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What Keeps a Freed Man in Saigon?

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Wednesday, Feb. 14—Why did Richard G. Waldhaus stay in Vietnam Monday when the 142 other American prisoners freed by the Communists flew to Clark Air Base in the Philippines?

The answer, appropriately enough on Valentine's Day, was love, according to an American source here.

The source said Mr. Waldhaus, who is 25 years old, stayed in Saigon rather than proceed to Clark because he has a Vietnamese girlfriend he wants to see.

For the moment, at least, Mr. Waldhaus did not seem to want to see anyone else. He remained in seclusion at the United States Army Hospital here and officials said he did not want to meet with journalists.

Background Is Sketchy

Much of his background and the circumstances surrounding his capture and imprisonment remained something of a mystery.

Mr. Waldhaus was one of

27 Americans freed at Loc Ninh in South Vietnam Monday, while 116 were set free in Hanoi.

So far as could be determined, Mr. Waldhaus was the only one of the 143 who was neither a member of the armed services nor a civilian employe of the United States Government.

"I am not aware that he was employed," said a United States Embassy official when asked about Mr. Waldhaus's occupation. Another American source described Mr. Waldhaus as a "hippie" and something of a wanderer.

It was apparently during his wanderings in Vietnam before his capture that he met the woman he now wants to see. Nothing is known about the woman and little more is known about Mr. Waldhaus himself.

For a time yesterday there was some speculation that Mr. Waldhaus's shadowy past might indicate that he was an intelligence agent. Americans who engage in that kind of business put a quick and heavy damper on the speculation.

"If you are inquiring about whether he belongs to me," said one such high-ranking official when asked about Mr. Waldhaus, "the answer is absolutely not."

According to information available here, Mr. Waldhaus was born on Aug. 18, 1947, and lists his home as Pittsburgh, Calif.

Embassy officials said he served in the Army medical corps in Vietnam during the late nineteen-sixties. After his discharge from the Army, according to these officials, Mr. Waldhaus went back to the United States, attended San Francisco State College, and then returned to Vietnam as a civilian in 1971.

"He probably was one of these young guys who got fascinated with Vietnam while he was out here," said one embassy official.

According to the official, Mr. Waldhaus was captured in August, 1971, near Lai Khe about 35 miles north of Saigon. American sources said he was either hitchhiking or riding a bus toward the Cambodian border when the Communists seized him.