

Bob Considine

Pueblo Crew Gets Raw Deal

U.S. Navy brass is acting disgracefully in the case of the U.S.S. Pueblo. The captured ship's battered, beaten and bereft crew is being put through a "debriefing" which smacks of a pre-trial brainwashing before Capt. Bucher and his men face the official court of inquiry.

The other day the men were lined up for a brief ceremony at which the several wounded crewmen were awarded the Purple Heart. The decoration was denied those who had recovered from their wounds (but not from their nightmares) and the company was marched back to barracks without being given an opportunity to speak with families present for the ceremony.

When the men arrived in this country after the phony apology was signed, the poor captain of the ship, his eyes obviously injured by 11 months of pitiless bright lights in his cell, tried to read a statement to the crowd on hand and the TV cameras.

But every now and then some stuffed shirt with four stripes intruded into the TV picture and snapped whispered orders to Bucher. Bucher would pause in his bone-tired manner, turn his head slowly to his superior, and humbly say "Yes'r." It was humiliating for Bucher. The crowning intrusion came when the Navy four-striper stopped Bucher dead in his tracks with a sharp command, then beckoned to the seamen pallbearers to start carrying the body of the dead crewman off the plane, and to the band to begin the dirge.

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IS THIS disciplinarian script being written inadvertently by Sen. Richard Russell, the Georgia Democrat who is chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee?

Sen. Russell appeared on the national TV recently to say he couldn't understand why the men of the Pueblo were being automatically received home as heroes. He wondered aloud why they gave up without a fight, and why they didn't destroy the costly spying equipment on board. He added that two days later several Soviet cargo planes carried the sophisticated gear to Russia.

Clearly identified murderers, rapists and kidnapers have been acquitted by our liberal courts because of some incident, however minor, that might have interfered with their getting a fair and unbiased trial.

But the way the Navy is handling this case is in line with Sen. Russell's broad pre-inquiry charge that these men were cowards and disgraced their country.

Their country, I believe, is more in a mood to ask, "Why didn't we immediately send carrier-based Navy jets and Air Force fighter-bombers stationed at Seoul to the scene and blow those North Korean pirate ships out of the water?"

Their country, I also believe, wants to know why so little protection is given to such ships as the Pueblo. We're not fooling any of the powers we're now spying on, any more than is the Russian trawler that sits off Guam and alerts Hanoi whenever the B-52s take off for Vietnam.

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THE OBLIQUE CHARGE that the men of the Pueblo curled up and quit is largely demised by the picture, taken by their captors, showing a group of them giving one of the world's most understood signs of utter contempt.

They were beaten up when the daring picture appeared through the world, just as was in all probability the North Korean censor who dimwittedly released it. He may be still hanging by his thumbs, or fingers.

Sen. Russ 'll is a fine man with a record of distinction. But he is also a man wholly feared by the upper crust of the Armed Forces. They will not imperil their pending appropriations by crossing him.

What seems to be happening here is that if Sen. Russell suspects that the actions of Capt. Bucher and his men were not quite kosher, the Navy brass must think so, too, and act accordingly.

God save the Pueblo, and give her men a fair shake.