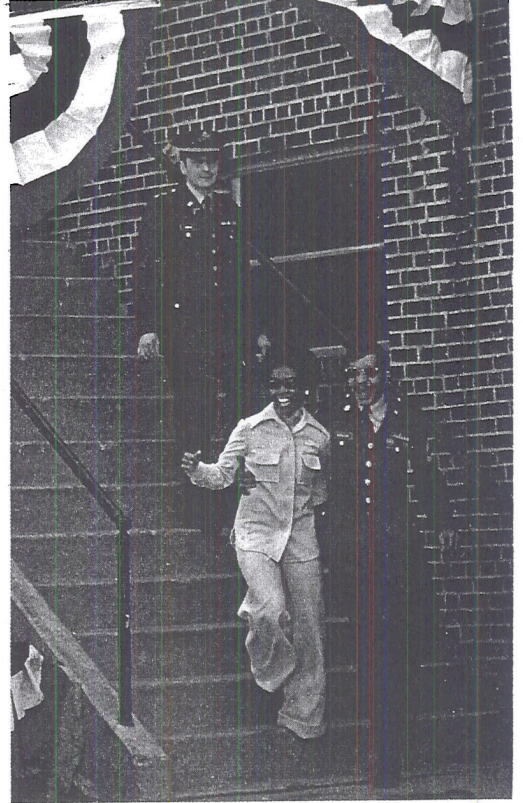


After two weeks in Valley Forge Army Hospital Sergeant First Class Donald Rander returned to Baltimore to find a large sign, above, welcoming him home — along with a flood of well-wishers in a hastily organized but enthusiastic ceremony at the Owings Mill fire station. At right, he descends into the crowd at the ceremony and stands, left, with his family including wife Andrea and daughters Lysa and Page—five years after he expected the quieter delights of stateside leave.



The Washington Post/Potomac/June 10, 1973

# After the Homecoming

## Part II

By Donald P. Baker  
Photographs by Linda Bartlett

Sergeant First Class Donald Rander had been in Vietnam just two and one-half months when his four year Army hitch expired, but he already had decided to make the military his career, so he re-enlisted.

"You get a free 30-day trip back to the states when you re-enlist for your own duty assignment in Vietnam," he recalled the other day, chatting in his apartment in suburban Baltimore.

"I had re-enlisted on Jan. 1, 1968, but delayed the leave for a month because we had four February birthdays in the family: my wife, daughter, father and stepfather.

"My bags were half-packed and I had my orders," he said, when a "little trick of fate" delayed the trip.

Rander was captured by the Viet Cong during the battle of Hue, on Feb. 1, 1968. He missed his departure for Danang — and freedom — by "one stinking day."

Andrea Rander, who had been wearing her hair in a modest Afro the last couple of years, had fixed it "the old way, the way Donald would remember," for their reunion.

Rander got his first glimpse of her from a staff car as it pulled up the drive to the Valley Forge Army Hospital at Phoenixville, Pa.

*Continued on page 31*

*Donald P. Baker is a writer on the Metropolitan staff of The Washington Post*

*At home, relaxed and jubilant, Rander hugs wife Andrea and puffs on an expensive cigar. "We've kidded about me being the perfect male chauvinist," he says, "and she wants to be the perfect mate to the perfect male chauvinist." At least when it's in the kidding stage.*

