



**Dennis Donahue (USIA-FSO, serving as USIS Publications Officer in Saigon) covering the return of American POWs at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport, February 12, 1973. Note the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper with article on the POW release and the C-9 "Nightingale" hospital aircraft in the background.**

The day was February 12, 1973. The Vietnam Peace Accords had been signed on January 27 and included provisions for exchanges of Prisoners of War from both sides and in both North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Less than two weeks later the first of those exchanges were scheduled Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi and Loc Ninh in South Vietnam.

I was Publications Officer with USIS in Saigon from January 2, 1973 to April 16, 1975. I was assigned to cover the return of the first prisoners released in the South as they transited Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport on their way to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. The news story was for the Wireless File for release by Embassy press offices around the world.

The American POWs transiting Tan Son Nhut were scheduled to be the earliest released, but there was a glitch at the exchange point in Loc Ninh. While I waited with a large press contingent throughout the tropical day on the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut, 119 POWs released in Hanoi began their journeys home as the first to be freed.

For us at Tan Son Nhut, it was an on-again-off-again situation, but with assurances from the authorities that the problems were being worked out.

As darkness began to envelop the airport ... it was after 8 p.m. ... the wop-wop-wop of large helicopters could be heard. Then, from where we stood, we could see the nose lights of six Army helicopters, traveling in formation, round a corner and head toward us. They lined up, maybe 30 feet off the ground, and then lowered themselves simultaneously to the tarmac. The doors opened and 27 former prisoners, dressed in new, baggy pajamas, debarked, waving to a cheering crowd of reporters, doctors, nurses and air base personnel. One was on a litter, but 26 walked determinedly to the waiting C-9 "Nightingale" hospital aircraft. Time stopped. Then, in a matter of minutes, they were off to the Philippines. It was an event of tremendous historical and emotional import for all of us there that day.

In all, 591 U.S. POWs were released in "Operation Homecoming", which began that day and continued until April 4.

There was no experience that could begin to compare with my being there among those welcoming back our servicemen on that first day of their freedom. It was the best day of my professional FSO life.

—Dennis D. Donahue, FSO (Retired) – USIA, 1967-1997