

20 POWs Arrive from Philippines

By Charles Howe
Chronicle Correspondent

The first major group of American prisoners of war released from Vietnam arrived at Travis Air Force Base in Solano county at 4:27 p.m. yesterday, ending a 8000-mile flight from the Philippines and a three-day journey from Communist captivity.

Welcoming ceremonies for the 20 men were deliberately kept low keyed as the men stepped off a giant C-141 Starlifter and onto a red carpet brought out for the occasion.

Wearing a uniform tailor-made at Clark Air Base, each man stepped out of the plane as his name was called and snapped a brisk salute at a four-man color guard.

INTERVIEWS

None of the 20 ex-prisoners was allowed to have an extensive interview with reporters and the few that made statements said little about the conditions of their captivity.

Military spokesmen said it "would be several days" before in-depth interviews would be granted.

First man off the plane was Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton, 48, oldest member of the group and its unofficial spokesman.

A prisoner since July 8, 1965, Denton said that faith in God and a whistled signal of hope helped him through his ordeal.

Denton said he and his comrades would whistle

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AP Wirephoto
CAPTAIN DENTON
First off the plane

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"California Here I Come" during bleak days.

"We usually knew we were whistling in the dark, but now, thank God, it has come true."

TEARS

Denton's voice broke and tears came to his eyes when he was asked how it felt to come home to his wife and seven children.

"I can't define it because I have nothing to compare it with. There was ample time in solitude to meditate on the glory of family and friends."

Six of the 20 men were escorted to military vehicles after they were disembarked and were transported to Bay Area military hospitals where they will be examined by doctors as they are reunited, in private, with wives and families.

The rest of the men were scheduled to be transported to military hospitals near their home towns.

WEIGHT

Navy Captain James A. Mulligan, 46, the second oldest member of the group told reporters he lost about 15 pounds while in captivity.

Captured on March 20, 1966, Mulligan said, "We just went out of our minds" when the plane touched down at Travis.

Mulligan said that while he was confined "we had



JAMES MULLIGAN
He had lost 15 pounds

reasonable food and a strenuous exercise program."

Despite periods of imprisonment that ranged close to eight years, most of the men looked amazingly fit. One officer wore an eyepatch, another walked with a noticeable limp, and a third swung down the gangway on crutches.

HUGS

Wives and mothers of three of the men met them for quick embraces shortly after the plane landed, but there seemed little time allotted for emotional reunions under the gaze of television cameras and more than 250 reporters.

Later, several Bay Area men transported to local military hospitals made brief statements.

At Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Harlan Page Chapman, shot down on November 5, 1965, said:

"during the little over seven years I was a POW I never shed a tear."

But in the past few days, the 38-year-old Chapman added, he had cried — "not from sadness, but from joy and amazement."

Chapman thanked President Nixon "for getting us back and the American people for their help."

Patients at the hospital cheered as Navy Commander John B. McKamey, 37

shot down on June 2, 1965, said his pride in serving in the Navy was "exceeded only by my gratitude at

being freed.

"God bless you all. We're all happy to be home."

At Letterman General Hospital at San Francisco Presidio, Army Captain Mark A. Smith, 26, captured on April 7, 1972, stood in front of the giant complex briefly as patients inside lined the windows and applauded him.

"It's wonderful to be back in the greatest country in the world," Smith said, "and in the greatest state in the world and with the greatest people in the world."

"I'm a little choked up right now. All I can say is God bless all of you people and God bless America."

STAYING

Three Air Force men among yesterday's group remained at Travis, housed in the David Grant Medical Center.

They are First Lieutenant William Arcuri, 25, of Yuba City; Captain Terry M. Geloneck, 29, of Decatur, Ala., and Lieutenant Colonel Alan L. Brunstrom, 41, of Tacoma, Wash.

Doctors at Travis said that the health of these three men, considering their ordeal, "is excellent."

At Clark Air Base in the Philippines, spokesmen said that the remaining 120 prisoners who were released Sunday night are expected to "be back in the United States by the end of this week." The first two arrived in San Diego Tuesday night.

REFUSAL

Shortly before the prisoners landed at Travis yesterday, an Air Force pilot who refused to fly more bombing missions over North Vietnam talked to reporters.

Captain Michael J. Heck, awaiting discharge, said that he, like everyone else at the base, was glad to see the men come home.

"In fact I'm particularly happy in some personal cases," Heck said. "Many letters I received, a good number at least, were from POW wives and women who had husbands and sons killed in this war."

"Many said at one time they agreed with the war policies and have since changed their minds and feel as I do now that the war is not justified and the terri-

ble death and destruction that resulted is just not worth it."

Heck refused to fly a mission December 26 "because the goals of the war do not justify the mass destruction and killing."

HAWAII

Earlier yesterday, when the plane carrying the POWs landed in Hawaii for an hour to refuel Denton told a crowd of 300 well-wishers.

"This has been a glorious trip homeward, and it's a

great pleasure to share part of the greatest Valentine's Day of our lives with you.

"Perhaps you all have some inkling of how we feel to stand again in the United States of America."

As at Travis, ceremonies in Hawaii were deliberately kept at a low key.

"The name of the game now is the welfare of these men," an escort officer said.