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Free American Visits Seven in Blue Denim

By Peter Arnett
Associated Press

Seven men. All dressed in simple blue denim prison garb. All crewcut. All American. And they had something else in common: a powerful desire to come home.

I could reach out across the table and touch their hands. Yet the gulf between us was immeasurable. I was a free man, about to board a plane within the hour and wing back to the United States.

Not these men. One of them, Navy Cdr. Eugene Wilbur, from Columbia Cross Roads Pa., had sat across that table a dozen times in the past 4½ years, watching faces of free men flit by as he waited for his turn.

Wilbur and the six others were all U.S. pilots shot down over North Vietnam and held in prisoner of war camps. I was with a delegation of four American antiwar activists in Hanoi to escort home three pilots released by the North Vietnamese.

At the last moment of our 10-day visit we were summoned to a government building in downtown Hanoi. We were ushered into a long room and saw tables crowded with beer bottles and glasses.

A few seconds later they came in, seven men with hands outstretched and faces beaming. They were more eager to see us than any other men I had ever met.

Two North Vietnamese officials sat in the room with us. Reporters and television cameras flooded in for the first five minutes. The affair was obviously carefully orchestrated by the North Vietnamese, the pilots handpicked for the meeting.

But only a master impresario could have created the spontaneous burst of feeling that had the pilots in bear hugs with their American visitors.

It is known that most of the approximately 400 U.S. pilots officially reported held in North Vietnamese prison camps don't wish to meet with visiting journalists and U.S. antiwar activists. Apparently they are fearful of being labeled as collaborators.

The Pentagon, however, says it will not hold pilots responsible for statements made while in prison.

The antiwar statements the seven made apparently were part of the scenario of the meetings, the price of admission. Some of the 12 American pilots released by the North Vietnamese over the years reversed their anti-war statements after they returned to America. Others didn't.

The antiwar rhetoric came thick and fast. Wilbur has met with other visiting groups and he repeated what he had said then. "Tell my wife and family you have seen me. Tell her to use every facility to help you and the anti-war movement," he said. "Tell her I am working at this end."

Lt. Peter Callahan, from Bellmore, N.Y., said, "I don't know how you can talk with my wife without giving her mental anguish in choosing between the peace movement and the government. If there is ever a group of men duped by the government, then here we sit."

Then there were the personal asides. Callahan said he was shot down on June 21 this year, and at the time his wife was nine months pregnant. She has made no reference to it in her letters. "Am I a father or aren't I?" he wanted to know.

Lt. Donald Karl Logan of Northridge, Calif., said, "Tell my wife to stop typing her name at the end of her letters. Tell her to write it out so I know it's her."

"Say 'Hi' to Patty for me," said bachelor Air Force Lt. Greg Hanson, from Thousand Oaks, Calif., in a personal message.

"Just don't play games with the packages," said Lt. Richard Fulton, from Mesa, Ariz., when told by the visitors of North Vietnamese charges that spying devices were being sent into the camps from America.

Capt. David Hoffman, from San Diego, mentioned the names of several other POWs and said, "Those people have not received any mail from their families since the day they were shot down."

The conversation flowed on. The beer glasses clinked and you could almost forget that these men were prisoners and you were free. But not for long.

One of the North Vietnamese officials stood up and announced to the visitors, "You have a plane to catch," and the talk was over.

Callahan crushed my hand as he went out. "Get us out of here, will you?" he said, and then they were all gone, swallowed up in Hanoi City, somewhere.

WASHINGTON STAR
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POW Party Sent to Bunkers

By PETER ARNETT
Associated Press

HANOI — The two American women who flew into Hanoi yesterday to escort home their captured loved ones were sent scurrying into roadside bunkers and concrete basements during four air raid alerts in their first five hours in North Vietnam.

"And I was silly enough to think that Washington would stop bombing while we were here," Olga Charles said. She sat hunched in the basement of the Hoa Binh hotel in downtown Hanoi as antiaircraft guns spluttered into the sky.

(American warplanes steered clear of Hanoi yesterday when a U.S. delegation arrived to escort three POWs home, sources in Saigon said. The Associated Press also reported the closest raids to the North Vietnamese capital on Friday were about 25 miles away along the northeast rail link to China.)

Mrs. Charles, of San Diego, Calif., is here to be reunited with her husband, Navy Lt. Norris Charles, 27. Hanoi also has announced plans to release two other captured pilots, Air Force Maj. Edward K. Elias, 34, and Navy Lt. Mark L. Gartley, 28.

Father Changes Mind

Minnie Lee Gartley, of Dunedin, Fla., is here to get her son Mark. Elias is from Valdesta, Ga. His father had planned to make the trip to Hanoi, then changed his mind.

North Vietnamese officials visited the women at the hotel and said plans were going ahead to release the three American prisoners, possibly today.

"We want to be certain you are healthy enough and psychologically ready to receive them," an official said.

"I'm as ready now as I'll ever be," Mrs. Charles said. Mrs. Gartley said, "Please let me see my son soon."

The officials said the released American prisoners could live with the visiting delegation at the hotel until they depart.

Mrs. Charles was about to step into a bath after an arduous day of traveling when sirens screamed outside her room and hotel staff members hurried her downstairs.

Gray-haired Mrs. Gartley joined her on the stairway and both made their way through a labyrinth of back rooms and corridors to a concrete basement room.

This was the fourth time the American women and four peace activists escorting them had run for safety, and the strain was beginning to tell. The first time was at Gia Lam Airport at noon when a polite delegation of welcomers quietly escorted the arriving Americans to an underground bunker. The Vietnamese waited outside under trees.

North Vietnamese cameramen filmed the Americans as they entered the shelter but did not photograph them inside.

Saw No Planes

This reporter, ho is accompanying the party, stayed outside most of the time and did not see any American planes.

No sounds of bombing or shooting could be heard then but an hour later on the two-mile drive through farming land to Hanoi, a crowd of peasants waiting at a checkpoint began to run as antiaircraft flak blossomed in the distance and explosions were heard. The motorcade screeched to stop and Mrs. Charles was half-dragged along the road by American antiwar activist David Dellinger to a bunker inside a small military post.

Dellinger cried out emotionally, "Is this Washington's answer to our visit?" But Mrs. Charles was smiling as she stepped inside the bunker and Mrs. Gartley was laughing.

Tension rose noticeably when sirens again blared as the motorcade approached a pontoon bridge upriver from Paul Doumer Bridge, which was hit by bombs two weeks ago and lay crumpled with its center spans down in the Red River.

North Vietnamese officials pushed the visiting Americans into roadside holes and said bombing was taking place five or six miles away. Distant explosions couldb e hard.

By the time the visiting party arrived at the Hoa Binh hotel, Mrs. Charles' flowery version of a Vietnamese traditional dress, the Aodai, was dirty and crumpled. Ninety-degree heat and the dust and dirt of damp, mouldy bunkers had streaked other Americans with grime.

A three-course lunch cooled nerves but no sooner had the visitors moved upstairs for a brief siesta than antiaircraft guns began chattering again, and itw as a race to the downstairs concrete basement.

Cora Weiss, cochairman of the Committee for Liaison that arranged the visit, said: "Washington probably is not deliberately antagonizing us. It's just that they plan bombing so far ahead it is difficult to stop it." Mrs. Charles said, "they are mad." Mrs. Gartley said, "This is getting me down."