*The Washington Post/Potomac/June 10, 1973*



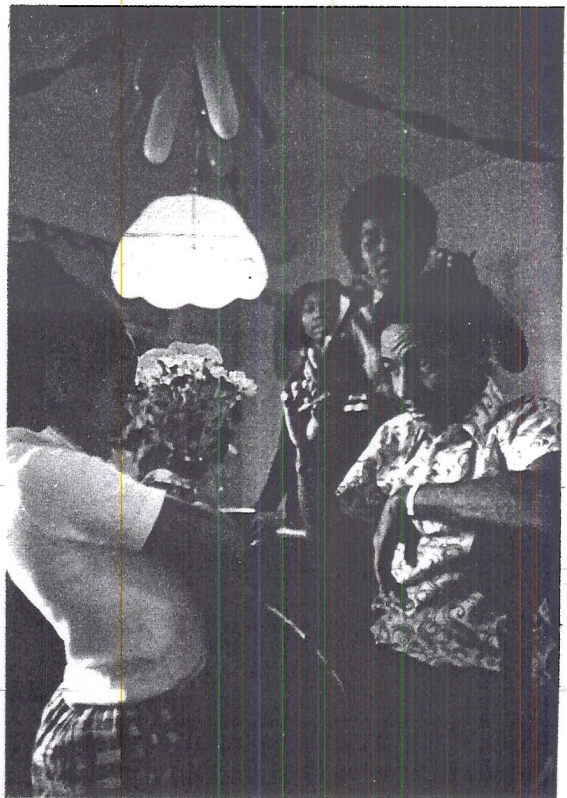


Above, Sgt. Rander hugs his daughter Page, 7, who was two years old when he left home. "It's been harder for her to adjust to me than for me to her, because I've been thinking about her for five years. She was just a baby when I was caught."

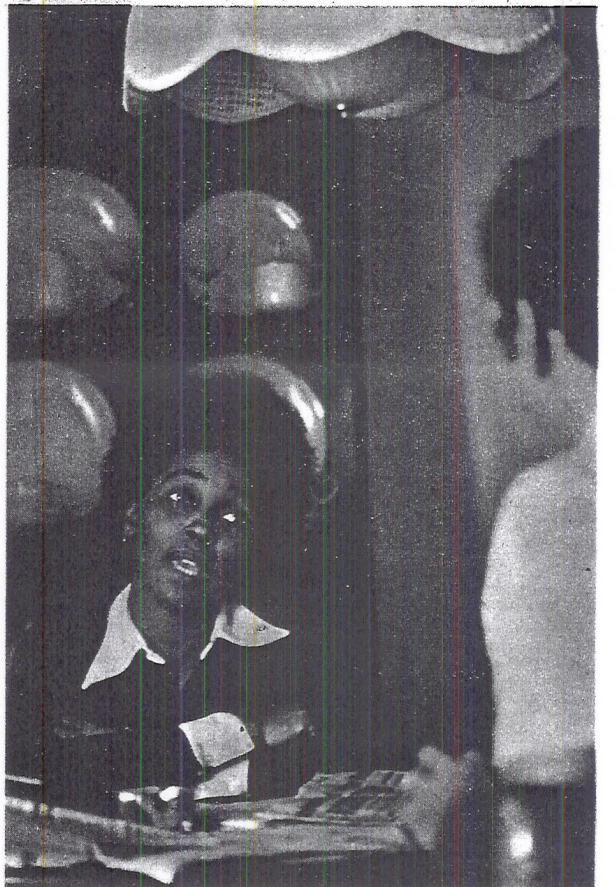
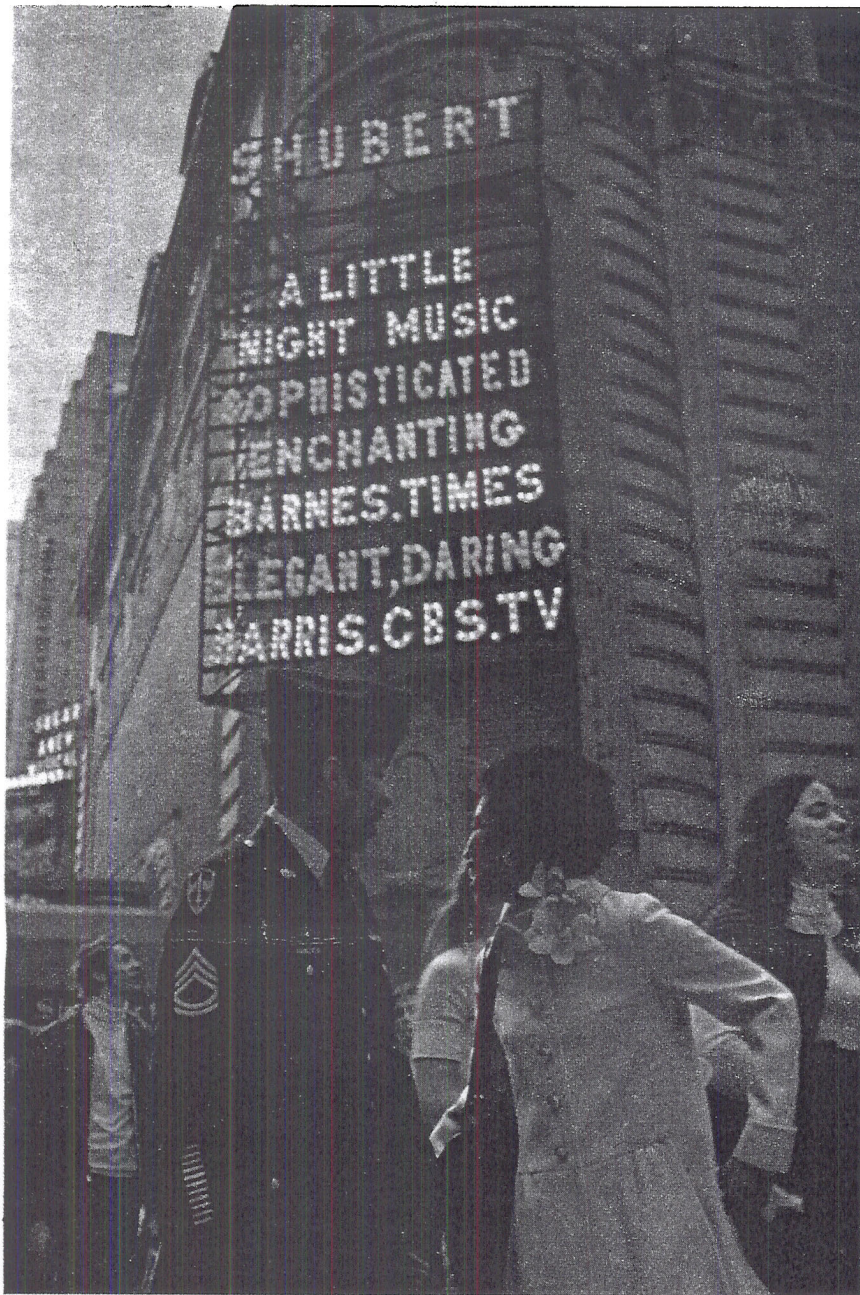
Below, Page holds a banner at a homecoming day party in the Rander's apartment. "The only thing I really recognize in the apartment is the can opener," says Rander. Opposite page: top left, the family relaxes on Sunday morning and later gathers together, top right, to give Donald his first Afro haircut. Rander recalls seeing an Afro cut for the first time in a picture of Angela Davis while he was in prison. He likes his wife's Afro but remained unsure of whether it suited him after the family labors. Below: Husband and wife gaze at chess set Rander bought in the Philippines before returning home. He became a chess fan while in prison.



