

MEN OF PUEBLO RETURN HOME

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82 Greeted by Laughing,
Crying Families

By MICHAEL SHORT

SAN DIEGO, Calif. (AP) —

The men of the Pueblo came home Tuesday to a laughing, crying-with-joy Christmas Eve reunion with the women and children who waited 11 agonizing months for them to win freedom from North Korean captivity.

Two big Air Force transports touched down at Miramar Naval Air Station at 1:58 and 2 p. m. and the 82 survivors of the ill-fated intelligence ship swarmed off to greet about 170 wives, offspring, parents and other relatives.

First to debark was the skipper, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, 41, who—as the Navy band struck up “The Lonely Bull” — requested by the crew—embraced his wife, Rose. She had been a leader in a drive to keep government officials working for the crew’s release.

BUCHER’S FACE DRAWN

Bucher, his face drawn, walked with a limp. But he smiled and waved to the crowd.

He was followed by crewmen, walking slowly and single file out of the high-tailed C141 Star-

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lifters that had ferried them from Seoul, South Korea.

They strode 75 yards across the apron to where their families were massed, their faces lighting as they recognized and heard the cries of loved ones. Husbands and wives embraced and broke into tears, or smiled, or simply looked numb.

Within a minute the crowd began breaking up as the families bunched in small groups as they met their loved ones. The same process was repeated as crewmen began leaving the second plane.

Children danced and were lifted on high by daddies long away. Little family knots formed, with the crewmen the nucleus, as the sailors waded into the happy throng.

Some appeared a bit dazed by the attention. All the while, the band played “California Here We Come,” then “This is My Country.”

TALKS WITH PARENTS

During the wait Mrs. Bucher stood beside Mr. and Mrs. Duane Hodges, parents of the Pueblo crewman, Fireman Duane R. Hodges, 22, of Creswell, Ore., fatally injured when the ship was captured.

When Bucher arrived he embraced Mrs. Hodges, then put his arms around both parents and spoke to them at length.

Later, turning to newsmen, Bucher said: “It’s so great to be home. You’ll never know, Jesus. I’m absolutely thrilled. How great it is to be a citizen of the United States. It’s the greatest country.”

The crew was freed Sunday and, during a stop at Midway Island on the flight home the Pacific Fleet commander, John J. Hyland, called them “a group of young heroes.”

Their skipper told a crowd on Midway that every crew member was “subjected to terror of some kind at one time or another,” including beatings.

The Pueblo was seized last Jan. 23 when, North Korea said, it invaded territorial waters, which the United States has denied.

DEBRIEFING SET

Crew members were to undergo intelligence debriefing at the San Diego Navy Hospital. For the first 36 hours they were to be kept under strict security wraps. Newsmen were not allowed to question them individually.

Crewmen stay at the “Pink

Palace,” a four-story building on the hospital grounds named for its fetching hue. Families are staying at a downtown hotel, but will be permitted to visit with crewmen at their “Palace” rooms and also join them at the RX Club, a hospital recreation center.

Gov. Ronald Reagan and Sen. Margaret Chase Smith of Maine gave brief speeches . . . but few seemed to listen. Crewmen and families were too busy getting reacquainted.

“How do you feel?” seemed to be the most common question. “Just great!” was the usual answer.

Some sailors hugged two or three people at a time. A few greeted babies born while they were gone.

Bucher made a brief talk.

TOO MANY OF THEM

“Some 11 months ago,” he said, “we were very unfortunate . . . there were just too many of them and just too little of us (referring to the Pueblo’s capture). We spent many, many months in that land completely devoid of humanity.”

“My primary thoughts were the embarrassment to the United States by losing one of its fine ships to the North Koreans, and that thought stayed on my mind continuously.”

He described the North Korean captors as, “so completely devoid of humanity, so devoted to the enslavement of men’s minds.”

He thanked those who had come to greet the returning crewmen for “making our return to the United States even more glorious than I thought possible.”

As Bucher finished speaking the band played the Navy hymn softly and an honor guard of six sailors in white gloves and white leggings slowly carried Hodges’ flag-draped coffin from the plane to a waiting gray Navy hearse.

Bucher said Hodges told him before he died that “It was a privilege to serve in the United States Navy.” He said he considers Hodges “a hero in every sense of the word.” He asked the crowd “to join me in a few minutes of silent prayer and thanksgiving to God that we have men of the caliber of Duane Hodges.”

Then the band played “Ancient Aweigh” and “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” ending the airport ceremonies

about a half hour after the planes landed.

Families and crewmen rode together in 15 buses to the hospital.

There were many touching scenes.

CRYING MOTHER SALUTED
A crewman saluted his crying mother.

