

Buried Alive

--Longest

Held Civilian

By William O'Brien
Examiner News Staff

TRAVIS AIR BASE — A tale of maltreatment equivalent to the worst medieval tortures was told here yesterday by a returned American prisoner of war.

However, Ernest C. Brace, 41, a civilian POW with the longest record of imprisonment of a non-military person, said he "has no bitterness towards those people."

His treatment included having his neck and wrists locked in wooden stocks for almost two years, frequent beatings, and being buried alive in a foxhole with only his head above the chin-line being exposed.

Brace was one of 18 returned POWs to land at this air base in the winding down of Operation Homecoming. Only one more homecoming aircraft is expected to land here in the early afternoon today, signalling an end to the bringing home of prisoners of the Vietnam conflict.

Yesterday, two other
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as a pilot for a private company chartered to deliver supplies in the Indochina war theater.

He did not identify his employer but denied vehemently that he was a member of the CIA. He also said he had been captured "on the ground" in Thailand by troops that he was "convinced were North Vietnamese regulars."

Also captured said Brace, was Thailand Special Forces Sgt. Chuichran Harnnabee.

Their treatment was to be imprisoned in individual bamboo cages, five feet high at the opening and "tapering" to two and one half feet at the rear.

"He still is in Laos, I am certain," said Brace of the Thai sergeant.

Brace recalled a march of what he estimated as 200 miles — "I think I was kicked most of the way" — from his point of capture to Dien Bien Phu, the scene of the French military disaster of the 1950s.

In December, 1965, said Brace, he escaped for a few hours, was recaptured, "tied to a post, beaten unconscious so that I lost my front teeth."

"Some Laotians were kind to us," the civilian pilot re-

planeloads — one bearing 13 POWs and the other, 18 — touched down at Kelly Air Force Base in Texas, and Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

The homecoming celebration here proceeded routinely yesterday with the usual homecoming greetings and only the "Welcome Home" red mat showing signs of wear on its underside from repeated use during recent weeks.

Air Force Maj. Norbert A. Gotner of Sacramento, senior officer aboard the homecoming plane and a POW since February, 1971, acted as official spokesman for his group.

The major "thanked all Americans, from the President to small children" for the welcome ceremony and stressed that it "was three faiths" that sustained the prisoners "during lonely hours."

The faiths said Major Gotner, were "faith in country . . . faith in the President, Richard Nixon, whose swift and decisive decisions assured our return . . . and faith in ourselves . . ."

He was followed from the plane by Brace, appearing gaunt and forlorn in a civil-

called. "one gave me a blanket and one a pair of black pajamas. For the first three years, those pajamas were all I had."

The treatment, said Brace, included being roped about the neck, and, "whenever we were out of the cage we were led around like dogs."

In the cages, Brace added, he and the Thai sergeant were bound with ropes about the feet with lines so rigged that they could not raise their hands to their mouths.

"But when you are tied down for a year, you learn how to untie yourself pretty easily," he said.

In 1966, said Brace, he managed to escape for four days but was recaptured. "I was kicked all the way back to the camp I escaped from," he said.

"They spread-eagled me and they beat me," Brace recalled.

A result, he said was that he and the Thai sergeant, who had not escaped, were clapped into stocks looped about their necks and firmly clamping their wrists.

When Brace escaped again in 1966, he was taken to a foxhole, shoved in, and dirt was pushed in to his neck height.

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ERNEST C. BRACE
'No bitterness'

ian suit tailored from material resembling the olive drab once worn by the Army.

The civilian was given a small cheer and ushered into the air base receiving center. It was in the post welcome, when he consented to speak to newsmen at the flight line, that he assumed the center of interest.

Speaking in flat accents almost bare of emotion, Brace told of being captured in May, 1965, while employed



JOYOUS sister Mrs. Karen Rav leaps into arms of released POW Air Force Maj. Edward W. Leonard on his arrival yesterday at Travis AFB.

—UPI Photo

puppy and he would come to your cage and you would pet him. Later, you would find him in your soup."

He estimated that his weight, normally 200 pounds, dropped to between 100 and 120 pounds.

His first contact with an American came in October, 1968, when he was taken to a camp in Hanoi and lodged in a cell — "it had been a torture room" — with Navy Lt. Cmdr. John McCain, son of retired Adm. John S. McCain Sr. of World War II fame.

"I thought I would be in 44 hours but they left me in seven days," he said.

His food, Brace added, was the same received by his captors but with less meat.

"Sticky rice, boiled leaves, and we ate lean dogs," recalled the pilot. "It was hard. There would be a