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Pueblo Crewman Tells of Wait For Surgery in Korean Prison

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CORONADO, Calif., March 4 —A critically wounded Pueblo crewman moaned in agony for three days before the North Koreans performed surgery on him without an anesthetic, a court of inquiry was told today.

The grim, poignant details of the wounding and hospitalization of Electrician's Mate 2d Cl. Steven E. Woelk were unfolded before the inquiry by the 20-year-old crewman. A commissary man, who treated him medically with Boy Scout training, also testified.

Electrician's Mate Woelk said he had been carried on a stretcher into a prison cell lighted by a single unshielded light bulb and placed on a wooden table for an operation without anesthesia near his upper right thigh.

"It was very painful," the blond, blue-eyed crewman told the five admirals on the inquiry into the North Koreans' capture of the United States intelligence ship a year ago last January.

More Accounts of Beatings

Now in its seventh week, the inquiry once again focused on the 11 months of detention of the Pueblo's 82 surviving crewmen. Once again the admirals heard accounts of beatings and general mistreatment.

Electrician's Mate Woelk was severely wounded by a cannon burst on Jan. 23, 1968, while burning secret papers in a passageway on the main deck of the Pueblo. North Korean submarine chasers and torpedo boats had surrounded the ship and opened fire.

"I crawled back into the wardroom," the young sailor recalled. "I was lying on the floor. I was put on a Navy stretcher and covered from head to toe. The Koreans came aboard and carried me out on the stretcher and put me on a bus."

"I was kicked and hit and dragged on the ground most of the time. Every time I moaned, I was kicked or hit by hand."

He Speaks Slowly

As Electrician's Mate Woelk spoke in a slow murmur, his hands were folded tightly in his lap. Sometimes he brushed back the thatch of hair that fell nearly to his eyebrows.

"I was taken to a room," he said. "I couldn't move. The smell—you wouldn't believe the

smell. The whole room was rotten. I was draining continuously.

"I was operated on the third day after we arrived at the point of detention. The operation was performed three to four rooms down from the one I was in. It was a regular room. There were no beds. I was laid on a table on a stretcher. They brought in everyone they needed to operate. There was no special lighting. It was barely adequate.

"It was very painful." Electrician's Mate Woelk, whose job aboard the Pueblo

was repairing electrical circuits, said he was then returned to his cell where two other crewmen also lay wounded, Sgt. Robert J. Chicca, a marine, and radioman 2d Cl. Charles H. Crandell Jr.

A fourth crewman in the room, Commissary man 3d Cl. Dale E. Rigby, was left to care for the three wounded men. Young Woelk remained in the cell "eight or nine days" after surgery with little medical care, he said.

'Cry for Help'

"Woelk would cry out for help," Commissary Man Rigby, the cook and baker on the Pueblo, said almost inaudibly, his eyes closed. "The room had the smell of decaying flesh. I was really unable to do anything for them."

"When Woelk slept at night his bandages would come off and his wounds were openly exposed. They finally gave me some disinfectant, and I tried to keep everything Woelk was using separate.

"They didn't seem to be concerned at all. I tried to give them as much treatment as I could to try to relieve the pain. I only had Boy Scout training."

The five admirals and the court counsels listened intently. Their questions were brief and generally couched in sympathetic tones.

"Was your treatment humane [in the days that followed surgery?]" E. Miles Harvey counsel for Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, skipper of the Pueblo, asked Electrician's Mate Woelk.

"It could have been better," the sailor replied.

"Was it inhumane?" "Yes sir."

Treatment Improves

Electrician's Mate Woelk said

that he had eventually been transferred to a North Korean hospital, two miles from the detention barracks, where treatment improved markedly. The date of the transfer by jeep is unclear—at one point, Electrician's Mate Woelk said it was "eight or nine days" after surgery, at another point "12 days later."

"They treated me quite good there," he said. "They gave me shots every three or four days, they changed my bandages every three or four days. The doctors were friendly. They couldn't speak English, but they would use hand signals."

There were also apples and milk on the hospital diet, he recalled, and playing cards were periodically offered as well as "some propaganda" for reading material. Cigarettes were distributed every two days.

"They didn't seem to hate anyone there," Electrician's Mate Woelk said.

During his 44 days of hospitalization, the sailor said, the North Koreans photographed him continually and performed "a fake operation" for propaganda distribution.

These photographs were to

be used, he said, to point up the North Koreans' "humane treatment."

Electrician's Mate Woelk was also operated on for ton-

sillitis during his imprisonment.

"The used an anesthetic this time," he said. "They seemed more concerned."

North Korean guards beat him two days after his release from the hospital following the first operation, he said.

"I was kicked by guards and during the last couple of weeks I was beaten," he said.

This mistreatment was the key subject at this afternoon's session when the court of inquiry heard Earl M. Kisler, 22, an intelligence specialist with the Pueblo. Crewmen have testified that Communications Technician Kisler, who looks like he is in his mid-30's had

suffered some of the worst beatings of the imprisonment because of his initial refusal to sign confessions or a statement.

"I didn't want to sign this letter. I think it was to Newsweek," Communications Technician Kisler said. "I was taken to a room. There was a chair and two officers. One of them we called 'Robot.'"

"I told them I didn't want to sign it and they started yelling and screaming. He took a stick, about three and a half feet long, and beat me around the head and shoulders. Then he took off his rubber-soled sandal and started beating me across the face."