

Vietnam Is 'Different'

When POWs Return Home

Washington

IN MAY, 1945, a 23-year-old Army Air Corps second lieutenant named Vernon Ligon was freed from a German stalag luff (POW camp) near Nuremberg by victorious Allied troops and was told to return to his base in England.

Ligon, a P-37 fighter pilot, who had been shot down and captured a year earlier, drifted through the chaos of post-World War II Europe and finally wangled a ride aboard a ship bound for the United States.

After a couple of weeks of impersonal, assembly-line debriefing, Ligon re-enlisted.

Ligon was shot down as a

second lieutenant and he returned home as a second lieutenant. If he received any preferential treatment, it failed to impress him enough for him to remember it today.

Twenty-two years later, in November, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Vernon Ligon's RF-4C Phantom jet was shot down in North Vietnam and he spent the next five and one-half years in the Hanoi Hilton prison camp.

Aside from an initial feeling of deja vu that he experienced as he again bailed out of a crippled plane over enemy territory, Ligon is hard pressed to find any similarities between his imprisonment in Germany and in Hanoi.

There is an even more striking contrast, he said, between his reception by the U.S. military after the two wars, 28 years apart.

When he returned home last March 14 as a full colonel, Ligon — like 566 other freed prisoners of war — found that the armed services had learned from mistakes following World War II and the Korean War, when readjustment and rehabilitation was left largely to the individual.

After World War II, the Pentagon's insensitivity toward returning POWs was blamed on the huge numbers of released servicemen and the general confusion of a demobilizing America.

After Korea, it was blamed partly on the unpopularity of the conflict and partly on the accompanying controversy over "confessions" made by some of the prisoners held in North Korea and in China.

Moreover, after both wars, U.S. servicemen clamored to get out of the military and pick up the pieces of their civilian lives, leaving the services little incentive for large-scale rehabilitation programs.

This insensitivity to ex-POWs' needs lingered on, even through part of the Vietnam War, until the services finally reacted to complaints by a handful of prisoners who managed to escape from Viet Cong camps in South Vietnam.

One escapee, Army Major James N. Rowe of Potomac, Md., recalled his "homecoming." He escaped on Dec. 31, 1968, from a Viet



JAMES ROWE
Euphoria—then shock

Cong prison camp. He had spent the last 14 months of a five-year imprisonment in solitary confinement.

Rowe, then a 31-year-old Special Forces officer, said he experienced "something like a dream" when he was picked up by a helicopter in the Camau Peninsula and heard American voices for the first time in years.

The euphoria was heightened, he said, when he was taken to an army base and heard someone say, "That's Major Rowe."

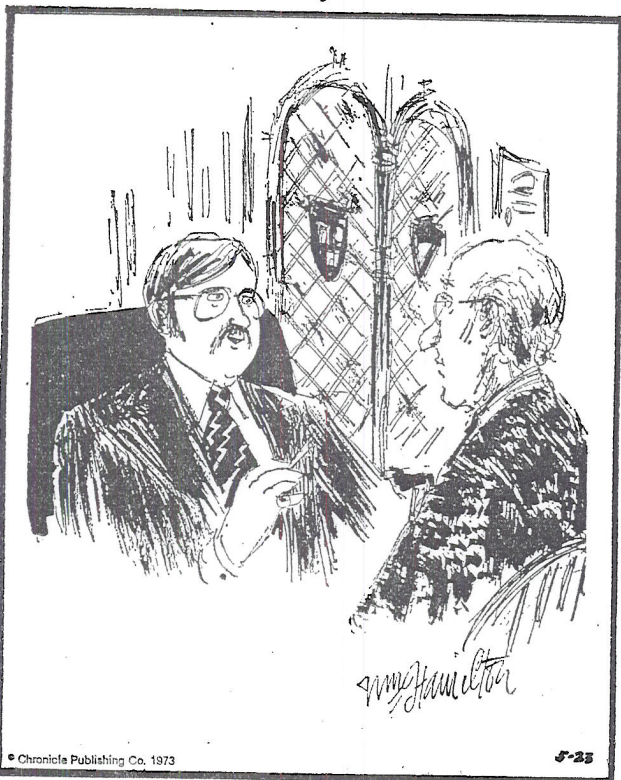
Since he had been captured as a first lieutenant, Rowe said he did not understand and remained confused until someone handed him a field jacket with a major's insignia.

