

Another Red Carpet Welcome More Prisoners Reach

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More POWs Reach U.S.

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TRAVIS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AP) — The red carpet was rolled out again here today for liberated American prisoners of war.

About 500 persons were on hand as the first of three planes, each carrying 20 POWs, landed at this former jump-off point for Vietnam-bound servicemen.

The first plane touched down shortly after noon, with the other two hospital craft scheduled to arrive within the next six hours after the 8,010-mile, 16-hour flight from Clark Air Base in the Philippines.

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Everett Alvarez Jr., the first American flier shot down in North Vietnam about 8½ years ago, was aboard the second plane. Five civilian prisoners of the Viet Cong were on the second plane and a sixth civilian was on the third flight.

A POSTER reading "You're the Greatest — We Love You" greeted the men as they left the first plane today.

The first man off, Air Force Col. Raymond J. Merritt of Colton, Calif., who was captured in September 1966, said, "I just want to take this opportunity to express our appreciation not only to all of you, but to all the wonderful people who made this trip possible."

There were no wives to greet the day's first homecoming flight. All but one of the 20 men aboard were headed for homecomings at other bases.

Air Force Capt. David E. Baker of Westbury, N.Y., who arrived in the Philippines from Hanoi on a stretcher four days ago, walked off the homecoming flight on crutches and smiled to the flag-waving welcoming crowd. The 26-year-old flier wore what appeared to be a cast on his right leg.

Twenty more Americans liberated last Sunday night will remain at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines another day and will fly home Saturday.

TWO EX-PRISONERS had been rushed to the United States on Tuesday.

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to the bedsides of critically ill mothers. A third, a civilian, returned by commercial aircraft Thursday, barefoot and carrying a flower.

The 60 men who arrived at Travis on Wednesday and Thursday in plane loads of 20 received formal welcomes before going to military hospitals across the country. Two Air Force generals and a color guard met the Operation Homecoming planes.

Hundreds of newsmen and base personnel behind barricades watched the former POWs emerge singly, salute the colors and welcoming officers and shake hands with the generals.

A few men stepped to nearby microphones for brief statements, but most walked briskly down the red carpet to the Travis terminal for refreshments. Most of the returnees looked happy and healthy.

"I WANT YOU to know we walked out of Hanoi as winners, and we're not coming home with our tails between our legs. We return with honor," Navy Cmdr. William Shankel told the cheering crowd Thursday.

Shankel, a native of Angels Camp in the California gold country, was a prisoner in North Vietnam more than six years. At his side was Navy Lt. Cmdr. Theodore Kopfman of Kent, Ohio, who added, "I'm ready and anxious to return to your service on behalf of our commander-in-chief."

Of the first 60 returnees at Travis, only Army Pvt. Ferdinand A. Rodriguez of Brooklyn, N.Y., did not take part in the formal welcome.

A military spokesman said Rodriguez, who faces charges of being absent without leave when the Viet Cong captured him in 1968, was ill.

The spokesman quoted the 25-year-old native of Puerto Rico as saying,

"I'm sorry. I don't want to get off. I don't feel well."

RODRIGUEZ REMAINED on the C141, awaiting a flight to a military hospital on the East Coast.

Five of the repatriated men returning Wednesday and Thursday were greeted by their wives and children on the flight line. All five were assigned to the Travis base hospital for recuperation.

Reunions for the rest were arranged at the military hospitals to which they have been assigned for treatment.

Capt. James D. Stockdale, the senior Navy officer of all the returning POWs, was spokesman for the first plane load Thursday.

Unlike most of the returning men, the effects of Stockdale's 7½ years in North Vietnamese prisons showed on his gaunt face, and he looked older than his 49 years. Tears welled in his eyes when he spoke of his men's loyalty and patriotism.

"THE MEN WHO follow me down that ramp know what loyalty means because they have been living with loyalty, living on loyalty, the past several years — loyalty to each other, loyalty to the military ethic, loyalty to our commander-in-chief," he said.

Air Force Col. Ronald E. Byrne Jr. of New York City, leader of the next group, said, "To be back on American soil is a dream beyond our prayers. Thank you America for your unwavering support."

A different atmosphere surrounded the first civilian to return from a Viet Cong camp.

Wearing a serape draped over his shoulder, Richard Waldhaus arrived barefoot and carrying a pink carnation on a civilian flight Thursday at San Francisco's International Airport.