

Eight May Face Courts-Martial For Antiwar Roles as P.O.W.'s

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WASHINGTON, March 15— At least eight of the enlisted men scheduled to return early tomorrow from Hanoi are known to be bitter critics of the Vietnam war whose refusal to participate in camp life in North Vietnam provoked deep hostility among their fellow prisoners, according to military sources.

The eight formed what a top-ranking officer described as "the Peace Committee" in North Vietnam and refused all orders given by senior officers of the highly organized prison camps.

Military sources said that they expected court-martial charges to be filed by some returning officers against the men as soon as the remaining prisoners were freed from Hanoi. March 28 is the end of the time limit set for such returns by the Vietnam peace agreement. Under the Military Code of Conduct, any officer or enlisted man can file charges against a military colleague.

The eight enlisted men, the military sources said, had been captured in South Vietnam, but then were marched north to a separate camp near Hanoi

some time in 1970. All of the 27 military men scheduled to be returned from Hanoi tomorrow had been captured in the South.

At various times, as many as 15 enlisted men and officers captured in the south have signed the same antiwar statement. The most notable was a message to Congress in June, 1972, urging the legislators to "exercise your constitutional power to force the Administration to return to Paris to negotiate an end to the war.

Many of the returning pilots, however, are known to be especially furious at the eight members of the "Peace Committee," whose antiwar messages have been harsh in tone. In July, 1971, for example, according to a broadcast on the

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Hanoi radio, Specialist 4/Michael P. Branch of the Army, who is scheduled to be re-

turned early tomorrow, described himself as a deserter and said:

"I have disassociated myself from the military. I have taken it upon myself to desert and cross over to the side of the South Vietnamese people on May 4, 1968." Army officials said that Specialist Branch, of Highland Heights, Ky., had been captured by the Vietcong in May, 1968. Other messages broadcast from Hanoi and reportedly made by Specialist Branch called on American troops fighting in the South to desert their units and to "refuse combat and just botch up all your operations."

According to a 1971 tape recording, an Air Force staff sergeant, John Young of Waukegan, Ill., and Chicago, who also returns tomorrow, told President Nixon: "I no longer want to fight for you or anyone like you. In fact, I won't ever fight for your kind of American people."

"I cannot support the killing of innocent Vietnamese men, women and children, or the destruction of their beautiful country," the tape went on. "My conscience tells me it is wrong to kill—the Bible tells me it is wrong. Most important, my mother and father have taught me it is wrong to kill or harm anyone."

Military officials identified Specialist Branch and Sergeant Young as members of the "Peace Committee." The six other members, the officials said, were tentatively identified from interviews with prisoners returned previously.

Pentagon sources said that the antiwar enlisted men had apparently shared quarters at various times with some of the pilots who were shot down and captured in the North. The pilots, many of them senior officers, immediately clashed with them.

"The G.I.'s were advised to knock it off," an officer said, adding that they had refused. Another source said that at least one officer "attempted to pull rank on the enlisted men—they didn't take to it."

Pentagon Aides Angered

The reported activities of the eight have angered many senior military officials in the Pentagon who have generally been reluctant to discuss the prisoner issue over the last few weeks.

One officer complained during an interview that the White House had refused to let the Pentagon make a public statement condemning the activities of the "Peace Committee."

He said that the apparent reason was a fear that adverse publicity on the prisoner issue would further erode Congressional support for the Administration's proposed multibillion-dollar aid program for North Vietnam.

Another officer noted that the eight men were troublemakers "before they got in there," meaning in the prison camps. While in prison, he said, "they were seen fraternizing with guards."

"Some of them were even getting out of camp to take tours of Hanoi," he said.

He further accused some of the enlisted men who lived with other prisoners of "giving away vital camp secrets," such as details of how prisoners maintained communications among themselves.

A Later Restraint Noted

Pentagon officials did note, however, that some of the men to whom virulent antiwar statements were attributed after their capture in South Vietnam in 1967 and 1968 had grown

more restrained upon being moved to the North years later.

Some officers here are known to be particularly pleased by the apparent change in attitude on the part of one officer, scheduled to be returned tonight, whose wife was a leading antiwar figure in last year's Presidential elections.

That prisoner, to whom many written and broadcast antiwar statements were attributed while he was in South Vietnam, expressed concern in a letter — smuggled to his wife by a prisoner recently released — about the growth of "radical" politics in the United States and cautioned her that he was politically conservative. The letter, well-informed sources said, was read by some officers in the Pentagon before it was given to the prisoner's wife.

Cable Traffic Is Heavy

The military concern over the status of the eight men and over the possibility that they might stage some kind of an antiwar demonstration during their return to the United States was reflected in heavy cable traffic in the middle of the week between the Pentagon and Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, the prisoners' first stop after Vietnam. A senior officer said during an interview that "these men intend to try to jump ship before they get back here." However, he did not amplify the remark or offer any basis for it.

Other Government sources, with access to the debriefing papers from returning prisoners, were far less concerned about the eight.

One official confirmed that "there is hard feeling between the pilots and some of the others," but added that the only real information about these feelings thus far had come from the returned offi-

cers, whom he characterized as one-sided sources.

"None of them are officers and some of them are black," the official added, referring to the antiwar soldiers, "so the club is going after them."

"Looking for Blood"

He accused some of the returned pilots and many senior Pentagon officers of "looking for blood" in connection with the dissident G.I.'s. He noted that classified details about the enlisted men "are coming out awfully easy all of a sudden."

"There are those of us who are hoping to handle this so some officers don't get what they're looking for," he said. "I hope we can ease the men out so they don't face charges."

Other sources noted that the bad blood between most of the returning pilots and at least two senior officers who had made antiwar statements while in Hanoi had apparently eased in recent weeks as the returnees began adjusting to freedom.

The two officers, who had been accused of disobeying orders and had even been ostracized while on their way from Hanoi to the Philippines, apparently will not now be charged with disobeying orders, officials said. The officers have yet to hold news conferences or to speak out in any other way since their return to the United States.

Seek to Drop Charges

In interviews three weeks ago, Pentagon officials acknowledged the charges pending against the two officers, but also disclosed that they were attempting to discourage any formal proceedings against them.

In the case of the "Peace Committee," however, the same officials have noted that many of the men were absent without leave when they were captured, and could presumably face desertion charges.

At least two of the enlisted men already returned from South Vietnam had been absent without leave at the time of their capture and had made antiwar statements while imprisoned. The Pentagon has announced that it will not press charges in those cases.

The enlisted men, however, have not yet been made accessible to newsmen. All telephone calls to them are intercepted by military public information officials.