

HELD 11 MONTHS

82 Men Are Expected to Be Flown Home Quickly From Seoul

By PETER GROSE

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 22—The United States announced agreement with North Korea today on arrangements for the release of the 82 surviving crew members of the U.S.S. Pueblo, exactly 11 months after the electronic intelligence ship was boarded and seized off the North Korean coast in the Sea of Japan.

A State Department announcement said the prisoners would be released at 11 A.M. Monday, Korean time (9 P.M. Sunday Eastern Standard Time). The Navy notified the families of the prisoners at about 3 A.M. today.

The North Korean press agency reported that "the U. S. Government signed a document apologizing for the espionage and hostile acts committed by the armed spy ship Pueblo after intruding into the territorial waters" of North Korea.

The North Korean statement said the United States also gave "assurance that it will not commit such criminal acts again in the future."

'Apology and Assurance'

"Taking into consideration apology and assurance of the U. S. Government," the North Korean report said, the Pueblo crew was to be released today.

[To obtain the release, Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward of the United States signed under protest a North Korean document asserting that the Pueblo had violated North Korean territorial waters and been spying when she was captured. The North Koreans said the release would be delayed 30 minutes in retaliation for a statement in Washington early Sunday by the State Department breaking the news of the time of the agreed release.]

'Bridge of No Return'

The men are expected to walk across the narrow "Bridge of No Return" close to the military demarcation line between North and South Korea near the truce site at Panmunjom. United States Army helicopters and ambulances were standing by to take the men to a military hospital near Seoul. They are then to be evacuated as quickly as possible to Honolulu or San Diego for debriefing and reunions with their families.

12-23-68
MIT
A final meeting last night between military negotiators of the two sides completed the arrangements for the release. Until the 82 men are actually in United States custody, the State Department said, "we

Continued on Page 3, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

will have nothing more to say."

The official statement, issued by the State Department spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, said: "A meeting was held at Panmunjom last night. The crew of the Pueblo is scheduled to be released at 9 P.M. Eastern Standard Time Dec. 22. Until then we will have nothing more to say."

The United States was expected to issue a statement, the terms of which have already been agreed upon with North Korea, at the moment of the crew's release. The Pyongyang regime has insisted on an American apology for what it asserts was a deliberate violation of North Korean territorial waters for espionage purposes.

No Word on Ship's Return

Nothing was said by the State Department or the Pentagon about the return of the Pueblo herself. A former Army cargo vessel, she was recommissioned for secret eavesdropping missions and equipped with the United States' most sensitive intelligence-gathering and radio monitoring devices.

American officials have long assumed that the 906-ton ship was promptly stripped of its multi-million-dollar gear and studied by counterintelligence teams called to North Korea from Moscow.

The break in the long deadlock over the Pueblo clearly came last week. After six weeks without a formal meeting, the two sides held a long session last Monday. They met again on Wednesday for nearly five hours, then completed the arrangements last night.

Many months ago, the United States negotiators informed the North Koreans that they would be willing to submit a formal statement, sufficiently ambiguous in its wording to permit North Korea to interpret it as the demanded apology, but which the United States could declare was not an admission of wrongdoing.

Timing a Key Issue

The precise timing for submission of this statement is understood to have been one of the details under discussion in the last meetings. The question was whether it should be handed over at the moment of the prisoners' release, as Washington insisted, or before the actual return of the men was arranged, as North Korea proposed.

In the long history of world intelligence operations, the Pueblo case ranks with the 1960 U-2 spy plane incident in the Soviet Union as demonstrating both the vulnerability of modern intelligence techniques and the inability of massive air and sea power to

retrieve or cover up a forward operation once it has been exposed.

Despite the anger and frustration widely expressed in and out of the Government last January, the Administration in Washington quickly decided that the use of American military might would be ineffective in getting the crewmen back alive.

Drastic military moves, such as the landing of commandos or punitive bombardments, were proposed and rejected. It was felt that they would probably have resulted in the killing of the prisoners, and possibly in the opening of a second war front in Asia.

