

AFEHRI File 19-5-1-2

Research Materials/Source Documents

FILE TITLE: Air Force Cross Recipient: (A3C) Arthur N. Black, Maj, USAF (Ret)

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Mod Clothes, Hair Styles

'Quite a Shock' to Sgt. Black



Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Black tell newsmen their POW son found mod clothes shocking.

THE MORNING CALL, Allentown, Pa., Sat., February 17, 1973

WASHINGTON (AP) — The biggest shock to Air Force Sgt. Arthur Black on his return from 7½ years as a prisoner of war was flare-legged pants, loud colors and long hair.

"He looked at his brothers' clothes," Black's mother said. "He looked up and down at them and kept saying, 'I can't believe it, I can't believe it.'"

Black, 28, who was released from captivity in North Vietnam earlier this week and flown to nearby Andrews Air Force Base, Md., for medical checks and debriefing early Thursday, went on a shopping trip with his brothers, Alan, 34, and Ronald, 30. He found the latest men's fashions something of a shock.

"His brothers were surprised at him," said his father, Benjamin F. Black of Bethlehem. "His tastes were very, very conservative.

"Before he went away, he had always dressed in the latest fashion. But the flare-bottomed trousers and loud colors were quite a shock to him."

Mrs. Black said that after much persuasion, her returning son finally selected a new wardrobe in the current styles, including a pair of balloon flared slacks.

But the elder Black said his son still has some qualms about

sideburns and mustaches on his brothers.

"He couldn't get over that for a while," the father said.

The parents said one of the first things Sgt. Black did at the reunion at the base's Malcolm Grow Medical Center was to offer a champagne toast to President Nixon.

"He said, 'I want to make a toast to my commander in chief for bringing me home to you,'" Mrs. Black said.

The champagne had been sent to the hospital by an old friend in anticipation of the sergeant's homecoming, they said.

Black's father said the family talked little about the war or Sgt. Black's imprisonment except that the helicopter crewman said he had been aware toward the end of his captivity of antiwar activities in this country.

However, Black said, his son felt he was "in the service of his country and proud of what he was doing."

"We think what we did was proper," the father said of the war and its settlement. "I have wholehearted support for what our administration accomplished, and I don't think they

could have done any more."

Officials at Andrews announced that two more freed POWs would be arriving at the base hospital Friday night. They were identified as Col. Fred Cherry of Suffolk, Va., and Maj. Norman A. MacDaniel of Fayetteville, N.C.



HOW SWEET IT IS — Air Force T. Sgt. Arthur J. Black of Bethlehem flanked by his parents, Atty. and Mrs. Benjamin F. Black, is welcomed to

family reunion by his brothers shortly after the former prisoner of war arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, near Washington. (AP)

Sgt. Black Taken Aback By New Flashy Fashions

Atty. and Mrs. Benjamin Black and two sons will return to Bethlehem tonight after a reunion with their son shared by dozens of POW families at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland.

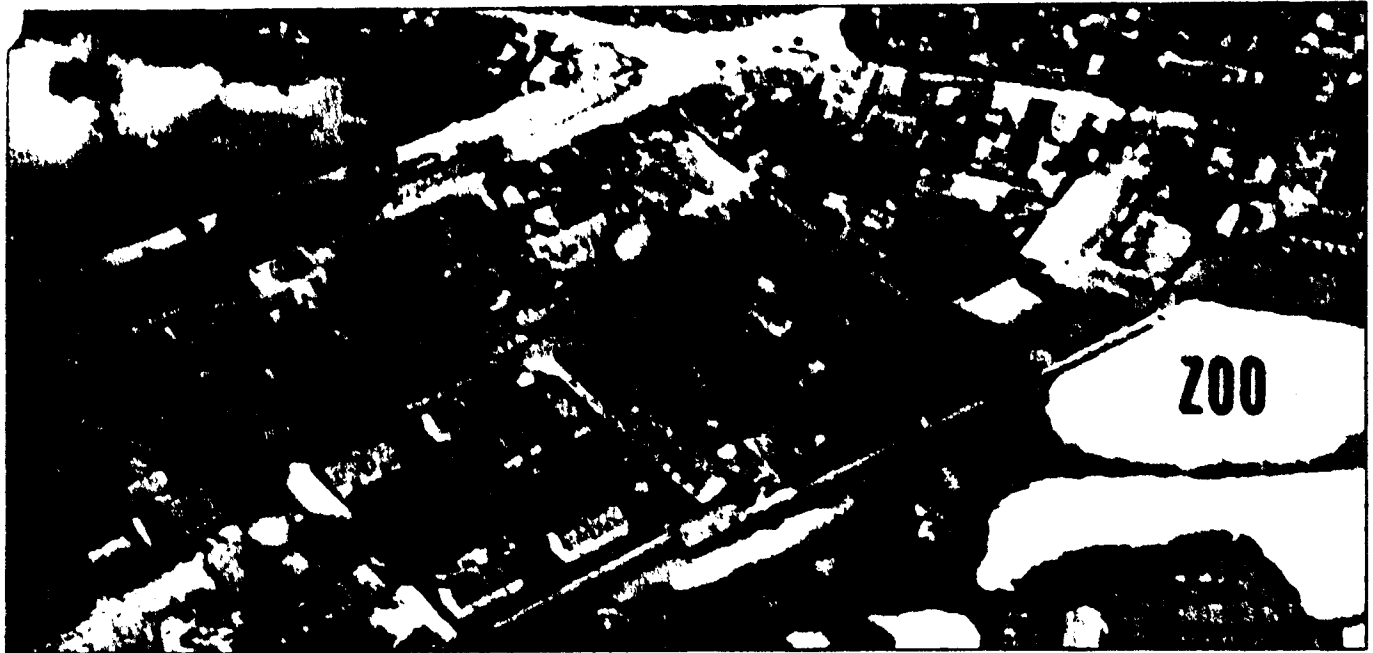
Air Force Sgt. Arthur Black, meanwhile, will begin a series of extensive physical tests tomorrow that will delay a long-awaited homecoming at least two weeks.