The Washington Post/Potomac/June 10, 1977



A trip to New York City, hometown of both Donald and Andrea Rander, included seeing a Broadway show, which the returned POW found "amusing," but not particularly enchanting, elegant or daring; and an appearance by Donald on the Dick Cavett television show (below left). Rander has made a number of public appearances because he believes it is "important to let people know" what happened in the prison camps. While he is anxious to get reacquainted with his girls, 7-year-old Page (opposite) has complained to her mother that her father's frequent trips out of town make it seem "like Daddy hasn't come back from the war yet." Below, he helps Lysa, 13, with her homework, found her "slack" in interest in academics, too interested in "rock and roll music". Bottom, Donald quickly took over the family budget, made "a few changes." Andrea has quit her job, which she misses, along with the freedom to have her own checking account.





# POW

from page 11

"There she was, on the arm of a colonel, all dressed in red, white and blue." Gorgeous on a bright March day, five years after they would have been reunited had the North Vietnamese cadres held back 24 hours.

In a war in which most captured American prisoners were white, college-educated Air Force and Navy officers, Donald Rander was black, enlisted (originally drafted) and Army.

And unlike the vast majority of the POWs—downed pilots, captured by regular North Vietnamese troops—Rander was captured in the South, by Viet Cong guerrillas.

News of Rander's capture, his whereabouts, were based on hearsay.

