

P.O.W.'s and the Press

Military, Keeping Newsmen at Bay, Has Carefully Managed the Return

NYTimes By JAMES P. STERBA FEB 20 1973

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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, Feb. 19 — The first 163 American prisoners freed by the Communists in Vietnam have come home to the theme of "God bless America," and many officers at this base clearly believe that the returnees' conduct has set the stage for a restoration of unchallenged patriotism and of the status of the military man to his honored place. If so it will have been no accident but a result of careful military planning.

First, the return represents the epilogue to an American war story that never seemed to end, and getting all the prisoners back will be one of its few undisputed achievements. For many Americans the return symbolizes victory. For others it merely confirms the war's conclusion for the United States.

Second, the captured men were predominantly career officers and fighter-bomber pilots—probably the most enthusiastic of American warriors.

Third, the military's repatriation effort was carefully programmed and controlled to insure that all would be retrieved without a hitch, that nothing was said or done to tarnish the prisoners' image and that everything was said and done to enhance it. This meant keeping a safe distance between them and inquiring newsmen; the widespread distrust of the press among the military made it relatively easy.

Joyous and Emotional

The arrival of the first prisoners a week ago was not only good news but also a joyous and emotional event that reduced to tears many of the nearly 200 reporters and photographers on hand.

At least partly for insurance, a team of nearly 80 military public-relations men were assembled from throughout the Pacific to hide possible warts and stand as a filtering screen between the press and the story.

No newsmen were allowed to fly to Hanoi or Saigon aboard the medical pickup planes — to photograph, to interview or even to observe silently — though there were extra places.

Here at Clark Air Base, the first stop on the way home, newsmen were barred from direct contact with the returning prisoners in the first days. On Friday there was a 20-

minute news conference with two senior prison-camp leaders who were carefully counseled beforehand by information officers. Last night a five-man pool of newsmen, under careful supervision, was allowed to observe for 20 minutes as the 20 men who had just returned were eating dinner in the hospital cafeteria. Today six newsmen were allowed to interview one returnee each for 20 minutes under ground rules, that prohibited "controversial" questions and allowed information officers to monitor the interviews and to censor any remarks thought to be sensitive.

Except for that, newsmen were not permitted to talk with the men in the hospital, and doctors and nurses were not allowed to give interviews.

Officers in a Key Role

Those few prisoners who expressed a desire to speak with reporters from hometown newspapers were refused permission. They were allowed to receive written questions and counseled on which ones to answer, and their answers were censored.

Military information officers not only reported the news but played a key role in making it as well. Except for what newsmen could glean from sympathetic sources, all information was clearly by the public-relations officers. It was a delicate assignment, and planning what the world would know about the prisoners was a major factor in Operation Homecoming.

Civilian and military officials had said that the restrictions on contact with the press were based on a desire to protect the health of the former prisoners and to shield them from stress. The policy was maintained though the men were found to be in generally excellent health—enough so to be allowed to drink beer and wine, eat steaks and ice cream, see movies, go shopping and be questioned at length by the hospital staff and friends.

Then the officials stressed that the major reason was to insure that nothing endanger the return of the 400 military men and 13 civilians still held in Vietnam, as well as the undetermined number in Laos. That standard precluded nearly all discussion about health problems, camp conditions and North Vietnamese treatment.

At the outset of the actual return the military information officers aboard each evacuation

plane advised the senior officer-prisoner aboard that live television cameras would broadcast the arrival at Clark Air Base to the American people and that a statement was warranted.

'Sounds Great to Me'

When the prisoners asked what they should say, suggestions were offered and a rough draft was prepared, with the information officers saying something like "that sounds great to me." As a result all four of the spokesmen from Hanoi so far have used similar language in thanking the Commander in Chief and the American people, but information officers insisted that they had not suggested such phrasing.

The statements appeared sincere, but newsmen could not determine whether they were unanimously approved.

The prisoners, who were tightly organized under senior officers, had planned how they would handle themselves. They had talked about what they would say, and they wanted to walk off the evacuation planes proudly. According to a senior officer here, "this was their way of showing that Hanoi had not broken them."

The prisoners also want to tell the stories of their imprisonment and treatment, but reportedly only after one agreed-upon condition is met—that all are free. That made the job of information officers easier.

The 19 military men released in South Vietnam by the Vietcong were quite different. Not in the fighter-pilot fraternity, they were not organized and were in much worse physical condition. Their stories of survival in the jungle would probably be more bizarre than those of men in organized camps in the North.

Specific Data Refused

Col. John W. Ord, a physician and the hospital commander here, termed the general health of the prisoners reasonably good but declined to discuss specific ailments uncovered even though many were obvious—for fear, he said, of upsetting Hanoi's sensitivities.

In declining to allow doctors and nurses to be interviewed, he said they were too busy. Several met newsmen privately, however.

Despite the effort to avoid "possible stress situations," two busloads of the freed men were kept waiting for more than an hour in the tropical sun until Lieut. Gen. William Moore, 13th Air Force commander, arrived to shake hands before they departed for home.

The military's concern over the image of the returning prisoners was reflected not only by the numbers of information officers on hand but also by the information specialists in key jobs.

Col. Homer A. Davis, chief

of information for the 13th Air Force, wrote the Operation Homecoming plan for Clark Air Base and became its chief operations officer. Col. Alfred J. Lynn, chief spokesman for United States Forces in the Pacific, not only went to Hanoi with the initial support team but also took part in the negotiations for the first group's release although he had not been previously scheduled to.

Some officers and men directly involved in retrieving the prisoners were allowed to talk with reporters, but were carefully briefed beforehand.

Officer Was Reprimanded

Lieut. Col. Robert L. L'Ecuyer, one of the flight surgeons who went to Hanoi, was interviewed with other crew members before taking off. He avoided answering any questions.

Col. Leonard W. Johnson Jr., over-all evacuation flight coordinator, did answer newsmen's general questions and was reprimanded for it. A flight surgeon, he was expected to be aboard one of the evacuation planes but was grounded at the last minute.

As added insurance that the returned prisoners would not speak with newsmen, the officers assigned to serve as escorts were told, they said privately, that they would be held responsible.

Before the first prisoner release a week ago, information officers arranged for three of the escorts to talk with newsmen, but they were told to avoid discussing several subjects, including whether they knew the names of the men they would escort.

While Marine and Army escorts knew months in advance, Navy and Air Force escorts did not. Asked by a reporter, an Army major denied that he knew the name of his man. Information officers reportedly apologized for putting him in a position in which he was forced to lie. An information officer told reporters it had been a misunderstanding.

Clark Personnel Warned

Directives had gone to 26,000 airmen and their families against expressing opinions to reporters on the war, the cease-fire or the prisoners. An airman quoted a directive on his barracks bulletin board as saying, "Don't talk to the press because they will distort everything you say." When newsmen heard about it and prepared to photograph it, the directive was removed. But such directives reportedly continued orally.

"This is one of the biggest stories of our time and it is being covered by military information officers," said Gordon Gammack, a long-time war correspondent for The Des Moines Register who covered the repatriation of Americans after the Korean war. He recalled that their return was also in stages over several weeks and that they were given the option of whether they wanted to speak to the American people through the press or not.