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DEBRIEF

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JOINT PERSONNEL RECOVERY AGENCY

“That Others May Live...To Return With Honor.”

Provides operational planning, mission analysis, and staff assistance visits to DoD components and inter-agency partners, as appropriate, to satisfy PR acquirements.

Supports the reintegration process and manages the non-conventional assisted recovery program, coordinating requirements, funding and reporting procedures for the program.

Develops Joint PR technologies, experiments, and tactics, ensuring technology interoperability among all of the Services.



Oversees Service Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape (SERE) training, and provides SERE psychology training, guidance, and oversight.

Provides timely and focused assessments that identify current and future challenges to support the evaluation, development, and validation of PR capabilities and processes.

Develops doctrine, recommends policy, establishes PR security classification guidance and manages PR records and archives.





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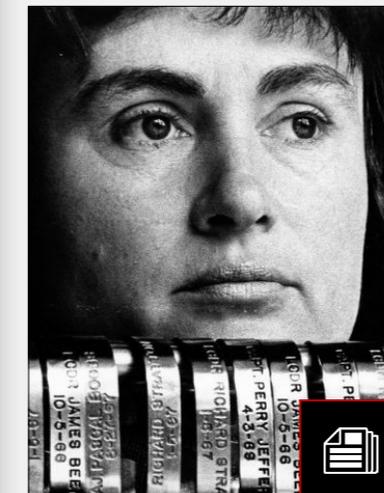
Left: "The Grip" by Charles Kuderna, 1968
Courtesy Department of Air Force Art Program

Winter 2023 Edition Articles:



Operation Homecoming Overview

The year 2023 marks the 50th Anniversary of Operation Homecoming, a program that facilitated the repatriation of 591 American Prisoners of War (POWs) held captive during the Vietnam War. The length of captivity varied from nearly nine years to a few months...



Archives Spotlight: The Department of Defense (DoD) Response to the work of the National League of Families' Committee on Repatriation, Rehabilitation, and Readjustment

Continuing from the Spring Edition of the Debrief...



JPRA J7 Lessons Learned Team Enhances Realism and Warfighter Training in 414 Combat Training Squadron's Survive and Evade Scenarios



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Operation Homecoming Overview

The year 2023 marks the 50th Anniversary of Operation Homecoming, a program that facilitated the repatriation of 591 American Prisoners of War (POWs) held captive during the Vietnam War. The length of captivity varied from nearly nine years to a few months.

When peace negotiations commenced during the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense and United States Air Force began planning Operation EGRESS RECAP, the repatriation of American Personnel. Most of the plans for Operation EGRESS RECAP can be found in the Joint Personnel Recovery Archives. When the Paris Peace Accords were finally signed on January 27, 1973, the United States and North Vietnam agreed to a mass release of all POWs. The Secretary of Defense renamed the repatriation program Operation HOMECOMING, a more apt description of the mission. *Continued on next page* ➔

A U.S. POW returns home.
Kelly AFB, March 17, 1973.

Image Source:
UTSA Special Collections



...Operation Homecoming (continued)

As the Department of Defense and Services prepared for Operation Homecoming, government officials were unsure of the physical and mental conditions of the POWs. Therefore, the Services conducted deliberate planning and training for physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, debriefers, public affairs officers, and aides/escorts to support the repatriation of the POWs. These individuals were provided training on communication skills, North Vietnamese interrogation methods, and the possible physical and psychological effects of prolonged captivity. They also received training on handling classified information, protecting the returnees' privacy and confidentiality, and reporting their findings to the appropri-

ate authorities. When it came time to welcome the American POWs home, care was taken to best match the POWs with debriefers, a physician, and an aide/escort that matched the rank, background, and interests of the returnee.

