

Bucher Asserts He Signed Confession to Save Crew

By BERNARD WEINRAUB
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CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 23—

Weeping and trembling, Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher said today that he had signed a confession in North Korea to prevent the deaths of the 82 surviving crewmen of the intelligence ship Pueblo.

"I was not prepared to see my crew shot," Commander Bucher said in a choked voice at the Navy court of inquiry into the seizure of the Pueblo off North Korea one year ago today. "I was convinced that they (the North Koreans) would do it. I was convinced that they were animals."

The 41-year-old skipper, standing before the five admirals of the court, then shrugged and turned his head and wept.

On the fourth morning of testimony at the Naval Amphibious Base here, Commander Bucher told in dramatic detail of his efforts, despite repeated beatings, to avoid signing a confession that the ship had been engaged in "espionage."

Once he had signed the confession, Commander Bucher recalled, he was so emotionally tormented that he sought to kill himself.

"I tried to commit suicide by drowning myself in a bucket of water in my room," he said. "I was unable to do so."

He spoke in a low, taut voice that cracked repeatedly. His wife, Rose, sitting in the first row of the packed hearing room, dabbed at her eyes with her fingers.

He testified that the Pueblo's crewmen had been blindfolded and taken by bus and train on a one-day trip to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.

Commander Bucher said that in Pyongyang he was taken to the third floor of a building, beaten on the back, chest and stomach, and ordered to sign a confession.

"Upon getting off the bus I received a tremendous kick

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in the small of the neck," he recalled further.

"That one really got me," he said, "I turned around and went after the guy, a little Korean. Before I could reach him I was grabbed and thrown forward."

Commander Bucher said that he had been placed in the charge of a North Korean colonel, later nicknamed "Super C," who ordered him to sign a confession.

Refuses to Sign

"I refused," the skipper said. "I was told that I would be given two minutes to sign the document or I would be shot."

At this point, he paused and sipped water from a yellow goblet. His shoulders sagged and his hands trembled.

"Super C said I had two minutes, but I must say I was somewhat relieved," he murmured. "I was relieved at the prospect of being shot instead of tortured."

'I Love You, Rose'

"I was told to kneel on the floor during the entire two minutes."

He raised a fist to his mouth and closed his eyes. Capt. William R. Newsome, counsel for

the court, rose and asked, "Would you like a recess?"

Commander Bucher shook his head. "No, I would like to get this over with." Then he continued, "I knelt on the floor during the entire two minutes and I repeated over and over . . ." He paused and wept again.

"I merely repeated the

phrase, "I love you, Rose," he said.

Commander Bucher then wept silently again and the admirals, sitting a few feet from him, turned away.

Commander Bucher, who was told yesterday that he was suspected of violating Navy regulations for surrendering the Pueblo and was subject to a court-martial, continued his account in the silent hearing room, a steamy 110 seat amphitheatre.

"The colonel said, 'kill the son of a bitch.' The gun was clicked. The colonel said something else — He said there has been a mistake and I had another two minutes to confess."

"I fully expected to be shot," he said hoarsely.

"But when the slide on the revolver was drawn back," he went on, "I did not hear the bullet hit the floor. I knew damn well they weren't going to kill me."

"They said I was not worth a bullet, they were going to beat me to death. They kicked me and worked me over real good. I lost consciousness after several minutes."

"I was carried out of the room and thrown on my bed. They beat me some more. I had to go to the bathroom and I went, and all I could urinate was blood."

"But I was still pretty mad at these people," Commander

Bucher said, breathing heavily. "I thought at this point I no longer gave a damn what they did to me."

Commander Bucher recalled that upon returning to his room, Super C stepped in. "He told me that I would now be shown what happened to spies," he said.

'Spy' Torture Described

He said he was driven to a nearby building.

At this point in his testimony, Commander Bucher trembled and clenched his fists. He faced the admirals and continued quietly:

"There was a man strapped to a wall. They explained he was a South Korean spy."

"The man was tortured. He had a compound fracture on his right arm with the bone sticking out. He was bare from the waist down. He had completely bitten through his lower lip and the lip was hanging on the side of his mouth."

Once more Commander Bucher wept.

"His right eye was put out and his head was hanging down

and . . . and . . . there was lot of black matter running out of his eye coming down his cheek.

'I Think I Blacked Out'

"I was completely overwhelmed, I think I blacked out. I was shocked."

"When I came to I was told that this is what happens to spies and we could expect the same thing. The experience exhausted me."

Speaking slowly and haltingly, Commander Bucher said he was then taken to a room and told to sign a confession but refused. He went on:

"A general then said, 'You will sign this or we will be-

gin to shoot your crew one at a time in your presence.' They said they would start with the youngest man first, Bland, [Engineman 3d Cl. Howard E. Bland]"

"I was not prepared to go through with that," Commander Bucher said, staring at the admirals. "I was convinced that they would shoot my people and I told them I would sign the confession."

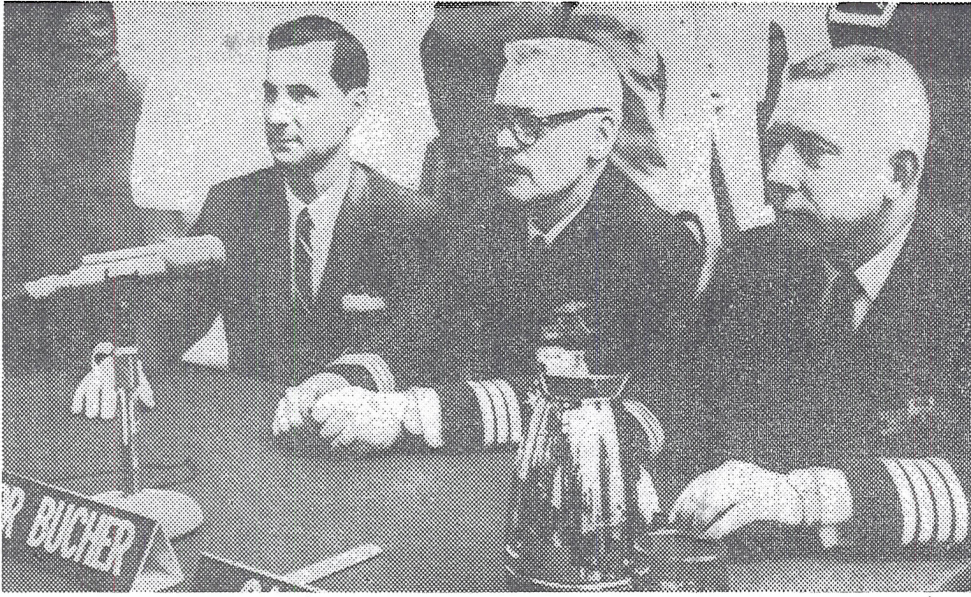
Commander Bucher wept. The session was adjourned.

Pueblo Inquiry Urged

WASHINGTON, Jan. 23 (AP) —The Remember the Pueblo Committee marked the first anniversary of the seizure of the intelligence ship today by demanding a Congressional investigation, return of the vessel and payment of indemnity by North Korea.

The Rev. Paul D. Lindstrom of Prospect Heights, Ill., chairman of the private committee, said that the group favored a military strike to destroy the Pueblo if she was not released.

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Associated Press

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, center, at session of the board of inquiry in Coronado, Calif. E. Miles Harvey is his civilian attorney, Capt. James E. Keys is his military counsel.