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Freed Woman's Chaotic Welcome

By Carolyn Anspacher

Mary Ann Harbert, a prisoner of the Communist Chinese for nearly four years, returned home yesterday, a smile on her lips, a huge "Happy Face" button affixed to her coat, a plastic hospital identification bracelet still on her wrist, and the prospect of a cold roast beef sandwich for dinner.

Miss Harbert, who will be 26 Monday, found a scene of chaos awaiting her at San Francisco International Airport.

Jammed into United Air Lines' VIP reception room

were her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Gene Harbert of 1560 Willow Road, Palo Alto; her sister, Sue Carrington; a covey of flower-bearing, picture-snapping family friends and a throng of news reporters and photographers that spilled out into the hall.

Released only yesterday morning from Valley Forge Army Hospital in Pennsylvania where she had been under observation for a week, Miss Harbert went through the welcoming ordeal with remarkable calm and bright good humor.

'WONDERFUL'

"I feel just wonderful," she said. "And she looks just wonderful," her mother interjected breathlessly.

Miss Harbert kissed her mother, hugged her father and embraced her pretty blonde 29-year-old sister. Mrs. Carrington was the only member of the family who wept.

Since early 1968 the Harberts had presumed their younger daughter dead, drowned somewhere between Hong Kong and Manila. She had left Hong Kong with a longtime family friend, Gerald Ross McLaughlin, 41, aboard his yacht. When the

See Back Page

From Page 1

boat did not arrive in Manila, a widespread search was instituted.

Miss Harbert said yesterday that she and McLaughlin were fishing and suddenly they were surrounded by Chinese junks and their boat was towed to an island.

"It is possible we were in Chinese waters," she said. "I don't know. There were no signs."

IMPRISONMENT

For six weeks she and McLaughlin were kept on the island and, during those weeks, she said, they saw each other.

But then they were transferred to a peasant house somewhere in the country on the Chinese mainland and once, when McLaughlin was ill with a recurring stomach ailment, she was allowed to visit him.

The following year, in March 1969, according to the Chinese news agency, McLaughlin had committed suicide while still under investigation. Miss Harbert said she heard of it much later.

Her own years of confinement, she said, were endless days of virtual isolation.

TREATMENT

"At first I wasn't treated very well," she said. "I don't mean I was harmed or threatened, but the food wasn't very good and there wasn't much of it. The living conditions were similar to those of the peasants. I tried to keep a calendar but I kept losing track of time."

Miss Harbert said she was constantly under guard and several interpreters were usually in the vicinity.

"I'm not very good at languages," she said, "and I only learned a few words of Chinese. But I occasionally was given reading matter — a couple of English-language magazines with pictures, the Peking Review which is a news magazine, and a Chinese literary magazine."

She hedged when asked if an effort had been made to brainwash her.

"The interpreters tried all the time to persuade me," she said carefully. "They talked politics all the time."

HOPE

Miss Harbert said when conditions at her sequestered place of confinement were "bad", she all but gave up hope.

"I often feared I wouldn't see this day," she said. "But when things improved, I had more hope."

Miss Harbert said she spent the last six months of her unofficial imprisonment in a hospital — where she didn't say, and why she did not know.

"They didn't tell me why," she said, "but I guess it had something to do with my physical condition."

NEWS

Miss Harbert said her Chinese captors lost no time in telling her of President Nixon's impending visit. "They were eager to tell me the news," she said. "I guess it was to see my reaction."

Miss Harbert said she had no intimation she was to be released and sent home until December 11 when suddenly and without explanation she was asked what clothes she wanted.

She was freed with Richard G. Fecteau, 44, of Lynn, Mass., an Army civilian employee shot down during the Korean war and held a prisoner by the Chinese for more than 19 years.

Miss Harbert emphasized, as she has during the last week, she has undergone no "debriefing" and was given no injunctions on what to say and what not to say about her years of captivity.

Miss Harbert, who majored in psychology at the University of Utah, said she has to begin thinking about getting a job. But her Christmas and birthday celebrations will come first.

The family spent last night trimming a five-foot Christmas tree sent them by a well-wisher and nibbling on cold roast beef.

"I'm no cook," said Mrs. Harbert. "But I do have a roast beef and we'll probably end up with sandwiches."

The menu sounded fine to Miss Harbert. She smiled all the way to a waiting automobile.