

POWs Feared Hoax

N.Y. Times Service

Clark Air Base,
Philippines

Twenty more American prisoners of war were repatriated in Hanoi yesterday after a tense two-hour argument between the prisoners and North Vietnamese prison camp officials over who should be set free and over whether the release was a hoax.

According to informed sources, the 20 men selected by the North Vietnamese to be released were rounded up yesterday morning from various prison rooms within

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one camp in Hanoi and told they would be released.

The prisoners, thinking it was a trick, reportedly told their captors they would not move out of the camp and that they would have to be tied up and forced out of the camp.

At the same time, leaders of the prisoners insisted that they be allowed to choose who would be released. Their North Vietnamese captors charged them with violating the release agreement and said that if the men they had chosen did not go, none of them would be released.

After what was described as heated negotiations, the prisoners insisted that an American delegate from the Joint Military Command be brought to the camp to explain what was happening. After he came and explained, the prisoners remained skeptical over the release, which was arranged as a goodwill gesture by Hanoi after the visit there last week of Henry Kissinger, the presidential adviser.

The prisoners were reportedly not convinced that their release was not a hoax until after they boarded a bus to Hanoi's Gia Lam Airfield

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and actually saw the U.S. medical evacuation jet, which was sent to pick them up, circling above the airfield.

"They thought they were being spoofed," a source said. "It happens all the time up there. You can attribute the situation to a general laxity in the Hanoi prison camps now. There is no longer the tight control there used to be."

Military information officers made no mention of the delay or the details surrounding it in their press briefings after they returned with the prisoners from Hanoi. Instead, they called the repatriation normal, with only a 20-minute delay caused by traffic congestion in Hanoi.

Only this morning, after news of the delay leaked out, did the information officers acknowledge that it had occurred.

ARRIVAL

An official at Clark Air Base who went to Hanoi said the prisoners boarded their bus for Gia Lam airport only after the U.S. delegate on the Joint Military Commission went to the camp

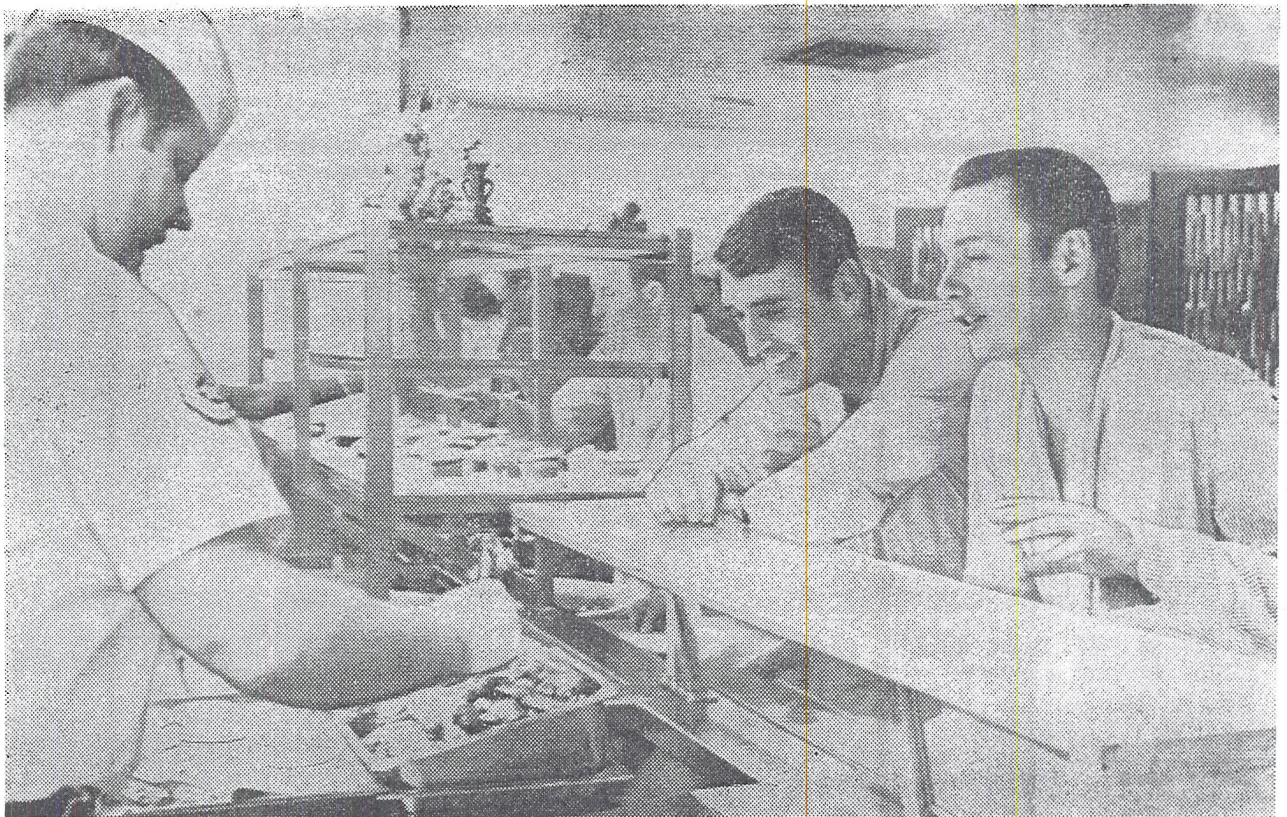
and confirmed to the prisoners that they were being released.

