

'So Happy to be Home'

Bay Area Pilot Back From Hanoi

By George Murphy

Navy Commander Richard A. Stratton, the Palo Alto pilot who became perhaps the best known and most controversial prisoner of war in North Vietnam, returned to the mainland yesterday with praise for the American people.

"If there's one thing the enemy knows and fears," he told a crowd of more than 100 outside Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, "it's a united America."

Stratton, 41, opened his remarks by saying:

"What brings us home in dignity and honor is the support of every one of you.

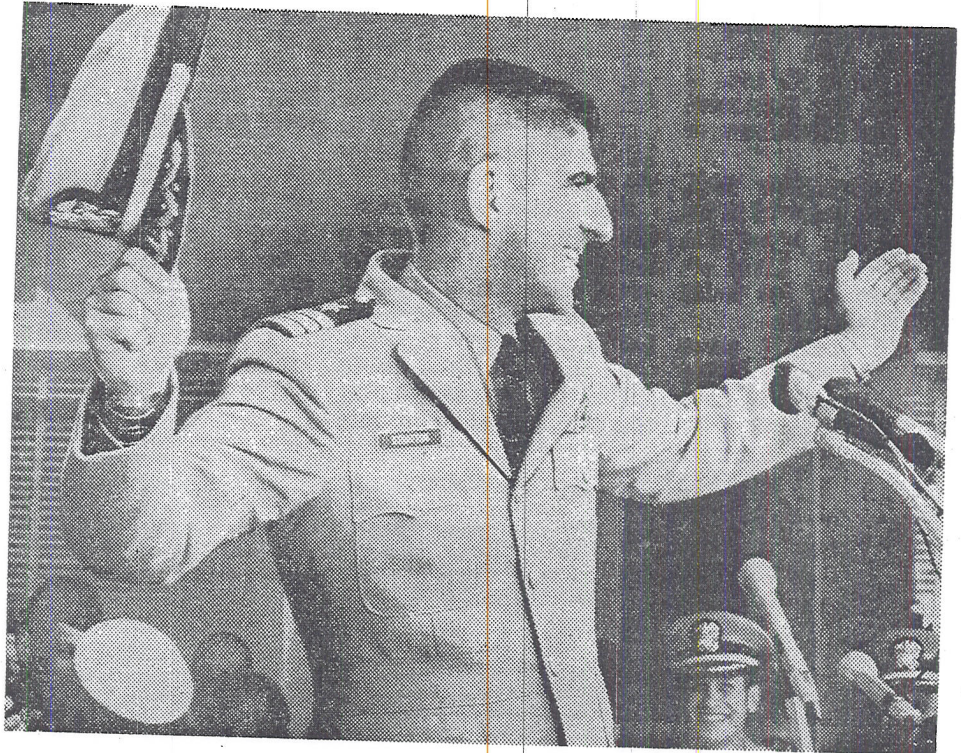
"... I'm so happy to be home.

"It's so good to be free.

"It's so good to have clean again."

Stratton's wife, Alice, and three sons were in a private room inside the hospital where the pilot went for a reunion after the brief ceremonies outside the main entrance.

Newsmen were not allowed to question Stratton.



NAVY COMMANDER RICHARD A. STRATTON
Perhaps the best known and most controversial U.S. prisoner of war

(This refusal has been customary with most POWs).

The North Vietnamese claimed Stratton made confessions of dropping anti-personnel bombs into populated areas.

He was shot down over North Vietnam on January 5, 1967. On March 4 of that year he appeared at a "news conference" in Hanoi, dressed in a prisoner's striped uniform, looking

gaunt and haggard.

Yesterday, however, he was smiling and looked fit on his arrival at Oak Knoll.

He was accompanied by POWs Lieutenant Commander Charles D. Stackhouse, of Norwood, Ohio, and Marine Sergeant Richard Burgess, of Aberdeen, Wash.

Burgess, who looked sallow and drawn, did not make a statement to the crowd. He had been held prisoner since Sept. 5, 1966 by the Viet Cong.

Stackhouse, a pilot shot down over North Vietnam on April 25, 1967, looked fit, and told the crowd he was "ecstatic" to be home again.

Then, rather than making a statement, he recited the first stanza of "America, the

Beautiful."

The three and 17 other POWs had arrived earlier in the day at Travis Air Force Base, their plane ten minutes late because they had asked the pilot to swing around for a view of the Golden Gate before landing.

At Travis, Stratton was greeted by Lieutenant Commander Everett Alvarez, of San Jose, who had shared POW life with him. Alvarez, released earlier, was a prisoner of the North Vietnamese longer than any other American.

A picture of Stratton taken at the March 4, 1967, "news conference" became a symbol of the POW question and was reprinted frequently in literature issued by both sides.