"For four years I thought he was in South Vietnam," said Andrea, who studied all the wrong maps, withstood all the horror stories of the fate of VC prisoners, while her husband was waiting out the end of the war in small, civilian-dominated prisons near Hanoi.

Even the U.S. government was unaware of Rander's whereabouts until last Christmas.

## "Home," A Stranger

The only thing I recognize in this place is the can opener," said Rander, relaxing in a chair in the apartment, northwest of Baltimore, where his wife and daughters have lived the last three years.

It was April 15, the day after Rander had been welcomed "home" to Owings Mills, a town he had never seen before, with a parade from the village fire house to the three-story garden apartment development.

"Surely you remember the bedroom suite," Andrea called from the kitchen.

"Pour me another beer," he called. "I think it's helping my memory." While Andrea opened another National Bohemian, she chided him about not even remembering the beer mug from which he was drinking.

"You bought it," she said, grinning, "because you liked

the cartoon on it."

The living room was filled: balloons and banners stuck to the walls and ceilings, and people—most of whom Rander had never seen before—shuffled in and out, shaking hands, leaving a gift, explaining who they were.

A photographer for the Baltimore Afro-American was teaching Rander the three-stage handshake used by many blacks as a sign of unity.

"Right on," said the photographer as Rander successfully completed his part of the greeting. "Right on, brother," laughed Rander.

Andrea's mother, Agnes Haywood, arrived and immediately took over as official greeter. As an aide to the Bronx borough president, she had had plenty of experience shuffling well-wishers in and out, a task she performed with the efficiency of a good-natured traffic cop.

Seven-year-old daughter Page, who was still several weeks away from her first fatherly spanking since age 18 months, snuggled onto her father's lap and attempted to tape record his voice for her first-grade class.

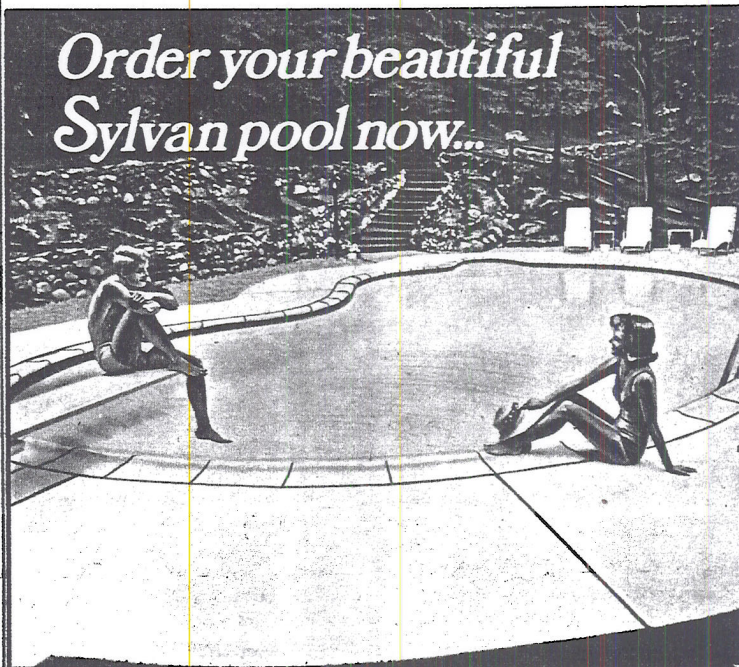
In the kitchen stepdaughter Lysa, 13, held hands with a 15-year-old boy named Melvin, a scene Rander said he had "tried to prepare for, but couldn't.

"I started counting up, and realized Lysa was a teenager," he said. "I tried to prepare for blue jeans, lipstick, even a boyfriend, but I just couldn't picture her as grown."

There she was, a young girl with a boy friend, trying to pass off a touching of hands as a shove or a slap, but fooling no one.

The tape recorder was playing a Joan Baez album. Rander said he recognized it from camp. "We'd hear Baez and Pete Seeger over the camp radio, and propaganda in between. But the speaker system was so bad that it was garbled," he said.

The tape outfit was a gift, and the box that it had come in was on the floor, helping to contribute to the scene of Christmas in February. Melvin, the boyfriend, had even decorated a table-size artificial tree, which got him off to a



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# POW

good start with Lysa's father.

