

By JERRY GREENE

Washington, March 21—Friends of three American civilians captured in 1962 shuddered today at the finality in the announcement by the Communist Viet Cong in Saigon that the last group of 32 war prisoners will be released this weekend.

They Have Faith Missionaries Are Alive in Viet

The Viet Cong statement referred to men only, and one of the three civilians of whom we speak is a woman. For nearly 11 years now, there has not come from the Vietnamese jungles one solid word as to the fate of the three.

These prisoners, workers for the Christian and Missionary Alliance, are Dr. Eleanor Vietti, a physician; the Rev. Archie Mitchell, and Daniel Gerber.

None of their friends has reason to believe they will be included in the scheduled group of PWs to be released Saturday, even though it is definitely known that they were captured by the Communists 11 long years ago. Their friends pray the three are still alive.

"We haven't given up hope yet," the Rev. Nathan Bailey, president of the Alliance, told us from his New York office today. "There is a strong possibility that they may be held in Cambodia. We have had some rumors."

Unfortunately, Bailey said sadly, there has been no substantiation for the rumors and both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese have disclaimed any knowledge of the location of the missionary workers.

The Alliance sent an agent hurrying down here last week when Michael Bengé, a Foreign Service officer, was returned to Washington after three years of captivity by the North Vietnamese. Bengé had worked alongside the Alliance people in the South Vietnamese highlands; two civilians seized with him, Betty Olsen and Hank Blood, were Alliance employees. Both died terribly in his presence during the weeks and months they were marched about in the bush.

"Mike knew all about our missing people," Bailey said. "He was alert and he inquired every place they went. But he could learn nothing."



PAPIN

Michael Bengé
He inquired everywhere

The Alliance people are anxious that the missing missionaries not be forgotten in the general joy over return of other prisoners. They are aware that time and again during this past decade, the military made innumerable attempts to recover Dr. Vietti and her companions through patrols, raids and by way of an arranged ransom.

The missing trio was grabbed in a night of senseless local terrorism, with marauders deliberately seeking out the doctor as a prime objective for the attack on a leprosarium, eight miles down a mountain road from the province capital of Ban Me Thuot.

By pure coincidence, we were in Ban Me Thuot at the time and covered the kidnaping in late May 1962, obtaining facts from survivors of the raid.

Dr. Vietti was 34 then. Her home had been in Houston, Tex. The Rev. Mitchell was 44; his wife and four children were with him when he was seized, when he pleaded with the raiders to take him, instead of his wife, as they were preparing to do.

Dan Gerber was 21 then. He was a Mennonite from Kidron, Ohio, and had only recently become engaged to Ruth Wilting, of Cleveland, a nurse at the leprosarium.

Cong Didn't Take His Sisters

We recall little 8-year-old Glen Mitchell piping up amidst a lot of adult talk and saying, "They took all my clothes. They didn't take my sisters!" His sisters were Becky, 13, Loretta, 10 and Geraldine, 4.

They, and Mrs. Mitchell, were unharmed. They watched helplessly as the company of Viet Cong stripped the hospital of valuables, hauled Dr. Vietti out of bed where she was nursing an ulcerated ankle, and marched off, prodding the doctor, Mitchell and Gerber ahead of them.

The leprosarium had about 250 patients who fled into the brush when the hospital was seized. The American personnel moved into Ban Me Thuot, where the Alliance had a sort of headquarters and out-patient clinic, but continued to serve the leprosarium on a daily visit basis, travelling under heavy armed guard.

"Yes," Bailey told us, "we are still there. I was in Ban Me Thuot a month ago. Our hospital in town has been rebuilt and it is bigger and better than ever."

Can't Shake Missionaries

"You know it was burned out and completely destroyed in the Tet offensive in 1968. They killed six of our people then . . . that's when Betty Olsen and Hank Blood were captured, and Mike Bengé. We are serving between 200 and 250 out-patients a day at the Ban Me Thuot hospital."

"The leprosarium down the road where Dr. Vietti and Mitchell and Gerber were taken is still in operation, but under Vietnamese personnel. We are providing support."

"We got word somehow—you know how word travels—that Betty Olsen and Hank Blood had died after their capture. That's one reason we have faith that Dr. Vietti and the others may have survived because we have had no word to the contrary."

The determination of these missionaries is as strong as their faith. If the night of terror in May 1962, if the horror of fire and death of the Tet offensive of 1968 couldn't shake them, they'll be around Ban Me Thuot a very long while yet. They just want to help people nobody else will help. They would scorn the word, but they make up, from first-hand observation, a first-class crop of heroes.