

Pueblo Captain's Actions Defended

Praise by

Military

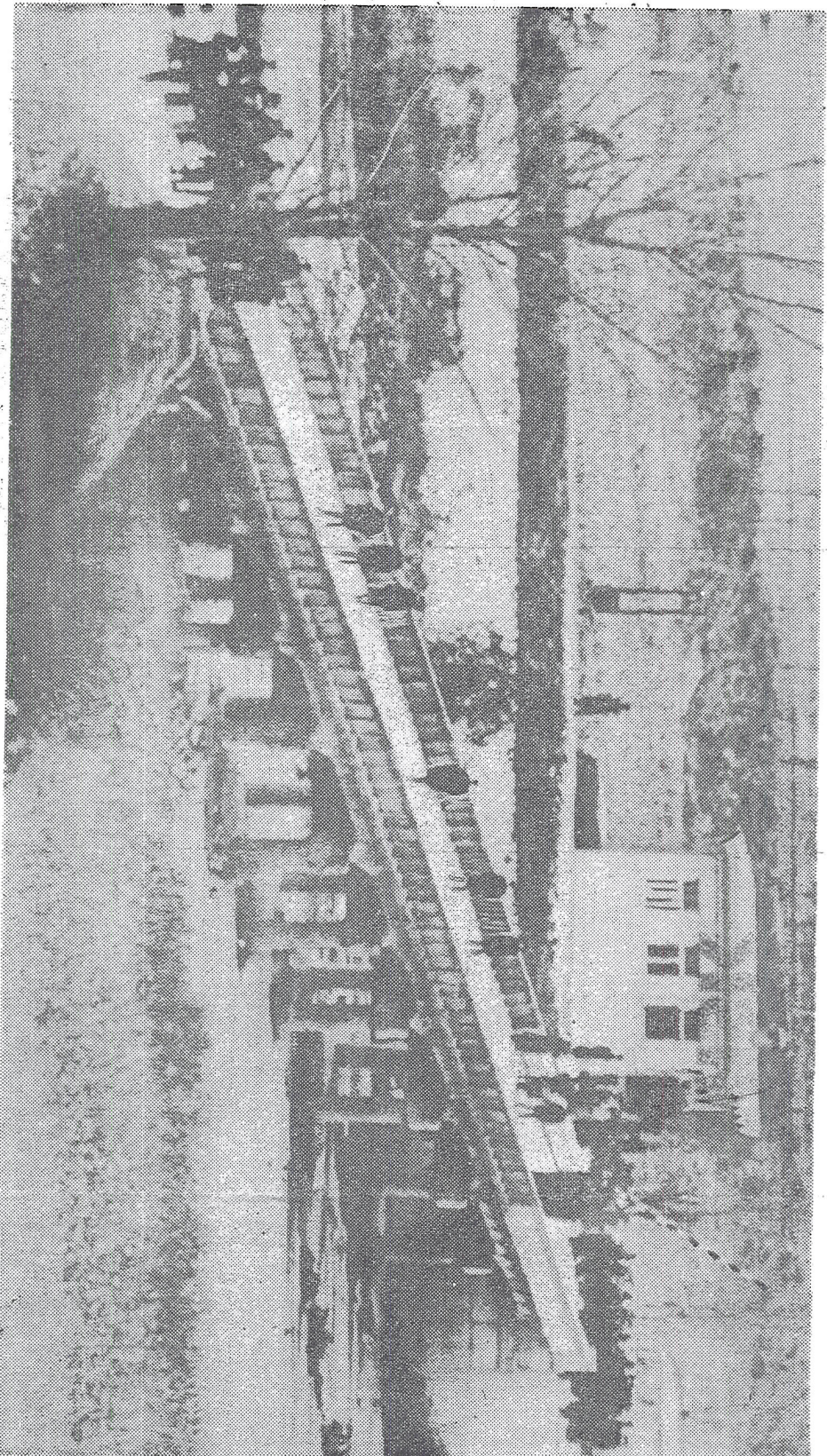
Colleagues

Panmunjon, Korea

Commander Lloyd M. Bucher drew nearly unanimous praise from military colleagues here for his press conference barely an hour and a half after he and the rest of the Pueblo's crew were released from captivity yesterday.

