

SFChronicle

FEB 13 1973

SHY

POWs' First Day Back

--Food, TV, Calls Home

Associated Press

Clark AFB, Philippines

The first American war prisoners to gain freedom since the Vietnam peace

agreement enjoyed some pleasures of life outside Communist prison camps last night.

A total of 143 military and civilian prisoners flew away from captivity, 116 from

North Vietnam and 27 from jungle prisons in South Vietnam.

All but one, who remained in a Saigon hospital, were flown to this U.S. base for the first stop on their way home.

CALLS

Back under the U.S. flag, the POWs telephoned their families in the U.S., watched television in their rooms at the Clark Air Force Base hospital and dined on steak and eggs.

Only four of the 143 were sick enough to be brought back on litters. Many others looked pale and wan, particularly those released at Loc Ninh in South Vietnam. They flew into Clark after their release was delayed 11 hours by a dispute between the South Vietnamese government and the Viet Cong.

The commander of the base hospital, Colonel John W. Ord, told newsmen after his staff of more than 60 physicians and specialists ran a quick check: "The general physical condition of the personnel is good."

Still held in North and South Vietnam and Laos are

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419 other Americans, mainly military personnel, who are scheduled to be released in three more groups over the next six weeks.

Those in the first group ate ice cream, steak, corn

on the cob, chicken and strawberry shortcake for their first meal in freedom. Most had requested — and got — that typical fare rather than the bland diets planned by doctors to ease their transition from prison life.

Major Marian Fortune, head dietician at the base hospital, was quoted as saying the returning prisoners dug right in at an ice cream bar rigged up at the entrance of the cafeteria serving line.

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

A spokesman said one of the men, still on crutches, declined an offer to be waited on.

"No ma'am," the prisoner said. "I've been waiting seven years, and I'm not about to sit down for someone to wait on me."

Spokesmen said many of the prisoners put in calls to their families at home after dinner, and others watched themselves on taped broadcasts of their arrival.

The first of four hospital planes — three from Hanoi, one from Saigon — carried 40 prisoners. It brought them from the North Vietnamese capital, where they had filed through a wire fence and moved 50 yards across the tarmac to board their flight to freedom. Most walked aboard; a few were carried in litters.

SPOKESMAN

During the 2 1/2-hour flight, they appointed Navy Captain Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. of Virginia Beach, Va., to express their sentiments to the cheering U.S. base personnel, families and newsmen on hand at Clark to greet them.

"We are happy to have this opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances," Denton said as he stepped first from the plane. "We are profoundly grateful to our commander in chief and to our nation for

this day. God bless America."

Next to descend from the C-141 was Lieutenant Commander Everett A. Alvarez Jr. of Santa Clara, Calif. The first American flyer captured in North Vietnam, he had been a prisoner since Aug. 5, 1964.

SMILE

Alvarez walked with determined steps down the exit ramp and smiled broadly as he shook hands with Admiral Noel Gayler, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific.

Gayler and Lieutenant General William G. Moore Jr., commander of the 13th Air Force, stood on the runway to greet the men: 41 in the first planeload from Hanoi, 39 in the second and 36 in the third. They returned later to greet the 26 who flew in from Saigon.

The 27th prisoner released in South Vietnam after a day of waiting remained in

an Army hospital at his own request, the U.S. Embassy said in Saigon. He was identified as Richard George Waldhaus, 25, of Pittsburg, Calif., a civilian with no known government connection who was captured Feb. 4, 1971.

The late-night arrival of the prisoners from South Vietnam contrasted sharply with the arrival of those from Hanoi.

Arriving at Clark from Hanoi, the Air Force and Navy aviators briskly emerged from their aircraft, saluted and shook hands with the official welcoming party and waved at the crowd of military personnel and newsmen.

Most of the 26 men from South Vietnam had been held for years by the Viet Cong in tunnels and jungle villages. Civilian Douglas Ramsey was in captivity for seven years. They insisted on wearing the Viet Cong-issued pajamas of pastel green and blue cloth until they entered Clark hospital.

The prisoners from the South also seemed shy of the huge press reception awaiting them and seemed uncertain whether to shake hands with Gayler and the other dignitaries.

One reason for their shyness was probably the isolated nature of their confinement. An escort officer said he got the impression on the flight to Clark from Saigon that one of the POWs had not even been informed that Americans had landed on the moon.

Once at Clark, the returning POWs from both Vietnams were swept up in the elaborate apparatus of "Operation Homecoming," the program aimed at easing the men back into American life.

The prisoners climbed into buses that carried them from the airport to the hospital, where maximum security measures were in effect. Earlier yesterday, doctors at the hospital had been frisked for concealed cameras and tape recorders.

The POWs were quickly checked over and assigned to wards. Soon afterward doctors allowed the POWs to pick their own roommates. Special diets were available but many of the men preferred the regular hospital evening meal.

The favorable medical bulletins indicated that the stay for most prisoners at Clark might be short. Officials said most can be expected to be on their way back to the U.S. within three days.

Late yesterday the returning men were introduced to specially trained military

More POW news on
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escorts, who have been studying files on the POWs for weeks and know intimate details of family life, including the bad and good news.

Today, the POWs will begin extensive medical checks. They will be measured for new uniforms and get basic items, like toothbrushes and soap.

The escorts will help them make financial decisions and give assistance for anything else they might need.

The idea is to make the transition from prison camp to U.S. life as easy as possible.

The prisoners from North Vietnam checked out of 'Hanoi Hilton' through a three-foot fence at Gia Lam Airport in the North Vietnam capital.

Inside
by
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AP Wirephoto

Among the returning captives was Douglas Ramsey, a civilian employee of the U.S. Operations Mission who was kidnaped by the Viet Cong in 1966 near Saigon.