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Combat Correspondent

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Stars and Stripes reporter/photographer Tom Lincoln was at Clark Air Base for “Operation Homecoming,” the release of the American POWs by communist North Viet Nam in February 1973. He was not alone; there were some 300 other reporters, photographers and staff from all over the world who had descended on Clark AB prior to the first planeload of the POWs’ arrival in the Philippines. *Stars and Stripes* sent Tom; photojournalists Paul Harrington and Chip Maury, and longtime “Striper,” the late Hal Drake down from Tokyo to cover the event of monumental historical importance.

“No one knew for certain when the first releases would occur because even though the Paris Peace Accords had been signed in late January, negotiations were still underway on the timing and manner in which the prisoner swaps would occur,” Lincoln said.

The waiting

He remembers a lot of frustration on the part of the seasoned correspondents who were forced into that uncomfortable experience with virtually nothing to do but attend the military’s daily briefings. “Nobody wanted to venture too far away from the base in fear of missing the first release. We didn’t know if we’d get 30 minutes or three days’ notice.”

With all that time on his hands, Lincoln could not help but notice the reason for choosing Clark as the point of disembarkation. “It had the best equipped hospital within reasonable flight distance of Hanoi, and all the military efforts were concentrated there. They had assembled all medical specialties in anticipation of receiving the POWs who might be suffering from any number of medical conditions. There were dieticians, physical therapists, surgeons, orthopedists and psychologists waiting to deal with whatever presented.”

The day that the hundreds of uniformed and civilian correspondents had been waiting for finally arrived late in the afternoon Monday, 11 February, according to “Striper” Tom Lincoln, with the most detailed stories and photos going out by teletype from the Philippines to the *Stripes* Tokyo bureau two days later.

Getting the story

“I remember working through the entire night on the 11th to write and file stories, and we all waited with great anticipation for the arrival of *Stripes*’ Wednesday edition to see which pictures had been selected and what stories ran,” Lincoln recalled.

Though he was at Clark Air Base for the return of the POWs, he knew full well what his colleagues back at the Tokyo bureau of *Stars and Stripes* were going through to get the stories of the POWs out

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to the military and its dependents. The sights and sounds of the bureau are with him to this day. And he prefaces his remarks with the full realization that this was long before e-mail; faxes were in their burgeoning days; PDF attachments and electronic transmission of documents were gleams in no one's eye in 1973.

“The sound in the typesetting room at the paper was deafening. But the paper was the real deal — cigarette smoke drifted in the air in all spaces of the paper. The teletype room clattered and bells rang with arriving stories. You could hear the typesetting machines clanging away a full two stories below, sounding much like a Tokyo pachinko parlor,” he said, referring to the Japanese form of gambling that involves machines that constantly shoot steel marbles at such a volume that participants often plug their ears to salvage whatever hearing they have left after participating in the game.

Lincoln found other parallels between the U.S. and Japan besides the way a newspaper was run at the time. “The sentiment of the Japanese people was much like that of the Americans. There were those who were supportive of the war, and there were those who were opposed, vehemently opposed,” he said.

Tom Lincoln has a vivid memory of his arrival at *Stars and Stripes* in November of 1971.

“I was driven into downtown Tokyo in a *Stars and Stripes* staff vehicle. It was a Sunday, about 1 p.m.

As we approached the front gate of the *Stars and Stripes* compound, I remember wondering why there were Japanese military guards posted at the gate. Later that day, I found out.

Anticipation

For Lincoln, the moment that POW Jeremiah Denton, later Admiral and Senator from Alabama, deplaned and uttered his now famous first three words upon deplaning at Clark: “God Bless America,” is forever imprinted on his mind and in his heart.

“I have always been one to get chills down my spine when our national anthem is played, so the feeling I had when Denton delivered his remarks was no different,” Lincoln remembers. Those same three words made the banner headline on the lead story for *Stars and Stripes* on 14 February in fact: “3 words said it all: ‘God Bless America’,” said Lincoln, whose memories of the first planeload of POWs arriving at the airbase remain very vivid.

“There was a large assemblage of military personnel and dependents behind a rope line that had been strung alongside the tarmac. The press corps was situated along that line as well as at a separate vantage point that had been reserved for us. I was lucky enough to get one of the two seats in a lift truck that had a bucket that elevated Paul Harrington and me about 20 feet above the crowd, right at the rope line. We had the best view of anyone,” remembers Lincoln.

Of the mood of the crowd waiting for the first plane, Lincoln said it was “...anxious and anticipatory. Photographers were jockeying for position. A red carpet had been laid on the tarmac and spanned the distance from where the exit of the plane would be to military buses that were waiting. Someone announced over a loudspeaker that the first C-141 was in range and preparing for its final approach.

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A big cheer went up at the announcement and you could feel the tension in the air. No one knew what to expect. Would these men walk off the plane? Would they be carried off? Would they appear emaciated? Would they be wearing prison garb or American uniforms? So many unanswered questions,” Lincoln recalls.

Another cheer went up the moment the plane landed. Even though it was daytime, Lincoln remembers the landing lights glistening in the distance. “I could feel my heart pounding in anticipation. I checked and rechecked my two cameras to make sure they had film and were set to the proper exposures. Paul did the same.”

The runway was a long distance from where the military reporters and photographers were assembled, but as soon as the plane touched down the crowd let out yet another loud cheer that “rang along the rope line,” according to Lincoln.