Still more people jammed into the apartment, until those who were there had to take turns walking outside to make room for new arrivals.

When one suggested everyone should leave, Rander said it was not necessary. "I'm ready for a slight infringement on my privacy," he said.

"I've had five years of too much privacy."

## The Attack

Rander won't discuss details of his assignment at Hue, except to say it was "in intelligence." He posed as a civilian during his

brief pre-capture time, living in a private home with American construction workers and Voice of America employees.

He was captured in the fiercest battle of the longest of American wars: the attack came at 3:30 a.m. on Feb. 1, 1968, as Rander and eight others sat in their pajamas and watched the might of the North Vietnamese regular army join with the VC rebels to surround the ancient citadel.

"As soon as the firing began, one man (in the house) was killed. We were not taking direct fire, however, so the fighting continued intermittently through the afternoon."

Rander and his companions attempted to reach a passing American jeep and tank, but "before we could get downstairs, the jeep got hit by rocket fire. So there we sat, through the night."

As the night wore on, "We took some mortar fire, and that's when I got hit, a piece of shrapnel got me in the left arm, near the elbow" (the scar is still clearly visible). The blast also punctured his left ear, which was to become something of a blessing during his prison years: "When the damned crickets would start, I'd just roll over on my good ear, and I couldn't hear a thing."

Rander had just come back to his third floor room, from an outside porch, when "a mortar came through the ceiling about 10 feet from me. I was on my knees, and it lifted me and then slammed me down. I guess I blacked out momentarily. I remember opening my eyes, looking around, a small cut on my forehead was bleeding profusely, and I remember thinking: Damn. Is this the way you die?"

I didn't feel any pain, but the blood from my forehead was on my hand, and I kept wondering is this the way it is? Is this the way the end comes?"

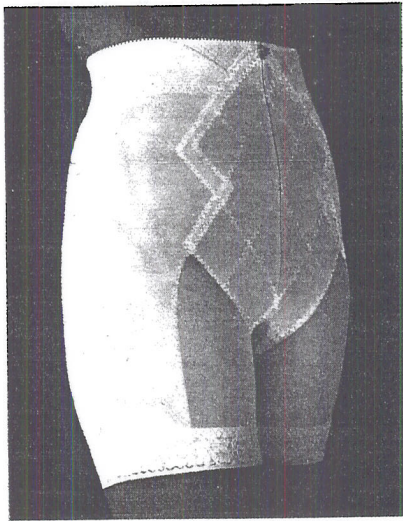
"Finally, I realized I could move, so I started for the door. Barry Wolk had been hit, and he was weeping. He said, 'Don, shoot me.' His face was covered with blood, and he was repeating, 'Shoot me, shoot me, Don.' I said, 'I haven't got a gun,' and he said, 'Your .45 is there on the floor.' I was now crying too, saying, 'Barry, I can't do it.' Then someone dropped a tear gas grenade in the stairwell, and we crawled out on the porch.

"I was sitting with a rifle across my lap, dressed in civilian trousers, Army shirt, no socks. Barry called out, came up to me and put his head on my shoulder. I guess I closed my eyes, and later, when he

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# POW

didn't move, I checked him out and realized he was dead."

## Keeping Father Alive

"There's been a lot of screaming, hollering, love, understanding and misunderstanding," was Andrea's assessment after Donald's first month at home.

The frankness with which they discuss problems of adjustment testifies to their commitment to put together a marriage separated for five years.

When Donald left for Vietnam in late 1967, Andrea got a job at Baltimore's City Hospital, first in the social services department, and later in the psychiatric section.

The girls were not quite 7 and 2 when Rander volunteered—"yes volunteered" he emphasized—for The Nam. In the succeeding 5½ years, Andrea, supplementing her husband's salary with her own, furnished a new apartment and tried to fill the role of sole parent, while "keeping their father alive through talk, pictures and tapes." She succeeded, Rander believes. "I was here, emotionally, in their hearts," he said.

The Randers exchanged tape recordings during Donald's initial months in Vietnam. It was on the last one received by Andrea that Donald promised she would soon be getting a surprise.

"I was referring to my 30-day leave," Rander said upon his return.

But the surprise turned out to be word of her husband's capture.

