

Pueblo Captain Tells Of N. Korean Shelling

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 21 —North Korean gunboats opened up on the USS Pueblo before capturing it last Jan. 23, wounding the captain, Lloyd M. Bucher, and two of his crewmen.

Cmdr. Bucher described his own wounding for the first

time in testifying today before the Naval court of inquiry on the seizure of the spy ship while it was operating off Wonsan Harbor.

Bucher said he was definitely in international waters at the time and did not believe until the last minute that the subchaser and four torpedo boats meant to take his ship.

Once he realized this was imminent, Bucher told the court he considered trying to scuttle the Pueblo but figured even if it sank the North Koreans might dive down and get all the secret equipment largely intact.

The gunfire that hit Bucher, signalman Wendell Leach of Houston, Tex., and communications technician Steven J. Robin of Silver Spring, Md., came from the subchaser and one or more of the torpedo boats, Bucher said.

Bucher was hit in the buttocks by one piece of shrapnel and in the right ankle by three other pieces. He said Leach was wounded in the leg and Robin in the neck.

He had been staring down the gun barrels of the four torpedo boats surrounding his ship before this firing and had also been signaled by the subchaser that it was going to begin firing unless the Pueblo heaved to.

Once the gunfire started, Bucher said, "I did not feel at that time that there was any point in going to war with

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those ships surrounding me. I was completely, hopelessly out-gunned."

As for defending the Pueblo with its .50-caliber machine guns, one on the bow and a second on the stern, he told the court: "To send a man up to that gun (on the bow) would have meant certain death."

The inquiry, now two days old, adjourned before Bucher told how the North Koreans boarded the ship and whether they were resisted by the men on the Pueblo.

But the skipper, still speaking in a monotone and seemingly holding up through the grueling ordeal that will decide his future, gave the most detailed public chronology to date of that disastrous day when the Pueblo was captured.

Fast Ship Sighted

"A few minutes before 12 (noon)" on Jan. 23, Bucher said, "I received a call from Law (Quartermaster first class Charles Benton Law) who said he sighted a fast moving ship." Law thought it might be a subchaser.

"I instructed Law to inform me if it approached within five miles," Bucher said. "I also told him to check our position by radar. He reported back we were 15 to 17 miles from the nearest land, Ung Do."

"Later," Bucher continued, "Law told me it was within five miles. I went to the bridge and used my binoculars and 'big eyes' — 22-inch binoculars. I tentatively identified it as an SO-1."

"The ship approached and circled me — our ship — at a range of 500 to 1000 yards."

"I remained on the flying bridge. I noticed he (the subchaser) was at battle stations and the deck guns were manned. . . 57-millimeter cannons, manned and pointed in many directions."

Circles Pueblo Twice

"The bridge of the SO-1 was manned by 10 to 12 people." He said he expected "only routine surveillance" from this encounter. The SO-1 circled the Pueblo twice.

"On the bridge with me," Bucher said, "was quartermaster Law and Mr. Lacy (chief warrant officer G. H. Lacy of Seattle, Wash.). I ordered all

hands to stay below decks."

To allay suspicions in such encounters with armed boats, Bucher said the standard dress in the Pueblo was anything but formal. "The general dress of those topside, on station far from home was quite relaxed. I wore khaki trousers and a leather flight jacket and a white wool ski cap with a white tassel. It kept my ears warm," Bucher said.

"Ordered Law to hoist the flag indicating we were a research vessel," Bucher told the court. "The SO-1 raised its flag asking 'What nationality?' My response was to hoist the U.S. flag . . . my ensign. I noticed quite a lot of activity on the SO-1. They must have been quite surprised we were a U.S. ship."

Seeing the fast developing events unfolding on the flat sea that wintry day, Bucher said he ordered Ensign Timothy L. Harris of Jacksonville, Fla., to keep a running narrative of what was going on.

"I was not particularly apprehensive," Bucher said, "but I thought I might have this SO-1 with us all the time we would be in the area. . . . I felt that their manned guns was an act of intimidation."

But just in case it was more than that, Bucher said, he had ordered the engine room to light the two diesel engines so the Pueblo could move out of the area quickly.

Engine Room Ready

"The engine room replied," Bucher said, "Ready to answer all bells." This means the engineers were ready to respond to orders for steaming the Pueblo at any speeds Bucher wanted out of the ship.

