

Was Pueblo's Trip

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CORONADO, Calif.—There is one black spot of a question that will not rub out as the Pueblo tragedy unfolds here before the naval court of inquiry: Was this trip necessary?

In some ways, the seizure of the spy ship Pueblo on Jan. 23, 1968, resembles the downing of the spy plane U-2 on May 1, 1960. And the Government's ultimate response may turn out to be the same for both cases; namely, find a safer way to gather the information.

Like Gary Powers's flight over Russia just before a scheduled summit meeting, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher was sent out on his spying mission at an awkward time—militarily if not diplomatically. The United States was so deeply involved in South Vietnam that it had no planes left over in South Korea to go to the rescue in minutes.

The few suitable planes we did have in South Korea when the Pueblo was seized were armed with nuclear weapons—not the armament needed for routing or sinking torpedo boats and a sub chaser. It turns out that properly armed planes close by in South Korea might have done some good.

Bucher's testimony last week brought out that the old Pueblo—built almost 25 years ago of solid steel by the Kewaunee Shipbuilding Co. of Wisconsin—did pretty well for herself against the steady fire of light machine guns and cannons. The skipper told the court that North Korean machinegun bullets bounced off her sides and the shell fire did not make a single hole below the waterline while the Pueblo ran the gantlet to get farther out to sea.

Who now can be sure that a few planes arriving at the right time would not have turned the tide for the Pueblo? The Pentagon argued after the ship's capture that any American planes sent to the rescue would have faced "a superior enemy force," to use former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara's phrase. But Bucher testified that he had steamed 25 miles away from the nearest land in fleeing from his pursuers. If that is indeed the case, the North Koreans would have had to have sent their fighters beyond their own airspace to take on the American planes going to the aid of the Pueblo in international waters.

But, again as in the case of the U-2, the United States decided to rely on diplomacy rather than any kind of

military retaliation. In both instances, the United States put the highest premium on human lives—a national characteristic that must figure in any reappraisal of the Pueblo and the policies it represented.

And since human life is more important to the United States than anything else, even on spying missions, the risks were indeed great when the Central Intelligence Agency sent Gary Powers winging over Soviet SA-2 anti-aircraft rockets and when the Navy sent Bucher and 82 other Americans within 13 miles of North Korean shores. In each case, tensions were high between the United States and the country being spied upon.

Did the potential gain outweigh the risk on the Pueblo mission? McNamara said last year that it did, in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee after the Pueblo was lost:

"This particular mission was related primarily to the defense forces of North Korea. It is important to us to know how they react, how extensive they are, what their radar coverage is, and the Pueblo was sent on this mission off the coast of Korea to obtain this kind of data.

Really Necessary?

"With hindsight," McNamara continued, "the mission was justified. The basic purpose of the mission was reviewed at the upper echelons of the Government in Washington. It is true that it had been recommended by field commanders, but it is equally true that I and certain other high officials in Washington must assume responsibility for it. Our personal representatives participate in a joint review of all of these missions. Some we approve, some we reject. Those we approve we are responsible for. This was one of those."

At another point in his testimony, McNamara said that the mission "originated with the request from a field commander, CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific) endorsed it and it was approved in Washington in full view of the probable risks . . ."

A standard ferreting chore—done by specially equipped airplanes as well as by spy ships like the *Pueblo*—is to figure out how good another nation's military radar is. In today's world of high-speed planes, radar is a nation's military eyes and ears.

