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Miami News Photos by Pat Canova

Each Man Kissed The Ground As He Stepped Ashore

Eight Refugees Row Here On Planks And A Prayer

By Mary Louise Wilkinson
Reporter of The Miami News

Eight Cuban refugees, including an infant girl, were safe in Miami today after six days of rowing across the Florida Straits in a crude, home-made boat.

The barefoot, sunburned refugees said they put out from the north coast of Matanzas Province last Wednesday and ran out of food and water three days later.

"It poured down rain much of the time." said Filiberto Sosa, a construction worker, "so we caught drinking water in an empty milk can."

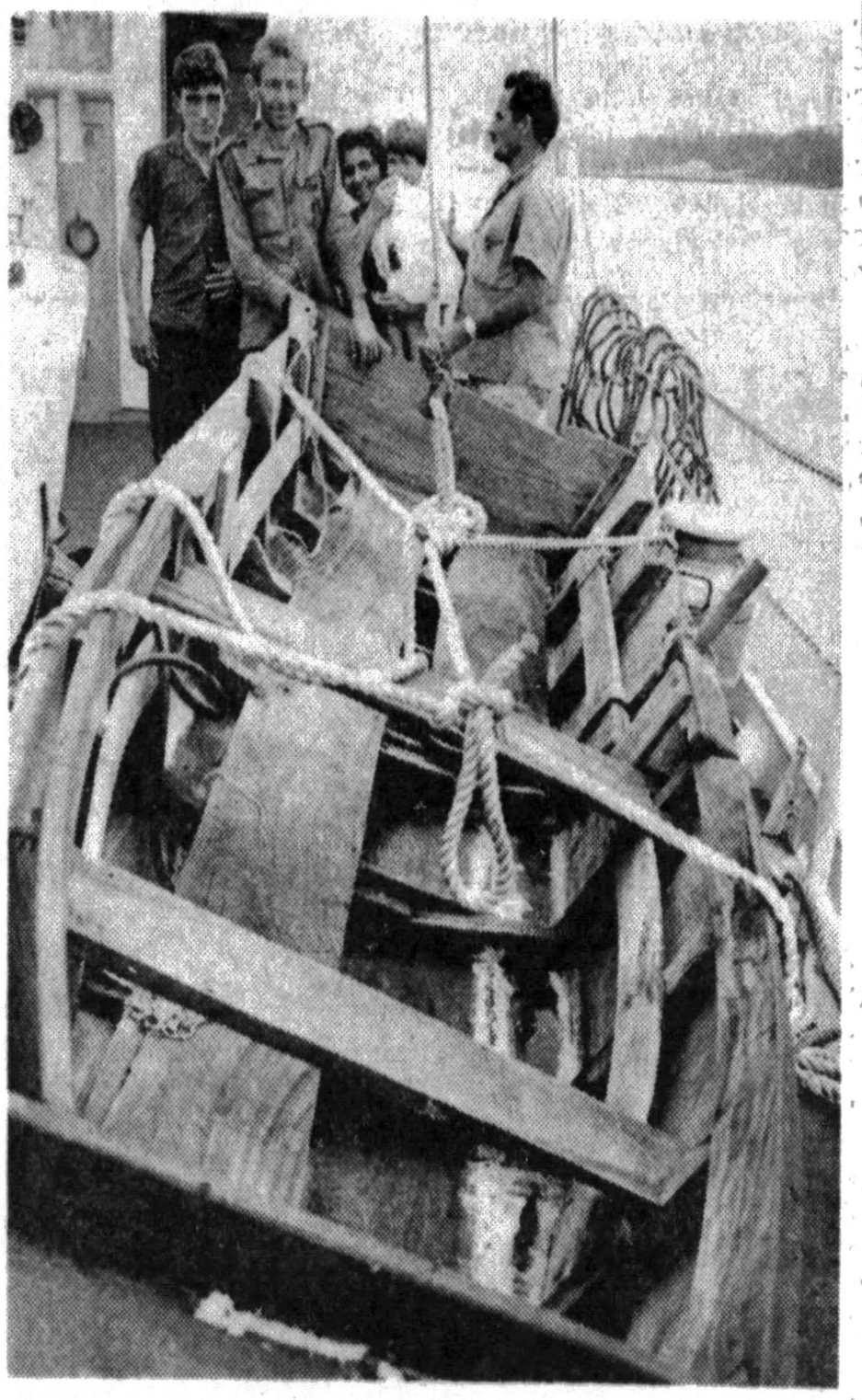
They were picked up yesterday by the Coast Guard cutter Point Thatcher as they drifted near Careysfort Reef, some 25 miles off the coast from Homestead.

Guardsmen hoisted aboard the refugee escape boat, hastily made of thick rough planks and powered by four home-made oars. The refugees said they hid out in a thickly-wooded area near the coast where they built the 42-inch wide craft.

The men displayed badly blistered hands before climbing ashore at the Miami Beach Coast Guard station and kneeling down to kiss the earth.

"Thank you, thank you for saving us. We'd almost given up hope," Mrs. Mirtha Sosa said over and over again in Spanish as she clung to her 21-month-old daughter, Ismari.

The round - cheeked baby, who burst into tears at the excitement of arrival, weathered the dangerous crossing well, except for sunburn and a severe case of prickly heat.



This Boat Crossed The Florida Straits

Among the group was a 47-year-old man who said he had just escaped from a Castro concentration camp where he had been imprisioned for the past year.

"I was sentenced to five years," said Laureano Jose Refollo, but I got a 24-hour pass to go home to see my family when I told the guards that my daughter was very sick.

"That wasn't true," he added. "I planned to join this escape group. I had to leave my family behind because there just wasn't room in this small boat."

Another of the escapees was Orlando Gonzalez, 14, who brought with him a plastic statue of the Virgin of Copper Charity, Cuba's patron saint.

The Cubans fled their homeland with only the tattered clothes on their backs, a cotton blanket for the baby and a handful of possessions tied in a towel bag.