

Long Wait Is Ended for 27, Set Free in South Vietnam

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By FOX BUTTERFIELD FEB 13 1973

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, Feb. 13 — After 12 hours of debate and anguishing delay, 27 American prisoners of war held in South Vietnam were freed last night by the Vietcong, flown to Saigon and then rushed to Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

The release of the prisoners, one of whom had been in captivity for seven years, was delayed until after dark because of a dispute between American and Vietcong officers over whether the men could be freed before the Communists received the first plan load of their prisoners from the South Vietnamese.

At the same time, the first South Vietnamese Army prisoners released by the Communists appeared at Bien Hoa air base, where earlier a group of Communist prisoners had been released. [Details on Page 14.]

The exchange of the 27 Americans for 1,000 Communist prisoners took place in Communist-controlled Loc Ninh, a small, devastated rubber plantation town near the Cambodian border and about 72 miles north of Saigon.

The former prisoners finally arrived at Tan Son Nhut air base at 8:20 P.M. (7:20 A.M. Monday, New York time) aboard six United States Army helicopters. The men debarked and strode swiftly toward the Air Force C-9 Nightingale medical evacuation plane waiting to take them to the Philippines.

The 27, wearing baggy gray pajamas and sandals and looking thin but healthy, paused only long enough to shake hands with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, the commander of United States forces in Vietnam.

Several of them greeted the ambassador with "It's great to be here," and he replied, "It's great to have you here."

Nineteen military men and eight civilians were released, corresponding exactly, United States officials said, to the list of 27 prisoners to be released that the Vietcong had provided last Saturday.

Of the 27, Douglas K. Ram-

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sey, a foreign service officer from Boulder City, Nev., had been a prisoner longest. He was captured on Jan. 5, 1966.

The first prisoner off the helicopters here was carried on a stretcher to the medical evacuation plane. He waved vigorously to the crowd of several hundred onlookers at the base and United States officers said later that he was in good condition.

He was identified only as a member of the Air Force who had been captured last year [The man was Capt. David E. Baker of Huntington, L. I., who fainted while he and the others were awaiting the exchange, United Press International reported.]

One Asks to Remain

Another man, Richard G. Waldhaus, a civilian who was captured on Feb. 4, 1969, asked to be allowed to remain in Saigon at a United States military hospital. Mr. Waldhaus, who was said to have been an antiwar activist, was not available for comment last night.

Most of the men carried small black plastic bags containing their few possessions. One reached down to touch the asphalt runway, then waved and smiled to the spectators, who applauded and cheered him. Brig. Gen. Stan McClellan, the Army chief of staff for Vietnam who commanded the team of 44 Americans that supervised the exchange at Loc Ninh, said that all the men appeared "in reasonably good physical condition," and that none had needed any immediate, serious medical attention.

"I complimented the P.R.G. officers on the men's condition," General McClellan said at a news conference, referring to the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Cites Specific Timetable

General McClellan, a tall, slender man, explained that he had received clear orders that he was to pick up the 27 prisoners at 8:30 yesterday morning and that he had not expected any difficulties. "I was told that everything had been agreed upon," he said.

He had received his instructions from Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, the chief United States delegate to the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, which has been negotiating the details of the prisoner releases.

But at Loc Ninh General McClellan found that the Vietcong commander, a lieutenant colonel, had different orders. The general said that the colonel insisted that he could not release any American prisoners until he had received Communist prisoners from the South Vietnamese.

The military commission had arranged that the South Vietnamese would send 1,000 captives from Bien Hoa Prison, near Saigon, to Loc Ninh yesterday.

American diplomats who are familiar with the Paris pact's provisions on prisoners said



Associated Press

Air Force Capt. Peter J. Giroux of Oklahoma City, his arm in a sling, leaving plane at Clark Air Base. He was shot down last December.

last night that there was no provision whatsoever linking the release of American prisoners to the release of Communist prisoners. "The protocols were specifically worded so that this sort of thing couldn't happen," a knowledgeable official said. "The Communists just got their orders

While General McClellan and the Vietcong colonel argued about the Paris pact, the 1,000 Communist prisoners who were to have been released at Bien Hoa balked at boarding United States Air Force planes, reportedly because they thought they were being tricked.

Newsmen Kept Back

"It was a frustrating day," General McClellan said. Asked if he had any ill feelings about the encounter, he replied, "Certainly there were some ill feel-

ings on our part." But he added that the Vietcong officers were "courteous, and never threatening."

The general said that for security reasons, he had not discussed their imprisonment with the men on the return flight to Saigon. He said that he could not provide any information on where they had actually been held.

Newsmen were not allowed to interview the prisoners directly and were kept 30 yards away from them behind ropes guarded by military policemen.

After the freed men had boarded the plane for the flight to Clark, General Weyand put his arm around Gen. John Vogt, the commander of the Seventh Air Force. They stood looking at the plane.

"It's the greatest day we've ever had in Vietnam," General Weyand said.

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Associated Press

Ellsworth Bunker, right, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, greeting an unidentified prisoner at Tan Son Nhut Air Base last night. The man was one of the 27 who were released at Loc Ninh and taken by helicopter to Saigon. They then flew to Clark Air Base.

Long Wait Ends as 27 Arrive at Saigon