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Crippled Cuban Stands Hours To Greet Returning Friends

By a Star Staff Writer

MIAMI, Dec. 24.—Juan Figueras, who is 24 and who lost his right leg at the Bay of Pigs in April, 1961, stood on his crutches at Homestead Air Force Base until the early hours this morning.

"I just got my new leg and it hurts to wear it but I want the muchachos coming from Castro's prisons to see me with it to make them feel better."

When the first prisoners—they call themselves "muchachos" or "boys"—began getting off the first plane from Cuba here at 6:06 o'clock last night, they did indeed see smiling Juan Figueras. There were 109 of the ransomed prisoners of the invasion on that plane and Juan exchanged lusty back-slapping embraces with fully half of them.

But Juan, most of all, was waiting for the arrival of his brother, Wifredo, 22, who was not on the first few flights from Cuba to the United States. The young man's sister, Miss Nory Figueras, 25, of 4600 Sixteenth street N.W. was unable to leave Washington for the reunion. Their parents are still in Communist Cuba.

Eager for Reunion

Wifredo's friends in the first group said he was thin and suffering somewhat from asthma, but looking forward eagerly to being reunited with about 60 of his relatives now living in exile here.

Twelve of the 60 prisoners who were released last April because of wounds or sickness formed a guard of honor in the yellow shirts that have become the symbol of their resistance to Mr. Castro.

They stood in two ranks: Juan Figueras on his crutches and artificial leg; Maj. Noelio Montero wearing a jacket over his "uniform"; another member of the assault brigade with an empty sleeve and yet another with a glove concealing his artificial hand.

But they quickly broke ranks when the blue-and-white Pan American World Airways DC-6B taxied to a halt shortly after 6 p.m.

Immigration and health officers boarded the plane, accompanied by port receptionist Maria Luisa Bolivar, a petite Puerto Rican brunette. As the first prisoner, Armando Lastra, walked briskly down the steps, the 12 swarmed over him and those who followed.

Some Grin Broadly

Some of the prisoners grinned broadly but others marched resolutely and unsmilingly to the waiting buses. Some carried their paltry personal belongings in woven cane bags. Others were empty-handed.

One man, older than most of the prisoners, carried only a carved image of Mary and the infant Jesus. Another carried a box of Havana cigars and shouted repeatedly: "Viva Cuba Libre. Viva President Kennedy."

The prisoners did not wear the yellow sport shirts Mr. Castro intended as a badge of dishonor.

The freed men said the yellow shirts were taken away from them, and they say with reason that Fidel Castro realized belatedly that the shirts and the color yellow has become a symbol of the hatred the exiles bear his regime.

Get New Clothes

They wore plain white shirts, but only until the Air Force was able to outfit them in khaki shirts and trousers.

The survivors of the ill-fated attack appeared thin but in reasonably good physical condition. Enrique Ruiz Williams, one of the leaders of the invasion, flew to Havana to accompany the men back to Florida on the first flight.

He said the men told him they began to get better food in September as ransom negotiations progressed to the point of eventual certainty.

"Before that," said the husky 41-year-old ex-prisoner, "we ate only Chinese beans and rice. The beans we called 'patria o muerte beans' (this is a reference to their 'fatherland or death' slogan). 'They taste like the dirt on the ground. We almost never saw meat and when we did it was rotten.'"

"No one in Cuba is eating well today, except a favored few," the resistance leader said, "so you can imagine what the prisoners were fed."

Some Unrecognizable

Some of the boys were so thin as to be unrecognizable. Dr. Carlos Falla, who waited for his two sons, Julio and Miguel, and his nephew, Enrique, was unable to comprehend that his loved ones were here and safe. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he walked with them to the bus, his arms around their thin shoulders.

The longest wait of all was that of the leaders of the Cuban exile colony. The first arrivals last night passed the word that Mr. Castro was holding the most important prisoners for the last plane.

Waiting for their sons at this base 30 miles from Miami were: Ernesto Freyre, one of the chief negotiators for the Cuban Families Committee which spearheaded the barter of men for medicines; Jose Miro Cardona, president of the Cuban Revolutionary Council, and Antonio de Varon, Mr. Miro's chief lieutenant.

Leaders Returning Last

Mr. Freyre waited until early today for the return of his 19-year-old son, Tioq. Mr. Miro stayed to greet his son, Jose Miro Torra, and Mr. Varona to welcome his son, Carlos.

Also awaited were the three military leaders of the little force that was overwhelmed at the place the Cubans call the Playa Giron: Manuel Artime, Encido Oliva and Jose San Roman.

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Four Cubans, returned last April in a group of 60 sick and wounded prisoners of war, wait at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami yesterday to geet their buddies. Left to right are Carlos Allen, Juan Figuares, Jose Ignacio Smith and Luis Morse, jr.—AP Wirephoto.