"They still have no idea of exactly how long Arthur will be tested," said his aunt, Mrs. Samuel Black, this morning. "But he said it will be at least two weeks."

Mrs. Samuel Black said that she had talked to the ex-helicopter crewman's parents last night and both were "very excited" and "very exhausted" from their three-day visit courtesy of the U. S. government. Personal talks with their son have been interspersed with countless interviews and questions from the news media at Andrews.

During one interview the Blacks told of their son's surprise at the new bright and baggy fashions. On a shopping trip with his brothers, Alan, 34, of Allentown and Ronald, 30, of Bethlehem — he had to be persuaded before purchasing a pair of bell-bottom slacks.

Black, who was held captive seven years, is still awaiting Pentagon validation of the lieutenant's commission he received while imprisoned. He was one of three sergeants promoted by Col. John Flynn, who is still being held.



The time: July 24, 1965. Place: 23,000 feet over North Vietnam. Mission: Fly cover for aircraft bombing troop concentrations. Restrictions: Stay between Hanoi and the troop concentrations.

First Force Capt. (O-3) Richard P. (Pop) Keirn, flying close formation in a flight of four F-4s, takes the first surface-to-air missile (SAM) hit of the Vietnam War. Keirn, his plane on fire and out of control, ejects and parachutes into the unknown below.

Landing in the trees but uninjured, Keirn manages to evade the enemy for more than 18 hours before he is captured and taken to the infamous Hanoi Hilton for interrogation. Later, he is moved to a "hell hole" that later would become known to its inmates as the "Zoo."

One such experience should be enough for any one person in a lifetime, but for Keirn it was POW experience number two. As a young flight officer in World War II, Keirn was shot down over Germany and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Stalag Luft 1 near Barth, Germany.

Four years passed.

The fall of 1969 found 24 POWs in Keirn's cell block. There were five other POW compounds in the camp; altogether there were more than 100 prisoners. But there were only

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three enlisted men in the whole camp — all in Keirn's compound: Airman Third Class (then E-2) Arthur Black, Airman First Class (E-4) Bill Robinson and Staff Sergeant (E-5) Arthur Cormier.

From time to time, little arguments would crop up between some of the officers and one or more of the enlisted men — over baseball or football, nothing of consequence. One day this was going on and one of the officers said, "I can't argue with you. You're an enlisted man and I'm an officer." Another officer quipped: "Well, let's make 'em officers and then we can argue!"

A couple of simple, off-the-cuff statements like that set the idea for an officer candidate school in motion.

Someone asked Keirn, since he had served in World War II, if he had ever seen anyone battlefield-commissioned. He had. Someone else suggested: "Let's battlefield-commission them." The idea took hold.

Col. (later Lt. Gen.) John P. Flynn — "Sky," as he was known then — was the senior POW in the Zoo. Since he was housed in the next compound, Keirn had to communicate with him by tapping out messages on the wall, in code. Flynn endorsed the idea and battlefield-commissioned them.

Robinson says, "We assumed the role of second lieutenants and were treated as such by all the POWs. Needless to say, our morale shot up to new heights."

One might wonder why it was unanimously decided that the

the cells of North Vietnam's "Zoo" prison camp, American POWs conducted their own officer candidate school for the only three enlisted men in the camp. The three, Air

Force sergeants at the time, are now captains: (from left) Bill Robinson, Arthur Cormier, Arthur Black. (AF and DoD photos) They were commissioned by the senior POW in the camp.

three men were officer material. Black and Cormier were both pararescuemen. Black was a high school graduate with less than a year of college. Cormier was a high school graduate and had 45 semester hours of college. Robinson, a helicopter crew chief, had graduated from high school. All had been aboard helicopters that were shot down.

