Twenty-five years ago this month, 332 Air Force POWs held by Communists in South-east Asia left their prison cells, boarded USAF transports, and returned home from the war.

Joy and privation alike show in the face of POW and Medal of Honor recipient Leo K. Thorsness, a major when captured six years earlier, as he shakes hands with a US officer when his name is called on Feb. 12, 1973. A long day of release—both physical and emotional—began with an early morning inspection at the “Hanoi Hilton,” and continued with the handover, the first step in “Operation Homecoming.”
POWs peer between the bars of the Hanoi Hilton—within its walls some had endured eight years of torture, incessant interrogation, confession coercions, and near starvation. Communicating by tapping Morse code on the walls, the POWs were able to offer each other emotional and spiritual support and present a united front to their Communist captors.

Hoping to give the impression that the POWs had been humanely treated during their captivity, the North Vietnamese dressed them in brand-new clothes—provided the night before—and gave them a bag for toiletries and "personal effects." In truth, most had tolerated years in rags, been fed poorly and intermittently, and were stripped of any possessions upon capture. Here, they step off the camouflaged bus that brought them to Gia Lam airfield outside Hanoi.

The POWs kept their composure during the handover process and even marched in formation toward the first American uniforms they’d seen in years. Their military bearing and sense of dignity had helped them survive and now served as a parting shot at their tormentors. Identified in this group of POWs are Lawrence N. Guarino, a major at the time of capture (at extreme left, about fifth in line), and Hayden J. Lockhart, a captain upon capture (third in line, seen between the first two POWs).
A total of 351 Air Force members were at one time or another held captive by Communists in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or China. Most were returned during Operation Homecoming, which began in February 1973. What follows is a comprehensive listing of the 332 USAF returnees and one escapee. (Ranks are as of date of capture.)

Note: The illustration above, and on p. 18, represents the POW ribbon.

Among the 351 Air Force members who were at one time or another held captive by Communists in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or China, 18 reportedly died during captivity. They are included at the end of this list. (Ranks are as of the date of capture.)

Note: The illustration above, and on p. 18, represents the POW ribbon.


The following 18 were reported to have died in captivity:

- Adams, Samuel (Sgt.)
- Atterberry, Edwin Lee (Capt.)
- Burdett, Edward Burke (Col.)
- Cobell, Earl Glenn (Maj.)
- Dexter, Bennie Lee (Capt.)
- Diehl, William C. (Capt.)
- Dodge, Ward K. (Maj.)
- Dusing, Charles Gale (Sgt.)
- Grubb, Wilmer R. (Capt.)
- Hegel, Keith R. (Capt.)
- Martin, Duane Whitney (1st Lt.)
- Moore, Thomas (Sgt.)
- Newsom, Benjamin B. (Maj.)
- Pamplin, Toney (Capt.)
- Schmidt, Norman (Lt. Col.)
- Sijan, Lance P. (1st Lt.)
- Storz, Ronald Edward (Capt.)
- Weskamp, Robert L. (1st Lt.)
There were no "parting gifts" or special outfits for POWs (right) who had been held by the Viet Cong. Released at a rural site in the south, away from any cities, these prisoners were handed over wearing the prison pajamas they had worn for the duration of their ordeal. Only a few of those held by the Viet Cong survived.

Tension is obvious as Army Brig. Gen. Stan McClellan (center), representatives of Hanoi, and international monitors hash out the details of a transfer.

Two USAF ground crew members direct a C-141 almost right up to the transfer table at Gia Lam, to make the last steps to freedom as short as possible. This Starlifter—tail #66-0177—still operates and, dubbed "Hanoi Taxi," serves as a flying memorial to Operation Homecoming and its precious cargo of that day.
Norman A. McDaniel, a captain at the time of his capture, tries to restrain a grin and a tear as he is called to board the airplane that will take him from Hanoi to the Philippines. Fresh clothes couldn't hide the gaunt faces and frail bodies of some of the POWs, many of whom suffered severe malnutrition in captivity.

Once their names are called, and they file past the transfer table, the POWs continue to receive greetings from US personnel as they walk to waiting aircraft at the Gia Lam airport.

The repatriation was an emotional experience for everyone involved. A USAF nurse offers a nonregulation, but heartfelt, welcome as Capt. Norman L. Wells comes aboard.
Aboard the C-141, the excited POWs start catching up on years of missed news and the simple pleasure of conversation with fellow Americans.

The C-141 could probably have flown on high spirits. The magic moment: A deliriously happy cheer goes up as the Starlifter departs North Vietnamese airspace and the former POWs know they’re really going home.

The first taste of “home” was a throng of well-wishers who greeted the POWs upon arrival at Clark AB, Philippines.
Supporters and a red carpet greeted each arrival of a planeload of returnees, no matter the time of day or night. The tumult, usually highlighted by children chanting, "Welcome home!" brought most of the travelers to tears. The applause was followed by a real shower, clean clothes, medical checkup, and the inevitable meal—usually beginning with ice cream, followed by steak and other treats only dreamed of during years of suffering.

Repatriations continued through March 1973, with Travis AFB, Calif., being the usual first stop in the US. Here, 1st Lt. Melvin Pollack holds up a card noting his birthday and the greatest gift he could receive: returning to American soil after nearly seven years as a prisoner.

Scenes like this one at Travis, where Maj. Robert L. Stirm embraces his waiting family on the tarmac, were the happiest of Operation Homecoming, for it marked the successful conclusion of the mission.
1st Lt. Carl D. Chambers (above) offers a spiffy salute upon his arrival at Clark and long-delayed return from his last combat mission in Vietnam. Tearful, yet joyous family members embrace Lt. Col. Alan L. Brunstrom (left) and Lt. Col. Louis H. Bernasconi (below) as they arrive at Travis.