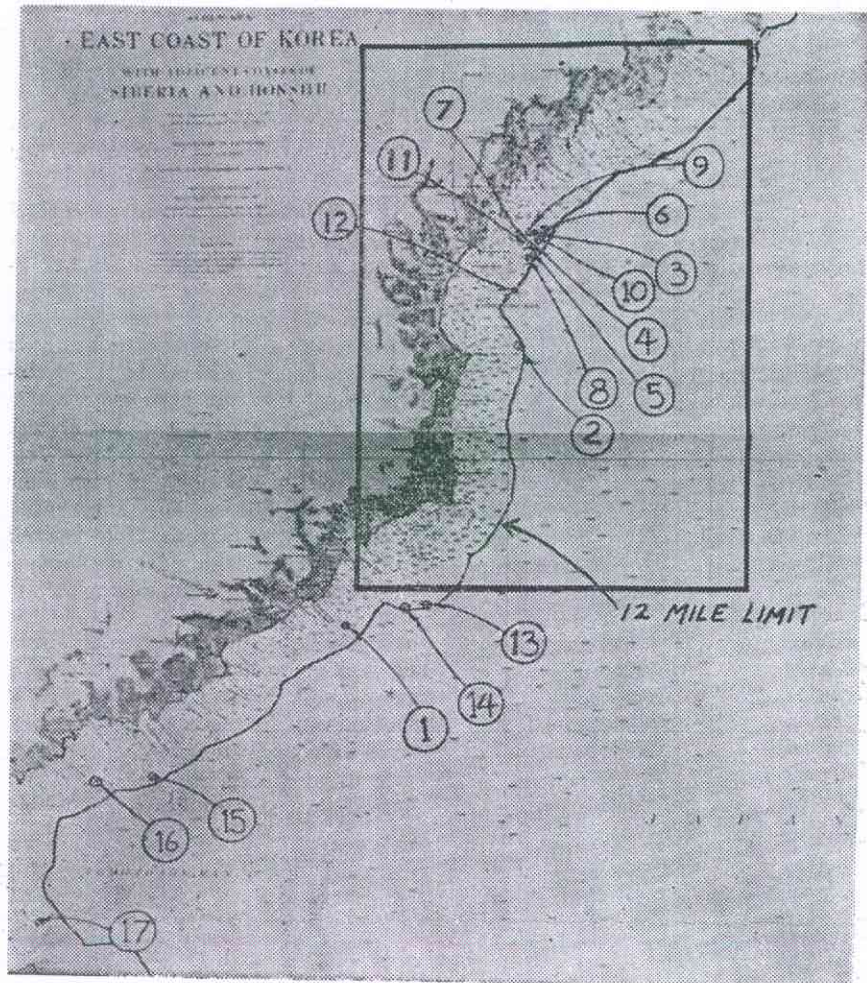
Not only is radar used to warn of approaching aircraft but also for guiding defending fighters to planes they are trying to shoot down. The name for such a system is ground control intercept, with technicians on the ground guiding the pilot in the air to the target on the basis of radar images.

One tactic long used by airpower countries is to make a dash toward the airspace of another nation, hoping that this will force it to turn on its radars. The signals can be recorded before the planes veer off. This cat-and-mouse game explains a lot of those stories about aircraft violating boundaries.

The *Pueblo*, because it was so much larger than an aircraft, could carry the equipment needed to record radar signals from North Korea's coastal defenses. Learning the types of signals emitted, the United States would know the best way to jam North Korea's radar in the event of a war. Also, the reaction time of North Korea's radar would figure in military planning.

Little Secret Equipment

BUCHER SET OUT from Sasebo, Japan, on Jan. 11, 1968, to listen



This chart from the U.S. Navy is said to show the 17 points of violation of territorial waters charged by North Korea in the Jan. 15-24, 1968, period. Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher denied each of the 17 charges.

in on such signals from radar stations along the North Korean coast. He said that most of the electronic equipment installed on the Pueblo could be bought in San Diego. There were secret coding machines in a locked room of his ship, however, for the handling of secret information.

In contrast to McNamara's solemn words about the vitalness of the Pueblo's intelligence mission, Bucher's statements make the expedition sound right out of McHale's Navy. His testimony—of course subject to challenge by other witnesses later—added up to the assertion that the Pueblo went north to south along the North Korean coast without

hearing much of military interest despite all of its eavesdropping equipment.

So routine and uninteresting were the signals that the Pueblo did pick up, Bucher testified, that he carried out the ship's secondary mission to the fullest. That was gathering water samples all along the route to inform oceanographers about the sea off the North Korean coast — presumably information about its currents, which affect underwater communications, and water temperatures, which figure in submarine detection.

In reporting the lack of much electronic intelligence activity off North Korean ports, Bucher told the court: "I wanted at least to accomplish a very thorough oceanographic profile."

Then on Friday, Bucher's last day before the court in open session, he said that North Korea's capture of his detailed narrative on what the Pueblo had been doing might have helped the imprisoned men.

"I realized this document would prove that we had accomplished very little other than the chipping of ice," Bucher said. "The document would also prove we had not intruded into their waters . . . Super C (the Pueblo crew's name for the North Korean army colonel who questioned them during their imprison-

ment) felt it was a plant. He did not believe it was real."

Such testimony poses important questions for the Pentagon in deciding what to do about spy ships from now on. What valuable intelligence, besides the secret documents the North Koreans captured, would the Pueblo have brought back if it had not been captured?

And if the information would indeed have been vital to have, isn't there a better way of getting it than sending out a slow, old ship armed only with machine guns so exposed that they cannot be reached safely if the spy ship does come under fire? In the case of the U-2, the U.S. Government turned to its advanced technology rather than risk another manned flight over Russia. Now reconnaissance satellites do the aerial photography.

As Pentagon officials try to salvage something for the future from the Pueblo tragedy, described in chilling detail here last week by Bucher, they may turn again to advanced technology to perform the mission—perhaps super spy satellites known to be in the works. The direction the new Administration sails in these troubled waters of spying may be indicated by what happens to the U.S.S. Banner, sister spy ship of the Pueblo.