

Admiral Says He Lacked Forces to Rescue Pueblo

By BERNARD WEINRAUB
Special to The New York Times

CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 29 — Adm. Frank L. Johnson, former chief of United States naval forces in Japan, said today that there were "no forces" in his command to help the intelligence ship Pueblo when she was seized by North Korea last January.

Admiral Johnson had operational control of the Pueblo, which was on a mission off North Korea.

The white-haired, 61-year-old admiral also told the naval court of inquiry into the seizure of the Pueblo that the ship's two .50-caliber machine guns "did not appear to me to provide it a significant defense capability."

"I was not in favor of arming [the Pueblo], Admiral Johnson testified in the packed 110-seat amphitheater of the Naval Amphibious Base here. "I did consider that they [the guns] might well be provocative."

In two hours of testimony, Admiral Johnson was questioned closely — at times acidly — by the five admirals on the court, which will recommend whether there should be a court-martial.

Admiral Johnson explained slowly that the "on call" forces available to aid the Pueblo had been airplanes of the Fifth Air Force and vessels of the Seventh Fleet.

"The Fifth Air Force reported a delay in two to three hours before they could have aircraft in the area," he said. "The [aircraft carrier] Enterprise was 600 miles from Wonsan. Its extreme range made it practically impossible to come to the assistance [of the Pueblo]."

Rear Adm. Marshall W. White, a member of the court, leaned forward. "Then, when we add it up, we had [on call] forces that did not exist?" he

Continued on Page 8, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 5

asked stiffly.

"That's correct," Admiral Johnson replied. "There were no forces made available to me under my operational control."

Moments later, the president of the court, Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen Jr., turned to Admiral Johnson and said, "You have referred repeatedly to 'on call.' It is somewhat misleading, since nothing was on call."

"It certainly didn't take care of the situation we had and, therefore, I think it is suspect in its validity."

Admiral Johnson's face flushed.

Admiral Johnson was later asked by E. Miles Harvey, the attorney for Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the Pueblo's skipper, about Navy policy at present over such ships as the Pueblo.

"Mr. Harvey, we're in a completely different ball game now," he said. "Concepts have completely changed. Our ships are certainly no longer safe under the concept of the freedom of the seas."

Asked if the Pueblo's sister ship, the Banner, had gone to sea since the Pueblo was seized, Admiral Johnson replied, "She was sent to sea but not on a similar type mission."

Admiral A Key Witness

As Admiral Johnson testified, Commander Bucher sat four feet away, biting his lip and blinking his eyes.

Once more, Commander Bucher appeared wan and quite haggard. Flanked by his civilian and military attorneys, he held his hands tightly folded on a table, breathing heavily and listening to his former commander.

Admiral Johnson has been termed a key witness in the inquiry, which started last week. As the former commander of naval forces in Japan, the highly decorated admiral was responsible for the mission and operations of the Pueblo as well as for Commander Bucher's final briefings.

Commander Bucher said last week that Admiral Johnson told him before the start of the Pueblo's intelligence-gathering mission off North Korea that the ship's machine guns were to be kept covered "unless it was absolutely necessary" and that "he was quite sure that they would never be needed."



United Press International

Rear Admiral Frank L. Johnson leaving yesterday's meeting of the naval court investigating the Pueblo seizure.

Received Pleas For Aid

Admiral Johnson's headquarters in Yokosuka received Commander Bucher's pleas for help as North Korean torpedo boats and submarine chasers opened fire on the Pueblo in the Sea of Japan on Jan. 23.

Admiral Johnson briefly discussed the operations of the Pueblo and the Banner. Both ships are termed agers, the Navy's designation for "environmental research" vessels.

"I was not too concerned with the security and safety of these ager ships," said Admiral Johnson, a World War II veteran who won the Navy Cross for heroism in the Okinawa campaign. "I was not too concerned because the safety of such ships was provided by the time-honored regulations of the sea."

"This had gone on for over 150 years. In this time no United States public vessel was ever illegally seized on the high seas. This was an excellent precedent on which to base decisions on the safety of the ship."

