietnamese prisoners of war released by the Communists joyously stepped off American transport planes here shortly after sundown yesterday.

Many of the men skipped as their feet hit the runway and they were swept toward waiting trucks by cheering military policemen and army social workers.

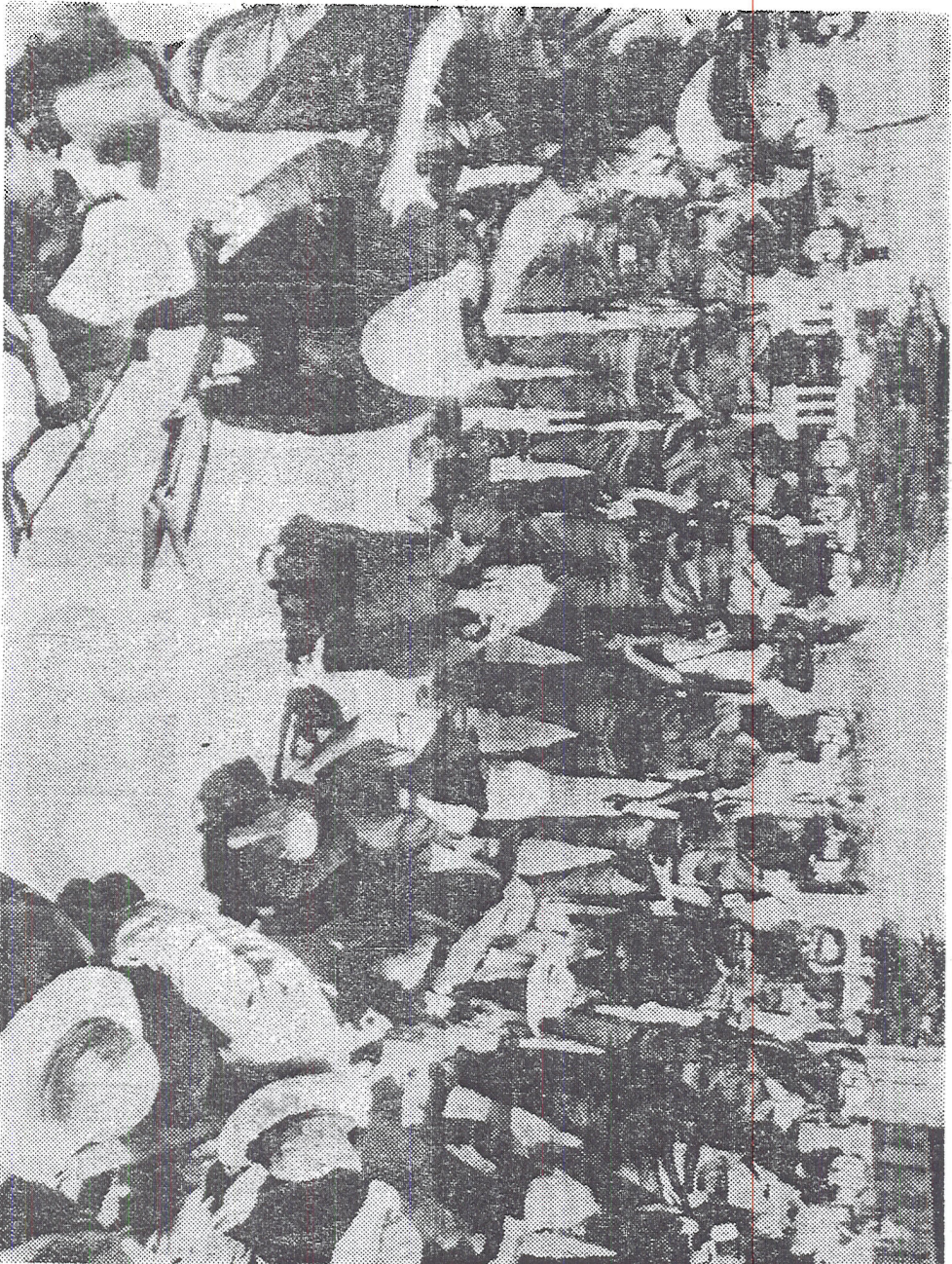
They were tired, dirty and looked somewhat undernourished, but their spirits could not have been higher. Broad smiles lit their faces, they called out greetings and vigorously pumped the extended hands of well-wishers.

Communist P.O.W.'s Quiet

The exuberant return of the Government soldiers contrasted dramatically with the earlier departure of 250 North Vietnamese and Vietcong who had been held captive by Saigon authorities.

The Communists soldiers shifted silently through the release procedure, their faces shifting from staves to grimaces.

Initially, the Communists, who were being held in the prisoner of war camp some 20 miles northeast of Saigon, had balked at Government attempts to return them. They finally agreed to accept their release nearly six hours after the time they were set by the members



A prison guard at Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, helping a disabled North Vietnamese prisoner to his feet as he and other Communist prisoners waited at the camp for a dispute over the exchange to be settled.

Associated Press

of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, made up of South Vietnam, North Vietnam, the United States and the Provisional Revolutionary Government. But the entire schedule of prisoner exchanges planned for yesterday was upset.

Small Group Freed

As a result, only a small group of the prisoners that the Saigon Government and the Communists had intended to exchange was actually set free for several hours. It was feared that the 27 Americans who eventually were released last evening would have to spend another day in captivity.

Not long ago, members of the International Committee of the Red Cross interviewed several hundred Communist prisoners and found that only a

handful wished to be repatriated. American and South Vietnamese officers say that the Communists have been told that to become a prisoner is a disgrace. Under the provisions of the Paris peace agreement, prisoners have no choice but to be returned to their former units.

Sunday night, a Government spokesman reviewing the details of the exchanges, said that South Vietnam would release 2,000 Communist prisoners and that the Communists would free 1,020 Government soldiers.

Fear of Deception

But when the first Communist soldiers were supposed to leave the camp here at 6 A.M. yesterday they insisted on seeing representatives of the four-

part joint military commission.

Maj. To Cong Bien, a Government spokesman, said the prisoners had indicated that they feared they were somehow being deceived. "Maybe they are worried that we want to take them out and kill them," the major said.

Shortly after 10, a commission delegation arrived from Saigon and conferred with six North Vietnamese and six Vietcong prisoners. Newsmen were kept more than 50 yards away.

About 11:30 P.M. the Communist prisoners agreed to cooperate.

The key release point was at Loc Ninh, a Communist-held district capital 77 miles north of Saigon, where the Communists had said they would free the Americans and the only

place where they said they intended to release South Vietnamese Government soldiers yesterday.

South Vietnamese military police led the Communist prisoners from their cell blocks in groups of 25 and as the prisoners approached the trucks that would take them to the air base, reporters and photographers pressed around them. The prisoners tried to hide their faces with hats and towels.

Many Are Amputees

Vietnamese newsmen several times tried to question the prisoners, but the only response was a cold stare.

According to the Paris agreement, the least physically fit prisoners were to be among the

first released. Many of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong freed today were either amputees or appeared to be in poor health. Many hobbled on crutches and artificial limbs and two double amputees were carried piggyback by fellow prisoners. One prisoner was carried on a stretcher.

One amputee nearly fell over backwards as he made his way up the ramp of one of the American transports, but when American airmen reached out to steady him he pushed away their hands.

There appeared to be far fewer amputees among the returning South Vietnamese soldiers. But some of the men were carried off the planes on the shoulders of their comrades.