

Peking story (American prisoners in China) - correspondence, letters and ca...

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Peking story - 1955

17 Feb.

Chou En-lai (Premier of the State Council
and Foreign Minister, China)

- 1 letter from D.H.

His Excellency
Mr. Chou En-lai
Premier of the State Council
and Foreign Minister
Peking, China

C O P Y

17 February 1955

My dear Mr. Chou En-lai,

By pouch from the Swedish Embassy in Peking I have today received via Stockholm pictures of the four American jet fliers Edwin Lewis Heller, Lyle Willis Cameron, Roland Williams Parks and Harold Edwards Fischer. I thank you for these photographs which will be handed over to the United States authorities for transmittal to the families.

I am sure that you will understand me if, on this occasion, in thanking you for the photographs, I present to you a few comments on the situation of these four fliers.

In the course of our talks you pointed out that these men had not yet been convicted. In your view it was an established fact that they had intruded on Chinese air-space; however, investigation as to the possibility of other activities or intentions had not been concluded, and for that reason the men had not yet been tried. I had hoped that the Chinese authorities would have seen their way to a quick solution of the problem of the four fliers as the pre-trial period they had spent in prison already far exceeded what legal systems normally permit. The fact that, during this long period sufficient evidence for proceeding to a trial did not seem to have come to light, encourages the view to which I gave expression in Peking, that the men were innocent. You will remember that I considered them as having taken part in no more than legitimate operations in the Korean war, and that, therefore, according to the rules applying to prisoners of war, they should be released (or, if found guilty of intrusion -- in line with the attitude you explained to me -- sentenced only to extradition).

His Excellency
Mr. Chou En-lai
Premier of the State Council
and Foreign Minister
Peking, China

You will have observed that with few and unimportant exceptions the discussion here about the fliers' issue after my return from Peking, has been moderate and restrained in tone, thus serving to create the proper level for progress. This was not achieved without some effort. But it would be a mistake to believe that the changed temperature in the public debate reflected any reduction of the real significance of the issue. Personally, I feel as strongly as ever about it, and my capacity to pursue the line I have been following will largely depend on the outcome of this issue. I feel that the change in atmosphere concerning the fliers' question -- taken together with other developments working in the same direction -- should have made it easier for you to meet my hopes without those misunderstandings which might have arisen in your country and elsewhere at an earlier stage. I am convinced that an action in line with your declared traditional policy and inspired by your appreciation of the humanitarian aspects and the general interests which I tried to present to you in the course of our conversations, would not at the present juncture be misinterpreted as a disavowal of the sovereign rights of the People's Republic of China or of the status of its courts. This is certainly true as concerns both the eleven men of the Arnold crew and the four jet pilots, but it applies in particular to the four, concerning whom so far no decision has been taken.

You will have observed that the decision of the United States Administration not to grant passports for visits to China of the members of the families of the prisoners, was announced to be "for the time being". I personally feel that the general situation recently prevailing would not have been a favourable one for such visits, but I hope to be able to revert to your proposal if and when I find that the visits might be helpful. I appreciate your offer which I feel entitled to regard not as an alternative but as a bridge, to that overall solution of the problem we were discussing, to which I attach such overwhelming importance.