

Pueblo Skipper Says Naval Inquiry Is Fair

By George C. Wilson

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CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 27—Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher of the Pueblo said through his attorneys today that he is getting a fair shake from the Naval Court of Inquiry investigating why he surrendered his ship.

Bucher feels there has been an "overreaction" to the court's warning last week that he might be recommended for court-martial for letting North Koreans board his ship on Jan. 23, 1968, without putting up a fight.

E. Miles Harvey, Bucher's civilian attorney who is also a commander in the Naval Reserve, told a press conference today that both he and the Commander considered the warning "routine" and one that had to be given.

'Eminently Fair'

Harvey conceded that this procedure probably had not been explained adequately ahead of time but said Bucher wanted to make sure the public understood that "this court has been eminently fair" with him.

Bucher's status before the court was changed last week from "party" to "suspect" after the five admirals con-

ducting the inquiry heard him describe how North Koreans boarded the Pueblo unopposed.

Theoretically, the court had no knowledge of this beforehand since it started the inquiry with a clean slate. So only after the testimony was taken could the warning be issued.

The specific Navy regulation that Bucher is "suspect" of violating is 0730, which states "the commanding officer shall not permit his command to be searched by any person representing a foreign state nor permit any of the personnel under his command to be removed from the command by such person, so long as he has the power to resist."

Commander's Testimony

Bucher has testified he did not have the power to resist since the Pueblo spy ship was hopelessly outgunned by four North Korean torpedo boats and a subchaser.

Harvey said today he did not foresee any other Navy regulations Bucher would be held in suspicion of breaking.

Press reaction and the 300 to 400 telegrams that have flooded Bucher's home have indicated to him that public believes the court is out to get

him, Harvey said. This impelled the Pueblo skipper to request today's press conference to knock down that impression, Harvey said.

It was all Bucher's idea and not requested by the Navy, Harvey said, although Adm. Thomas H. Moorer's distress at the public reaction to the court's warning figured in the Pueblo skipper's decision. Moorer Chief of Naval Operations, said in a weekend speech the Navy is looking only for "facts, not a scapegoat."

Asked if he believed the Court of Inquiry would recommend Bucher for court-martial, Harvey said: "It is premature to make any comment along this line."

Wants Another Command

Harvey did say, however, that Bucher "definitely wants another command." His attorney added that Bucher "evidences to me everything you would want to see in a Navy commander."

Harvey said that Bucher, "in order of priority," wants to get the court proceedings over with; spend more time with his family, and then get on with his normal life as a Navy officer.

He views the Court of Inquiry "as an opportunity to clear any slur which may have been on his name and to get the facts before the Nation," Harvey said.

Bucher is known to feel grateful to Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen Jr., president of the Court of Inquiry, for letting him give his story in straight narrative form rather than through questions and answers. Capt. James E. Keys, Bucher's Navy attorney, said today that such a procedure is "somewhat different but not improper."

Capt. Vincent Thomas, Pacific Command public information officer who heads press operations here, estimated today that the inquiry

would last another four weeks.

Other Witnesses

Bucher attended this morning's closed-door session but did not testify. Witnesses in the morning session were Capt. Forrest A. Pease, who was chief of staff at U.S. Naval Forces Japan last Jan. 11 when the Pueblo sailed for waters off North Korea, and Capt. William H. Everett, the Naval Command's operations officer at the time.

Scheduled to testify next is Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson who was commander of U.S. Naval Forces Japan during the Pueblo crisis. It was Johnson who, as operational commander of the Pueblo, had to decide how to respond to the Pueblo's plight when it called for help.

Harvey said during today's press conference that "the record of these proceedings will contain the full story" of the Pueblo incident, so there would be no point in holding separate hearings on it. This inquiry, he said, "will answer all the questions that need to be answered."