Assurances to Court

Speaking with a tremor, Admiral Johnson said moments later, "I would like to assure the court and Commander Bucher and the crew that, had I been convinced that ship was in jeopardy, I would never have sent the ship on that mission without proper protection."

Admiral Johnson testified that any immediate decision on planes or ships to the help of the Pueblo, or any American ship in trouble, had to be re-

ferred along a chain of command that went from his headquarters in Japan to the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, then to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and sometimes to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington.

The Pueblo's mission was to collect electronic data, particularly of radar installations, and to check on the movements of vessels, including submarines, in the Sea of Japan. It was the ship's first intelligence operation, but the Banner had conducted numerous "snooping" missions off North Korea, the Soviet Union and China.

'Risk Areas' Cited

Admiral Johnson said that there were three "risk areas" in his command that posed "sensitive" problems on intelligence missions — the China coast, the Soviet coast on the Sea of Japan, and the North Korea coast.

"We had two missions off the North Korean coast prior to the Pueblo," said Admiral Johnson. "During these two missions the North Koreans paid no attention to the presence of the ager."

Admiral Johnson told the court that his command conducted 16 ager missions without incident before the Pueblo was seized. The ninth mission, he recalled, was in the East China Sea off Shanghai.

"I thought it would be prudent to have more than on-call support," he said. "I requested that the Fifth Air Force provide aircraft on the runways and that the commander of the Seventh Fleet assign me a destroyer to remain about 30 miles distance from the agers over the horizon."

"The Air Force provided me with the alert," he testified. "The Seventh Fleet did not, but they directed a destroyer from the Taiwan defense patrol to remain in the northern sector of the Shanghai patrol area. It had a reaction time of 16 hours."

Admiral Voices Concern

Admiral Johnson, who testified for more than five hours in closed session last week, said that the order to arm the *Pueblo* had been made by the Chief of Naval Operations. The two .50-caliber machine guns were placed on the ship shortly before her mission off North Korea.

"I was concerned about the reaction to its armed status," Admiral Jackson observed. "I considered it might well be provocative. I was particularly desirous that the ship's guns be covered in order not to elicit too much interest or disclose its presence unnecessarily."

"I made no attempt to try to indicate [to Commander Bucher] that he could not use the weapons," Admiral Johnson said firmly.

Recounting the moments after

the *Pueblo* was seized, Admiral Johnson said that he was called to the telephone of the Sanno Hotel in Tokyo while attending a "tropical cyclone conference" for the Pacific Command.

"It was an unclassified phone and the details were sketchy," he said. "My chief of staff told me the *Pueblo* was in trouble and added, 'They may be gone.'"

Air Support Requested

Admiral Johnson said he immediately took an Army helicopter to his headquarters in Yokosuka.

"I was advised that the Fifth Air Force had been requested

to provide air support," he recalled. "I was advised no request had been made to the commander of the Seventh Fleet because no forces were so positioned.

"I told the staff they had taken proper action."

Admiral Johnson said that the only planes available within "a reasonable distance" from the North Korean coast were Air Force units on Okinawa and possibly in South Korea.

At this point, a member of the court of inquiry, Rear Adm. Edward E. Grimm, asked Admiral Johnson about the availability of planes in Japan.

Admiral Johnson replied, "Under the status of forces [agreement] in Japan, we're not permitted to use military forces based in Japan to go out on combat missions against unfriendly forces."

"To do so," he went on, "requires prior consultation with the Government of Japan."

Reagan Blames Government

Special to The New York Times

SACRAMENTO, Calif., Jan. 29

—Gov. Ronald Reagan blamed the Government and not Commander Bucher today for any mistakes resulting in the capture of the *Pueblo*.

Mr. Reagan said that the Government had failed to meet its responsibilities by refusing "to risk the possible consequences" of helping the crew.

Mr. Reagan disclosed that he was an acquaintance of Commander Bucher.

"I knew him years ago," the Governor said. "He was the executive officer of the submarine we used in a picture."

The film was "Hell Cats of the Navy."