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GI Discipline in POW Camps Key to Mental, Physical Health

CLARK AIR BASE, Philippines (AP) — American organization in North Vietnamese prison camps played a key role in keeping up the spirits and physical condition of the 116 U.S. prisoners released by Hanoi Monday, U.S. government experts said today.

They also said the lack of such organization in Viet Cong prisons in South Vietnam apparently took a toll on the condition of the 27 POWs released north of Saigon the same day.

"The organization and discipline the prisoners in North Vietnam had been able to maintain were very apparent yesterday," said Roger Shields, the Pentagon's senior civilian adviser on prisoners of war who was in Hanoi for the first release.

HE TOLD a news conference that POWs arriving in buses at Hanoi's Gia Lam Airport were drawn up in formation by the senior prisoner on the bus.

"They had maintained a fine organization in the prison camps, and the discipline in the camp helped keep their spirits high," Shields said.

He said the three men who spoke briefly to the crowd on their arrival at Clark "were leaders of camp organization." They were Navy Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr., 49, of Virginia Beach, Va., and James A. Mulligan, 47, of Pensacola, Fla., and Air Force Col. Robinson Risner, 48, of Tulsa, Okla.

The 143 prisoners represent about one-fourth of the Americans held by Hanoi and the Viet Cong. The rest are to be released at two-week intervals and flown to Clark for preliminary medical checks en route home. All are to be out by March 28.

MUCH IS still unclear about details of the American organization within the prison camps.

The returning POWs are not being pressed for these details while they undergo medical examinations, officials said. It also is believed officials would prefer to keep some details confidential until all Americans are released.

But all combat air crewmen attend survival training and, as Shields put it, "are taught to organize in captivity for their own safety and protection.

"From what we've learned so far, camp organization was a great deal like that during the Second World War," he added.

HE SAID the senior American officer in a camp was designated camp commander by his fellow POWs and the commander had a staff organized along military lines.

The staff was concerned with all aspects of prisoner welfare and prisoner concerns, including committees on entertainment, medical affairs, food and clothing — "things that would help a man survive," Shields said.

Officials refused to say whether there also were committees on escape or intelligence gathering.

It has been reported that prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton

a large POW compound in Hanoi, at one time organized a chapter of "Toastmasters International," at which a POW with expertise in any subject would lecture to others on it.

EDUCATION AND library committees also were believed to have been set up where possible.

Col. Albert Lynn, an Air Force officer who handled the POW turnovers in Hanoi Monday, said the behavior of the men "indicated that their American spirit, their ingenuity, still live. They were very military."

The POWs who returned to Clark from South Vietnam were noticeably weaker and less well oriented than the returnees from North Vietnam.

The State Department's expert on civilian POWs, Frank Sieverts, said part of this could be attributed to different prison camp conditions in North and South Vietnam.

"In the North, the camps were organized in a very open way . . . But, in the South, there was no opportunity for that kind of organization," Sieverts said.

PRISONERS HELD in the South were constantly moved to keep them away from battles and U.S. forces and were held in small groups for the same reasons. Mail was less frequent and medical care worse than in North Vietnamese camps, sources said.

"These men are returning from oblivion without even the

limited contact with the outside world that was available in some cases to men in North Vietnam," Sieverts said.

In addition, most of the military POWs in South Vietnam are younger enlisted men, while those in the North are generally older officers.

It is not known whether the North Vietnamese administered the POW camps through the American staff, but Shields said the United States is aware of "attempts on the part of the men to ensure that their contacts with the North Vietnamese went through the (American) camp commander."