“As the plane taxied from the runway and approached the tarmac, I remember how proud I felt to be an American. As the plane turned in front of the rope line, I remember the scream of the engines and the great welling up of emotion in me as it turned in front of the crowd and came to a halt. I had a lump in my throat as big as a tennis ball. As the jet engines spooled down, I looked at those gathered behind the rope line and I saw men in uniform, women, children, all with tears in their eyes, some weeping openly. It was a very moving sight.”

The POWs

For Lincoln, it seemed like a lifetime before the plane door opened up. When it finally did, Jeremiah Denton was the first to exit the plane. He gave his famous remarks, then shook hands with Admiral Noel Gayler of CINCPAC and Air Force Lieutenant General William Moore, commander of the 13th Air Force and a representative of the Philippine government.



Next off the plane was Lt. Commander Everett Alvarez, the first and longest-held POW during the Viet Nam War. “I remember reflecting over the realization that when he was shot down and captured, I was barely 14 years old and entering high school. I was now taking this man’s picture as a 23-year-old Army Spec-4. It really brought into focus for me the enormity of what was happening. He had been held so long that his wife, whom he had married shortly before he deployed, divorced him while he was in captivity, allegedly because she gave up hope that he would ever be released. I never learned if he was made aware of the divorce by his captors, or if it was revealed to him upon his arrival at Clark,” said Lincoln.

When the rest of the POWs on that first of what would be several planes arriving over a period of a few days deplaned that day, Lincoln recalled that several of the men walked off the plane with noticeable limps. Many were gaunt and malnourished, but others were so happy that they ignored protocol and simply relished the moment. “Some knelt down and kissed the tarmac, and several had scrawled personal messages on different items to show their appreciation for having been freed. One

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held up a cloth on which he had written 'God Bless America & Nixon'. Another had taped the inscription 'God Bless Nixon' on his jacket breast pocket."

Those jackets, grey windbreakers all, black trousers and black Oxford shoes had been issued to them by the North Vietnamese prior to their departure from points of captivity, most notably the Hoa Lo Prison, forever dubbed the "Hanoi Hilton."

"The ones who were too weak or injured to walk from the plane were carried down the back ramp in litters and placed directly on buses that had been outfitted as stretcher carriers. But many of them rose on their elbows and acknowledged the crowd's affections. They were in poor shape, but they were very happy men," said Lincoln.

Lucky

While happy is the word that Lincoln used to describe the released POWs, lucky is the word he would apply to himself whenever he thinks about the assignment to cover "Operation Homecoming," which is frequently.

"What comes to mind is how lucky I was, not only to get assigned to *Stars and Stripes*, but to be given the opportunity by the paper to be part of the team that was selected to cover the first releases."

Of Hal Drake, Lincoln recalls that he helped to compile a book published in 1985 called "Pacific *Stars and Stripes*: The First 40 Years 1945-1985," in which he included a copy of the lead *Stars and Stripes* story, which he attributed to Lincoln as the sole author. In actuality Drake and Lincoln had collaborated on the piece, but in what Lincoln called "typical Drake fashion," he attributed the story only to Lincoln, who called Drake, "one of the most brilliant reporters I have ever met and one of the few mentors in my life."

Tom also speaks highly of photographers Chip Maury and Paul Harrington. Maury had been a Navy Seal and "superb photo-journalist," who, along with Harrington, won many awards for their photography of "Operation Homecoming." Harrington went on to a many-year career with the Associated Press's Los Angeles bureau from which he recently retired.

"I remember that Paul and Chip went everywhere loaded down with extra film and multiple cameras, some with motor drives and others with long and short lenses, prepared for both color and black-and-white shooting."

In the meantime, Drake and Lincoln made sure their tape recorders had extra batteries. We had each purchased a set of field glasses just in case we were kept at a distance and needed a closer perspective. I carried a couple of cameras as well," Lincoln recalled.

Lincoln, who had gone from graduating from the military's Defense Information School (DINFOS) at Ft. Benjamin Harris in Indianapolis to *Stars and Stripes*, gives talks from time to time about his experiences covering "Operation Homecoming."

"I still get a little choked up when I get to the point where I describe the arrival of the first plane," he said. "It was emotional for me then, and it is still emotional. I realize now that I was a witness to one of the great events in our country's history, and I feel enormously privileged to have been a part of it. The men who were imprisoned by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong endured things that none

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of us can begin to imagine. Not only the torture, which has become legend, but that fact that none of these men had any idea if they would ever be released, ever see their loved ones again, or even survive to the day of release if it ever came. A number of them did not. And those men and the ones who returned deserve our lifelong gratitude, no matter what our opinions of the war.”

I took this picture of LCDR Edward Davis with the dog he sneaked out of Hanoi. I happened to be planeside when he was departing for the United States and the only camera I was carrying had a 400mm lens on it; I was standing only a few feet from him. It was awkward taking pictures at such short distance with a long range lens, but when I viewed the pictures on the contact sheet they were quite striking.

The dog is one that he had befriended while in Hanoi, but he was not going to be allowed to take it with him. He ended up hid-ing it under his clothes when he boarded the airplane. After he arrived at Clark AB, someone prepared a dog tag for him with the dog's name, "Ma Co," which had some significance in Vietnamese. After much red tape and negotiation, he was allowed to take the dog with him to the U.S.

*I would love to locate him today and share the picture with him. —
Tom Lincoln*