A gray-haired mother, spotting her son as he stepped from the plane, broke into a sprint in his direction, showing real speed.

A little girl talked shyly to the father she hadn’t seen in so long as she nestled in his arms.

Two Navy Waves wept openly as Hodges’ casket was given a salute.

A crewman, wife and baby at his side, became exasperated as he pushed an empty stroller over its lack of speed— and picked it up and carried it to a bus.

Gov. Reagan had this comment: “Only your shipmates know the full measure of your captors’ brutality. We can never repay our debt to you.”

The weather was crisp and cloudy with the temperature about 50 degrees. Women and children were decked out in Christmas finery.

The families were flown here at Navy expense, but have to pay their own food and lodging expenses.

Donations to help have swamped the San Diego Chamber of Commerce.

CONTRIBUTIONS RECEIVED

“We’ve already received more than \$6,000,” said a spokesman. He estimated that about \$40,000 would be needed if the families stay as long as long as two weeks.

The spokesman called the campaign “A San Diego Merry Christmas to the Pueblo crewmen,” explaining that the effort is local rather than national.

For many of the Pueblo families, it will be the first Christmas together in two years. Rose Bucher, for example, hasn’t seen her husband Lloyd, the Pueblo skipper, since November of 1967.

But all this was just a memory for her and the other relatives in this reunion day that wrapped up Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July and Glory, Glory Hallalujah all in one package.

Or, as the mother of Marine Sgt. Robert Chicca, of Hyattsville, Md., put it:

“We just feel that the Apollo

astronauts are going to pass us, we are so far up on Cloud 9," said Mrs. Edward J. Chicca.

Chicca's wife, Ann, their 10-month-old daughter, and his father also were on hand.

The Navy Training Station Band hoped its rendition of the crew's theme song—Herb Alpert's "The Lonely Bull"—would send "the guys out of their mind," said a band spokesman.

After the planeside reunions, the next item on the agenda was a Navy-arranged news conference, and intelligence debriefings and medical checkups at the Naval hospital. The debriefings and medical checks will last an indefinite time. Before they start, however, families will have an hour in private at the hospital. After that, said the Navy, "a man will be able to visit his family whenever he's not tied up with debriefings or physicals."

ALL TO BE HOSPITALIZED

The crew will be in the hospital from two weeks to two months. The question of private Christmas reunions with families was left hanging.

The crew members' last stop before San Diego was at Midway Island, where the planes had a two-hour refueling stop. From there it was just seven hours to Miramar.

While on Midway, the men were greeted by Adm. John J. Hyland, Pacific fleet commander, who told them, "you are regarded as a group of young heroes."

Commander Bucher, 41, also spoke at Midway. He said he questions whether "the people who came out and captured the

Pueblo had actually been authorized."

"We had the feeling they had blown it," said Bucher.

The Pueblo crew cheered as Bucher described their captors as "apes."

Also aboard the Air Force planes was a coffin with the body of Fireman Duane R. Hodges, 22, of Creswell, Ore. Hodges was injured fatally when the Pueblo was captured off North Korea on Jan. 23. He was the only fatality.

"Every member of the crew has been subjected to terror of some kind one time or another," Bucher said. "Whether it was actually physical beating or not is beside the point, because the terror of expecting a beating is just as terrifying."

But he stressed "we were not brainwashed."

"The people who were more physically endowed were beaten harder," said Bucher. "Engineer Chief Monroe Goldman was beaten so badly it was indescribable."

At Midway, the crew enjoyed those American favorites—cheeseburgers, hamburgers, or hot dogs. Cheeseburgers were the 2-1 choice.

Asked about his release, Quartermaster 1C Charles Law Jr. of Tacoma, Wash., said it was "like climbing out of hell into heaven."

Many other crewmen described Law as a man with tremendous backbone during captivity. His comment on that:

"There were 82 backbones and the biggest is the skipper. He's the best skipper in the Navy. He's a great guy."

Simple memorial services were held for Hodges in an open field before the crew left Seoul's Kimpo airport. The casket, draped in a U.S. flag, was carried from a military ambulance

by eight Navy men. An eight-man honor guard fired three rounds of salute while taps were blown.

Before their Korean departure the Pueblo men were visited by several top U.S. and South Korean officials, including Premier Chung Il-Kwon.

Several of the men chatted with U.S. Army Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel, head of the United Nations Command in Korea. Bonesteel conferred a promotion on Timothy L. Garris, 23, of Jacksonville, Fla., making him a lieutenant junior grade. He was due an ordinary promotion but captivity prevented him from receiving it on schedule.

As the crew board the plane at Seoul, a U.S. Army band played "California Here I Come" and "Anchor's Aweigh."