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Bucher Pits Moral Judgment Against Naval Code

By BERNARD WEINRAUB
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CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 26 —His face is wan and haggard. He stands tautly before the five admirals, breathing heavily and clenching his fists. His lips quiver when he speaks of the first days in North Korea.

"My state of mind," he says softly, "there was a great deal of thought surrounding my state of mind. I would have like to have rested, but I was thinking. I could not eat nor could I sleep. I can't explain why. I have never in my life experienced anything of that nature. It was just not possible for me to close my eyes. So after I had been up for three days, I had been broken, I did relax."

Comdr. Lloyd Mark Bucher recounts his story of the seizure of the Pueblo in a monotone that rarely breaks. He appears tired and powerless before the admirals who sit behind an elevated table and watch him at the Court of Inquiry on the naval base here.

And yet, standing before this Court of Inquiry, Commander Bucher has placed himself in a rebellious position where he is challenging the court's five admirals, the naval establishment and even the Government.

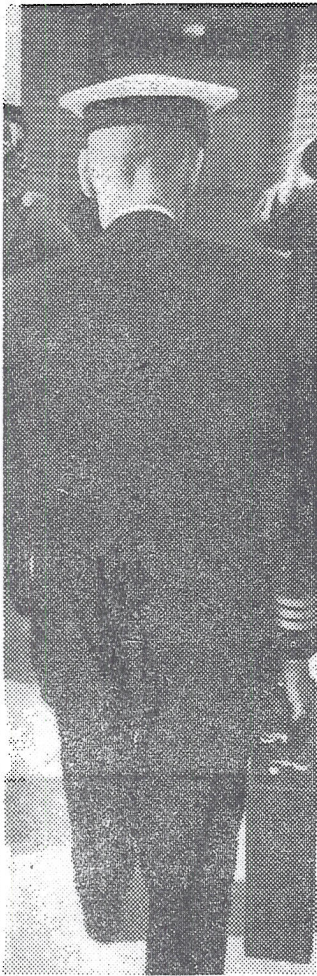
He has told the admirals that the Navy rejected his numerous pleas for a "destruct system," damage control gear, alarms and more phones on the Pueblo, which carried millions of dollars worth of secret electronic equipment.

An Unlikely Rebel

Even his last-minute efforts to buy dynamite—to be used in the event the Pueblo was captured—were fruitless.

Commander Bucher has told of confusing orders from naval superiors about the use of the two-50-caliber machine guns on the ship and equally confusing replies from naval headquarters in Japan to the Pueblo's feverish pleas for help as North Korean torpedo boats and subchasers opened fire Jan. 23, 1968.

His emotional challenge to the Navy, however, goes far



Associated Press

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher arriving for yesterday's meeting of the court of inquiry.

deeper than equipment shortages or indecision. He is challenging the fundamental naval doctrine: "Don't give up the ship."

He is pitting a basic naval code against a basic moral judgment.

"I saw no point in senselessly sending people to their deaths," he repeats over and over.

He has emerged as a dramatic figure who has laid bare the inadequacies and contradictions that sometimes confront an officer who has to make decisions that may have enormous repercussions.

At first glance, Commander

Bucher is quite an unlikely rebel. A Navy veteran of 16 years, he has an impeccable record. He served mostly on submarines before taking over his first command, the Pueblo.

He is politically conservative, with a fondness for William F. Buckley Jr. and Ayn Rand; the author. On weekends in San Diego, Commander Bucher—whom friends call Pete—and his wife, Rose, often visited a local nightclub, the Four Winds, to dance foxtrots and rumbas.

Commander Bucher's mother, Nola Baxter, died in childbirth, and little is known of his father. At the age of 1, he was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. L. B. Bucher of Pocatello, Idaho. One year later Mrs. Bucher died, and the boy was placed in a series of children's homes and orphanages.

A serious student, he was later placed in Boys Town, Neb. He left the orphanage in 1945 to join the Navy for two years and was discharged as a quartermaster second class.

He attended the University of Nebraska, where he signed up for the Reserve officer candidate program and was commissioned an ensign in the Naval Reserve. He reported for active duty in 1954 and has remained in the Navy since then.

A Father to Crew

Clearly, his early life and his decisions as commander of the Pueblo are intertwined.

"He wasn't just a commander to the crew," says a friend. "He was paternal, deeply involved with everyone, trying to understand each man."

"They were like sons to him, and he was like a father, and the idea of ever giving them up, like he had been given up when he was a kid, was very hard, especially when they were totally outnumbered."

Seeking to obtain the confession that the Pueblo was on a mission for the Central Intelligence Agency in North Korean waters, officers beat Commander Bucher repeatedly. He refused to sign the confession.

Then the North Koreans threatened to kill him, placing a revolver twice against his head and pressing the trigger.

Then they threatened to kill his crew one by one. Recounting this, Commander Bucher began to weep.

"They told me they would start with the youngest man first and shoot them in that order, and I was convinced that they were animals," he said.

"I was convinced, however, that they would shoot my people, and that they were desperate to get this confession, and I told them at that time, I said, 'I will sign the confession.'"