

How the Military Runs Interference

Returning POWs Are 'Hidden' From

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The first 163 American prisoners of 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 programed 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.

EMOTIONS

The arrival of the first 143 prisoners a week ago was not only good news but also a joyous and emotional event that reduced to tears many of the nearly 20 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.

CARE

One night, there was a 20-minute news conference with two senior prison-camp leaders who were carefully counseled before hand by information officers.

The next 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. The next day, 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.

REFUSAL

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; their answers were censored.

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 although the men were found to be in generally excellent health.

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.

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 initial spokesmen from Hanoi used similar language in thanking the Commander-in-Chief and the American people, but information officers insisted that they had not suggested such phrasing.

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