

The Pueblo Reunion: Tears, Laughter and a Silence

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SAN DIEGO, Dec. 24—Tears of joy flowed freely here today as the 82 survivors of the Pueblo embraced wives, children and parents in Christmas reunions.

Some 72 hours after they had crossed the chilly concrete bridge at Panmunjon to freedom, they stood on California soil, basking in love and sunshine.

Frequently the reunion seemed on the verge of hysteria as some men and women laughed while they wept in close embrace on the field of the Miramar Naval Air Station here.

It was as though by their sheer emotional energy they wanted to thrust out of their minds the knowledge that still on one of the two planes on which they arrived was a coffin containing the body of one member of the crew—Duane D. Hodges of Creswell, Ore.

The coffin was brought forth from the plane after the reunions had been completed and while most of the men of the Pueblo were engaged mainly in conversation.

But as an honor guard of sailors brought the flag-draped coffin from the plane, there was such an intense silence that the clicks and whirrings of the cameras could be heard for hundreds of feet.

The emotional reunions began shortly after 2 P.M. as the first of the Pueblo men in submarine coveralls, which resemble dungarees, walked toward the ropes where the relatives waited. The men came slowly, one or two at a time, peering into the crowd of more than 250 persons for the ones who had come for them.

Generally the search ended with a call, often a penetrating sob of a mother or the outthrust hands of a wet-eyed father.

By the time the first plane had been emptied, in a matter of some 10 minutes, a number of the women looking for sons and husbands had moved past the ropes. Marines did not ask them to get back behind them.

A Child in a Stroller

Some men picked up children they had not seen since they were infants. One was pushing a little child in a stroller for the first time.

At times a man, a wife, a mother and a father all had their arms around one another. As the second plane began to empty, the families that had been reunited moved back and out of the way without being asked so that other reunions could take place without interference.

Within half an hour after the planes had come to a stop, much of the crying had ended

and there was widespread smiling as men patted their returning sons on the shoulders and women stroked their backs.

The families began to form clusters and exchange introductions. Though speeches were taking place less than 100 feet away, very few among the Pueblo crewmen or the families who met them made an effort to listen.

A Bugle Blows

The atmosphere, which had become comparatively cheerful, changed very suddenly as a Navy bugler blew attention. The Pueblo returnees and their relatives turned to face one of the two planes as the Navy honor guard carried out the coffin with a Navy band playing the Navy Hymn. The coffin was placed in a hearse.

Then the Pueblo men and their families entered buses and were taken to the Navy hospital here, where the men will be debriefed, receive thorough medical examinations and be questioned by intelligence men.

The families will have Christmas dinner with the men at the hospital tomorrow and will have brief visiting rights, though they will not be allowed to live on the base with the men.

Navy officials said they did not know how long the Pueblo men would have to be ex-

amined by doctors and questioned before they would be allowed to rejoin their families.

Earlier, as the hour for the arrival of the Pueblo crew neared, the joy of relatives was mixed with anxiety about the possibility that the husband or son they were awaiting might have been injured psychologically or physically by their North Korean captors.

"Just so they get here and they're O.K.," said Mrs. Charles Kisler of St. Louis, whose 22-year-old son, Earl, was among the returnees.

"I'm very worried," she continued. "And I will be worried until I see him. I realize he's not going to look like he used to. But I hope he'll be back to what he used to be in a few weeks."

To ease the suspense of the final wait, the city showered the relatives with attention while trying to be careful not to invade their privacy or add to their emotional strain.

A drive was under way in this city, spearheaded by the local Chamber of Commerce, to raise \$20,000 to help the Pueblo families celebrate Christmas. By this morning more than \$3,500 had been raised. Hotel reservations were made for 170 persons, with the community committed to paying the bills.

Two girls went from door-to-door with a coffee can and raised \$25. Employees of an insurance company took up a collection when they reported for work. A band gave the proceeds of last night's performance to this cause.

American Red Cross workers obtained a stroller for one child and a crib for another and took ailing children to the Navy Hospital here for examination and treatment.

Rebecca Steinhour, a case worker for the Red Cross, said: "They're very excited. Very very happy. A little tired. I'm sure it's still a shock to them."

The Navy, which was paying for commercial flights of the Pueblo families, assigned a group of WAVES to be hostesses, guides, companions and offer general assistance. The Navy was also organizing a baby-sitting service.

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