

POWs Deny U.S. Coaching

Post 2/24/73

Their Patriotic Words 'Came From the Heart'

Four Navy captains who made patriotic statements after their release from North Vietnamese prisons said yesterday they had not been coached on what to say by U.S. officials.

Capt. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr., 48, the first prisoner of war to deplane at Clark Air Base in the Philippines after the Vietnam peace settlement, said that he had "perhaps a quarter of an hour to select what I considered appropriate words" to express how he felt after being a prisoner seven years.

He said his closing thought, "God bless America," was ad libbed at the microphone.

His cellmate in Hanoi, Capt. James A. Mulligan Jr., 46, also said he had only

about 15 minutes before landing to put together a description of "what I think most of the POWs had thought."

Both men had been selected to speak at Clark because they were the senior officers on their respective planes. They appeared yesterday at a news conference in Portsmouth, Va.

Their comments coincided with those of two other returned POWs who spoke at a news conference at Balboa Naval Hospital in California.

Navy Capt. James B. Stockdale, 49, said, "We were offended that anyone would think we would be used in any form of organized programming or orchestration. At no time have I ever been given words to say."

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And Capt. Howard E. Rutledge, 44, said, "This thing all came from the heart. It surprises me that anybody would question someone saying, 'God bless America.'"

The Portsmouth and Balboa interviews were two of seven around the country yesterday with returned POWs. In all of them, the former prisoners followed Pentagon instructions to omit details that might mean harm for POWs still held captive.

As Air Force Lt. Col. Carlyle S. Harris said at Maxwell Air Force Base Hospital in Alabama, "We don't want to say anything that might jeopardize the further release of POWs."

At the Balboa news conference, Stockdale and Rutledge and another Navy pilot, Capt. Harry T. Jenkins Jr., 45, made it clear that they do not sympathize with the American antiwar movement or those who demand amnesty for deserters or draft resisters.

In full-dress summer khakis and looking fit and rested, the officers ranged freely over a wide area in their answers.

But they would not respond to a published report of dissension among American POWs and denied any knowledge of the possibility that charges may be lodged against certain returnees for collaborating with the North Vietnamese.

Of the dissension reports, Stockdale, the senior naval officer among all the POWs, said, "It just contradicts my basic understanding of the situation. I was always impressed with the unity and common sense of values that all the prisoners with whom I had contact held. I can't comment on, any of it because I don't understand it."

Stockdale was shot down on Sept. 9, 1965. His wife, Sybil, and four sons were in the audience.

The men were more vocal in response to questions about amnesty, the peace movement and their own personal rationale of the Vietnamese conflict.

Especially vigorous was Jenkins, a Washington, D.C. native whose A-4 Skyhawk fighter-bomber was downed Nov. 13, 1965.

On amnesty, he said: "I don't know of a single man with me who fought this war who would have accepted amnesty, and I don't see how anyone who would not have fought it should be offered amnesty."

Jenkins, whose parents still live in Washington, gave this response when asked about the antiwar movement:

"I don't have full knowledge of the political implications. My job was to fight it once it started. I know that it was started with the will of the majority of the people . . . I am a little disgruntled at what I believe has been described as a small minority that has seen fit to loudly oppose this majority ruling once it has been made. They've done nothing but hinder the mechanism set in motion."

Stockdale, Rutledge and Jenkins all agreed that the United States' role in the war was justified and vindicated by the results. "I think it accomplished self-determination for the South Vietnamese people," said Stockdale.

Added Rutledge, who was imprisoned from November, 1965: "I can't speak for what others think. Fortunately, we live in a free society where everyone can express their feelings. I haven't changed my mind, nor do I think I stayed there in vain."

They also criticized the stream of visitations to Hanoi by anti war activists. Said Jenkins, "They shamed our nation in the eyes of the enemy by meeting the enemy on their own ground at the time the conflict was on."

