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CLARK BASE GETS THANKS OF P.O.W.'S

Men Boarding Plane to U. S.
Express Gratitude for
'Wonderful Welcome'

By JAMES P. STERBA
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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Thursday, Feb. 15—Twenty freed American prisoners departed for the United States yesterday on a United States Air Force medical evacuation plane. Two more plane-loads were scheduled to depart today.

Military officials here said that 20 more American prisoners might be picked up in Hanoi today. North Vietnamese officials had announced that they would be released ahead of schedule as a goodwill gesture after the Hanoi visit of Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser on national security.

Most of the men who left Clark Air Base yesterday were still wearing blue hospital pajamas and bathrobes as they boarded a C-141 converted cargo jet for the 16½-hour trip to Travis Air Force Base, Calif.

Denton Thanks Group

Capt. Jeremiah Denton of the Navy, the first released prisoners to step off the first plane from Hanoi three days ago, made a short departure statement:

"I would like to express our thanks to you people here at Clark. You have shown us that your feeling is as deep as ours, and that is the highest compliment I can pay for the wonderful welcome we received here.

"I would like to thank President Nixon and everyone associated with this project for an experience we will never forget."

Before boarding the plane, Lieut. Comdr. Edward A. Davis posed for photographers with the puppy that a North Vietnamese guard gave him in Hanoi two months ago. Air Force officials said they had received special Pentagon approval for the puppy to accompany Commander Davis on the flight.

Men Visit School

Yesterday three of the returned prisoners visited the Virgil Grissom Elementary School on the base to thank the children for their posters, table place mats and Valentines of welcome.

Some 150 children sang "God Bless America" and "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow" as the men entered the school auditorium.

When the former prisoners emerged from the auditorium, newsmen attempted to chat with them but were brushed aside by Col. Al Lynn of the Air Force, who is in charge of public relations for the prisoner return.

"Come on, you guys aren't playing the game," he told newsmen.

The press has thus far been prohibited from talking to the prisoners or any of the doctors and officials attending them at the hospital here. Instead, all information on hospital activities, except from informants, has been screened through military information officers.

Yesterday, for example, the information staff released its daily resume of Operation Homecoming activities. It said, in part:

"Members of joint Homecoming command center staff spent this morning monitoring the progress of the returnees as they moved through processing. The rapid pace established by the returnees themselves was made possible, in large measure, by their generally excellent physical condition and high state of morale.

"The rapidity with which the necessary processing is being accomplished was evidenced by plans to commence movement of the first group of 20 returnees to the CONUS [Continental United States] at 5 P.M. this afternoon.