

Homecoming

Every year, thousands of Filipinos leave the country to seek their fortune abroad. Some of them, after a few years, come home quite well off or disillusioned; but definitely wiser. A few unlucky ones return in coffins.

Three such Filipinos came back recently to two contrasting receptions. It was a joyful one for Candido Badua, 49, and Arturo Balagot, 47, both former prisoners of war. It was a silent but equally emotion-soaked homecoming for the third—Lucia Navarette, a 24-year-old nurse slain by a still unidentified man in Houston, Texas.

Badua and Balagot left for South Vietnam in 1967 to work as radio technicians for the Voice of America. They fell into Vietcong hands a year later and promptly slipped into obscurity, leaving their worried families guessing about their fates.

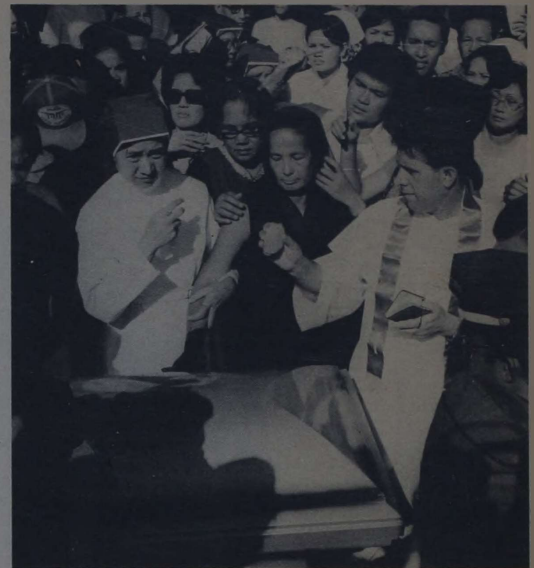
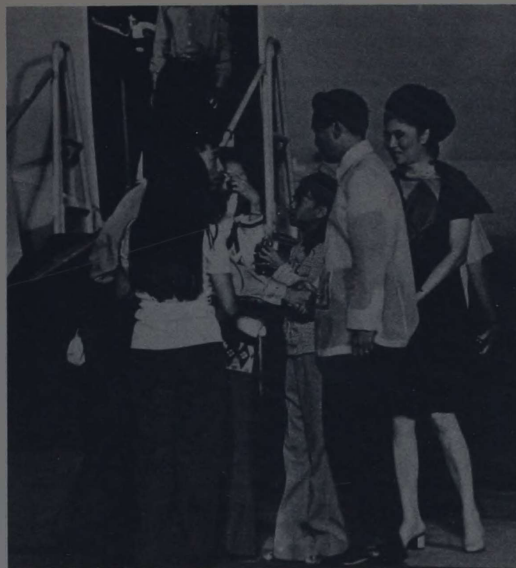
Last March 5, the two men came back after five years of captivity in the jungles of South Vietnam. No less than President Marcos and the First Lady, Mrs. Imelda R. Marcos, were on hand to welcome them at Clark Air Force Base, where they landed together with the latest batch of American POWs.

"This is an unbelievable moment," said Badua, recovering from the initial pleasant shock of homecoming. "I am glad I am still alive and able to see my family again."

Balagot was not as inclined to talk, but it was evident he too was more than happy to be back.

At the V. Luna Memorial Hospital where they were taken for a checkup, Badua was found suffering from a skin disease and lung infection. Balagot looked pale, was slightly feverish and now and then coughed.

They were captured by the Vietcong during the "Tet" offensive in Hue on January 31 and February 2, 1968, respectively. The first time other Filipinos learned about them



Reception at Clark, MIA: a moment of joy, a time of grief.

was when the wire services carried reports of their capture. Their names were not to surface in the news again until early this year, when the Vietnam ceasefire went into effect and arrangements began for the release of prisoners of war.

Badua said he and Balagot were kept in separate prison camps. They did not see each other again until sometime in 1970. Badua said he and the other prisoners in his group were moved frequently from one spot to another in the jungles, but were not forced to work by their captors. "There are no other Filipino prisoners there," he said.

The President thanked the US military and civilian authorities for extending to the two Filipinos the same facilities given to the released Americans. He said the families of the two men had requested him to express their gratitude and their

sentiment, "which is the sentiment of the entire Filipino people who rejoice for the safe return of their two countrymen."

Not as lucky to come home safe and alive was Lucia Navarette, of barrio Ligas, Bacoor, Cavite, who went to the United States in 1971 to work at the M.D. Anderson Medical Center in Houston, Texas, under the Exchange Visitors Program.

