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PUEBLO 2nd NL 1,000

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CORONADO, Calif. AP - The captain of the Pueblo said Tuesday it was hopelessly outgunned with "no hope of outrunning" the North Korean gunboats that attacked the intelligence ship just before its capture.

He said he radioed his plight to the Navy command in Japan and, ultimately, to the White House.

When the boats closed in and pointed guns at his ship, Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher testified he said "I'll be damned if they're going to get away with that," and he tried to maneuver away from them.

The 41-year-old Navy officer spoke calmly to the five admirals comprising a board of inquiry into the Pueblo's capture and the 11-month imprisonment of its crew. But he appeared emotionally drained when he finished.

It was just before noon last Jan. 23 when a lone boat headed toward them on the Sea of Japan and circled, guns manned, as he signaled he was making hydrographic tests in international waters, Bucher said.

Soon three torpedo boats, then a fourth, approached to point blank range as he radioed his plight to Japan and later to the White House in Washington.

Bucher said he thought it was just harassment, but he ordered secret items destroyed and got under way to try to get away. To man the Pueblo's machineguns, he said, would have meant "certain death" for the gunner. Bucher said his defiance of a "heave to or be fired upon" order caused the North Koreans to open fire and he and others were hit by shrapnel.

He was to continue his testimony Wednesday with details of the ship's capture.

Bucher said earlier his assignment was to conduct surveillance of Soviet ships in the Sea of Japan and monitor North Korean radar, but he saved the surveillance until the last and was captured before he got to it.

And he denied, one by one, 17 Communist charges that his ship violated North Korean waters.

Here are highlights of his testimony:

When the first ship, a sub chaser, was sighted seven or eight miles away Bucher ordered the Pueblo's position confirmed—"15 to 17 miles f 2pn.b57k-mounted guns, 57-millimeter cannons, were all made a 5 a l d rection. I suspected this was nothing more than routine surveillance."

He said he ordered all hands to remain below decks to avoid letting the North Koreans know how many men he had on board, and raised flags showing the Pueblo was taking hydrographic tests.

Bucher said the sub chaser hoisted a signal asking "what nationality?"

"My response to that was the hoist the U.S. Flag."

"I was not particularly apprehensive," he said, but ordered that a running narrative be kept and that all the engineroom prepare to maneuver.

Then a junior officer "reported sighting three torpedo boats headed in our direction, operating from the same location Wonsan Harbor as the sub chaser," Bucher said.

"They were identified as P-4's, armed with deck-mounted machine guns and torpedoes on both the port and starboard sides. The torpedo tubes were covered, but the guns were manned."

The sub chaser then hoisted flags demanding "heave to or I will fire," Bucher said. "I was momentarily confused as to just what he meant by that message since I was dead in the water."

He said he signaled, "I am in international waters..."

Meanwhile, he said, he was having "very good luck" in communicating with navy headquarters in Japan. Earlier he had reported previous difficulties in reporting his initial detection by North Korean vessels.

"I told the radioman to keep the line open," Bucher said. Then he said he sent a message reporting the presence of the torpedo boats, and "I raised the precedence from flash to critic, enabling it to go straight and direct to the White House."

A junior officer asked about scuttling the Pueblo but the skipper thought, he said, it could not be done quickly enough—another officer had told him it would take more than 2½ hours—and the vessel was in only 30 fathoms of water.

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CORONADO - Pueblo 2nd NL A291LA Take 2: water.

"I was indeed concerned," Bucher said, "but not to the point that I thought the North Korean ships would do anything more than continue the harrassment and get me to do something embarrassing."

Bucher said a fourth torpedo boat appeared. "I now had them on both bows and both quarters at point-blank range about 25 yards."

He did not go to battle stations as "I did not want to give them the excuse of concluding our ship was in their vicinity and being aggressive."

But at this point, Bucher said, he gave the order to prepare to destroy classified material.

"At about the same time, two MIG aircraft, I believe they were MIG 21's, passed directly over the ship and began to circle."

He said he prepared a message of "Critic priority" that "one of the P-4's was backing toward my bow, intending to board."

"Friar Tuck the nickname for the oceanographer, get that damned gear up here," Bucher said he shouted. "I'm leaving!"

"I said on the bridge that 'I'll be damned if they're going to get away with that' so I got under way out to sea to gain as much room as possible to maneuver."

"I ordered a modified general quarters and hoisted the flag signals hoping to confuse the sub chaser."

"Thank you for your consideration," Bucher said he messaged, "I am departing."

"In hindsight I should have filled my yardam with flags of all sorts and let them fiddle with it to try to figure out something that really meant nothing," Bucher said.

"They started playing porpoise, crossing my bow at 10 yards, and keeping all guns aimed at me," Bucher said. "I did not feel at any time, though, that there was any point in going to war. I was completely and hopelessly outgunned. To man our 50-caliber machine guns would have been to send a man up to that gun and that would have been certain death to him."

"And we would have had to remove their covers, which were in fact frozen. . . I saw no point in sending people pointlessly to their deaths."

Bucher said he gained 3,000 yards on the sub chaser before the North Korean vessel gave chase in earnest, angling toward the Pueblo's port side "to bring his guns to bear on as big an angle of my ship as possible."

He said the sub chaser again signaled, "Heave to or I will fire on you," and "I ignored this."

"At 1,500 to 2,000 yards the sub chaser opened fire."

Bucher said. "Each salvo contained 6 to 14 individual shells."

"On the bridge were myself, Signalman 1-c Wendell G. Leach, Quartermaster 1-c Charles B. Law and Communications technician 3-c Steven J. Robbin."

"Robbin and Leach and I received shrapnel wounds. One piece of shrapnel passed directly into my rear end and other pieces into my leg and my right ankle. Leach was hit in the leg, Robbin in the neck."

"The five to six pieces in my leg did not bother me, but the one that entered my rectum gave me considerable pain. But I was able to completely ignore it and resume full control of the ship within about five seconds."

"I did not give my troubles another thought until I reported them by message 20 or 30 minutes later."

Bucher said that after a few months of imprisonment a North Korean general told him he would have been torpedoed had he continued to depart the area.

Rear Adm. Edward Grimm, a member of the board of inquiry, asked whether Bucher could have taken the Pueblo to 100 fathoms and then scuttled it, wondering "would they the Koreans have more right to salvage the ship than we would?"

"No sir, Admiral, I never thought of salvage rights," Bucher replied.

Earlier, in denying he entered North Korean Waters, the skipper said the Pueblo nearly was rammed by a North Korean fishing boat that "swerved away at the last possible minute" the day before the capture.

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