

String of Fiascoes Discredits Navy

By Jack Anderson

The deeper the Navy delves into the Pueblo affair, the more compelling is the evidence that some swivel-chair admirals should be on trial.

They dispatched a slow, undefended, ill-equipped ship into troubled waters to spy on North Korea. She was loaded with electronic gear, tapes and documents so secret that even the skipper, Cmdr. Lloyd (Pete) Bucher, wasn't permitted full access. Yet, in case of capture, sledge hammers were the only available destruction devices, and the documents had to be stuffed into weighted canvas bags and dumped overboard.

Machine guns were mounted on board, but Bucher was ordered to keep them tightly covered in sensitive waters to avoid suspicion. Despite three warnings from the irascible North Koreans immediately before the seizure, the admirals neither withdrew the Pueblo nor took steps to protect her. Half a dozen Air Force fighters, which had been kept on strip alert in South Korea to protect a sister spy ship on a less provocative mission, were left in Okinawa 900 miles away while the Pueblo cruised off the North Korean coast.

When the Pueblo was first intercepted and circled by two North Korean vessels, the radio officer couldn't raise Navy headquarters in Japan

for 14 hours. The message didn't reach the Pentagon for 25 hours and 35 minutes.

Case Against Navy

This incredible botch-up is another in an alarming series of incidents that have shaken public confidence in the Navy. In an unpublished manuscript sent to me for preview, Dan Gallery, a retired admiral, complains sadly:

"The dry rot from ashore is beginning to get into our ships . . . It used to be that a captain's main concern in training his crew and running his ship was to make her a man o' war. Now a captain must look back over his shoulder and ask himself, 'What will the public info boys back in the Pentagon think of this.'"

The main occupation of the admirals who man the desks at the Pentagon seemingly is to keep their gold braid untarnished.

Here are some of the results:

Scorpion Affair—The nuclear submarine Scorpion disappeared in the Atlantic last May. For five months, the Navy searched the ocean bottom in vain for the wreckage until the Russians helpfully pointed out where the Scorpion had gone down. The untold truth is that the Soviet Navy kept better track of the Scorpion than did our own Navy. The underwater pictures don't reveal the cause of the tragedy, except there was

no evidence of an explosion. Apparently the ocean pressure simply crushed the hull like an egg. Yet for seven years, the Navy has ignored warnings that defective steel plates have been going into submarine construction.

Liberty Affair—When the Israelis ripped into their Arab neighbors in June, 1967, two warnings were dispatched to the spy ship Liberty to clear out of the area. The first message was delivered to the Naval communications station in the Philippines. The second at least reached the Mediterranean but was erroneously routed to a relay station in Morocco. Meanwhile, Israeli planes, mistaking the Liberty for an Egyptian ship, bombed it and killed 34 crewmen.

Arnheiter Affair—Lt. Cmdr. Marc Arnheiter, the gung-ho skipper of the picket ship Vance, upset some junior officers by attacking enemy targets on the Vietnam coast too aggressively and by cracking down on his crew's lax ways. Their complaints to a Navy chaplain resulted in Arnheiter's summary dismissal. He demanded the right to face his accusers at a court-martial. By this time, however, so many admirals had become involved in the decision that they merely gave him the run-around until this column took up his cause.

Alexander Affair—Capt. Richard Alexander, one of the Navy's most promising offi-

cers, who had been given command of the battleship New Jersey, felt Arnheiter had received a raw deal. Troubled by his conscience, he put his career on the line and protested to the Secretary of the Navy over Arnheiter's treatment. Alexander summed up the case in a letter demanding: "Mr. Secretary, the question all your officers will ask is—How the hell can this happen in the U.S. Navy?" Instead of justice for Arnheiter, the courageous captain was abruptly transferred from the bridge of the New Jersey to command an ancient mahogany desk in the Boston Navy Yard.

Cheek Affair—Four disgruntled seamen complained to Rep. Mendel Rivers that their skipper, Cmdr. Glen Cheek of the Ault, had worked them too hard and had cut back their weekend leaves. Rivers forwarded the complaints to the admirals, who, eager to placate the powerful House Armed Services Chairman, summarily stripped Cheek of his command. Apparently it made no difference that three of the four instigators later retracted their complaints and that almost everyone else on board signed statements praising Cheek. The admirals stubbornly stuck to their decision to relieve him "for cause." However, they recognized the injustice and made it up to Cheek afterward, as a reward for keeping his mouth shut, by promoting him to captain.