

Skipper Tells Of Spy Ship's Capsize Peril

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CORONADO, Calif., Feb. 1—The spy ship Banner, sister of the Pueblo, was so unstable that the Navy figured it would blow right over "with any appreciable icing" in a 40-knot wind.

This kind of startling testimony, on top of the seizure of the Pueblo itself, is adding a sense of urgency to the Navy's full-scale review of the spy ship program.

Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations, has named Rear Adm. Leslie J. O'Brien Jr. to conduct the review. O'Brien is working out of the Pentagon in consultation with the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency.

But the review of the policy implications of the Pueblo affair will not stop with Adm. O'Brien's study. Congress all through 1969 will be second guessing the Navy on the Pueblo while the Naval Court of Inquiry here in the coming weeks undoubtedly will bring out more information to fuel the controversy.

The disclosure about the Banner's instability came at the end of the court's last open session when Cmdr. Charles R. Clark, skipper of the Japan-based Banner from December, 1966, to October, 1968, was asked if his ship—like the Pueblo—was unstable at sea.

"We did have some major stability problems since the electronic space was added in a very high area as compared with the previous cargo hold,"

Clark said.

"A study conducted by the Bureau of Shops, which I received just before I departed the Banner, indicated with any appreciable icing, we would have capsized with a 40-knot beam wind."

Icing on the superstructure would have made the ship more top-heavy. The Banner and the Pueblo are old light cargo ships converted for the spying missions. A 40-knot wind at sea is unusual but not rare.

Now a missile range safety officer at Point Mugu, Calif., Clark said he would like to see spy ships like the Banner and Pueblo get more speed and hulls with water tight compartments so they would not fill up and sink from one hole below the waterline.

Already the Navy has upgraded the armament on the Banner from 50-caliber machine guns to 20-millimeter cannon. But this is only the start of the changes, with the most significant probably coming in the area of command and control of spy ships.

These are changes underway or under consideration:

Armament. Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher of the Pueblo testified that his deck-mounted 50-caliber machine guns turned out to be useless. He said it took the North Koreans, after capturing the Pueblo, about a

half hour to remove the canvas cover from one of the guns.

The Navy, besides installing 20-millimeter cannon, is considering weapons which could be stowed out of sight but have a big punch for an emergency. Included in this category are grenade launchers for repelling boarders, more automatic rifles and even bazookas.

Destruct systems. Bucher said one reason the Navy did not fulfill his request for something better than axes and sledge hammers to destroy his secret equipment would have to be built in to the gear. The Navy did not want to take the time and money to do this on the Banner and Pueblo. But the Pueblo experience, with many secret papers left undestroyed, has changed the Navy's mind about the urgency of automatic destroy systems.

One material being considered for automatic destruct systems is thermite. But Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson, who was in charge of the Banner and Pueblo missions as Commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Japan, told the Naval Court of Inquiry: "It is my understanding that thermite is somewhat sensitive. If I were commanding officer, I would be somewhat hesitant to carry these mechanisms on board."

Scuttling. Both Clark and Bucher testified that there was no easy way to scuttle their converted cargo ships. They did not even have sea-cocks for letting the water in—a relatively easy installation. They said their only hope for scuttling was to open the valve controlling cooling water for the engine. Bucher figured it would take 20 minutes to get the valve open and at least another 2½ hours for the ship to fill up with enough water to sink it.

Command and control. Adm. Johnson testified that when he sent the Pueblo out on her fateful mission he did not request any naval or air forces to stand by in case she needed help. He said he considered the Pueblo mission of "minimal risk" because she would be operating in international waters at all times.

When the Pueblo ran into trouble, Johnson, with no ships or planes under his own command, had to request

them from others. Asked at the inquiry whether this was a satisfactory setup, he replied:

"I think that operational control of the (Banner and Pueblo) missions . . . was probably as good a command setup as they could provide."

E. Miles Harvey, Bucher's civilian counsel, then asked Adm. Johnson, "What is your opinion now?"

"Well, Mr. Harvey, we are in a completely different ballgame now," Johnson said.

The Navy, as part of this reassessment of command and control, is rewriting the guidelines for spy ships like the Pueblo. From now on, their captains will report to shore bases by radio more often, alert their superiors at the first sign of trouble and generally show a more conservative attitude toward harassment.

Also, the Navy will make sure ahead of time there are ships and planes which could come to the aid of a beleaguered spy ship.

All this indicates that the Navy's concept of sending out unarmed ships unobtrusively to collect electronic intelligence was torpedoed last Jan. 23 by the North Koreans who seized the Pueblo.