Although it is doubtful that Bucher will ever be promoted, some of his colleagues said it is equally doubtful that he will be punished for misconduct in view of the similarity between his repudiation of his earlier "confessions" of violating North Korean territorial waters and the U.S. Government's repudiated apology to free the crew.

"How can the Navy get tough with him when Major General (Gilbert) Woodward did the same thing to free the Pueblo crew?" an officer asked.



LPI Telephoto

Pueblo crewmen field across the 'Bridge of No Return' into South Korea. (foreground) after their release

APOLOGY



AP Wirephoto

COMMANDER LLOYD BUCHER Terrors of North Korean captivity

said he was as surprised as anybody else.

There were hints that the Navy may have determined Bucher's action, although he hardly had time to be coached in the short interval between his walk to freedom and the meeting at the U.S. advance camp just south of the joint security area.

The only Navy officer at the windswept bridge was Lieutenant Commander Paul Brooks, from the staff of the Armistice Affairs Division of the United Nations Command in Seoul.

RETURN

However, Bucher did see during the interval rear Admiral Edward Rosenberg, commander of the Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force, who had been privy to the long planning for the eventual return of the crew.

The navy's, and Bucher's, problem is that the skipper and his men, particularly officers, participated in a torrent of broadcast interviews, propaganda films and letter writing by which the North Koreans sought to establish the ship's guilt. As the crew walked across the bridge, a tape recording of their commander's voice was played repeatedly from loudspeakers at the Communist end of the bridge.

"For each of us this is the most exciting moment we

have ever experienced," Bucher's voice said in a recording which must have been made just before the release since he told newsmen he had no inkling of being freed until the latter half of last week.

"Eleven months to the day ago, we were captured in the act of committing espionage and violating the territorial integrity of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea."

BUS

The voice continued to denounce the U.S. "occupation" of South Korea until the last bus carrying the Pueblo's officers left the bridge.

Bucher based his defense against any wrong-doing on his assumption that his confessions were too far-fetched to be credited.

"I had to rely on two things — that the U.S. Navy would have faith in me," he said, "and that the people of the United States would not believe the U.S. Navy would send a ship out on an espionage mission."

The skipper also cited his "terror" at the "vivid threats" to himself and his men by the Communists, who he said were without any trace of humanity. He said he was hit only by fist and feet, but that other Pueblo crewmen were beaten with clubs.

"The last week was the most concentrated form of terror," he said. "I'm not a terror or espionage man — all I know about that is James Bond books."

Yet in almost the same breath the 41-year-old officer assured newsmen that "our life was not unbearable."

Bucher himself looked thin and worn, with his graying blond hair cut short, but he said he felt much better in the later stages of captivity than in the earlier days when solitary confinement gave him "many occasions when I didn't think I was going to make it."

Times-Post Service

Woodward, in the name of the U.S. Government, signed a statement of apology admitting U. S. espionage and trespass, but repudiated the statement. Bucher, while captive, freely admitted intruding into North Korean waters, but insisted after his release that his ship had never violated the 12-mile territorial limit.

There will be an automatic inquiry into the loss of the Pueblo and the conduct of its crew, Captain Vincent Thomas, information chief for the Pacific commander, said before Bucher's press conference.

Thomas introduced Bucher with enthusiasm, however, and said, "this is Captain Bucher, still captain of the Pueblo."

QUIZ

Nobody here expected the freed skipper to appear before newsmen and answer questions until after weeks of careful "debriefing," the invariable practice in cases like the Pueblo in the past. Bucher himself proposed the idea, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Rryklund said, and Fryklund