On Feb. 2, 1968, Rander, six other military prisoners and 17 civilians began a "circuitous march to the north." They were on the trail 15 days, but

the trek was interrupted by a three-week rest in Quan Tri Province, near the Laotian border.

At one point, their truck convoy was attacked by American fighters. "I was scared to death," Rander said. "I could see the ack-ack fire, the tracers, and every once-in-a-while a rocket. One of the jets came right at us—I almost went off the side of the truck—and he hit a truck about 20 back. We saw it go up in smoke.

"One habit I can't get rid of," says Rander, "involves the planes. I was 5 years in the north, and there was bombing from time to time. We heard the 52s last Christmas. We were in two hard-top buildings in the middle of nothing, and we were scared they'd unload on us. So whenever I hear a plane, I have to catch myself from looking up, and then looking for cover."

At the first formal camp in North Vietnam, Rander was "interrogated. It got a little sticky because there were certain things I didn't think I should discuss. But they put the pressure on me—I was beaten, put in stocks and threatened."

By July, 1968, the little band of POWs had grown to 30, including some Vietnamese, and they were moved to a camp near Hanoi. Rander dubbed it the Comrade Hilton. "I didn't learn of the Hanoi Hilton for a couple years," he said.

For the next 3½ years, Rander shared a room with Charles E. Willis, who had been in charge of the Voice of America radio station at Hue. The black man from the Bronx and the white from North Carolina became such friends that "If there was any way for Chuck and I to be blood brothers, we would be," Rander says now.

"I got a letter from Chuck who is out in Idaho and it made me feel nostalgic for a second. The way we lived together, all of us, the way we kept each other from going under. I've thought about this a

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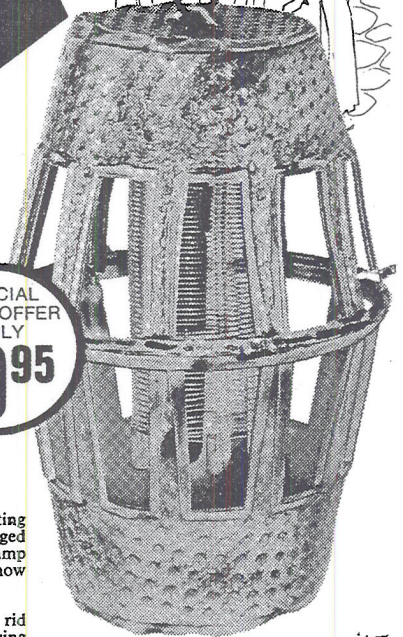
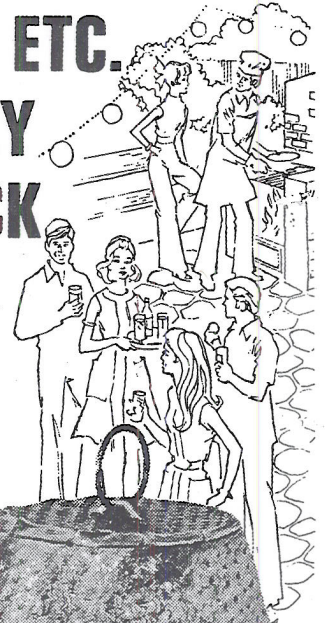
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# POW

couple of times. I doubt I'll ever be as tight with anybody. When you share life and death with somebody, tears and happiness, when you clean the feces out of somebody's trousers or they do it for you, you're tight . . . closer than a husband and wife, even, could ever be. I don't miss that closeness, not yet. Next week I'll see Chuck and some of the other guys when they come in for this thing at the White House. It'll be like how we'd talk about, back then, how we'd get together when we got

out, have a few beers, have a good time. When I arrived at Valley Forge Hospital Col. Thompson — I have a lot of respect for that man—he came up to me and it was like seeing my mother again. He said: 'I know you've been looking for this' and he gave me an apple —didn't actually give it to me, he shoved it in my mouth. It tasted great."

There were only five military prisoners in the camp, and three of them were kept in solitary most of the time. The record-holder was Air Force Col. Benjamin H. Purcell, who spent 4½ years in solitary. "There is a man!" Rander said of Purcell, whom he first met face-to-face in 1972.

