

POWs More Ill Than Suspected

By Stuart Auerbach
Washington Post Staff Writer

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.

"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 POWs' problems are far from over. Studies of prisoners returned from Oriental prison camps in World War II and the Korean War showed they had 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 re-

See POWS, A8, Col. 1

POWS, From A1

ceive extensive counseling to ease the readjustment problems.

Already, Wilbur said, problems are cropping up among the POW families. Wives who had been managing their families and finances for years while the husbands were in prison camps are now finding it difficult adjusting to having a man in the house. And the returned prisoners have trouble adjusting to women's new role in American society.

"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 checkbook and use the family car. "The wife feels she's been put back in the home," said Wilbur, and the returning POW "feels himself as a kind of extra."

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

One POW wife, Wilbur recounted, saved \$30,000 while her husband was a prisoner. But she was nervous; she thought she should have saved twice as much.

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, 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.

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 last February and March after as long as seven years in North Vietnamese and Vietcong prison camps.

Seventy per cent of the Army prisoners—many of

whom were held in makeshift Vietcong camps in the south—suffered from worms. Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force prisoners—mostly airmen shot down over the north and held under somewhat better conditions—suffered slightly less from worms. Wilbur said more than 55 per cent of Navy and Marine prisoners and 48.6 per cent of the Air Force prisoners had worms.

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.)

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.

In eight to 10 cases, he said, the malaria flared up again while the men were under treatment. "The treatment," he said, "was insufficient to keep down the disease."

Army doctors are looking to new drugs, developed at the SEATO laboratories in Thailand, to treat those cases, Wilbur said.

The biggest surprise, he said, was the small number of hepatitis cases among the returning POWs. He said he was also surprised by the small amount of nutritional deficiencies suffered by the prisoners.

Once again, Army prisoners held in the south suffered the most; 35 to 40 per cent of the 77 Army returnees had nutritional problems.

The Navy and Marines reported that 18 per cent of their 164 returnees suffered nutritional deficiencies, and the Air Force reported that 4 per cent of their 325 returnees had the same problem.

"They must have had more problems in the early years," said Wilbur, "but they got better food later and overcame them."

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," Wilbur said. He added that all three services are working on better methods of getting men out of speeding planes.

He explained that these back injuries—where the bones are pushed down or the spinal discs are compressed—are very rare in young men. In some cases, he said, they caused partial paralysis.

The injuries in the helicopter passengers and crews are caused by the impact of the ship coming straight down onto the ground, Wilbur said.

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.

The Air Force reported no cases of schizophrenic reaction or depression, Wilbur said. He explained that it was probably due to a more careful screening of pilots by the Air Force than the other services give their men.

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."

He called the medical care that the POWs received "far from adequate," but added that many prisoners feared that what little treatment they were offered "was not in their best interests." They practiced self treatment "with surprisingly good results."

Wilbur emphasized that the information released yesterday is "preliminary" and may be changed when doctors make further checks on their patients.