

## *Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles*

Carroll's Yesteryears  
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Bringing POWs home  
By Jay Graybeal

Several weeks ago I attended the local Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter meeting to interview former Mt. Airy resident Charles Runkles. The main topic was his role in "Operation Homecoming," the return of prisoners of war from Vietnam.

Runkles attended Carroll County public schools, graduated from Western Maryland College in 1961 and received a Regular Army commission through the ROTC program. He soon volunteered for service in South Vietnam and received his orders on the day President Kennedy was assassinated. During two tours of duty he mostly advised South Vietnamese Army units and was decorated for valor in combat.

In early 1972 Runkles was ordered to the U.S. Army Base Command at Okinawa to serve as Personnel Plans Officer for "Operation Egress-Recap," the initial name given the plan to bring home the POWs. The plan, which was quickly renamed Operation Homecoming, was a joint services project involving Army, Air Force and Navy personnel.

Runkles and his staff reviewed the records of nearly 500 Army soldiers listed as missing or known to be held captive, although they knew that most would not be coming back. The staff also reviewed each man's family status to determine which men would require special assistance upon release. Runkles also worked closely with this Air Force and Navy counterparts in planning the joint operation. After reviewing several possible sites Clark Air Base in the Philippines was selected.

Operation Homecoming's cornerstone was the commitment to provide each returned prisoner with an escort. The escort was intended to accompany the former prisoner to his hometown and stay as long as needed. Runkles and his staff went to great lengths to locate compatible soldiers to team with the 500 potential returnees on their lists. Every effort was made to match an escort and prisoner on the basis of branch of service, age, rank, race, religion and geographic origin. No Army soldier who was asked to be an escort refused.

The planning phase also included assembling a team of medical, religious and administrative officers to handle all the needs of the returned prisoners. The planners also had to arrange for the necessary facilities and transportation to accomplish the mission. Another element was the procurement of full uniforms with proper insignia for each man.

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POW releases began in January 1973 and continued for several months. A typical release began with the flight of an advance aircraft to Hanoi carrying staff to execute paperwork with North Vietnamese officials. A second aircraft brought in medical personnel and returned the former prisoners to Clark AB. Runkles commanded two flights which brought back American and Philippine military personnel and two German civilian aid workers. After takeoff from Hanoi the plane erupted in celebration, a high point for Runkles and others who had worked on the operation.

Despite years of cruel treatment most prisoners were in good physical and mental condition. North Vietnamese prison officials had changed their tactics when it became evident that the prisoners would be released. The POWs received better food, medical care and facilities.

The arriving returnees called their families, were issued uniforms, received needed medical care, were debriefed and prepared for their return home. Some had special needs ranging from poignant to practical. The staff located a 9-year-old boy to talk with a former POW who had never met his nine-year-old son. Another man had become so emaciated during his captivity that he needed a shirt with a 14" neck and 39" sleeves. The quartermaster simply combined two shirts to make one.

The last POW, Robert White, was released on April 1, bringing the Army total to 77. He was jokingly referred to as "the White at the end of the tunnel." A skeleton crew continued the operation for more than a year in case any additional prisoners were released. None were.

Runkles wrote the final report on his work on Operation Homecoming and closed a chapter which became the most satisfying assignment of his military career. He left the Army in 1975 but recently joined the Maryland National Guard.

Twenty years ago our nation welcomed back its prisoners of war captured during the 10-year war in Southeast Asia. The return of prisoners brought a sense of closure to a war which had bitterly divided the nation. For the families and friends of still missing personnel, however, there is no relief from the terrible uncertainty about their loved ones. Many veterans, too, feel the war cannot be over until all personnel are properly accounted for. Their efforts continue today.

*Photo credit: Courtesy of Charles Runkles*

*Photo caption: Operation Homecoming reception crew commanded by Major Charles Runkles (third from left) at Gia Lam Airport, Hanoi, North Vietnam. The reception crew provided initial care to the former POWs on their flight to Clark Air Base.*