By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

Returned prisoners of war listen to a briefing by President Richard Nixon at the State Department yesterday.

Breakfast at 8, Tea at State, and Dinner Late

By Judith Martin

Yes, she was having a wonderful time, said Mrs. John Murphy, sitting next to her husband at the huge Washington Hilton breakfast that opened yesterday's festivities for returned prisoners of war.

But what is she going to say when she gets home to their Air Force base in Lebanon, Tex., and sees her friends from the POW-MIA family group she spent her time with when she didn't know whether her husband was dead or alive?

"I was the only wife in our group to get a husband back," said Mrs. Murphy. "The others are missing in Laos. All this makes their situation doubly hard—the public thinks it's all over. I know how I would feel sitting back home while all this hoopla is going on:

"We're being transferred soon. I'll always go on working with the family groups, but in a way it will make it easier that it will be someplace else."

The young women who had come as dates of the returnees (who had met them after their return from imprisonment) weren't voicing such mixed feelings.

"They're great—they really want to live every minute of the time," said Jane Champagne of Honolulu, who had met her date when he went there on rest and recuperation.

"It's really an honor to go out with a POW. My boyfriend even knows all the latest dances. He was in prison with an Arthur Murray instructor. And you know, most men now don't act proud to be with you, but he does. He's 32, but he was captured when he was 26 and he says, 'You know, I'm really still 26.'"

"The social stuff isn't a big deal for me, not like it is for the colonels' wives," said Miss Champagne.

Nevertheless, everyone seemed to be going to everything on the program. The 8 a.m. breakfast was packed and some of the people admitted that even though they were having a full day, with a late dinner at the White House ahead of them, it hadn't occurred to them that they were free to skip anything listed on the schedule and just sleep.

Others said that because

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the hotel rooms were allotted by service, they had to attend the planned events to find their prison mates from other services.

In the afternoon, while the men were being briefed by President Nixon in the auditorium at the State Department, the women were upstairs in State's Diplomatic Reception Rooms at a tea where they were received by Mrs. Nixon, her daughters and Mrs. Spiro Agnew.

When everyone got together, there was a lot of chatter about the freebies that the prisoners have been offered since their return, but which many hadn't found the time yet to pick up. Did you get your free car? Have you taken any of the trips? Did you buy your clothes?

The last was a reference to the $500 clothing allowance granted each by the men's retail clothing industry. Bill Beekman, from Dayton, Ohio, had an additional $500 that Ohio manufacturers offered, and said "I had real trouble spending it, but I managed. In fact I got to 24 cents over."

The fashion situation varied depending on how long people had been away. Raymond Schrump, who was in Cambodia for five years, needed a whole new wardrobe. "I haven't gotten to the extreme yet, but I'm getting there. I couldn't believe my wife when I first saw her, in a red pantsuit. And my sons, with hair to their shoulders, Mine is coming along," he added, tugging at a too-short forelock.

Kevin Cheney was captured for less than a year, but it was enough to put him out of fashion. "I'd just gotten rid of my cuffs and now they bring the silly things back."

Cheney had been in both the Hanoi Hilton and the Zoo. Breakfast was just the same, he said, waving a hand at the buffet tables loaded with bacon, ham, sausages, salmon, cereal, eggs, fruit, chreamed chipped beef and fresh rolls. "Only at the Hanoi Hilton, they had real crystal."

By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

Joy Jeggrey, left, and Ginny Flom at yesterday's tea at the State Department for family and friends of the returned prisoners of war.

But just below the surface of the joking and socializing, were the real stories each man had to tell. At one table, three men who had been in Cambodian prisons, sat with their wives over the luxurious breakfast and talked seriously about their former diet of lizard tails, field corn and salt water.

"I got through because I'm tough—you can't kill me any kind of way," said William Hardy, an army sergeant stationed at Fayetteville, N.C., with 19 years of service, seven of them in prison. "I was mean as hell."

"What he means is he's hardheaded," said Richard Utecht of Fayetteville, a civilian motor maintenance man; who then went on to mention that Hardy had saved his life.

