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Theatrical Release of Viet POWs

A Weird Show at

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Washington Post Service

Quang Tri, South Vietnam

The release of Viet Cong prisoners of war to their comrades waiting across the Thach An river is an elaborate theatrical production in which both setting and plot are equally implausible.

It is a bizarre spectacle, but it has a certain importance for what it tells about how things really have changed since the cease-fire, breaking patterns set through years of war.

The river has become the new frontier. The north bank, and the devastated plains of northern Quang Tri province beyond it, are controlled by Communist forces. On the south bank is the rubble of what was Quang Tri city, where no building was left standing by the time Saigon's Forces retook it last fall. Only a few tents have been put up since.

All the performers except the prisoners are in place long before the exchange begins, staring at each other across the clear, shallow river. Red, blue and yellow flags of the National Liberation Front — not of North Vietnam, which actually is the controlling force but does not admit it — fly on the north bank. There is a similar profusion in Saigon's saffron and red on the south bank.

At a clearing in the rubble on the government side, there is a small crowd of official participants, official observers and curiosity-seekers, both military and civilian.

There are etwa laconic U.S. army majors, assigned to the four-power joint Military Commission, who are part of the prisoner release team. One talks on his radio, reporting to the official transfer site across the river on the progress of the trucks carrying the prisoners up



North Vietnamese soldiers applaud returning prisoners

SFChronicle MAR 19 1973 POW Who's Fit to Fight

Clark Air Base,
Philippines

Air Force Colonel Theodore W. Guy said yesterday he kept fit during nearly five years in Communist captivity by doing 45 left and right one-armed pushups each day.

Guy's escort officer, Lieutenant Colonel Carl Crews of Ardmore, Okla., said the colonel is "hard as nails" and "wants to get back into attack fighters as soon as possible." *United Press*

from an airport near Hue. The other reads a magazine.

Officers of the International Commission of Control and Supervision are there to control, supervise and kibitz, though all they really do is count the prisoners to make sure the number matches the list prepared in Saigon.

The Poles and Hungarians — wearing incongruously,

the same dress uniforms in the dusty wreckage of Quang Tri that they wear in Saigon — are serious and uncommunicative. The Indonesians, jaunty in bright blue berets, are friendly to all. The Canadians are amiable and efficient.

The audience one recent day included three Catholic priests who had come to Quang Tri to see if anything was left of the school where they once taught. There wasn't. Pray for us, they said.

A few reporters and photographers are on hand to record the event, though their ranks are thinning as the exchanges of prisoners go on and the novelty wears off. The American officers say the procedure seldom varies and a Canadian already grown blasé after six weeks in Vietnam says, "It's getting boring."

Saigon's psychological warfare teams have set up a loudspeaker on the river bank, aimed at the other side. It blares South Vietnamese patriotic songs and the theme from the movie "Love Story."

One MP's whistle signals the arrival of the first truckload of prisoners. They come 100 at a time, uniformly clad in the purple prison garb issued to them by the South Vietnamese. Surrounded by rifle-toting MPs, they squat silently in groups of 25 while they get brief instructions from a South Vietnamese officer. Their faces are impassive.

On a signal from the MPs, they rise to march down to the river bank, shedding their prison clothing as they go, wearing only shorts by the time they get to the edge of the water. They are conspicuously well-fed, even chubby. Unlike those in the first groups sent north a few weeks ago, who were sick or maimed, these look ready to fight.

Raising clenched fists, they shout political slogans in unison. An MP scuffles with one of them to make him keep quiet, then grins at the appreciative laughter of his colleagues.

At the river bank, they climb into flat-bottomed rubber boats operated by South Vietnamese soldiers,

The press is allowed to go along. Two months ago, the idea of the South Vietnamese army ferrying the foreign press into enemy territory, and of the Communists letting the reporters come in and wander around taking notes and shooting pictures, would have seemed out of the question. Now it is commonplace here.

There is a reception committee of perhaps two dozen uniformed Viet Cong on the north bank. They wade out to greet the returnees, applauding as they go. Two nurses in white bring out a stretcher for the one prisoner being carried. Viet Cong film crews take movies of

Thach An

the stretcher case.

The Communists have set up a little tent city at their reception center. The only people in North Vietnamese uniforms are two of Hanoi's representatives to the four party military commission.

As each man's name is read from a list, he stands up and is escorted to the next station by a uniformed Viet Cong soldier. Without exception, the escorts place their left arms around the prisoner's shoulders and grasp his right hand in theirs, holding the pose as they walk.

One group of prisoners bursts into song, another into applause. It is hard to tell whether any of it is spontaneous.

From the name checking tent, the prisoners are escorted to another tent where they get new uniforms — the baggy green shirts and pants and round floppy hats of the Viet Cong. The press is permitted to watch this process and to take pictures, but not to follow the returnees any farther. No interviews are allowed.

While the returnees are being processed on one side of the compound, lunch is served for guests and observers in a mess tent a few yards away.

Where the prisoners go after they board the waiting buses is an open question. South Vietnamese officials believe that most of them are North Vietnamese anyway, not indigenous Viet Cong, and will be put right back into the ranks of the North Vietnamese army.