The men arrived here from Hanoi, looking healthy, saluting the flag, and waving and smiling at a crowd of more than a thousand well-wishers.

As a refreshment truck dispensed hot dogs and coffee to the spectators who chanted "Welcome home, welcome home," the men bounded one at a time out of their medical evacuation plane as their names were called. They saluted the flag, walked quickly down the ramp, shook hands with a general, an admiral and Henry A. Byroade, the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, then walked over a red carpet to an ambulance bus.

Commander James Pirie of the Navy, who is 37 years old and has been a prisoner for almost six years, spoke for the group as senior officer, continuing the patriotic tone set by spokesmen for the 143 prisoners freed on Monday.

"It's been a long time," he said. "Seeing the American flag over here defies description of my emotions. We are proud to be Americans. We are proud of our commander in chief, President Nixon. We are proud of the



AP Wirephoto

In the Clark Air Base cafeteria yesterday, freed POWs Major Hubert Flesher (left), Clarksburg, W. Va., and Captain John Nasmyth Jr., San Gabriel, Calif., leaned forward in anticipation.

American people who have supported us over the years."

With yesterday's release, 400 American military men and 13 American civilians remain in captivity in North Vietnam and South Vietnam, according to lists provided by Hanoi. They are scheduled under the cease-fire agreement to be released during the next month.

At Hanoi's Gia Lam Airfield, the 20 prisoners to be freed alighted from a green camouflaged bus, formed into lines of ten and were marched by Commander Pierre to a canvas-covered area. As each man's name was called, he stepped forward, past a table where his name was checked off by the negotiators. Then he stepped up to Colonel Emil J. Wengel, an Air Force information officer, saluted and said, "Reporting for duty, Sir." Then each man was escorted to the waiting C-141 evacuation plane.

The turnover took about 15 minutes. The weather was humid, the sky overcast.

Lieutenant Colonel Richard F. Abel of the Air Force, an information officer who was on the evacuation plane, said that there was "jubilation as the men boarded," with shouting, hugging and tears. There was more shouting and "tremendous euphoria" as the plane took off and then again as it crossed the North Vietnamese coastline, Abel added.

Aboard the plane, nurses and other crew members autographed the blue work shirts that the North Vietnamese had issued to the prisoners to wear for their release. They also wrote down addresses and telephone numbers.

During the flight to Clark, doctors made a cursory examination of the 20 freed men and pronounced their general health "very good." They were served pineapple, tomato and orange juices, coffee, a nutrient drink called sustacal, and life savers, candy bars and cigarettes from a large sack.

"It was like Halloween," Abel said.

MAGAZINES

Newspapers and magazines were provided. One of the men returning, Major Joseph S. Abbot Jr. of the Air Force, discovered a copy of Time magazine that showed his wife and seven children on the cover and carried a story about the prisoners inside. He looked at the photo and read the story uninterrupted for about 20 minutes, Colonel Wengel said.

Abel noted that one man had told him "It's the longest final approach I've ever been on" as the plane started to land.

Abel continued that the men on the flight home had said that "it was great to get back to freedom" and that America is "the greatest country in the world. Others said how much their faith in their country and their God meant to them," he recalled.

After the plane had landed at Clark Air base last night and the returned prisoners entered the hospital, a news pool was allowed inside for the first time. A three-man television team and one photographer and one reporter observed the men for 20 minutes in the hospital cafeteria at dinner. No questions were allowed.