She was walking home with her roommate, Divina Estores, also from the Philippines, after the day's work, February 17 when an unidentified man pointed a gun at Miss Navarette and dragged her away. Two days later, some 25 kilometers from where she was abducted Miss Navarette's body was found. She had been raped and beaten to death.

Even in death, the deceptively fragile Filipina, whom relatives and

friends described as a girl determined to succeed, left a story of indomitable courage to her shocked countrymen. "It was one hell of a struggle," said the medical officer who conducted the autopsy. "Her fists were clenched in death and two of her fingers were broken. There were slivers of skin under the fingernails, probably gouged from the face of the killer." Other marks showed the nurse used her wrists and forearms to shield herself from the killer's blows.

In contrast with the Clark reception for Badua and Balagot, a grieving crowd of 300 met the grey metal coffin bearing Miss Navarette's body at the Manila International Airport last February 25. From that crowd filtered out stories that threw further light on Miss Navarette's character: birthday cards, holiday presents, and, occasionally, a sum of money for her folks back home.

PRISONERS OF WAR

A period of adjustment

"I haven't done anything."

This was the baffled—and baffling—remark of Army Sgt. Ken Wallingford when his mother, in an understandably exuberant mood, declared at a welcome ceremony in San Antonio, Texas: "I'm so proud of you!"

Sgt. Wallingford was one of the scores of American prisoners of war who appeared bewildered by the rousing receptions accorded them, first, when they arrived at Clark Air Force Base in Pampanga and later, when they returned to the United States.

The reaction such as his, worries a team of doctors and psychiatrists who had spent years to help prepare for a smooth reentry of POWs to a normal life "back home." Their arrival is just the first step in a long readjustment period they face after months or years of privation at the Hanoi "Hilton" and various Vietcong prison camps in South Vietnam. And the readjustment they will undergo is more than just physical.

The transition plans, based on experience gained from studies of former prisoners of war, called for a low-key reception at Clark, seclusion in the base hospital for physical and medical checkups, controlled intake of food, prohibition against interviews about prison life, assignment of trained valet-confidants to each prisoner, long-distance calls to their wives or relatives and shopping at the base commissary for things they had missed during their confinement.

The reception at Clark last month was anything but low key. Most of the preparations were cast overboard in the ensuing surge of emotion for the first batch of 116 prisoners. They were cheered, embraced or otherwise gaped at as though they had just returned from another planet. All the while, an army of reporters, photographers and TV cameramen (the event was transmitted live to the US via satellite) strained to catch a stray word or record a revealing gesture or movement. The POWs found themselves in practically the same situation

in the weeks that followed their return to the United States. They were dined, wined, and generally pampered. Not a few got offers of marriage, lifetime passes for sports events, free vacation trips, and even cars and TV sets.

If many of the POWs like Sgt. Wallingford did not relish their being projected into the limelight, neither did the relatives and widows of more than 40,000 Americans who died in Vietnam. Many wondered aloud why the living were given such rousing welcome while their dead kin elicited only expressions of regrets and pension checks for those left behind.

Already, in some parts of the US, communities are debating the wisdom of laying out elaborate receptions for their homecoming sons. Some towns, in fact, have abandoned plans for such type of welcome. "We just want Lt. Comdr. Spencer to feel at home," said Sam Buck, a banker in Earlham. "If he doesn't want a lot of ceremony, then we'll cancel it all."

Some interpret the emotional outpourings for the POWs not so much as a show of concern for their well-being as to have something of a national celebration to mark the end of a bitter war that had for years kept the American nation divided.

For the POWs' own sake, doctors and groups of former prisoners of war hope that the series of receptions will stop. They are only too aware of the effects that such lavish gestures might have on the returnees, particularly those finding difficulty in readjusting to their old lifestyles.

Doctors warn that greater difficulties lie ahead for the former prisoners. POWs of past wars have had histories of recurring illnesses caused by exposure, inadequate food, lack of medical attention and loss of freedom in prison camps. A number have become victims of depression and slow reflexes.

While the prisoners released from Hanoi appeared in high spirits and needed only minor readjustments, many of those released from Vietcong camps seemed badly in need of medical and psychiatric assistance. When the former Vietcong captives arrived in Clark, some of them did not even bother to salute their flag or acknowledge the cheers of the thousands who greeted them.

Perhaps, it wasn't out of sheer indifference. It was more likely, as the doctors predicted, that these POWs wanted nothing better than to be left alone until they had regained their bearings.