

Questioning of Pueblo's Captain Delays Court of Inquiry 2 Weeks

Bucher's Debriefing Held Up Because of 'Physical and Emotional Exhaustion'

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SAN DIEGO, Jan. 8 The court of inquiry into the capture of the Pueblo has been delayed about two weeks while Navy intelligence officers began questioning Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the ship's skipper. The court had been scheduled to begin this week, more than two weeks after Commander Bucher and the 81 other survivors of the intelligence ship were released from North Korean captivity.

But senior Navy officers started intelligence debriefings only last Monday, questioning Commander Bucher, in his quarters in a heavily guarded pink, stucco building on the fringe of the United States Naval Base Hospital here.

The delay in the questioning of Commander Bucher was caused by what doctors termed "physical and emotional exhaustion." The skipper, who friends say looks a decade older than his 41 years, has recently been transferred from a private room at the hospital to the building where the entire Pueblo crew is staying.

'The Key Man'

"Bucher is the key man from the point of view of the Government intelligence people as well as the court of inquiry," said one senior Navy officer.

"Clearly, the intelligence people want to find out from him what happened, what things occurred when the ship was captured, what losses took place. In short, how much did our country suffer because of the loss of the Pueblo?"

Nearly 100 Navy intelligence officers and clerks have moved into San Diego to question the men of the Pueblo, which was captured by North Korean vessels last Jan. 23. The 11 months of imprisonment were reported to have been physically and emotionally harrowing.

"A lot of these people are still bewildered because they went through such mental torture," said one naval officer who has spoken to the crewmen. "The North Koreans were very peculiar. They never said why they would beat someone up, but for no apparent reason they would go ahead and do it.



United Press International
Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher

"Something was set up between the captors and the crewmen — a psychological fear that these men still have. They were always worried about getting beaten — maybe the next minute, maybe the day. They were so worried they somehow wanted it to happen, they wanted to get beaten, maybe, to relieve the mental pressures. They wanted to get it over with."

"The captors kind of took the will out of a lot of people. Some of these men get far-away looks in their eyes when you talk to them. They give you blank stares. They turn off like radios."

The Navy appears ambivalent about the handling of the case.

On the one hand, Navy officers think that disclosures about North Korean mistreatment of American prisoners

will generate sympathy and understanding for the Pueblo crew, some of whom made "confessions" that the ship had been engaged in espionage in the territorial waters of North Korea. After their release, the crewmen said that "at no time" did the Pueblo go into North Korean waters.

On the other hand, the Navy has placed heavy security restrictions on the men and has temporarily barred doctors who were treating them from speaking publicly.

The Pueblo men, housed in a 12-room suite at the hospital, have begun taking overnight liberty in San Diego but have been told not to discuss their imprisonment.

Commander Bucher, who remains physically weak but has gained 15 pounds, left the hospital for the first time last Friday night to visit his wife, Rose, and his two teen-aged sons in San Diego. He has since made several overnight visits to his home.

Aside from the debriefings, medical treatment—including dental work—and visits home, Commander Bucher has spent several hours with a recently hired civilian attorney, E. Miles Harvey, who will represent the naval officer at the court of inquiry.

Mr. Harvey, a 38-year-old business and corporate lawyer here, had represented Mr. Bucher's wife the last year.

Lawyer Is Optimistic

"It is my impression that this court of inquiry will come out well, very well, for Commander Bucher," Mr. Harvey said yesterday.

"There are some experiences of a moderately dramatic nature that have not yet come out—why the ship was captured, why the crew behaved as they did. This court of inquiry should be interesting."

The court of inquiry, to be headed by Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen, commander of anti-submarine forces in the Pacific, will be public. The court will send its findings and recommendations to Adm. John J. Hyland, the Pacific commander, will then make his own recommendations to Washington.

It will be up to the Chief of Naval Operations and the Secretary of the Navy to decide what action to take.

"This could range from medals and commendations to courts-martial," said one lawyer. "The court of inquiry will be the basis for whatever action takes place."