"They were marching us from one camp to another, and he ran out of steam," said Hardy of Utecht who at 48, was the oldest prisoner in that group. "They put a rope around his neck and started to drag him. I walked up and took his pack off him; and then I carried his pack and him."

But then, as Utecht tells it, his heart stopped. Hardy and another man spent an hour massaging his heart and giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. "He came to and said, 'Sergeant, just roll me down the hill and forget about me.' "

They did give up, but only after they thought him dead. "They had put a blanket over him," said Hardy. "So I took his shelter tent and went on. But then he showed up at the camp. Golly, was I glad to see him."

"No, you weren't," said Utecht. "You wanted my tent."

Hardy gave it back and doubled up with another prisoner, sleeping in hammocks one on top of the other. And Utecht made him a Christmas present: "Merry Christmas," carved on a stone.

"I really wanted to keep that," said Hardy. "But before I left, they took it away from me."

By Gerald Martineau—The Washington Post

Fred Flom: "Maybe I came out of it with something valuable. I think I understand myself—I feel I understand life better."

Capt. Flom's Hell

An unexamined life is not worth living.
—Plato

By Henry Mitchell

Fred Flom, who ate rice with rocks in it for 6½ years as a North Vietnamese prisoner, agreed that yes, it was quite a deal to see an acre of sausage and melon balls in the Washington Hilton's vast International Ballroom yesterday.

The 32-year-old Air Force captain was one of about 1,000 breakfasters tending to honey dews and such like, to begin their great day as guests of the White House for dinner, but unlike most of the men he and his wife arrived quite late for breakfast.

"Sorry, we've got to clear off this table, we're having a luncheon here today," said a waiter snatching the red tablecloth more or less gracefully.

"Oh, sure," said Capt. Flom, and his wife, Ginny, 31, shared a substantial grin with him.

The waiter could have said "Pardon, we're tearing the hotel down" and it wouldn't have bothered the Floms as they walked out on Connecticut Avenue in a kind of high that would prove salable indeed if it could be bottled.

"I wish I could make one talk to 4,000 or 5,000 people," Flom said at breakfast, "and be done with it. Some guys like to make talks, but I don't, and then some men do it out of a sense of obligation."

"That's the worst of all," said his wife, who thinks you should do things with all your heart and not from nagging duty.

"I'm sure that somewhere along the line, at the State Department or the White House tonight, we'll meet President Nixon," Flom said. (A newly disclosed election tally for 1968 among 12 prisoners in Flom's compound showed 10 votes for Nixon, none for Humphrey and two for Wallace—one of the Wallace votes was from a black Southerner who said he wanted to vote on the right side since he'd be living in the South again.)

"Yes, I guess I was tortured more than some others," Flom had said.

Suspecting it might be awkward to pick out a prisoner of war from a breakfast crowd of hundreds and just walk up and ask him to summarize life in prison and how are things going and describe the torture please, the press phoned Flom the night before and had a session with him and his wife. Even so, Flom found it difficult, really difficult, to discuss horror over coffee. It was a little easier for him over Jack Daniel's Black Label on Wednesday night, and in some notes he made in prison which he had later summerized in a letter mailed home to his family

Before his release from prison on March 4 he had made notes on his feelings and what good, if any, he could see in the past 2,401 days of hell. He said yesterday he often thought of the Vietnamese, even in prison where he saw none except his guards and tormentors.

"It's hard to imagine the thing in reverse, with bombers being shot down over America and them being captives instead of us.

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(over)

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"You could expect them to behave badly when bombers were shot down over their fields — I myself had resolved never to be taken alive but to shoot it out. I had plenty of ammunition. But I was unconscious, fortunately I guess, and it was only years later I found out the details from other pilots because at the time my 105-D just exploded, a split second after I ejected.

"But I think there's this difference. Once captives are in prison, I don't think we'd have tortured them. Their torture wasn't all that efficient — sometimes it worked to our advantage, sometimes not — and sure, I guess some of the gooks enjoyed it. But some of them just turned their backs and walked out, though they were assigned —they had no stomach for it. A few times — rarely — a guard would do a kindness, like sneak me a cigarette."

