

Pueblo Crew's Exposure Strengthens Release Idea

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No Breakthrough in Panmunjom Talks Seen

By LEWIS GULICK

WASHINGTON (AP) — The new North Korean exposure of the Pueblo crew has strengthened an assessment here that the Reds will eventually set the men free. But it produced no signs of an imminent breakthrough in the deadlocked talks at Panmunjom.

This conclusion came Saturday from U.S. officials who combed through extensive reports of the four hour news conference staged by the North Koreans Thursday. For the first time since the Pueblo's Jan. 23 capture, some non-communist newsmen saw the U.S. prisoners.

What seemed new from the affair was North Korean disclosure of a U.S. intelligence ship order, expanded allegation of U. S. spy-boat intrusions and non-communist accounts indicating the crewmen are in relatively good physical condition.

The U.S. government has already sought to demolish the Red claim that the February 1966 Navy reconnaissance order carried aboard the Pueblo authorized the electronic eavesdropping vessel to snoop within three miles of the North Korean coastline. It made public what it said were specific Jan. 5, 1968, sailing orders to the Pueblo telling its skipper, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, to steer outside the Communists' claimed 12-mile limit.

NEW CLAIM

As for the Reds' new claim of 17 Pueblo penetrations inside the 12-mile limit—previously they listed only six—the Washington officials noted the North Koreans produced no more evidence for such charges than before. Actually, since the Pueblo kept radio silence until the day of her seizure, neither side has produced proof of her exact whereabouts.

The reports by Japanese newsmen invited to the news conference with Bucher and 19

of the 82 surviving crew confirmed accounts from earlier news conferences attended only by Communist journalists that the men appeared to be in good health.

The pains which North Korea is taking to portray the prisoners as well treated, indicates to U.S. authorities the captors intend eventually to

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PUEBLO CREW

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release the men—rather than carry out veiled threats to sentence them to death on allegations of criminal espionage.

The theory here has been that the North Koreans will hold on to the Pueblo captives as long as they think they can use them to score propaganda gains, to wring a humiliating confession from the United States and to demonstrate alleged impotence of the world's foremost "capitalist imperialist" power to rescue its sailors.

Since the North Koreans vigorously pushed their charges again at the Thursday exposure of the crew, the presumption by U.S. authorities is that no breakthrough is likely soon in the Panmunjom stalemate.

At the Korean truce site, U.S. negotiators have been demanding prompt release of the ship and crew which they say was seized by North Korean gunboats in international waters. The Reds are calling for a U.S. confession to spying inside Korean territory, an apology and a promise to cease such operations in the future.

There have been 20 Panmunjom sessions on the Pueblo so far. Another is expected shortly.

Bucher was quoted on Thursday, as he has been before, as acknowledging that he sailed deep inside North Korean waters.

U.S. officials observed that the words used by the Pueblo skipper and his men, as previously, sounded like a North Korean propaganda version rather than what an American would say of his own free will.

Letters from crewmen, which came to a virtual halt late last spring, are once again beginning to arrive in the United States, officials said.