

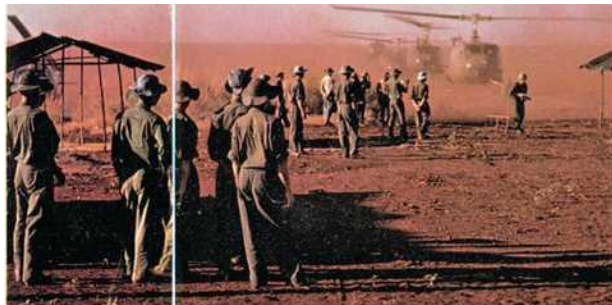
# HOMECOMING AT LOC NINH

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I had anxiously awaited this day for several months, but I knew the prisoners had waited for six years or even longer. This was to be the first release of American POW's held by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. We were in the reception party to bring them out. The release site was Loc Ninh, located north of An Loc, 10 miles south of Cambodia.

It was dark when our choppers lifted off from Tan Son Nhut AB, at seven o'clock, on February 12, 1973. Our flight time to Loc Ninh was about 45 minutes, and shortly before we reached our destination, the sun began to peek over the horizon. A relief . . . plenty of light for photography.



The choppers touched down on an area covered with perforated steel. We then walked to the open area where shelters had been set up for the release. To our right, along the edge of the hard surface, were several temporary huts, one which served as a first aid station. The middle row of 12 huts, spaced about 150 feet apart, were simply four poles stuck in the

ground and covered with tin which served as protection from the sweltering heat. Under each hut was a small table surrounded by chairs. To the left were three open air tents covered with camouflaged parachutes. These served as shelters for the International Control Commission and Four Power Joint Military Commission negotiators. There was also one tent in the right row in which the Viet Cong had set up a Swiss-made movie camera on a tripod. It was a good vantage point from which they could document the events of the day.

Loc Ninh was a Green Beret Camp which was overrun by the Viet Cong. Evidence of the battle was everywhere. Large craters pockmarked the area, and the ground was covered with shrapnel, empty and loaded M-16 and AK-47 rifle shells. FAC rockets were plentiful along the edge of the hard surfaced area, and the large tail section of a wrecked C-130 loomed above the tall grass. On the far end of the strip, a tank lay motionless among the bomb craters.

When we arrived on the scene, the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) personnel were already in conference discussing the release of the POW's.

Now and throughout the day, everything that moved was photographed—especially after a “snag” in the release became apparent. I felt that every meeting and every confrontation could possibly develop into an important historical event. I photographed the ICCS in conference with the Americans; the Viet Cong negotiating with the Americans and ICCS ... the Viet Cong meeting with the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and so on.

The prisoner release was originally scheduled to take place about 0830 hours. We had been briefed that we would have only 30 minutes in which to cover this historic event. That meant some fast shooting and changing of film. At 0900 hours it became evident that we would have a long wait and the first of many long meetings commenced. Off in the distance, at the edge of the hard surface, we could see the POW's patiently waiting. I got as close as possible and used the 135mm lens taking the first shots of the American prisoners.



*Meanwhile (left) U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Stan L. McClellan, the head of the American party, was constantly on the field radio to Saigon, trying to resolve the delay. Apparently the PRG (Viet Cong) were refusing to release the American prisoners until a Viet Cong Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Prisoner of War exchange was made.*

About mid-morning we were surprised when two Viet Cong came out of the Prisoner of War area carrying a parachute litter. Inside the litter was the first American Prisoner of War to be seen at such close range. He just kept waving and saying over and over, “I knew you guys would come . . . Fantastic!” Following this emotional experience, I looked at my fellow Americans and noted that there wasn't a dry eye in the bunch.

*The Prisoner of War (below) was identified as Capt. David E. Baker, a USAF 0-2 pilot from Tan Son Nhut who had been shot down eight months ago. I followed the litter, shooting all the way to the station. There, as the Viet Cong doctors examined his swollen leg, I kept taking pictures until the large crowd of Viet Cong had dispersed and a Viet Cong guard put up his hand to signify no more pictures.*



A few minutes later the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) delegation came over and started to question the captain. "What is your name? . . . How long have you been in captivity? . . . What aircraft did you fly? . . . Oh, it was not a fighter aircraft. It was a FAC? . . . When did you first learn of your release?" The captain replied that he had been told two days before. All the while I kept clicking my shutter until the International Commission of Control and Supervision people and the crowd departed.

I came back later and quietly asked Captain Baker if we could continue our photo "session." "By all means," he said with a happy smile which indicated he should like some American company. However, the Viet Cong again put up his hand. "Sorry," Baker said, "I want you to go ahead, but I guess they don't."

Captain Baker remained under the tent all day and each time I walked past the aid station I'd return his smile hoping that this would convey to him that all was OK. The senior U.S. medical officer and his assistant also moved toward the aid station and said in a loud voice: "Too bad about the slight hitch at Bien Hoa, but we'll still have these guys outta here this afternoon." General McClellan also announced that, "We aren't leaving here until those Prisoners of War are aboard the choppers. I don't care how long we have to wait." We were prepared to spend the night or until doomsday unless ordered otherwise.

