

My recollection of Operation Homecoming, Dick Tobiason, LTC, U. S. Army, Retired

Today, Feb. 12, 2023 is the 50th anniversary of “**Operation Homecoming**” the repatriation of 591 American Prisoners of War in Hanoi, North Vietnam and 27 POWs in South Vietnam, at a small village called Loc Ninh near the S. Vietnam/Cambodia border about 70 miles north of Saigon. I was one of 8 Army officers selected for the Loc Ninh mission and responsible for organizing the evacuation by 5 UH-1 helicopters known as “Hueys” which I have flown.

We landed at Loc Ninh within seconds of the prescribed 8:30 am touchdown. We could see the POWs loaded in a Russian truck. As soon as we touched down, the Americans were driven into the jungle and hidden from our view. We met with our North Vietnamese and Viet Cong counterparts to begin the process of negotiating the repatriation surrounded by armed guards. By agreement we were unarmed and allowed one Stars and Stripes reporter who also documented the event by photographs.

I believe delays in the repatriation process were intentional on the former enemy’s part. The hours crept by with no sign of the POWs. We were forced to attend propaganda lectures and eventually fed a fish soup lunch. In the late afternoon, the prisoners were unloaded from the truck within our sight. They assembled in a loose formation dressed in new blue pajama type clothing over gaunt bodies clutching a bag of their meager possessions – an aluminum bowl and spoon made from crashed American aircraft. Around their necks hung a card stating their identity. They stared right through us with the thousand yard stare typical of long held POWs. One of them fainted.

It was getting dark when we finally loaded the Americans into the Hueys. We belted up and took off with the enemy shooting small arms at us – tracers were flying all around. In my Huey, the 5 POWs held hands and sang God Bless America – a memory of a lifetime. The 70 mile night flight back to Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon was quick. We landed under glaring lights and cameras that shocked the POWs. They were loaded into US Air Force medical evacuation C-9 aircraft and flown to Clark AFB in the Philippines for health checks and debriefings.

I later learned from their debriefings the former POWs memorized the dates and times of heavy nearby American bombings. When correlated with the records of actual bombings it was found that the POWs had been marched in large circles within S. Vietnam and Cambodia. Some had been POWs for over 5 years.

Some photos and the Stars and Stripes report are attached.

I count that one day experience as one the most rewarding events of my life – the return of Americans to cherished freedom.

This one day experience is in contrast to the two months required to repatriate the 591 Hanoi POWs by the C-141 “**Freedom Bird**”.

While the Loc Ninh and Saigon repatriations were in process, the United States and South Vietnam governments transported Viet Cong and North Vietnam troops held as POWs to other locations – the required POW swap was nearing completion.

“Operation Homecoming” was one of two conditions required by the Paris Peace Accords signed by America’s Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam’s Le Duc Tho the month before. The other requirement leading to the end of hostilities and evacuation of US Forces from South Vietnam was for the United States government to turn over all military equipment (ships, aircraft of all types, tanks, weapons, etc) to the South Vietnam government. That action was named **“Operation Enhance”** and I was the Program Manager and one of the last combat troops to leave Vietnam.

These 2 events are a sharp contrast to my first tour in South Vietnam as Commanding Officer of a platoon of 8 armed Army Cessna O-1 Birddogs performing “Forward Air Control – FAC” services to the 3rd USMC Division “up north” in I Corps, the DMZ and north of the DMZ.

Dick Tobiason
LTC US Army, Retired
Hue Citadel: 1966-1967
Saigon: 1972-1973
Feb. 11, 2023

For further details and reports of Operation Homecoming, please view these and other YouTube videos and links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xhyqCVRK7A8>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Homecoming