

Travis' Last SF Chronicle Big POW

Welcome

By Charles Petit

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Travis AFB,
Solano county

A flag-waving crowd of 6500 welcomed 15 returning U.S. POWs and one Canadian civilian off their big C-141 aircraft here yesterday, all but finishing Operation Homecoming.

Earlier in the day three other planes took prisoners to Ohio, Texas and March

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WELCOME

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Air Force Base in Riverside county.

The only prisoner yet to return to the continental U.S. is Army Captain Robert T. White 32 now in the Philippines following his release in the Mekong Delta by the Viet Cong.

Yesterday's touchdown at

More POW news
on Pages 7-8.

Travis at 2:49 p.m. brought the total number of prisoners to arrive at Travis to 24 civilians, 76 Army, 137 Navy, 26 Marines and 325 Air Force personnel.

First off the plane was Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Louis H. Bernasconi, 41, of Napa.

After saluting the flag and stepping across a well-worn Welcome Home mat, Bernasconi walked with a slight limp over to microphones and said:

"God bless each and every one of you. God bless our commander in chief President Nixon. God bless these United States of America."

CHORUS

A group of youngsters in the crowd broke into a chorus of "God Bless America." Bernasconi was then welcomed by his tearful daughter Katherine and his mother Maria Easley.

Next down the ramp was Navy Lieutenant Command-

er Henry D. Lesesne waving an American and South Carolina flag.

As did all the rest, he got a tremendous cheer from the crowd.

Four of the returning POWs were of Asian ancestry: Air Force Captain Melvin K. Matsui of Honolulu; Air Force Major Tamotsu Shingaki of Haiku, Hawaii; Air Force Lieutenant Colonel James Y. Nagahiro of Spokane, Wash., and Navy Commander Gordon R. Nakagawa of Newcastle, El Dorado county.

Several hundred Orientals were on hand to greet the men, including a large contingent from Nakagawa's home town.

One Navy flyer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Michael G. Penn, found himself assaulted by six men in blue jumpsuits — the members of his Attack Squadron 56, his unit on the aircraft carrier Midway. Penn was shot down last August 6 flying his A-7 Corsair over North Vietnam.

Penn was walking toward the terminal when the six pilots bounded with a whoop from the crowd and lifted him bodily as they embraced him and slapped him on the back.

CIVILIAN

The one civilian on board was Lloyd J. Opper, 20, a carpenter for the Christian Mission in Many Lands when he was captured in Laos last October 28. Opper



Commander Gordon Nakagawa was welcomed by his parents, who came from El Dorado county.

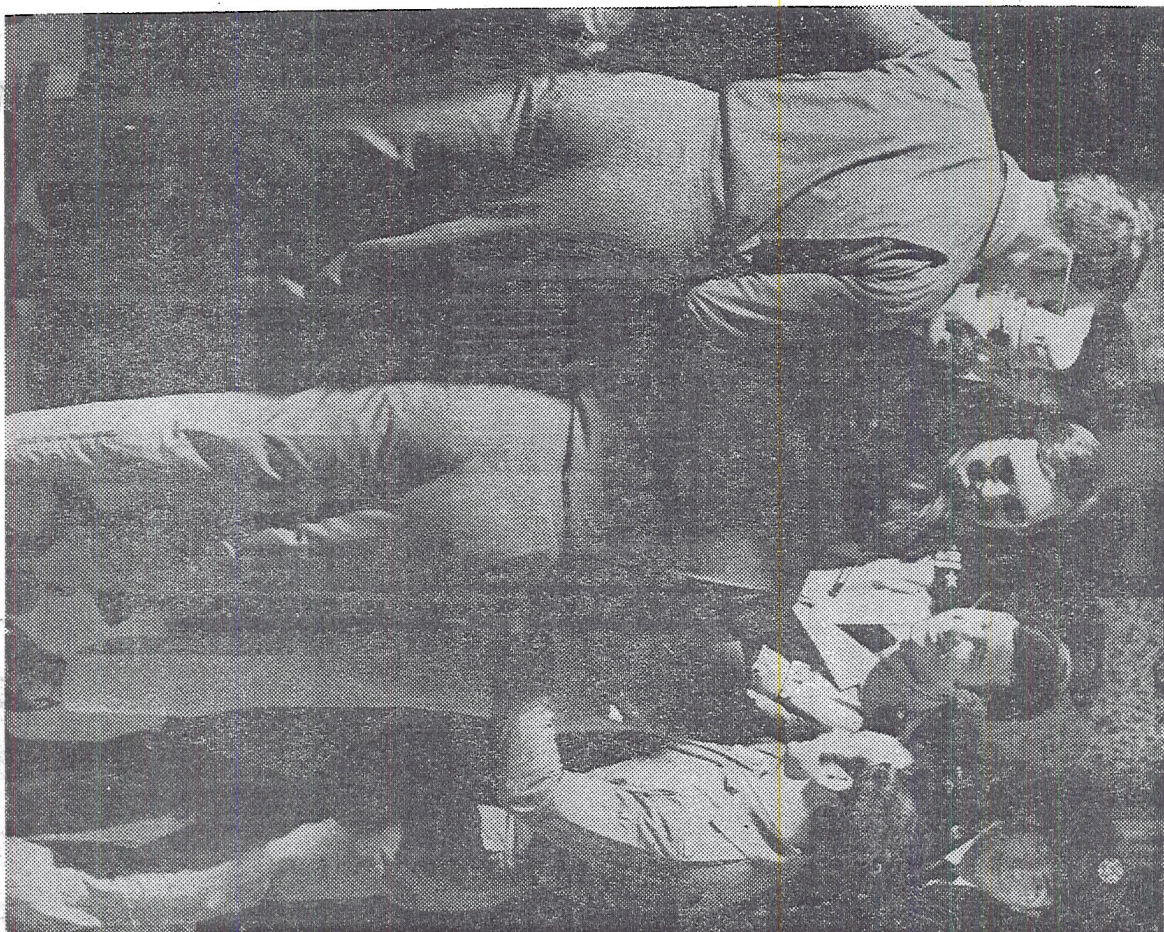
is from Courtenay, British Columbia, Canada, and he stepped down the ramp bearing a small Canadian flag.

All the military men aboard were flyers shot down in the last six months of 1972.

Eight Air Force flyers remained at Travis, two Navy

men were taken to the naval hospital in Oakland, and the rest were flown to other West Coast military hospitals.

The flight ended a major phase in the history of Travis Air Force Base, which for 12 years has been a major funneling point for troops flying to and from Vietnam.



Michael Penn was greeted by members of his squadron

Photos by Terry Schmitt



Commander Henry Lesesne and his family embraced