On a lighter note, Rutledge added that it was unlikely that he or any of the

colleagues would be going to any Jane Fonda movies.

There were other moments of levity and a few insights into the process of repatriation. Jenkins, who has two sons and a daughter, admitted it was "a little disconcerting to find the women wearing pants and the men wearing women's hair styles."

Jenkins, more than six feet tall, added that his greatest culture shock was finding his oldest son by now 30 pounds heavier than he is. "When I left, he was still at a size and age I could administer discipline."

Stockdale, who said he and his fellow prisoners called each other "the Alcatraz gang," and who clearly was one of the principal leaders of the imprisoned servicemen, expounded on the philosophical aspect of being a POW.

"We professional military officers have a responsibility the average citizen doesn't have. As servants of the Republic we had the responsibility to the men with us to maintain the military ethic to obey the code of conduct and to remain within the bounds of military law."

"We do not consider ourselves heroes. We ask no handouts. We ask only to compete in this society, to achieve the responsibility and production that we on our own two feet can demonstrate."

In Portsmouth, Denton and Mulligan appeared at the news conference with a third released POW, Navy Lt. Cdr. William M. Tschudy, 37, who had been Denton's bombardier-navigator when their plane was shot down on July 18, 1965. Mulligan's plane was shot down March 20, 1966.

Tschudy said that he had been held in the prison at Sontay but had been removed from there in July, 1970, four months before the abortive attempt by American commandos to free the POWs there. He said he did not know if any other prisoners were subsequently detained there.

All three men noted that they had heard about the Sontay raid while they were in prison elsewhere. "Unfortunately, I was not there at the right time," Tschudy laughed.

Denton said the first prisoners released as part of the peace agreement were "not a selected group of men in any sense. We were a random group . . . We believe that had another group been randomly selected that their performance would have been as good as ours."

Mulligan, in answer to a question, said he was "giving you a personal answer" in saying "this war has been very divisive for many years . . . I feel very strongly that it's about time the American people started

pulling together. It's about time we all realized where we're going. It's about time we start raising the flag instead of burning it.

"I know people have strong feelings but I think we're all in it, we're all Americans. We're all Democrats, we're all Republicans, but we are all Americans and it's about time to get back to that main theme . . . I hope the return of the POWs, myself and the other guys, is going to help this country achieve its goal."

Mulligan said he had heard about the war-caused divisiveness in the United States "mostly since I've been back. I've done a little reading, and of course, I heard a little Communist propaganda while I was there. And they all tell you their side, so I was able to determine there was some divisiveness. But really, I'm not worried about that."

A reporter noted that some psychiatrists are saying returned POWs will experience "bouts of depression" and asked Mulligan if he had had any since his return to America. Mulligan said, "I haven't even had a hangover yet."

Like his colleagues elsewhere, Denton declined to answer questions about published reports that the prisoners had a highly organized high command in prison, that charges will be made against some of their fellow prisoners who reportedly disobeyed orders of the prison organization.

He said it would be "out of order" to answer until all of the prisoners have returned to the United States. "I'm not afraid of it [the question], but I believe the time for . . . it would be later and not now."

Denton said that "one sour note in our homecoming was sounded" however, in an article written by Robert Maynard, ombuds-

man for The Washington Post, that appeared in The Post on Wednesday. It was reprinted in today's Norfolk Virginian-Pilot.

Maynard suggested that the homecoming had been orchestrated by the government, "a militarily managed event down to the last 'God Bless America.'"

Denton said that if Maynard "meant, entirely meant, what he said . . . I'm sorry for him and pray he will come off it. As one of my sons used to say, 'Open up your heart and let the sun shine in.' Most Americans, from what we've read in the press and what we got in personal letters and telegrams to us, see some sunshine now and we certainly see a lot of it. And I'm asking Mr. Maynard to come out and enjoy it."

This story was written by Washington Post staff writer Susanna McBee from dispatches filed by staff writers Leroy F. Aarons and Donald P. Baker.