

Ex-P.O.W.'s Say Ordeal Was Not in Vain

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SAN DIEGO, Feb. 23—In a series of news conferences around the country, former American prisoners of war insisted today that the Vietnam war had succeeded and that their years in captivity had not been in vain.

Some sharply criticized the idea of amnesty for draft evaders and assailed the antiwar movement. But they denied reports that some prisoners were considered "collaborators" by their fellow captives for making anti-American statements while held by the enemy. And none said that they knew about reported plans to bring charges against returning prisoners who had made such statements.

Several Americans, while held prisoner in Indochina, did sign statements and give interviews that criticized the United States conduct of the war. The New York Times reported today that they continued to do so even after senior officers in the prison camps ordered them to stop.

Lieut. Col. Carlyle S. Harris, speaking at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, acknowledged that there had been some "minor arguments" in the prison camps, but otherwise, he said, the show of unity never cracked.

The news conferences took place at the Naval Hospital here and at six other hospitals where former prisoners are receiving medical examinations and talking to intelligence officers. In all, the news conferences involved no more than a score of the 163 American prisoners of war so far released by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

The conferences represented

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the first real chance in almost two weeks for the news media to question the returning prisoners, but most of them refused to discuss conditions in the prison camps. They contended that any adverse publicity might hinder the swift release of the remaining prisoners.

One who did talk about his experience was Sgt. Ken Wallingford, who appeared at

Brooke General Hospital in Houston. Sergeant Wallingford, who was captured in South Vietnam last April, said that he had been kept in a cage with a 10-foot chain locked to his ankle most of the time.

Almost all the men who spoke today had been held prisoner in North Vietnam, including the three who appeared here—Capt. Howard E. Rutledge, Capt. James B. Stockdale, the senior naval officer held in the North, and Capt. Harry T. Jenkins Jr. All were Navy pilots shot down in the fall of 1965.

Despite the disillusionment with the war that has spread through much of the country since they left, the men enthusiastically agreed with Captain Jenkins when he said, "We started out to assure the self-determination of the Vietnamese people and I think we have. I really don't believe we wasted our efforts."

Disturbed by Protesters

But that view is not completely shared even in their own families. As one wife put it recently, "It's hard to believe that eight years was worth it."

Captain Jenkins, 45 years old, who wore his hair in a crew cut, added that he was "a little disgruntled" at what he called a "small minority" of protesters who opposed the war. He was particularly critical of activists who visited Hanoi while the fighting was going on. "I think they shamed our nation in the eyes of the enemy," he declared.

When asked about amnesty, Captain Jenkins said, "I don't know a single man who fought in this war who would accept amnesty and I don't know why anyone who didn't fight should be offered amnesty." The small crowd of military people watching the news conference burst out into applause.

The men seemed surprised at the welcome they have received. "We thought we would come back like anybody else did from any other war," said

Captain Rutledge, the father of three children.

"We do not consider ourselves heroes," added Captain Stockdale, whose wife, Sybil, was the founder of the National League of Families. "We want no handouts. We ask only to compete in this society to achieve the responsibility and productivity that we on our own feel we can demonstrate."

Health Condition Good

Doctors here report that the main medical problems of the men involve bad teeth and intestinal parasites, but that their general health is good. Captain Stockdale called their condition a "tribute to American vigor and self-esteem."

Like many of those returned,

Captain Stockdale is eager to get on with his military career, despite a leg injury suffered when he was shot down.

"If I ran a prison camp on a stiff leg," he said, "I can run a ship with a stiff leg."

Asked about the changes they had noticed in American society, Captain Jenkins replied, "I find it a little disconcerting to find women wearing pants and men wearing women's hair styles."

But their main concern seemed to be their families. Captain Rutledge, who became a grandfather in captivity, said, "We all want to catch up with our families. They've all outgrown us. They're kind of new to us, and we're kind of new to them."

Diet Largely Rice

SAN ANTONIO, Tex., Feb. 23—Sergeant Wallingford said that while in captivity his food was mainly rice and pork fat. He said he had three meals every day, "sometimes vegetables and fruits," and that the quantity fluctuated from day to day.

Asked about the morale among the prisoners, he said, "We were just thankful to be alive. God carried us through." He said that he knew of no specific mistreatment and recalled that the Vietcong had not attempted to indoctrinate prisoners "directly."

He said that other Americans had been in the camp and that their treatment improved during the peace negotiations in October.

The former prisoner said, "I am against amnesty. I think they [persons seeking amnesty] are not true Americans if they didn't fight for their country."

Asked what he thought he had fought for, he replied, "Stopping Communism which

was being forced on the South Vietnamese." He said he would like to thank "Nixon for sticking it out."

Pentagon Advice Heeded

By The Associated Press

In their news conference yesterday, the former prisoners largely heeded the Pentagon's advice to avoid the subject of prison life for fear of endangering the prisoners yet to be freed.

"The answers will come out in an appropriate time," said Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. of the Navy, who led the first group of prisoners of war off the plane in the Philippines. Captain Denton and two fellow prisoners spoke at the Portsmouth Naval Hospital in Virginia.

The two men appearing with him—Capt. James A. Mulligan Jr., 46, and Lieut. Comdr. William M. Tschudy, 37, both of the Navy—indicated that they had been aware of the unsuccessful United States attempt in November, 1970, to free prisoners inside North Vietnam. They nodded when asked if they knew of the raid on the prison camp on Son Tay, 23 miles west of Hanoi.

Commander Tschudy said he had been in that camp but had been moved in July. "I have a habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said.

Captain Denton, 48, discussed the qualities he felt had helped the men while in prison.

"In the most general terms I believe it's an expression of

the fact that human nature, when placed under duress, can find and use sources of strength to survive," he said. Noting that the men had observed "a great deal of luxury" since their return, he said he believed the nation "may be in a stage where we are subject to a lack of physical duress."



Associated Press

Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr. and Lieut. Comdr. William M. Tschudy, left, at Portsmouth (Va.) Naval Hospital.



Associated Press

Lieut. Col. Carlyle S. Harris of Preston, Md., during news session yesterday at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.