

18 POWs Seek Aid For MIAs

By Richard M. Cohen
Washington Post Staff Writer

On Tuesday night, Warrant Officer Don Rander celebrated what he prefers to call his first birthday by "busting a bottle of champagne, the wife and I" and toasting the good life since he left the Hoa Loa prison camp in Hanoi a year ago.

Yesterday, he was one of 18 former POWs who met here to discuss the fate of the men they say they left behind — 1,200 men they contend are still missing in action, and three in particular, two Thais and an American they saw with their own eyes.

Rander recalls the two Thais well. They were in the same compound with him in Hanoi, caged in a different cell adjacent to the area the Americans dubbed "Little Vegas." On the day the Americans were freed, Rander saw them for the last time.

"We had cigarettes and toothpaste and we knew we didn't need them," he said. "Just as we were getting ready to change clothes, I scaled the wall and hung on by my fingertips." He passed the cigarettes and toothpaste through the barred window and checked the spelling of the names of the two Thais.

"I said, 'Don't worry, we won't forget you.'"

Earlier, Cmdr. Peter Schoeffel, who was a POW for 5½ years, put it another way, "We consider it a debt of honor which we are trying to keep."

So, to honor that debt, Schoeffel, Rander and 16 other former POWs from all the services met yesterday at the Statler-Hilton here. Their purpose was to turn the propaganda guns on the Vietcong, North Vietnamese and Communist forces elsewhere in Asia who, they say, are violating the cease-fire by refusing either to cooperate in the tracing of men listed as missing in action or in freeing those still held prisoner.

Schoeffel, who spoke for the group at a press conference, focused on the two Thais—Chai Cahn Harnnaver and Napadom Wang Chom—and an American civilian pilot, Emmet Kay, who was shot down over Laos in 1973 and taken prisoner by Pathet Lao forces. Kay, whose capture was announced by the Laotian Communists, was flying a small transport plane for Continental Air Services under charter for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Schoeffel praised the efforts of the White House and the State Department to make the Asian Communists account for men missing in action and said the time had come for congressmen to speak out.

In addition, the POWs said Congress could pass "economic" legislation to exert pressure on the governments they consider to be uncooperative.

After the press conference, the former POWs went to Capitol Hill for meetings with various congressmen.

In a press release, the organization estimated the number of men missing in action as "over 1,200." According to a Pentagon spokesman, 1,088 Americans were listed as of March 1 as missing in action.