

The Joyous Drama Continues

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By Larry D. Hatfield

It was, after four days of scenes becoming increasingly ritualistic and boring, a moment of high drama.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. James R. Cook was carried off the giant C141 flying hospital in a litter. His legs, broken, were in casts. He occasionally winced from pain.

But when he came to the Marine color guard on the ramp at Alameda Naval Air Station, Sgt. Cook made the snappiest salute of a week of prisoners of war returning to American soil.

A crowd of Navy men and their dependents, many of them in tears, cheered lustily.

Cook grinned widely at the crowd and waved again and again as he was carried to a waiting ambulance bus.

Cook, 31, is a native of Emory, Va. He was reported missing Dec. 26 during a B-52 bombing raid. He and his wife Joene live in Golden, Colo.

Cook was the last man off "Homecoming G," the seventh and last flight bringing the first 143 American POWs home from war. Another 20 were being released by Hanoi today and, after a breeze through Clark AFB in the Philippines, the men could be landing at Travis AFB as early as Wednesday.

Yesterday's "Freedom Flight" was diverted yesterday morning from Travis, socked in by tule fog, to Alameda Naval Air Station.

There, at 9:36 a.m., some 350 cheering people greeted the 20 ex-POWs, the most haggard group so far.

On board, along with Cook, was Air Force Staff Sgt. Roy Madden Jr., of Beale AFB, north of Sacramento, who also was carried in a litter. He was suffering from a broken leg.

Madden, who grew up in Oakland, was more than Cook but still managed a game salute to the flag and a wave to the crowd.

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Doctors W.S. Moore and David Letourneau, both Navy commanders who accompanied the flight, said Cook and Madden were "okay."

Moore said both had bone breaks "that are not unlike fractures you see in automobile accidents stateside."

Letourneau said the flight "went very, very well" and the men suffered a "little discomfort" but "nothing that couldn't be taken care of very, very readily."

Also aboard Homecoming G were Navy Lt. Kenneth H. Higdon, of San Francisco; Air Force Maj. George G. McKnight, of Berkeley; and James U. Rollins, a civilian from Fairfield.

Higdon, whose parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hill Higdon live on Union Street, was met by his family at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland after the homecoming.

Crowd Cheers

Another poignant moment came when Navy Lt. Cmdr. Roger G. Lerseth, a captive since Sept. 6, 1972, was met by his wife Jean, who lives in San Francisco, and his mother, Lillian, of Spokane.

Having held back tears for the tense moments awaiting the plane, both women let them go when Lerseth, looking wan but happy, stepped off the plane.

The crowd cheered when Lerseth embraced his wife, then his mother, and then jubilantly walked to a vehicle awaiting to take

him to Oak Knoll. Other POWs reboarded Air Force planes to go to hospitals elsewhere.

The only other family reunion came when Mrs. Elizabeth Hastings, of Half Moon Bay, embraced her nephew, Lt. Col. McKnight. McKnight's mother lives in Honolulu.

Famous Face

Although most of the crowd didn't realize it, one of yesterday's returnees was probably America's most famous POW, in face if not in name. He is Navy Lt. David E. Rehmann, a flier who was paraded on worldwide television through the streets of Hanoi.

It is Rehmann's picture that is on the front of match books, brochures and other literature put out by VIVA and other POW organizations.

As Rehmann came off the plane yesterday, a blonde woman, later identified as Carol Bates, rushed to the surprised lieutenant, who had never seen her, and handed him a leatherbound book. The book contained copies of the vast amounts of POW literature put out by VIVA and other groups.

Miss Bates, accompanied by Gloria Coppin, chairman of VIVA's national advisory board, originated the idea of POW bracelets carrying the names of prisoners and men missing in action. They said they were at Alameda yesterday at the request of Rehmann's mother.

Rehmann, obviously taken

aback, did not say anything to Miss Bates.

Her dash to the POW line was typical of yesterday's departure from tradition. In the six previous flights into Travis, starting Wednesday afternoon, everybody was kept well away from the POWs.

But yesterday, besides Miss Bates, another civilian — two of them, as a matter of fact — broke through the lines.

Box of Candy

That was 15-year-old Philip Vogel, son of an Alameda Navy commander, who carried his two-year-old brother, Glenn, out to greet Navy Capt. Harry T. Jenkins. Little Glenn, looking confused, presented Jenkins with a small box of Valentine's Day candy in a heart-shaped box.

Jenkins, of Coronado, was spokesman for the plane and he said at a flight-line ceremony: "As we boarded the aircraft at Clark AFB, a young girl gave me a huge sign which read: 'Waiting sure takes a lot of patience.'"

"Out there, our patience sometimes faltered but our faith never did—in our God, our families and our country."

His homecoming speech was very much like the speeches of each of the previous six spokesmen.

The flight from the Philippines, through Hickam Field in Hawaii, was described by an accompanying public affairs officer as "jubilant... and active... they couldn't seem to stay in their seats."