Coming Home | Operation Homecoming started on February 12, 1973, when North Vietnam released 142 of 591 POWs. The final set of POWs was released on March 29,



This C-141A was the first to carry POWs home from Hanoi.
Source: U.S. Air Force



USAF Lt. Col. Lewis Shattuck is greeted at Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi, Vietnam
Source: U.S. Air Force



USAF Capt. David Baker, an injured POW, awaits release.
Source: U.S. Air Force



USAF Lt. Col. Warren lighting a cigarette for one of the first group of Americans released by the North Vietnamese
Source: U.S. Air Force



USAF Capt. Robert Parsels salutes as he is returned to the U.S. military control.
Source: U.S. Air Force

1973. The first phase of Operation Homecoming required the initial reception of prisoners at three release sites: POWs held by the Viet Cong were to be flown by helicopter to Saigon, POWs held by the People's Army of Vietnam were released in Hanoi, and the POWs held in China were to be freed in Hong Kong. The former POWs were then flown to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. They were processed at a reception center, debriefed, and received

a physical examination. While at Clark Air Force Base, each POW had instructions to visit a doctor. Many were given a nutrition card that restricted the POW to a bland diet for fear their digestive system could not handle American food. This upset several of the returned POWs. Meanwhile, military physicians and psychologists were unsure what physical or emotional state the POWs would be in. Therefore, they initially planned a

stringent 4-day quarantine to observe the men's health and state of mind (Townley, 2014). This also upset several returned POWs, many demanding to be released home after completing their initial physicals. Eventually, the physicians obliged and gave the green light for the returnees to travel back home to the United States.

The final phase of Operation Homecoming was the relocation of the returned POWs

to military CONUS hospitals, where they continued medical treatment and debriefing. The first 20 POWs and 20 escorts, a medical crew, and public affairs officer arrived at Travis Air Force Base in California on February 14, 1973. Following the Vietnam Conflict and Operation Homecoming, numerous scholarly efforts were undertaken to understand the POW captivity experience. This included over 5000 hours of *Continued on next page* ➔



*...Operation Homecoming
(continued)*

recorded debriefings, medical examinations, follow-up visits, and a research program called the Prisoner of War Studies. Initially, the Department of Defense mandated a five-year program for all the Services to evaluate the effect of captivity among repatriated POWs. However, in 1978 when the charter ended, the Air Force and Army ended their part in the Original POWs Studies, while the Navy evaluations (under the guidance of CAPT Mitchell) continued. The Navy evaluations were eventually transferred to and remain at the Naval Aerospace Medical Institute. While the recorded debriefs, transcripts, and Operation Homecoming repatriation plans have been archived in the JPRA library, the Robert E. Mitchell Center for Prisoner of War Studies currently

holds the longitudinal database of the long-term effects of repatriated POWs and their spouses.

Experience of Repatriated POWs |

"I couldn't believe it was over. It was a mixture of joy, excitement, and apprehension about the future." Maj Everett Alvarez Jr (the first airman shot down over North Vietnam and the second longest-held POW).

The experience of the repatriated POWs during Operation Homecoming was diverse and varied. Some POWs reported feeling overwhelming emotions of joy and relief at their release. In contrast, others experienced various physical and psychological challenges as they transitioned back to civilian life. While some men returned to their wives and children, others came home to empty homes or

"It was a mixture of joy, excitement, and apprehension about the future."

no homes, their wives having moved on and refusing to see them. Many factors influenced the decision, including personal values, family dynamics, and individual circumstances. The decision to wait or not wait for a spouse who is a POW was profoundly personal.

Once in military CONUS hospitals, the returnees' experience continued to vary as they acclimated to returning to the United States. For example, in the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia, eight POWs spent six weeks in a concentrated rehabilitation period, followed by several more weeks of post-hospital care. The Portsmouth Hospi-

tal was the only naval hospital where repatriated POWs could have their wives as roommates (Fellowes, 1976). Each couple was assigned a suite, two rooms adjoined by a private bathroom. One room was a living area, while the other was a bedroom.

One of the most significant adjustment areas for the repatriated POWs was handling their image of American heroes. While in captivity, many POWs felt guilty for no longer being able to fight in the War. Others felt guilt and uncertainty if they were upholding the Code of Conduct or bringing shame and embarrassment to their Service

and Country. In 1972, recently shot-down pilots brought word to the POW camps about the United States' plans and preparation to bring the POWs home. They learned about the groups advocating for their humane treatment and return home, the yellow ribbons tied around oak trees, and the individual bracelets, with their names etched on them, worn by people across the United States.