At about 1 1:30 hours we could see the POW's being loaded onto a truck which was then driven out of our sight. The senior Viet Cong officer informed us that they had been taken to a shady

spot. I later read that a Chief WO James H. Hestand, one of the men on that truck, said his most despondent time in captivity was “when the truck that brought us down to be released—Monday— turned around, and we went back to camp. I almost jumped out.”

At 1200 hours we were notified that lunch would be served. The duck and French bread were good and the pepper was outstanding. Eight months earlier at Fairchild Survival School I would have thought they were crazy had they said the Viet Cong would some day graciously serve me Peking duck with green soda pop to wash it down. Thai cigarettes were also passed around.

The negotiations resumed after dinner and continued throughout the afternoon. Helicopters came and went as additional negotiators arrived in an attempt to break the deadlock. Throughout the afternoon the Viet Cong served us a piping hot tea which tasted like alfalfa. Although we could see the heat waves rising from the ramp and the temperature approached 90 degrees, the “wet” scalding tea was welcome.

As the afternoon wore on, an Army chopper pilot told me about a wrecked C-130 half way down the runway. I asked Sgt. Frank Zullo, a motion picture cameraman, to investigate with me and to get some shots. But when we reached the C- 1 30 tail section and started to check the area around the craters, a Viet Cong guard firmly put up his arm. We did not argue with him and returned to the chopper area.



At approximately 1650 hours the first USAF C-130 from Bien Hoa AB landed at Loc Ninh with its load of ARVN-held Viet Cong prisoners. The unloading, the issuing of clothing, and transfer of the prisoners to waiting trucks was photographed in detail.

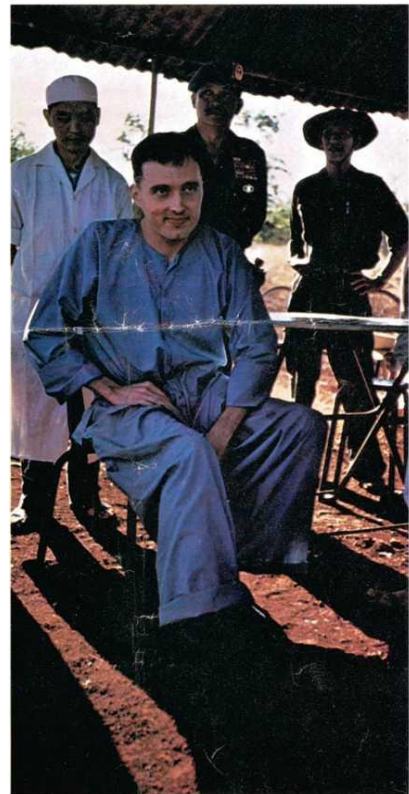
There was a long wait between negotiations, and when not exploring, I sat at the table with the Viet Cong and NVA. Their ‘Sit down, please,’ sounded more like an order than an invitation. One officer spoke English and served as interpreter for the rest of the group. The conversation sounded like an interrogation sequence from a grade “B” movie. “What is your unit?” “How many are in your unit?” “When are you leaving Vietnam?” “Was this my first time at Loc Ninh?” “What part of America did I come from?” I showed them my Detachment 2 cap which had my home state sewed on the side, and they had problems with the K in Oklahoma. Several VC and NVA cameramen were always present with their Swiss- made movie cameras and Japanese still cameras. Chalk up one point for the competitive capitalistic system. These guys know quality in cameras. They kept smiling and I smiled, but we both sensed that there was no love between us.

After the South Vietnamese released the Viet Cong prisoners, several truck loads of South Vietnam prisoners were brought out and loaded onto the still waiting C-130's which then roared aloft.

*RIGHT: USAF Capt. David Baker waited out the day in a hospital tent.*

Finally about 1815 hours the cheering and laughing American POW's were driven up in a truck. After disembarking, they were assembled in a group and General McClellan briefed them on why the photos were being taken, explained that they would be tagged with the medical slips, receive a short physical and be flown to Tan Son Nhut to board a USAF C-9 for Clark AB in the Philippines. Another gusty cheer. The briefing, tagging and physicals were photographed in depth. While this was being accomplished. General McClellan was completing the final signing for the prisoners.

Meanwhile each of the POW's met his escort officer and an instant jovial bull session commenced. "They still have cable cars in San Francisco? How many?" Another POW ravenously paged through a copy of *Stars and Stripes*. "God, it's good to finally get the straight word."



It was getting dark now so I took a deep breath, clicked the shutter at 1:30th using Tri-X rated at 400 ASA. I would have re-rated the film at 1200 ASA/ACUFINE but I had already exposed about 15 "normal!" shots on this roll. I had previously decided that the use of flash during any part of the operation would be inappropriate. "How can we get prints?" asked several prisoners, and I gave the escort officers the address of Hq Aerospace Audio Visual Service at Norton. I knew AAVS would be happy to honor such a request.

It was dark when we finally walked toward the choppers. As we made our way over the ditches and rocks, I tried to help one of the POW's. "Let's not break a leg now, let me give ya a hand" ... the POW laughed, "No sweat." He confidently replied "I've been walking this terrain for over three years ... I know it like my own backyard."

***Note; From Patrick Aguilar; This is the Airman's Magazine story of the 27 American POW's released in exchange for Viet Cong and NVA prisoners at Loc Ninh where Jim Blakesley and I worked the air operations/control zone /LZ for the mission on 12 February 1973.***