

(See also SFChronicle story from Times Svc for other details.)

20 More P.O.W.'s Welcomed Warmly At Philippine Base

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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Feb. 18 — Twenty American prisoners of war arrived here tonight 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 United States Ambassador to the Philippines, then walked over a red carpet to an ambulance bus.

Hanoi released today's group of prisoners ahead of schedule as a goodwill gesture, following Henry A. Kissinger's visit there last week.

[In Washington, the Administration was preparing legislation to solve some income tax problems for families of servicemen who had been listed as missing but who are now found to be dead. Page 5.

As the 20 freed prisoners returned to Clark Air Base today,

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Comdr. James G. Pirie, 37 years old, of the Navy, the senior officer, acted as their spokesman. Commander Pirie, who had been a captive for six years, continued the patriotic tone set by spokesmen for the 143 prisoners released 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 American people who have supported us over the years."

With today'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.

Hanoi Ceremony Similar

The release ceremony in Hanoi today also followed Monday's pattern, said Col. James R. Dennett of the Air Force, the American representative there for the prisoner release.

One difference was that a sack of mail for men who were still being held was delivered to the American representative on the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, who flew in from Saigon for the ceremony. He was to turn it over to the North Vietnamese for distribution to the imprisoned men.

At Hanoi's Gia Lam airfield the 20 prisoners to be freed alighted from a green camouflaged bus, formed into lines of 10 and were marched by Commander Pirie 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 Col. 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.

Took 15 Minutes

The turnover took about 15 minutes, beginning at 2:45 P.M. The weather was humid, the sky overcast.

Lieut. Col. 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, Colonel 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," Colonel Abel said.

The turnover ceremony was delayed for about 20 minutes because members of the International Commission for Control and Supervision, out on an inspection trip, were caught in traffic, a military spokesman

said here.

Newspapers and magazines were provided. One of the returning men, Maj. Joseph S. Abbott 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.

Colonel 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.

Colonel 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 tonight and the returned prisoners were inside 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.

The men walked through the cafeteria line, loading plates with corn on the cob, steak, chicken, eggs, green beans, canned peaches and pears, Jell-O, strawberry pie and chocolate cake. The 20 men ordered a total of 85 eggs and 21 steaks.



Associated Press

Released Communist prisoners, who have discarded the clothes given to them by the Saigon Government, being greeted and carried by comrades after crossing Thach Han River to Communist-held bank near demilitarized zone. One of the former prisoners unfurled a banner that said, "Long Live the People's Revolutionary Party."

Several commented that they would not use spoons—apparently the only utensil for eating allowed in captivity.

Maj. Hubert K. Flesher, a captive for six years, eyed the steaks and said, "I'll start with two of those." He had a cigar in his bathrobe pocket.

Capt. Edward J. Mechenbier of the Air Force, who had been a prisoner since 1967, asked for four eggs—"what I used to

eat at home." He said he had lost 26 pounds while in captivity.

One Man Substituted

CLARK AIR BASE, Feb. 18 (AP)—A United States Navy lieutenant shot down over North Vietnam in 1967 was added to the list of prisoners released from Hanoi today because of illness in his family. Another man had to remain in North Vietnam to let him come home.

A United States spokesman said that Lieut. James W. Bailey, 30, of Kosciusko, Miss., was substituted on the list of 20 men flown out. The man who stayed behind was Lieut. Robert E. Wideman, 29, of Bay Village, Ohio, also of the Navy and also a captive since 1967.