

JOHNSON RECEIVES A PUEBLO 'LETTER'

It Is Purported to Be From
Crew and Urges U.S. to
Apologize for Intrusion

5 MARCH 1968

The text of the Pueblo letter
will be found on Page 5.

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 4—

President Johnson received today an open letter purported to be from crew members of the captured intelligence ship Pueblo. It appealed for "assistance in our repatriation" by a public apology to North Korea.

The State Department announced that the 800-word letter, apparently signed by a majority of the 82 surviving crewmen, was handed to United States negotiators at a meeting in Panmunjon last night. [The North Korean press agency said all of the crewmen had signed the letter.]

That session was the 10th in a series of private conferences with the North Koreans in the stalled effort to negotiate the release of the Pueblo and her crew. The vessel was seized off North Korea's Wonsan Bay on Jan. 23.

Letter Dated Feb. 29

The Pyongyang radio broadcast the text of the letter, which was dated Feb. 29. State Department officials confirmed that the radio version coincided with the text relayed to the President in Puerto Rico before his return from a holiday weekend.

The letter calls upon President Johnson to "frankly admit the fact that we intruded into the territorial waters" of North Korea, to apologize and to give assurance that such an intrusion will not occur again.

The repatriation of the prisoners can be achieved only after such public statements, the letter said.

After initial readings, American officials said the letter seemed quite different in tone and phrasing from previous "confessions" broadcast by North Korea. Those statements

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contained awkward English phrases that suggested that they had been fabricated by North Korean propagandists.

With only a few passages considered questionable, the present letter has an air of authenticity that the earlier statements lacked. State Department officials cautioned, however, that no final judgment could be made until the letter and the signatures affixed to it had been analyzed.

The letter purports to describe the Pueblo's movements and intelligence missions, including the 10-day period of radio silence just before the seizure. It says that the ship did, in fact, penetrate North Korea's 12-mile coastal waters.

Administration officials have contended that the Pueblo was ordered to stay at least 13 miles off the North Korean coast at all times. The letter contradicted this, saying:

"As we were ordered, we concentrated our intelligence-collection efforts during the 10 days in the coastal waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the vicinity of four ports: Chongjin, Songjin, Mavang-do and Wonsan.

"We sampled the electronic environment with emphasis on collecting various information on the naval forces of the Korean People's Army and intercepting and locating radars along the coast.

"We also intercepted communications and detected observation posts and military objects located on the coast."

United States officials have acknowledged that electronic-

observation missions were assigned to the Pueblo. What is in dispute is the letter's assertion that the ship had been ordered to approach the North Korean coast.

Administration spokesmen, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the retired Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, have admitted the possibility that the Pueblo could have penetrated territorial waters in violation of orders during the period of radio silence. Only the ship's log would show that, they said.

The letter gave this account: "We were captured while committing hostile acts 7.6 miles from Yo-do in the vicinity of Wonsan in the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on 23 January 1968.

"Immediately following the capture, we attempted to deny the real purpose of our operation and our intrusion into the territorial waters, hoping to safeguard national security and our national honor.

"However, we could not long deny the facts since the Korean People's Army had in their possession our documents, which revealed the real purpose of our operation and the ship's position logs and charts."

In North Korea, the coastal patrols that boarded the Pueblo are technically considered naval personnel of the national army.

The State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, said that it was not yet clear how many signatures were affixed to the letter. A version of the letter was cabled to Washington late yesterday. The actual document handed over at Panmunjon has not yet arrived.

The letter referred to the Pueblo as AGER-2, which is the United States Navy's clas-

sification for the vessel, Auxiliary General Electronic Research.

One hypothesis is that crew members could have dictated the opening and closing paragraphs of the letter, which could be authentic sentiments of men held prisoner and out of contact for nearly six weeks.

The more suspect middle section, according to this reasoning, could have been inserted or altered by North Korean officials.