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Seizure a Gamble, Bucher Believes

MIDWAY ISLAND (AP)—The commander of the USS Pueblo today questioned whether "the people who came out and captured the Pueblo had actually been authorized." "We had the feeling they had blown it," said Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher during a two-hour refueling stop here en route home.

He added that he felt the "sole purpose" of the North Koreans capturing the U.S. intelligence ship was to "embarrass the United States government more than anything else."

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

Bucher and the other 81 surviving members of the Pueblo crew returned to American soil at this Naval

installation 1,000 miles northwest of Honolulu and were greeted by Adm. John J. Hyland, Pacific Fleet commander.

THEY WERE scheduled to arrive at San Diego's Miramar Naval Air Station at 4 p. m. CST for a joyful Christmas reunion with their families.

"You are regarded as a group of young heroes and we are very proud of the way you stuck it out for such a prolonged period," Adm. Hyland told the crew.

"The name of the game, of course, became procedure to try to assure one way or the other that you returned to us alive and that right off the bat precluded a heavy military move in retaliation."

TWO AIR FORCE C141s carrying the crew members and a coffin with the body of Fireman Duane H. Hodges, 22, of

Creswell, Ore., left Midway on a seven-hour flight to San Diego.

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 had been subjected to terror of some kind one time or another," Bucher told the admiral, crew and newsmen here.

"WHETHER IT was actual physical beating or not is beside the point, because the terror of expecting a beating is just as terrifying."

Bucher said he was "rarely beaten in the face because I was subjected to a lot of camera ordeals and they wanted me to look at least presentable to the camera."

"But this didn't keep them from caving in my ribs, or kicking me in the tailbone to the point where I was almost

unable to walk for many weeks."

THE 41-YEAR-OLD commander said the crew "was subjected to various forms of physical and mental torture," but he stressed that "we were not brainwashed."

In Washington, the acting press secretary at the White House, Tom Johnson, was asked for comment on the reports of maltreatment of the crew by the North Koreans.

He replied: "The United States government is seriously concerned and is making an urgent investigation of the reports received so far on the treatment of the crew."

Johnson declined to elaborate.

The skipper said the North Koreans threatened to kill him "but I wasn't particularly concerned about that. I held up pretty well during their ordeals but then they threatened to commence shooting the most junior members of the crew in my presence."

Bucher said that at one time the North Koreans threatened to kill Firemen Apprentice Howard Edward Bland, one of the youngest persons on the ship, "in my presence."

"THE THREAT of a beating was always there," Bucher said. "Every time they decided to beat someone up it was done from an emotional point of view. It was always done from a studied attempt to create terror among my men and myself."

"The people who were more physically endowed were beaten harder. Engineman Chief

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Monroe Goldman was beaten so badly it was indescribable."

At Midway, the crew members were treated to the American favorites of cheeseburgers, hamburgers and hot dogs. Cheeseburgers were a 2-1 favorite.

QUARTERMASTER
1-C Charles Law Jr. of Tacoma, Wash., described his release from North Korea as "like climbing out of hell into heaven."

Law was described by many as one of those with a lot of backbone during captivity, but he said "there were 82 backbones and the biggest is the skipper. He's the best skipper in the Navy. He's a great guy."

Communications Technicians Chief James Francis Kell of Honolulu had a typical comment: "It's great to be free."

ALL THE PUEBLO crewmen, including Bucher, were wearing blue Polaris submarine crew uniforms with USS Pueblo stenciled on the backs. All wore new black shoes, which contrasted with the blue top tennis shoes they wore on their release from North Korea.

Bucher was presented a new commander's hat. He smiled, held back tears, and said "Thank you" repeatedly.