"Mr. Lacy reported sighting three torpedo boats—P-4s—approaching from the west. The P-4s were armed with machine guns and their torpedo tubes were covered when they approached. But their machine guns were manned all afternoon."

Luckily Bucher had just finished sending a situation report to his commander in Japan, so the communication link was in operation. The skipper ordered that line kept open.

The SO-1, standing off within easy firing range of the Pueblo, then put up a flag signaling: "Heave to or I will fire."

Bucher said "to confirm my belief I called Mr. Murphy (Lt. Edward R. Murphy of San Diego) to check in the diction-

ary for the definition of heave to." Bucher, although he did not explain it here today, might have wanted to make sure he understood the flag signal displayed.

Position Confirmed

"I asked Law to check our position. He reported us 15.8 miles from Ung Do. I also asked Mr. Murphy, the navigator, to confirm our position. He confirmed the findings of Law. I went to the wheelhouse and took a fix," which he said showed the same results.

"I prepared a flag signal saying roughly," Bucher con-

tinued, "I am in international waters."

"With P-4s approaching, I knew I had to get this out"—meaning the word about this now dangerous looking encounter—to Navy superiors in Japan.

This time, in contrast to the day before when it took between 12 to 14 hours to make radio contact with his commanders, Bucher said the Pueblo "had good luck" since it was already in contact with Japan.

"Through a voice tube I had people in the wheelhouse call Lt. Harris in Research (Lt. Stephen Robert Harris of Richland, Wash., who was in charge of the secret research section on the Pueblo) to tell Japan 'We have company' and to leave the line open."

Several Messages Sent

Bucher said he sent several messages and raised their transmission priority by the addition of secret code names: In this case, the word "Critic" meant it would be flashed to the White House. And that was the code word he used.

"As soon as he (the SO-1 subchaser) got close enough—that was about 1000 yards—I started drafting a message so people could be alerted to possible trouble. I still considered we were not in serious trouble. I had a conversation with chief warrant officer Lacy, the engineer, about scuttling if necessary. In his opinion, it could not be done quickly."

Bucher said that his fathometer showed there was about 180 feet of water underneath the Pueblo at the time. "It is not unusual to recover equipment from 180 feet so I ruled

out scuttling," Bucher said.

"And with the water temperature nearly freezing—about 35 degrees—the men could only survive about five minutes. My only concern was to destroy the classified material."

Remains in Touch

All this time, Bucher said he kept in touch with Japan through "chatter action"—keeping radio traffic moving over the line to keep others off it.

Even as the subchaser menaced the Pueblo with its guns, Bucher said he still thought the North Koreans were just trying to provoke him into an action that would embarrass the United States.

The P-4s—still only three of them at this time in the afternoon of Jan. 23—moved in closer. They got within point-blank range, Bucher said. Two of the boats were on either side of his bow and the third off the stern.

"Mr. Lacy asked me if we should go on general quarters. I said no," Bucher said he thought going on deck "wearing helmets and breaking out arms" would escalate the situation by forcing the North Koreans to show some counteraction.

Two Migs Arrive

"About this time two Migs—I believe Mig 21a—passed over the ship. The Migs didn't worry me, those torpedo boats 50 yards away with their guns uncovered and manned did.

"The SO-1 and one of the P-4s came together and had a conversation with megaphones," evidently about what to do next to the Pueblo, Bucher said.

The first solid indication that boarding the Pueblo was contemplated came when Bucher noticed that one of the torpedo boats carried army troops with rifles tipped with bayonets.

Course of USS Pueblo Up to Seizure Mapped

This map shows the course the spy ship Pueblo sailed until the time of her capture by North Koreans on Jan. 23:

(1) Pueblo left the port of Sasebo, at 6 a.m. (Japan time) Jan. 11 with the mission of observing Soviet Navy maneuvers in the Tsushima Straits and tuning in on radar and radio communications from North Korea.

Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher hoped to record the coastal defense radar signals of North Korea so the U.S. would know how to foil them in the event of war.

His plan was to collect electronic intelligence off North Korea first and then observe the Soviets on his way home. The Pueblo had authority to move as close as 200 yards to take pictures of Russian ships. His area of operation was between the latitudes of 39 degrees and 42 degrees north.

Bucher proceeded northward to the 42-degree boundary, running into a heavy storm enroute near the island of Ullung Do (2). He moved off his course to get out of the storm and then headed for his first objective — the North Korean port of Chongjin (3). He arrived there Jan. 16. Bucher said he "laid to off that port for approximately two days monitoring ELINT (electronic intelligence) signals and recording them." He said he observed commercial ships while laying off Chongjin, "but I did not consider myself detected."

