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Bucher Urges Pueblo Crew to Aid Inquiry

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SAN DIEGO, Feb. 28—The commander of the American spy ship Pueblo, captured by North Korean naval units seven years ago, urged former members of the vessel's crew this week to cooperate in a study being prepared by the Navy to determine the effects of their 11 months' captivity.

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, now retired from the Navy, said the medical and psychiatric studies being set up by the Navy Center for Prisoner of War Studies here was "an excellent idea and I urge all the men of the Pueblo to volunteer, if requested."

The study, he added, holds promise of healing some of the physical and emotional scars many of the Pueblo's 81 survivors still carry. He continued:

Navy Court of Inquiry

"But more importantly, it may help to correct serious errors of the past so that, in the future, Americans assigned to such projects can be better equipped to carry out their mission and, if they become prisoners of war, to withstand the brutalities of enemies who reject all civilized standards of decency.

"If it is a meaningful study,



United Press International
Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher

it will help both our national security and, in this particular instance, a group of men who served the Navy more honorably than they in turn were served by their Government."

His statement was in reference to a Navy court of inquiry early in 1969, following repatriation of the Pueblo crew on Dec. 23, 1968, which he said sought only to blame her officers and crew for the ship's loss.

"The men of the Pueblo were

put through that ordeal because they followed orders while a lot of people high up in our military and intelligence bureaucracy who were responsible for the Pueblo's ill-prepared mission ran for cover and escaped punishment or even exposure of their actions that sacrificed the ship and its crew," he said.

The court of inquiry, made up of five admirals, recommended trials by court-martial for Commander Bucher and the ship's intelligence officer, Lieut. Comdr. Stephen Harris, for giving up the vessel without a fight and for failure to prevent classified intelligence data from falling into enemy hands.

Reprimands Denied

Reprimands for dereliction of duty were asked for Commander Bucher's second in command, the executive officer, Lieut. Edward R. Murphy, 37, and for Rear Adm. Frank Johnson, then commander of American naval forces in Japan and since retired.

The Commander in Chief of the United States Pacific fleet and the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington subsequently proposed that, instead of a court-martial, Commander Bucher receive a letter of reprimand. (The New York Times reported erroneously on Jan. 19

that such a letter of reprimand had been issued to Commander Bucher).

However, all recommendations for punishment, either courts-martial or reprimands, were denied by then Secretary of the Navy John H. Chafee who held that Commander Bucher and his crew had "suffered enough."

"If I had received such a letter of reprimand, I would have certainly insisted on trial before a court-martial and the whole story would have been exposed," said the 47-year-old retired commander. "I still regret, as I did at the time of the court of inquiry's finding, that I did not stand court-martial instead of allowing the matter to end with what turned out to be a cover-up for those who were mainly at fault for the Pueblo fiasco."

Commander Bucher, following his repatriation, was assigned temporarily to a desk job here but requested and was assigned to operational duty in the Pacific.

When he retired on May 31, 1973, after 27 years' service he was chief staff officer of Minesweeper Flotilla 1 based in Guam. As second in command of the flotilla, he participated in organizing the mining of North Vietnamese waters and later in the removal of mines laid in the American blockade of the North Vietnamese port of Haiphong.

Instructions on Mission

Commander Bucher said the Pueblo, although a Navy ship, had been selected for the secret intelligence mission by the National Security Agency and, thereafter, the Navy had little or no interest in the vessel.

"We were told not to provoke or engage in any hostile action with the North Koreans, that we were not out there to start a shooting war, and we obediently followed those orders when we were intercepted," Commander Bucher related.

Before leaving Pearl Harbor, he added, he was told that in the event that the ship ran into

'to Correct Errors'

a hostile situation there was a "contingency plan," approved by the President, to come to the Pueblo's assistance.

"But it is evident no such contingency plan existed," he said. "When we were attacked, without the means of defending ourselves, there were at least three American aircraft carriers close enough so their planes could have reached us in 45 minutes. They had nearly seven hours to respond to our constant radio appeals for help, but we were abandoned. No help was sent."

The Pueblo study, which is still awaiting Department of Defense funding authorization, is part of the Navy Prisoner of War Center's continuing research on former prisoners of war. The center organized the repatriation and rehabilitation two years ago of Americans released from imprisonment in North Vietnam.

Limits of Study Plan

Officials of the center stressed that the proposed Pueblo study, if approved, would deal only with the physical and emotional state of the Pueblo crew six years after their release and the manner in which they readjusted to military and civilian life.

It will not touch upon responsibility for the ship's loss, which has been a matter of considerable controversy ever since Jan. 23, 1968, when the Pueblo surrendered while under attack off the North Korean port of Wonsan, the officials added.

Commander Bucher refused to enter into a discussion of the most recent allegations made against him by his second in command, Lieutenant Murphy, whose statements about Commander Bucher have served to keep the Pueblo dispute alive.

At a Navy ceremony last month, Lieutenant Murphy refused to accept a commendation medal for bravery while a prisoner of war, calling it "another attempt at a Pueblo cover-up oozing of whitewash."

He read a prepared statement

alleging that Commander Bucher frustrated the North Koreans' readiness to release the crew on Oct. 11, 1968, two months before they were finally set free. He also said that the commander had rejected a North Korean offer to return the Pueblo to the United States Navy.

Commander Bucher's denial of his former executive officer's latest charges, which he said were "a complete surprise and wholly unsubstantiated," found support from the Department of Defense, the Navy's chief counsel at the court of inquiry and an admiral of the five-man court. All said they had never heard even an allusion to the two purported incidents.