

Pueblo Crewmen Testify at Hearing That They Received no Orders to Destroy Secret Documents

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Senior intelligence petty officers on the Pueblo have told the Navy court of inquiry here that they had "no orders or messages" to burn secret papers when the North Koreans opened fire and seized the ship.

One petty officer, Communications Technician 1st Cl. David L. Ritter, said that he "saw" Lieut. Stephen R. Harris, the chief intelligence officer on the Pueblo, in the secret research quarter of the ship but that no one was "really supervising" the destruction of documents and coding equipment.

Another petty officer said that he "never saw" Lieutenant Harris take part in the burning and scuttling of equipment in the research space, where crewmen collected intelligence data behind steel doors with triple locks.

The enlisted men testified yesterday in a closed session of the inquiry into the capture of the intelligence ship of North Korea on Jan. 23, 1968. Today, the Navy released portions of their testimony.

Destruction of Documents

Once again, the court of five admirals focused on the hour in which the Pueblo's intelligence specialists axed equipment, burned papers and threw documents overboard.

The partial destruction of the Pueblo's secret papers and equipment took place from 1:30 P.M., when the North Koreans opened fire, 2:32 P.M., when a North Korean party boarded, the Pueblo with no resistance. Undestroyed documents fell into North Korean hands.

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the skipper, has testified that he ordered the destruction at the time of attack.

Virtually all the Pueblo's secret mission was in the hands of Lieutenant Harris, a 30-year-old Harvard graduate who speaks several languages fluently. The bespectacled, quick-stepping officer commanded a 28-man crew of trained Navy intelligence technicians who operated with some secrecy in quarters on the main deck.

The six men who testified yesterday were communications technicians under his control.

Unable to Recall

The Navy's summary of their testimony said:

"Ritter told the court how he destroyed various publica-

tions and pieces of equipment, but like many of the other crew members, did not remember who passed the word to 'stop burning.'

"He said he saw Lieutenant Harris in the research space, but no one was 'really supervising' destruction."

The 24-year-old Californian recalled that he twice saw Commander Bucher in the intelligence area at the time of the attack.

The first time was a "five to 10 minute" meeting between Commander Bucher and Lieutenant Harris. The second time followed the fatal wounding of Fireman Duane Hodges, who was struck by a cannon burst in a passageway outside the research space while burning papers.

Skipper in Decoding Area

Technician Ritter said that Commander Bucher had shouted, "For God's sake, help this man! He's dying."

Another intelligence petty officer, Don E. Bailey, said that Commander Bucher had stepped into the crypto, or decoding, area to send an emergency message to the American naval headquarters in Japan. The line was kept open but, according to Commander Bucher's earlier testimony, the Pueblo received no orders.

In their testimony, the petty officers clearly indicated that it had been the enlisted men, and not Lieutenant Harris, who ordered the destruction of secret material in the intelligence area.

The Navy summary said that

Communications Technician 1st Cl. Michael T. Barrett "recommended on his own initiative that personnel in the research space prepare for emergency destruction."

"He made this decision about the same time that the [North Koreans] signaled, 'Heave to or I will open fire,'" the summary said.

Called for Destruction

Communications Technician 1st Cl. James D. Layton "told his men to start [destroying] the top secret material and work down," it said.

The summary went on: "He stated that Lieutenant Harris walked in shortly after

the firing started, but had no orders nor messages to be released and that he never saw Lieutenant Harris participate in the destruction of materials.

"He further testified that he never saw any weighted bags on that day or in fact, ever, on the Pueblo. He did agree that, as a watch supervisor, he should have known if bags were available and where they were stowed."

Lieutenant Harris has testified that he had weighted bags of heavy canvas made to line file cabinet drawers in the research space. These could be used to sink documents thrown overboard.

So far, the burning and scuttling of the secret papers on

the Pueblo has emerged as a pivotal issue in the court of inquiry, now in its fourth week at the 1,000-acre Naval Amphibious Base here.

Found Secret Papers

Commander Bucher has insisted that he surrendered the Pueblo in the belief that most of the 600 pounds of secret papers aboard had been destroyed.

After the ship's capture, however, two North Korean officers escorted Commander Bucher back to the Pueblo, where secret papers were scattered throughout the research space. "I was very surprised," Commander Bucher said.

The head of the research space, Lieutenant Harris, has

said that at least 10 bags of secret papers fell into the hands of the North Koreans. He said that destruction of the papers had been hampered by confusion that gripped the ship during the attack, smoke in the passageways and repeated machine-gun and cannon fire that made the decks impassable to crewmen who hoped to toss papers overboard.

The court has pressed the Pueblo's crewmen for the reasons so many secret documents were undestroyed. It has also questioned, with some acerbity, Navy intelligence officials responsible for equipping the Pueblo and sending the ship on her mission off North Korea. These officials have testified that the Pueblo was converted

from an old Army cargo carrier into an electronic intelligence ship with only fire axes and sledgehammers to destroy secret equipment.

Broom Closet Converted

There were two paper shredders for secret documents on the ship, too, but only one sheet of paper at a time could be fed into a shredder.

There was no incinerator until Commander Bucher had one installed, and the ship's crewmen had to convert a broom closet into a locker to provide safe stowage for secret publications.

Discussing the paucity of destructive equipment on the Pueblo, Technician Bailey told the court yesterday, "torches

would have helped destroy equipment. An eight-pound sledge hammer on some of the gear just bounded back in your face."

Several petty officers said that they had had no training in the destruction of papers or equipment and could not recall seeing an "emergency destruction bill" in the research space.

Both Commander Bucher and Lieutenant Harris have testified that such notices, telling in detail what material should be destroyed and how the crewmen should do it, were on the intelligence ship.

Crewmen Held Confused

Once the North Koreans attacked the ship, the petty offi-

cers indicated yesterday, the crewmen became confused and frightened.

The crewmen thought "they had had it," said Technician Barrett, who added that the intelligence detachment felt "this was it" when the North Koreans boarded the Pueblo.

The Navy summary said that Technician Barrett "looked forward to being shot since he was a communications technician." It said, "He removed his rating badge and moved to the mess deck."

The crewmen were assembled on the deck, blindfolded and taken off the Pueblo for prison, where they spent 11 months.