

Bad Health

Report on The POWs

Washington Post Service

Washington

America's returning POWs were far sicker than they looked when they stepped off their freedom flights last winter, the Pentagon's chief health officer reported yesterday.

Almost one-third of them had major bone fractures and 15 per cent suffered broken backs when they ejected from their planes flying at supersonic speeds.

Almost two-thirds of the soldiers captured in South Vietnam returned with serious cases of malaria, some so virulent that they resisted the drugs used to fight them. More than half the men brought intestinal worms back with them.

WELL

"When they came off the planes they looked so well we were deceived," Dr. Richard S. Wilbur, assistant secretary of defense for health, told a Pentagon news briefing.

Moreover, he said, the POW's problems are far from over. Studies of prisoners returned from Oriental prison camps in World War II and the Korean conflict showed they had high rates of violent death for three years after their return.

In an attempt to avoid this, Wilbur revealed that the Vietnam POWs will be followed by military doctors for at least five more years, and every POW family will receive extensive counseling to ease the readjustment problems.

WIVES

Already, Wilbur said, problems are cropping up among the POWS.

"A lot of their difficulties," said Wilbur, "is moving back into families that

have gotten along without them. In most cases the wives carried on successfully alone."

Then the husband comes back and wants to see the check-book and use the family car. "The wife feels she's been put back in the home," said Wilbur, and the return-

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ing POW "feels himself as a kind of extra.

He needs a lot of help fitting back into the family."

ILLS

At the same time that military health officials are assisting the POWs in adjusting to their families and contemporary America, doctors are repairing a wide variety of physical and mental ills suffered during their captivity.

Some of the injuries are directly related to torture by the Vietnamese jailers, Wilbur said.

For example, more than half of 60 Navy POWs whose medical records were studied most completely suffered "oral facial injuries" resulting from "physical abuse" during their capture or interrogation.

NERVE

Another 8½ per cent of the POWs suffered nerve damage due mostly, Wilbur said, to having their hands and feet bound with ropes and chains for long periods of time.

Intestinal worms are the greatest medical problem facing the 566 POWs who returned home after as long as seven years in North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prison camps last February and March.

These worms caused malnutrition and anemia, but Wilbur said, "We think we can get rid of them."

Malaria, however, is proving to be far knottier a problem for Army doctors. (Again, Navy, Marine and Air Force prisoners, held in the north, were found to be free of malaria.)

ARMY

Wilbur reported that many Army POWs are suffering from falciparum malaria,

the most virulent kind, and in some cases the bug is resistant to the drugs used to treat it.

Army doctors are looking to new drugs, developed at the Southeast Asia's Treaty Organization laboratories in Thailand, to treat those cases, Wilbur said.

Of injuries suffered by the prisoners, almost half the soldiers had gunshot wounds. Far fewer — 5 per cent and 7 per cent — of the Navy and Air Force airmen had gunshot wounds.

But the airmen — and to a lesser extent Army helicopter pilots and passengers — suffered broken backs. The fighter pilots, Wilbur said, were injured when they were catapulted out of their damaged planes flying at supersonic speeds.

"It's a violent ejection," said Wilbur. He added that all three services are working on better methods of getting men out of speeding planes.

STRESS

All the men suffered from "stress reactions," which was to be expected. It showed up as depression, fright and euphoria. But, Wilbur said, "It will not last with them."

Six per cent of the men suffered more serious psychological problems from their imprisonment. Wilbur said that 3½ per cent of them had stress reactions so severe as to be abnormal. Two per cent suffered from mild and moderate depression and .7 per cent suffered a schizophrenic reaction. At least one returnee is being hospitalized for his psychiatric problems.

As bad as the health of the returning POWs was, Wilbur said, few suffered any permanent damage. "Most will be able to go back to active duty."