"It's hard to put into words what they did to make us believe they would make good officers," Keirn says. "Their conduct in prison was as good as any officer there and better than some. They supported the officers over them to the best of their ability. They took orders without question. They did more than their share of the work. They helped anyone who was injured or sick and tried to do their best to make things work for everybody."

Keirn suggested they start a school for the new officers so that when they got back to the States, Air Force authorities would not question the validity of the commissioning. The three enlisted men didn't think the whole thing would work, but they went along with it just to have something to do. No one thought it would be a waste of time to have the school; instructing Black, Robinson and Cormier would give the others something to do, too.

All the officers offered to help in any way they could. The ones who did the actual training were 1st Lt. (now Lt. Col.) Thomas Browning, 1st Lt. (now Lt. Col.) John Borling, and Navy Lt. (jg) (now Cmdr.) David Carey. Browning and Borling were graduates of the Air Force Academy and Carey was a graduate of the Naval Academy. They gave the three men the benefit of everything they had learned.

The teachers and the students went to work: customs and courtesies of the service; the structure of military command, supply and intelligence, and how these things should work together to make a viable military outfit. They conducted courses in math, psychology, writing and grammar. They used any kind of material that was available, such as toilet paper and pencil stubs.

Sometimes, the three students were given one day to prepare for a 15-minute speech on a certain subject. Another time, they were given a subject and only two minutes to prepare a five-minute speech. The instructors gave them math problems, navigation — just about anything that could be studied and questioned. This continued for four hours a day, six days a week, for about four months.

And not one of the men "slacked" in his homework.

The treatment of the Americans seemed to change with the political climate. Early in their captivity, most of the torture came in the form of beatings, solitary confinement, starvation and humiliation.

But by 1970, when this officer training was going on, the North Vietnamese had slacked off on this kind of treatment; the starvation diet had been improved. The food they were getting was adequate for exercising, running in place, playing volleyball or some basketball. And both instructors and students were better able to concentrate.

The policy in most wars has been to separate the officers from the enlisted men. But in this case, there were only three enlisted men. Keirn believes the North Vietnamese thought it wasn't worth the trouble to separate them.

Flynn suggests another idea: "The NV treated us as the blackest of criminals, never recognizing us as prisoners of war. Since they considered us criminals, there was no separation of the enlisted men from the officers. For them to do so

would have indicated that they did consider us POWs and were following accepted procedure."

Either way, the NV inadvertently paved the way for this OCS behind bars.

Ironically, the NV did recognize that the American "criminals" had military rank. They posted signs stating that junior officers would be imprisoned for at least seven years; majors and lieutenant colonels would have to stay for 12 to 14 years; and colonels and above would never see their families again. Theoretically, commissioning the three airmen could have meant the NV would increase their sentence — had they known what was going on.

In February 1973, freedom came.

For years, Air Force policymakers have been hung up on the notion that all officers should have degrees. Would they honor the battlefield commissions?

John Flynn was uncertain of his authority to bestow a battlefield commission. He had been promoted to brigadier general while he was in prison, but the information had been withheld from the public for two reasons. If the North Vietnamese had found out about the promotion, it could have meant harsher treatment. Second, officials wanted to see whether Flynn was mentally capable before they pinned on a star.

Wasting no time, Flynn went directly to then-Secretary of the Air Force John L. McLucas. He told McLucas the story behind the battlefield commissioning. To some people's surprise, McLucas enthusiastically supported it. The only thing he wouldn't go along with was making the commissions retroactive to the date of the commissionings in prison. Considering the time-in-grade factor, that would have made them first lieutenants well on their way to being considered for promotion to captain.

"I think it's important to note," says General Flynn, "that bestowing a battlefield commission on a deserving enlisted man improves the spirit and morale of the enlisted force. I never made the mistake of believing all officers are smarter than all enlisted men."

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

All three men are captains. Because of his enlisted experience in the field, Bill Robinson went into aircraft maintenance and today is an aircraft maintenance officer with the 33rd Component Repair Squadron at Eglin AFB, Fla.

Arthur Black went through pilot training and flew HC-130s for a year and a half. Today he is a T-37 instructor pilot at Mather AFB, Calif.

Arthur Cormier, the "old man" of the trio, has had a most unusual career. Cormier actually had gone to Air Force OCS back in 1960, but had not completed the course. When released from prison on Feb. 12, 1973, he had close to 20 years' service. On official Air Force records, he had been promoted to senior master sergeant (E-8) and had a line number for chief master sergeant (E-9).

With the approval of the Secretary of the Air Force, Cormier waited until he was promoted to chief master sergeant before accepting his commission. That way, if he retired before 10 years' commissioned service, he would be able to retire at his highest enlisted grade. When Cormier did accept a commission, he was given the same time-in-grade as Black and Robinson, who were commissioned earlier. Today, he is a fuels management officer at RAF Mildenhall in England. □