

Controversial Prisoner Is Exuberant on Return

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CLARK AIR BASE, the Philippines, March 4 (AP)—Comdr. Richard A. Stratton was a prisoner in North Vietnam for six years and captivity made him a famous and controversial figure.

There were fears that he had been brainwashed. And there were predictions that he would be ostracized on his return for antiwar statements that North Vietnam said he made at a press conference in Hanoi on March 4, 1967, two months after his A-4 Skyhawk was shot down during a combat mission over Communist territory.

But when Commander Stratton, 41, bounded down the ramp of the plane that brought him here from Hanoi today, he was exuberant. And the crowd cheered and applauded him as it did the 105 other released Americans.

The 41-year-old commander, whose wife, Alice, lives in Palo Alto, Calif., and whose parents live in Quincy, Mass., was the most prominent of the returning men. Widely displayed pictures of the press conference, showing his gaunt, stooped figure and haunted expression, became familiar to millions as the symbol of the plight of American war prisoners.

An American photographer,

Lee Lockwood, who was with Life magazine at the time, said he heard Commander Stratton confess at the press conference that antipersonnel bombs were dropped on populated areas of Hanoi to intimidate the North Vietnamese.

This and pictures of the commander at the conference brought assertions in the United States that he had been brainwashed. Tass, the official Soviet press agency, said, however, that Commander Stratton had denied the brainwashing charges and explained that he had spoken out of conscience.

Contacted last week in Palo Alto, Mrs. Stratton said she believed the press conference represented a "staged performance." She said her husband, who was pictured bowing to an unseen North Vietnamese official, was "trying to get across to the world how horrible their treatment was."

American military officials at Clark, the first processing station for the returning prisoners, said that Commander Stratton would undergo a regular medical examination here before leaving for home. Informed sources say, however, that officials plan to question him later on the antiwar statements attributed to him.