

RELEASE OF PUEBLO CREW BY NORTH KOREA ARRANGED IN AN AGREEMENT WITH U.S.

12-23-68
nyt

Jarred Awake by Phone, Families of Crew Rejoice

By SYLVAN FOX

In dozens of homes across the country, telephones jangled at around 3 A.M. yesterday and awoke sleeping parents and wives to one of the most joyful days of their lives.

The phone calls brought the news from the Navy that the 82 surviving crew members of the intelligence ship Pueblo, captive in North Korea for 11 months, would be released. The public announcement was made in Washington at 8 A.M.

"First I had to grab a chair," Mrs. James A. Shepard of Williamstown, Mass., the wife of a 28-year-old petty officer, recalled of her phone call, which came at 3:30 A.M.

She Wakes Neighbors

"I just felt—I can't really explain it—I was so happy," she said. She and other relatives of the Pueblo crewmen were interviewed by telephone.

Mrs. Shepard's initial shock was quickly replaced by an outpouring of joy. She rushed from her home and began banging on neighbors' windows, oblivious to the fact that it was then 3:45 A.M.

"I was so excited," she explained, "I just wanted to tell everybody."

In Melrose, Mass., Mrs. Robert Harris, a widow, had held a Christmas party at her home Saturday night for the children and parents of the fourth-grade class she teaches at the Beebe School.

"I had put the dishes away

and had gone to bed," she said. "I had just gone to sleep when the phone rang."

It was about 3 A.M., Mrs. Harris said, and it was the Navy calling to tell her that her son, Lieut. Cmdr. Stephan R. Harris, the 30-year-old research operations officer on the Pueblo, would be released with the rest of the crew.

"I went right downstairs, walked around the party table and helped myself to everything," Mrs. Harris said. "And for the first time in 11 months the food tasted good."

She Is Still Cautious

Like many of the relatives of the Pueblo crew members, Mrs. Harris retained a degree of caution about the announcement of the release.

"I won't really believe it until I can put my arms around him," she said.

This same caution was reflected in the comments of Mrs. Lloyd M. Bucher, the wife of the skipper of the Pueblo.

"My first reaction was that I was overjoyed when I got the word," Mrs. Bucher said in San Diego, Calif., "but there have been so many disappointments and false rumors in the past that I have to be only cautiously optimistic now."

"I won't feel at ease until my husband and the rest of the crew are actually in the hands of United States officials. The

Continued on Page 2, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

North Koreans could change their minds any minute. I don't think I will believe it until he actually walks in the door."

Mrs. Bucher said that after having been informed of the imminent release of her husband, a commander, she went to early mass at a church near her home in the Pacific Beach section of San Diego and offered a special prayer—as she has at every mass she has attended since the Pueblo's capture—for the safety of her husband.

Chester Rogala, the father of Seaman Recruit Richard J. Rogala, was awakened at 3:15 A.M. by a phone call to his home in Niles, Ill. "He thought at first it was a prank call," Mrs. Rogala said, "but somehow when I answered that phone I knew this was it."

Mrs. Rogala, whose 21-year-old son had been in the Navy about two months when the Pueblo was captured, said the Navy officer who called her home said: "This is it!"

"He was excited, very much so," she said. "It was wonderful! I thank God."

"I couldn't believe it," said the wife of Boatswain's Mate 3d Cl. Ronald L. Berens of Russell, Kan. "I just sat there. They told me to pack my bags and to be ready."

Mrs. Berens, who lives in Wichita, Kan., said she and her husband had been married only five months before he left on the voyage aboard the Pueblo.

Call to His Parents

At around 3 A.M.—the same time Mrs. Berens got her phone call—another call was placed to her husband's parents in Russell, Mr. and Mrs. Jake Berens. The senior Mrs. Berens was asleep.

"It didn't take me long to wake up," she said. "I was so happy about it. It was almost unbelievable."

A similar feeling of disbelief afflicted Mrs. Howard Bland, of Leggett, Calif., mother of a fireman apprentice.

Mrs. Bland said that the Navy called her shortly before 11 P.M.—Pacific time—and said that her 21-year-old son would be released.

"I just couldn't believe it," she said, "and still don't. It hasn't reached me yet. I've heard so much in the last 11 months I still can't believe it. I won't believe it until I see him and know he's all right."

Mrs. Bland said that while

Dead Sailor's Family Is Glad for the Others

At the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Hodges in Creswell, Ore., there was joy mixed with profound sadness yesterday. Mr. and Mrs. Hodges are the parents of Fireman Duane D. Hodges, the 21-year-old Pueblo crew member who was wounded when the ship was seized by the North Koreans and who subsequently died.

Mrs. Hodges said in a telephone interview that a Navy officer came to the Hodges home at about 4 A.M. Pacific time yesterday to inform her and her husband that the Pueblo crew was being released and that she would receive further word later on the disposition of her son's body.

"I was glad to hear that the crew was being released," Mrs. Hodges said, "and I was wishing our boy was alive."

she has remained calm since getting word from the Navy, her husband, a custodian at a local high school, "got a little bit emotional."

"I did all my crying before, and he had to be the man," she explained. "But now it was time for him to let go."

One Father Dubious

When F. Carl Schumacher of St. Louis, the father of Lieut. (j.g.) F. Carl Schumacher Jr., the Pueblo's 25-year-old operations officer, got his call at 3:30 A.M., his first reaction was "Are you sure? Are you kidding?"

Convinced that the Navy officer was in earnest, Mr. Schumacher said he was swept by a "tremendous feeling of relief that it finally happened."

"The Government," Mr. Schumacher said, echoing the feelings of several relatives of the Pueblo crew members, "has been most helpful and most considerate. Whenever these rumors would begin to fly, we would immediately get a call saying 'disregard.'"

The calls to Mr. Schumacher and the other parents and wives yesterday did not advise them to disregard rumors. Instead, they carried a new and happier message: Pack and stand by for a reunion, probably in San Diego, perhaps by Christmas.

DO NOT FORGET THE NEEDIEST!