Overall, the repatriated POWs had various experiences and reactions to their captivity and release. While the Operation Homecoming personnel had been trained and prepared for almost every challenge or

issue the repatriated POWs may face, the one thing they were not prepared for was that the POWs might return relatively normal. Since it was predicted that there would be problems, most staff looked for them and sometimes, unwittingly, created some. A study by the Robert E. Mitchell Center for POW Studies shows that former Vietnam POWs have an average lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder rate of only 4%, compared to a 30 rate for other Vietnam service members. ■



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Archives Spotlight: The Department of Defense (DoD) Response to the work of the National League of Families' Committee on Repatriation, Rehabilitation, and Readjustment

Continued on next page →



Left: Alice Stratton and other wives of American POWs made the prisoners' plight publicly known. Her husband, Navy pilot Richard Stratton, survived years of torture until his release in 1973.

Image Source: American Legion (www.legion.org) & courtesy of the Stratton family

Continuing from the Spring Edition of the Debrief and the work of the National League of Families, the National League recommended several ideas for improving the Air Force's assistance program to family members of prisoners of war and those personnel missing in action. Among the recommendations were the creation of a family assistance program with specialized counseling, preparation of a pamphlet giving updates on search efforts to recover missing personnel, and representation on the Air Force Task Force of at least one member from the National League of Families.¹ The DoD and Air Force Task Forces took action on the recommendations around the summer of 1972 when they requested each Air Force POW/MIA primary next of kin (PNOK) to express their views on the recommendations of the National League. Some of the recommendations were accepted with enthusiasm by the Task Force. The Task Force responded with plans to create a new Family Assistance Program, which would offer support to the families that need it. The Air Force provided that "all assistance officers will be thoroughly indoctrinated in the medical, psychological, legal, and financial resources and services available on the installation and in the surrounding civilian community." Also, the Air Force also implemented a policy that assistance officers would be appointed in accordance with the desires of the POW/MIA's family. This policy stated specifically, "NCOs and civilians will not be utilized in the assistance officer program unless specifically desired by the PNOK".² The Air Force was able to identify appropriate psychologists to brief the wives of POWs/MIAs of the situation regarding their husbands.



President Richard M. Nixon, center, met with representatives of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia in 1972.
Source: Richard Nixon Foundation



American POW soldiers line up at the Hanoi Hilton prior to their release. March 29, 1973.
Source: David Hume Kennerly/Getty Images

In lieu of child psychologists, the wives would then be able to inform the children.³ This action plan would fulfill the recommendation of the Committee that "establishment of counseling programs for both returnees and families should not be delayed until they have been perfected in every detail." In addition, a POW/MIA Fam-

ily Assistance Council was in the process of being established on every installation that provided services to the families of prisoners of war. The councils would provide the necessary psychological, financial, legal, and other necessary services required for the prisoners of war and next of kin to face their situations with dig-

nity and address the specific problems that uniquely faced them.⁴

Other recommendations of the Committee on Repatriation from the National League of Families, however, were rejected outright or were modified to suit the requirements of the DoD while still providing next-of-kin vital

information that they needed to know about their lost relatives. For instance, the recommendation of the Committee to establish a joint armed forces research center for POW studies was denied because the DoD Task Group never officially established the need for a POW research center, and

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1. Schoning, William M., Brig. Gen, USAF, National League of Families Committee on Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Readjustment (RR&R) Report to Director, DOD PW/MIA Task Force (MFCH 5026) (23 June 1972), p. 1.

2. Dupont, R. G., Maj. Gen, USAF, Attachment 1 to Memo (Subject: National League of Families Committee on Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Readjustment Report (Your ltr 25 May 72)), 1 June 1972, pp. 1-2.

3. Hekhuis, Gerrit L., Brig. Gen., USAF, Memo (Subject: National League of Families Committee on Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Readjustment Report (Your ltr 25 May 72)), 31 May 1972, p. 1.

4. Air Force Comments on League of Families' RRR Committee (1972), pp. 1-3.



...Archives Spotlight
(continued)

that such a research center was not beneficial to ongoing POW/MIA rehabilitation efforts provided by the Department of Defense unless it was located in the Washington area and could coordinate with other DoD agencies for cost effectiveness. Instead, the DoD funded a five year program, from 1973 to 1978, to evaluate the effects of long-term captivity on returned Vietnam POWs. The Navy established the Center for POW Studies (CPOWs),

at the Navy Health Research Center in San Diego in 1971. In 1972 the Services met at CPOWs to develop a standard for evaluating returned POWs and collecting data. The Air Force established their center at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, the Army used Brooke Army Medical Center, also in San Antonio, and the Navy and Marines established their center at The Naval Aerospace Institute in Pensacola. Once a year, for five years, the returned POWs would report to their military hospital for physical and mental evaluations. Over the course of five years, several returned POWs stopped reporting to military hospitals for continued evaluations, or sought private care. In December 1978, the Air Force and Army ended their part in the original POW studies, but the Navy continued. Another recommendation of the com-