Rowe said the exhilaration soon ended — during his first debriefing, when an officer began reading him his rights from the Code of Military Justice and asked if he wanted to waive his right to counsel.

The legal notification was

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The Now Society



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routine, Rowe said, but came as a shock to someone who had endured years of harsh oppression.

"I couldn't believe it was happening. They were my own people," Rowe said.

When he returned to the United States, Rowe persistently urged the Army to be more sensitive to the needs of ex-prisoners. Ultimately, he and a half-dozen other escapees helped alter Armed Forces procedures for handling returnees and laid much of the groundwork for the Army's Vietnam homecoming operations.

"They finally knocked off all the rough edges I ran into when I came out . . . the services did a good job of responding," said Rowe, who is now on the Defense Intelligence Agency staff at the Pentagon.

As in the Korean War, Rowe said, imprisonment in Vietnam was "a battle for the mind, an ideological struggle." The difference, Rowe said, was that "in Korea, we didn't recognize the needs of the men and this time we did."

The military's readiness for the homecoming of the POWs is already beginning to show results.

Most of the ex-prisoners are still on 90-day convalescent leave with their families. They have not yet been required to commit themselves, but the majority have informally indicated they plan to stay in the military.

The most likely to remain in the service are those who are only a few years short of 20-year retirement, but many of the younger POWs have said they plan to stay.

What the Pentagon has done for Ligon and his fellow Vietnam ex-prisoners

since their return partly explains the POWs' inclination to remain:

- It has waived some previously inflexible rules. Ligon, who is 51, instead of being automatically retired while he was in a POW camp, has been allowed to stay in the Air Force at least another year.

- It has rolled out the red carpet for the POWs and their families: free first-class accommodations during hospital stays, roundtrip air fares anywhere in the country for convalescence, tax-exempt combat pay while recuperating, and promises of virtually any schooling and assignment.

- It has promoted four senior officers to flag rank (rear admiral and brigadier general) and has given automatic promotions of from one to three grades for hundreds of long-term prisoners. It has also commissioned several ex-POWs who were captured as enlisted men.

And tomorrow, President Nixon will be host to many of the ex-POWs at a White House dinner.

Interviews with dozens of ex-POWs in different parts of the country indicate that it is professionalism — and not the much-publicized amenities of a hero's welcome — that is prompting so many to stay in the military.

Many ex-prisoners said they were tiring of the hoopla and constant attention and longed for the normalcy of their service jobs.

Many appeared to be acutely sensitive to the advances in military technology that they missed during prolonged captivity and said they were eager to get to the business of filling large gaps in their professional knowledge.

The Air Force began an

update program at the end of April.

The first pilots in the program seemed most concerned with how their imprisonment will affect their climb up the career ladder.

Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. North, a silver-haired, 43-year-old fighter pilot who was imprisoned six-and-one-half years, was routinely promoted as were other POWs from captain to lieutenant colonel. But North is aware that had he not been captured, his Vietnam tour would have ended shortly and a series of advancements would have begun.

North wants to continue flying, but he wonders whether there is enough time left in his career to make top rank by that route.

Like most of the ex-POWs, North has regained his health and will require more hospitalization only for corrective dental work. Only a handful of returnees are still hospital patients, and most of those are undergoing post-operative care after corrective surgery.

An Air Force official said that personal readjustment has gone smoothly in most cases, although some are planning divorces. The services claim they are not keeping track of the number of family breakups. But one returned POW said about one in ten has been divorced or is planning divorce.

Many of the former prisoners said they plan to take advantage of educational opportunities offered by the Pentagon.

"As long as they are physically qualified and have a chance of success, they can pretty much write their own ticket," said Colonel Fred Warren, personnel chief at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala.

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