Instead, it was left to patient diplomatic means to resolve the problem, once tempers had dropped and the propaganda value of the Pueblo case to the Communists had diminished.

Last night's meeting at Panmunjom was the 28th in a series of secret and often vituperative sessions between military representatives of the United States and North Korea. The chief American negotiator was Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, chief representative of the United Nations Command in the Military Armistice Commission for Korea. The North Korea negotiator was Maj. Gen. Pak Chung Kuk, Pyongyang's top member of the armistice committee.

From the first days after the capture of the Pueblo off the

port of Wonsan last Jan. 23, the Administration insisted that the seizure was an "act of piracy" on the high seas. Evidence from United States communications, and even from monitored North Korean radio signals, placed the vessel well outside a 12-mile limit from the coastline at the time it was boarded, officials said.

Moreover, the official orders to the Pueblo for its fateful mission clearly specified that the ship should remain at least 13 nautical miles from the coast at all times. The Defense Department took the unusual step of making these secret operational orders public last September, in an effort to prove that the Pueblo was not on an illegal mission.

Complicating the Administration's argument, however, was the fact that for 10 days prior to being seized the Pueblo was maintaining radio silence to avoid interception by Soviet monitoring vessels nearby. It could not be stated with absolute certainty, therefore, that the Pueblo had not entered North Korean waters prior to Jan. 23 either inadvertently or in disregard of orders.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Robert S. McNamara, who was then Secretary of Defense, repeatedly insisted that there was no evidence of a violation of territorial waters. But even if there had been, United States officials said, the boarding and seizure were illegal since they took place on the high seas.



Associated Press

DURING CAPTIVITY: Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, captain of the Pueblo, speaking at a press conference last summer in Pyongyang at which he and members of his crew appeared.

enlisted men, two marines and two civilian hydrographic engineers.

One man was reported by the North Koreans to have been wounded in the brief struggle with the boarding party and later to have died from his injuries. He was identified as Fireman Duane H. Hodges of Creswell, Ore.

The United States quickly asked the Soviet Union to use its influence with North Korea to have the Pueblo and her crew released. Moscow publicly refused.

Preparations Completed

Special to The New York Times

SEOUL, South Korea, Dec. 22.—United States authorities in Seoul completed preparations today to receive the crew of the Pueblo upon their return tomorrow from 11 months' captivity.

South Korea's Foreign Minister, Choi Kyu Hah, disclosed this evening that his Government had been officially informed of plans for the release of the Pueblo crew after today's meeting of American and North Korean representatives at Panmunjom.

After crossing the "Bridge of No Return," the crewmen were expected to be taken briefly to the officers' mess of the United Nation's Command's advance camp about a mile from the Joint Security area that surrounds Panmunjom.

Helicopters will then fly the crew to the 121st United States Army Evacuation Hospital, 10 miles east of Seoul, for their medical examinations, after which they will be taken to the United States.

Apology Statement Likely

It was regarded here as almost certain that the United States would make some sort of statement in the nature of

The Pueblo skipper was Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, aged 38, a native of Pocatello, Idaho, and graduate of the Boys Town training school in Nebraska. It was his first command.

Commander Bucher's voice has been identified in propaganda broadcasts from Pyongyang since the seizure, but the United States has been unwilling to accept his alleged "confession" until American officers could interview him and determine whether these statements were made under duress.

There were 83 Americans on board the Pueblo for its secret mission: five officers under Commander Bucher, 73 naval

personnel "contiguous" rather than

"territorial" waters, it was believed.

Other conditions demanded by Pyongyang include an American promise not to violate North Korean waters in future and a withdrawal of American military personnel and equipment sent into South Korea in the large-scale military build-up since the Pueblo incident.

It was considered highly unlikely that the United States had acceded to the demand to pull out troops and arms. The South Korean Government which has been subjected to from the North in recent months would strongly protest any such step.



The New York Times Dec. 23, 1968
Pueblo was taken to Wonsan (1) last January by North Koreans. Crew was scheduled to cross at Panmunjom (2) and be flown to hospital near Seoul (3).