“The Committee continued to make recommendations to the Department of Defense and the United States Air Force to improve the family assistance program and repatriation...”

mittee was that a long-term health program be established to serve even those POWs who had decided to separate from military service. The Department of Defense responded that a long range, continuing health-care program for returnees is being developed by the Services and coordinated by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health and

Environment (ASD/H&E).⁵ In addition, physicians at both CONUS and overseas military hospitals were briefed on the psychological condition of returning POWs, including being shown a film on the subject.

The Committee continued to make recommendations to the Department of Defense and the United States Air Force

to improve the family assistance program and repatriation through 1973, and continued the work after the war's end. After the end of the Vietnam War, the National League continued to press the government to repatriate remains, which some relatives still suspected were buried in Southeast Asia. The National League was even able to meet with returnees

such as Doug Hegdahl, John Sexton, and Daniel Pitzer, as well as with psychologists, public affairs specialists, and other personnel needed to help in the successful repatriation of former prisoners of war.⁶ Many of the recommendations made by the Committee of the National League of Families proved influential in the repatriation and reintegration of 591 prisoners of war that returned stateside after the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. The return of these prisoners of war may have been overshadowed a bit by other current events (such as the ongoing Watergate scandal at the time), but the warm reception and resurgence in patriotic feeling at their return vindicated the work of the National League of Families to help ensure that former prisoners of war would “return with honor”. ■

5. Air Force Comments on League of Families' RRR Committee (1972), pp. 1-3.

6. SUBJECT: National League of Families RRR Committee Meeting, 22-25 June (1972), pp. 1-3.



JPRA J7 Lessons Learned Team Enhances Realism and Warfighter Training in 414 Combat Training Squadron's Survive and Evade Scenarios

In a series of groundbreaking training exercises, the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency (JPRA) J7 Lessons Learned team has shown unwavering commitment to improving the realism and effectiveness of warfighter training. This dedicated team actively participated in multiple scenarios, diligently organized by the 414 Combat Training Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada. Their involvement showcased exceptional expertise and

contributed invaluable insights, significantly enhancing the survivability and skillset of military personnel.

Since Red Flag 2022, the collaboration between the 414 Combat Training Squadron and JPRA has consistently improved Survive and Evade techniques. This successful partnership has not only bolstered the relevancy of training exercises but also elevated the overall preparedness of the armed forces. The tireless efforts of both teams undoubtedly demonstrate their shared

vision of providing the highest level of training for the warfighter.

Throughout the Survive and Evade scenarios, JPRA J7 Lessons Learned was instrumental in elevating the authenticity of training experiences. Through the application of analytics and extensive knowledge of PR and survival techniques, the team effectively simulated real-world challenges that warfighters may encounter during high-stress situations. This hands-on approach proved to be invaluable



in preparing military personnel for the rigors of the field.

Among the team's notable achievements was the collection of eight key observations related to seat kit and Android Tactical Assault Kit (ATAK) improvements. These insights not only show JPRA's commitment to advancing technology but also highlight their dedication to ensuring the functionality and reliability of equipment crucial to mission success. The observations collected will contribute to the



refinement of seat kit/ATAK systems, ultimately enhancing the warfighter's ability to navigate and communicate in demanding environments. The participation of the JPRA J7 Lessons Learned team also highlighted their ability to provide critical support both during training exercises and in real-world situations. The team's presence showed the agency's versatility and capacity to respond effectively to the needs of the warfighter across a spectrum of challenges. Their insights and contribu-

tions have not only improved training exercises but have the potential to positively impact the outcome of real-world recovery missions.

As military equipment and operations continue to evolve, the importance of realistic and comprehensive training becomes increasingly evident. The collaboration between JPRA J7 Lessons Learned team and 414 Combat Training Squadron serves as a testament to the dedication of both organizations in ensuring the preparedness of military personnel for any scenario. Through their unwavering commitment and expertise, JPRA J7 Lessons Learned has reinforced its role as a vital asset in supporting the warfighter and advancing the capabilities of personnel recovery and survival training. ■