But there were other sessions, he said, in which his body cast was broken, his broken arm rebroken, and he spent a year in solitary confinement. He was hung up by his heels from a rafter in leg irons, he said, and chained to his bed.

"They used to put food just out of reach while he was chained," his wife broke in, "and then come back and take it away."

Once he went several months without being able to wash, he said, until he could gather clumps of dirt from his crotch. Once he woke up and found a rat had crawled up his pants, he said, and sometimes diarrhea fouled his clothes. There are other memories as specific and as ugly.

"Time was the enemy and the uncertainty of everything. Time is so intimate — you wouldn't know how to approach it. I mean the hours were sadistically long, you'd wonder how you'd ever spend them. Then you wonder where the years all went."

He said it sounded crazy, and her certainly wasn't interested in giving the impression it was easy, but now that it's over he'd like most to tell people one thing:

"It's this, that faith and spirit let a man do things he could never do, or never thought he could. I don't mean faith in God — that depends — sometimes — it was just faith in himself or his family and the strength to just try to hold on.

"Do you know those poems of Kipling's, the lines that go like this: "and he started reciting in the packed Montpelier Bar of the Madison Hotel:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on where there is nothing in you
Except the will which says to them, Hold On!

"Well, those lines meant a lot to me in prison. And do you know the motto of Alcoholics Anonymous? A buddy of mine had a father who was an alcoholic and he told me this:

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

"I can tell you these things helped."

His wife was spared the endless anxiety whether he was alive, at least, but she was left with an 18-month-old baby and a new baby born a few days after Flom was shot down Aug. 8, 1966. The boy, Erik, was 3½ years old before Flom learned he had been safely born.

He said his wife had "kept me alive" for the kids and it was glorious when he got to know them—"you just sort of let things happen," not forcing any haste, he said, and in no time he and the kids were close.

"Yes, it was hard without letters to read them every few days," said Ginny, "but I'd tell them how Fred would have reacted to various little things in the course of the day, so they felt they knew him. But the trouble was, I knew how he *would* have reacted, but I also knew he was changing —I didn't know in what ways."

Her husband broke in:

"We developed in different ways and then somehow came together in the end. We had had a fantastic marriage, but I think now if I hadn't had those enforced hours to think, that we might have made a lot of mistakes. It's easier to be more honest and open now.

"It's hard to forgive my captors, but I honestly don't feel real bitterness toward them. They were tools. I believed in what we were doing in Vietnam. I still do."

"I don't know that I agree that we had a fantastic marriage," his wife said. "We had a good one. We knew each other well, we went steady, for four years before we were married and that was 2½ years before Fred was taken prisoner. I learned a lot, just watching married people, in the years he was away."

In his letter to family and close friends Flom had said of himself and his fellows:

"Heroes? No way. "But while he was still in Asia he noted, as his release approached, "It is the way I wanted to come home, with honor and my head held high."

He is well aware some think American warfare in Vietnam was a terrible mistake or a terrible crime, but he sees it another way, and as he once said, "I've paid my debts."

"If you lose your money you lose nothing," he said. "That's a Russian proverb, and it goes on that if you lose your health you've lost a little. But if you lose your spirit, you lose everything."

Ginny Flom, who through the hours alternated or combined pride and protectiveness, added a sentence:

"It's like something Tolstoi wrote, that if a man loses his wallet or his automobile—though he didn't mention automobile, but you get the point—then he knows it and feels deprived. And yet a man can lose himself and not even know it."

"A psychiatrist told me I had psychoanalyzed myself better than I could have done in 100 hours with a psychiatriat," Flom said. "Maybe I came out with something valuable. I think I understand myself—I feel I understand life better and my relationships with people. It's hard to put in words."

Ginny agreed and, to a question about whether Flom is harder to live with, said no, he's saying much easier to live with.

"But you two aren't saying every husband should be put in prison for seven years to gain insights and self-knowledge?" they asked.

Flom grinned his boyish disarming grin, and his wife said, "only in extreme cases," and they laughed like kids at the beach.