The other officers in the camp were Army Capt. Theodore W. Gostas, and Army Col. Floyd H. Thompson. Thompson, who had been in solitary confinement for four years in South Vietnam, was the longest held prisoner of war in American history. He was released just 10 days short of nine years' imprisonment.

Although after nine months the prisoners were moved into "community rooms" serving three or four men, there was little communication outside their immediate groups.

The fifth U.S. military POW was Frank E. Cuis Jr., then a 20-year-old Marine corporal with whom Rander was never able to get together. So what did you do, Rander was asked. "We prayed a lot," he said.

## The Comrade Hilton Song

A Canadian civilian, Marc O. Cayer, was giving French lessons on the other side of the camp, but Rander was learning the language alone, by comparing English and French texts of "such classics as 'The Battle of Dien Bien Phu' and the 'Selected Works of Ho Chi Minh.'"

Still another language heard, but little understood, was German, as spoken by two German civilians, Bernhard J. Diehl, and the camp's only female prisoner, Monika Schwinn, who joined the ranks in June, 1970. They had been

*Continued on page 40*

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# POW

from page 36

captured on April 27, 1969.

"Two very fine young people," said Rander, who at Diehl's urging, wrote a song shortly before their release. "Bernhard was a philosophical German," Rander said. "He had written 5,000 lines of poetry in German and English; and when the little camp was disbanded early this year, following signing of the peace agreement, they were moved to Hanoi. "He got a guitar at Tet, gave me the title, 'Freedom Now,' and I wrote the thing in 15 minutes."

Here are the song lyrics Rander wrote:

### Freedom Now

We've waited long years for  
these gates to open,  
We've shed lonely tears of  
undistinguished hopin',  
They've tried for so long our  
souls to cow,  
Oh how we long for our  
Freedom Now.

We've seen many days that  
are filled by sadness,  
We've spent lonely nights  
which were filled by madness.  
Life is too short to waste all  
this time,  
Frustration is painful, self-  
pity a crime.

We've held our heads high  
thru these years of grief;  
Oh when does it come now,  
that longed-for relief?  
At long last the end of the  
tunnel is showing,  
And back to our loved lands  
we soon will be going.  
Our heads we no longer  
have to bow,  
Because we have regained  
our Freedom Now.

Sgt. 1/C Donald Rander  
North Vietnam, 1972.

Rander says he doesn't dream about his POW experience because "there's too much sunshine in my life since I got back, all the sunshine from American faces."

Continued on page 42

The Washington Post/Potomac/June 10, 1973

# LANE BRYANT

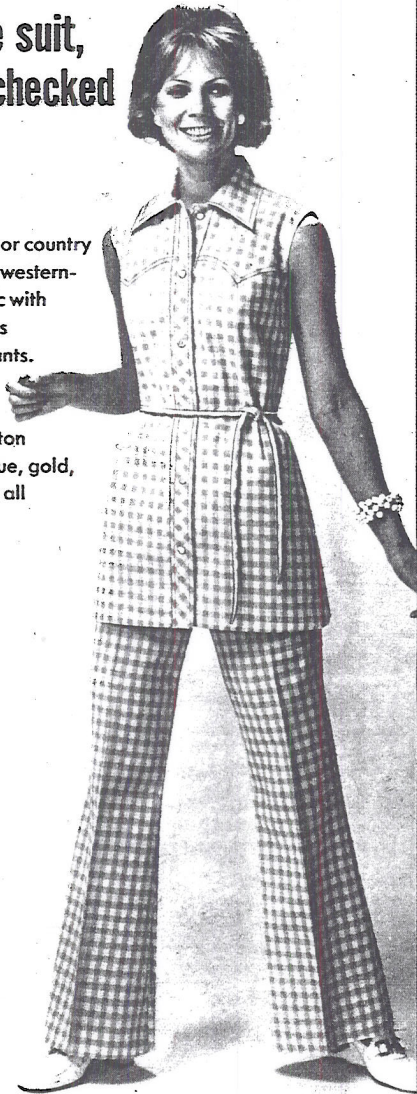
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# POW

from page 40

The only question people ask him now that annoys him is about what kind of activities and sports they had in prison. "To me that's stupid. I realize they've been listening to the Communist propaganda, and sure, we got some activities, but what do these people think it was, some kind of picnic?"

