

How the Red POWs Left

Grotesque

Parade of

Sullen Men

Bien Hoa,
South Vietnam

The first group of Communist prisoners left South Vietnam yesterday the way they came: Silent, sullen and defiant.

There were 200 of them, mostly young but all crippled, wounded or sick. They were hard-core North Vietnamese soldiers, and they played that role to the hilt, as if to prove that having their bodies blasted and broken had not bent their spirit.

At first they refused release from their prison at this air base, 15 miles north of Saigon. They claimed that the South Vietnamese might be trying to trick them, that North Vietnamese member of the Joint Military Commission Team overseeing the exchange might not be "real" North Vietnamese.



A guard helped a North Vietnamese prisoner to his feet—but such gestures of mercy were few

UPI Telephoto

South Vietnamese and American officials, however, said they believed that the prisoners simply were demonstrating their willingness to postpone freedom for the sake of harassing their captors. "It was a show of toughness," said one American who sat in on the negotiations.

Finally, after several hours delay that upset the exchange timetable and delayed the return of 27 Americans from Communist hands, the prisoners yielded when commission members

agreed to accompany them on a flight to the release point in Quang Tri province. But if the North Vietnamese were happy to be heading home, they hid their joy behind hard eyes and impassive faces.

Limping five abreast from their barbed-wire compound to waiting trucks, they looked like a band of limbless lepers, clinging together and clad in faded, patched prison uniforms that could not conceal still-raw wounds and places where arms and

legs had been.

Nevertheless, they kept uncompromising dignity about them, moving slowly and in silence, the weaker ones borne on stretchers or on the backs of less maimed buddies.

Seemingly oblivious to the blazing midday sun, they stared straight ahead when squatting on the ground for the final roll call. They paid no attention to officials, camera-clicking correspondents or their well-armed guards.

Their captors sensed the prevailing mood and quickly reciprocated. Herding the group toward the trucks, South Vietnamese military policemen — their starved faces and strong bodies in stark contrast to the figures before them — gave the North Vietnamese no assistance in mounting the vehicles' high tailgates.

The halt had to help the lame, and the results were grotesque. The prisoners floundered, clawed and scrambled desperately in

trying to clamber aboard.

Some tumbled, others lost crutches or crushed their fingers, but none cried out. Several guards smirked; most watched without expression. It all happened in silence.

Fourteen trucks took the 200 prisoners to Bien Hoa's main airfield, where they dismounted by themselves and limped unaided through a corridor of armed guards to waiting C-130s. Transports that were to fly them north.