His procedure at this and other points was to lay to 14 to 18 miles off the coast during the day and then move out to between 20 to 25 miles at night. The Pueblo lay dead in the water while listening for signals.

Bucher said he stopped the ship at 20 different spots

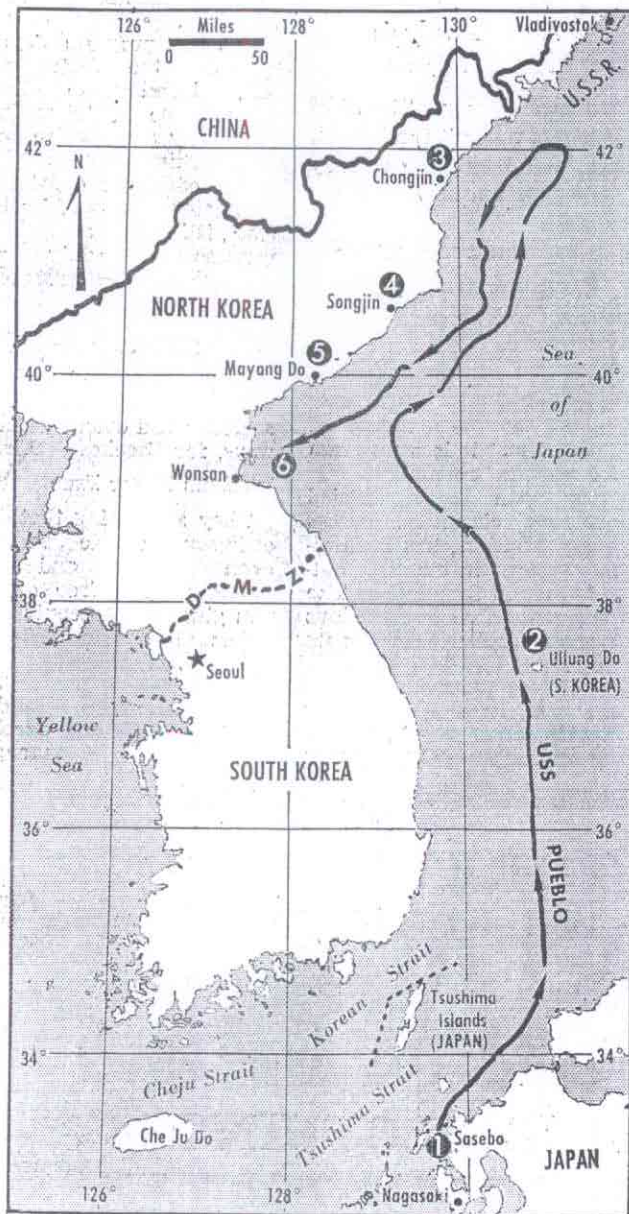
off the North Korean coast so oceanographers could collect water samples. Although Bucher did not say so, such samples are useful in determining how temperature layers in the sea affect sonar for detecting foreign submarines.

Bucher sailed south from Chongjin to Songjin (4), arriving there Jan. 18. He eavesdropped in that area for two days. He told the court he observed "very little activity, either visually or electronically."

On the night of Jan. 19, the Pueblo left Songjin for Mayang Do. (5). He laid to off Mayang Do until Jan. 21. Bucher said he spotted a North Korean subchaser, known as An So-I, in "the gathering dusk" of Jan. 21. The subchaser went by at 25 knots, Bucher said, and "evidenced no interest in the ship . . . I decided we had not been detected" Bucher told the Court, and therefore did not communicate with his commanders in Japan, presumably because such signals might alert North Korea to the Pueblo's presence.

The Pueblo left Mayang Do the night of Jan. 21, Bucher said, and "headed for Wonsan Harbor" (6). The Pueblo lay dead in the water on Jan. 22, listening, watching and taking samples of ocean water. "During the afternoon around 1 or 2 p.m.," Bucher told the Court yesterday, "we were approached by two government fishing vessels." He said they had no arms. Bucher ordered the crew below deck because he said he did not want the Korean vessels to see the unusually large number of men the Pueblo carried for an apparent cargo ship.

It was off Wonsan (6) on Jan. 23 that the Pueblo was surrounded by Korean gunboats and captured in what Bucher said was international waters.



By Joseph Mastrangelo—The Washington Post