Rander missed two presidential elections, but he is happy with the way his wife voted, for Nixon, although they do not consider themselves political partisans.

The Watergate revelations haven't shaken Rander's confidence in the country for which he gave five years of his life: "After seeing a Communist society, this is the only place in the world where something like this (Watergate) could happen, and be revealed to the people. We will learn by this experience, and we will profit by it, both Republicans and Democrats."

Rander says he's learned a lot more about Communism—in the time he's been away—"learned it's not a bogeyman, not a myth. It's real, and it's a threat to this country. People here are losing sight of that to some extent. They say we should spend money on schools, and so on. But the only reason we got those schools is because we didn't let up on the Communists for all those years."

As the only black in camp, Rander was subjected to "amateurish" attempts by the Vietnamese to alienate him from other U.S. prisoners.

"They told me blacks at home were being prosecuted; that Angela Davis was being persecuted—I don't know who she was—and that the Black Panther Party, of whom I had never heard, was a great, goodwill organization whose leaders were being murdered by the police.

"I didn't buy that," Rander said, although he did find "ex-

tremely plausible" reports of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

## Not a Private Hero

While some returning prisoners have sought privacy, for themselves and their families, Rander has accepted dozens of requests for public appearances: he has led parades, reviewed parades, appeared on local and national television, visited his daughters' schools, thrown out a ball at an Orioles baseball game, had dinner at the VFW, American Legion, Ft. Meade and the White House—so frantic has his schedule been that Page asked her mother, "When will Daddy really come home from the war?"

He does it because "the American people need us. This has been a war which hurt the conscience. Someone has said this was a war without heroes. I cannot agree with that," Rander says.

He believes that many of the returning Vietnam veterans (non-prisoners) were "heroes . . . sullied by narcotics," that his own group is "more or less clean."

There were no drugs in camp, "not even when you needed them for pain," he says. Few stimulants were available: "The tobacco was pretty hard, pretty stale" and the beer ration was "very small." Through 1971 the beer allotment was one a year, at Christmas. In 1972 it was increased to two a month, and after the peace agreement was signed there was "an influx of goodies," which served only to point up the "hypocrisy and deceit" of the enemy.

"I only sleep 4 to 6 hours a night now. I don't know why. That's all I need," he says.

"I have to say, yes, I'm as happy as I dreamed I would be, because everything is just beautiful. But, yes and no. People are still adjusting to us. We pulled the wool over the psychiatrists' eyes. They thought we'd be alcoholic, homosexual, impotent, drug addicts . . . but we fooled 'em.

The Washington Post/Potomac/June 10, 1973

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# POW

from page 42

We weren't. Except for a few guys, and they were always 180 degrees off from us anyway.

"And people are too solicitous, too nice sometimes. I see them watching me, watching my reactions. I find my wife watching me, but I know what it is, she's just worried . . ."

Rander had decided before his capture that he would remain in the Army, and although "during the first few months of captivity I vacillated a few times," his decision remains firm.

After a recuperating period that may extend through the summer, he hopes to apply for a direct commission, earn a college degree through the Army's Operation Bootstrap, and then get an assignment in Africa, either in intelligence or as a military attache.

His wife is prepared to follow Rander to his new location, although she admits the subservient role he envisions for her, while liberal from his view, is going to cause resentment on her part.

"I miss the job, the check-book, the independence," she said. "But I love Donald, and if he is going to be the perfect male chauvinist, then I'm prepared to be the perfect chauvinist's perfect wife."

"I've gotten used to most of the glaring changes," says Rander. "I want my wife to wear short skirts because she has a nice pair of legs, and she wants to wear slacks and the long dresses that are fashionable now. And I haven't seen one of my daughters in a skirt since I got back. I can't get used to the long hair on men, either. I come up behind a car and it looks like two women snuggled up close, sometimes, and I say 'What's going on here?' And the long hair on the policemen, too. And the businessmen in New York. They used to wear Brooks Brothers suits, a pair of nice shoes—now it's flared jackets, hair over their collars. They used to look distinguished, be somebody to look up to."

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