

BUCHER DEFENDS FAILURE TO FIGHT

Pueblo's Skipper Calls Ship
'Hopelessly Outgunned'

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CORONADO, Calif., Jan. 21.—Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher said today that the intelligence ship Pueblo was "hopelessly outgunned" by North Korean vessels last January and that any effort to fight the attackers "would have meant certain death."

"If I sent people to those guns [on the ship] they would be shot," Commander Bucher said quietly. "I saw no point in senselessly sending people to their deaths."

In his testimony on the second day of the court of inquiry into the seizure of the Pueblo, Commander Bucher recounted the moments last Jan. 23 when North Korean patrol boats and submarine chasers surrounded the intelligence ship and opened fire.

He spoke in a slow and unemotional tone of losing the ship.

"For me to man my machine guns, to send a man up, would have meant certain death," he said. "The guns were frozen, the covers on the guns were frozen and could not be easily

Continued on Page 2, Column 4

removed."

"I was hopelessly outgunned," he testified.

Commander Bucher said he had been able to send a message that the North Koreans had surrounded the Pueblo and an armed party was attempting to go aboard. The White House was tied into the radio transmission.

"I said to myself, I'll be damned if they're going to get away with that," he said. "We got away at one-third [speed]. We wanted to leave the area in as dignified a way as possible so as not to appear in a panic."

As the Pueblo steamed away from the North Korean vessels, Commander Bucher recalled, one of the two chasers moved within 1,500 to 2,000 yards of the Pueblo and opened fire.

"They fired between six to 14 individual shells from what I believe were 57-mm. cannons,"

he said. "Most of the shots went over the ship, at least one hit the radar mast."

Stood on Flying Bridge

Commander Bucher said that during the first salvo he stood on the flying bridge with three other crewmen.

"I received shrapnel wounds in the rear end," he said. "I was in considerable pain. I was able to ignore it, though. I maintained control of the ship within five minutes after it happened."

In earlier testimony today, Commander Bucher said that the first warning message to his Navy superiors was delayed 12 to 14 hours after the Pueblo was sighted by North Korean vessels the day before, Jan. 22. "As we had feared, it took us 12 to 14 hours to establish communications," he testified.

"The problem was one of matching up frequencies and frequencies that would work," he said. "It was one of the problems I had discussed at length [before sailing] with officers in Japan."

Commander Bucher, a wan, sallow-cheeked Navy veteran who is the key figure in the inquiry, described in detail yesterday numerous shortages of equipment and "destruct devices" on the Pueblo. He recalled his anxiety over the Pueblo's inability to maintain rapid communications in the event of harassment and said he had voiced his concern to his Navy superiors in Japan.

In his testimony today in a crowded amphitheater at the Naval Amphibious Base here, the 41-year-old skipper repeated that the Pueblo had never moved into the 12-mile territorial waters claimed by North Korea, as charged by his captors.

"At no time did I penetrate into the claimed territory of North Korea," he said, standing beside a navigation chart of the North Korean coast. "The closest point we came to North Korea was 13.1 miles at some points along the coast."

Commander Bucher, who had been a prisoner of the North Koreans for 11 months, appeared taut and uneasy today. He stood beside the chart or sat rigidly behind a table, sipping numerous glasses of water. He spoke evenly and slowly, but his lips quivered. When he stood, his Navy uniform sagged. He breathed heavily.

The Pueblo, a former cargo ship whose hull was crammed with sonars, navigation equipment and hypersensitive radar, was captured by North Korean gunboats in the sea of Japan last Jan. 23. The ship's mission was to collect intelligence, par-

ticularly of radar installations, and to check on the movement of vessels along the North Korean coast.

Today Commander Bucher discussed the movements of the Pueblo from the morning of Jan. 11, when the ship left Sasebo, Japan, to gather intelligence along the North Korean coast. The ship was his first command.

"My ship was requested to remain at radio silence to avoid detection," he said. "Signals of any kind would have helped identify us."

On the afternoon of Jan. 22, a day before North Korean sailors boarded and seized the Pueblo, the ship broke radio silence, Commander Bucher recalled.

"We were approached by two government [North Korean] fishing vessels," he said. "There were no arms visible, there was much fishing gear and it was piloted by civilians, standard Oriental fishermen."

"The boats approached me and elicited some interest," he went on, standing three feet from the five admirals on the court of inquiry. "They circled us at 30 yards. I was flying the international signal for conducting hydrographic operations."

18 Miles From Land

The incident took place 18 to 20 miles from the nearest land, the island of Ung Do. "One of them did aim his ship at my bow and avoided collision at the last moment," Commander Bucher said.

"I was certain they would report us," he went on. "I considered we had been detected. I prepared my first sitrep [situation report] and released it at 5 o'clock in the afternoon."

"We were unable to effect immediate contact with the people we were assigned to communicate with," Commander Bucher said, referring to Navy officials in Japan. "It took us 12 to 14 hours to establish communications. We were continually attempting to establish communications."

Replying to a question by Rear Adm. Allen A. Bergner, a member of the court who is head of the Naval Training Command in San Diego, Commander Bucher said that in the 12 to 14-hour lapse the ship sought to send a message through "alternate routes." This apparently failed, too.

"We never established voice communications on this patrol," he went on, replying to another question.

"During the capture [the next day] one of the first things that happened to us was the antenna was shot off," he

said. This prevented voice communications from the ship.

At the opening of the session, Commander Bucher described in detail the Pueblo's movements north and then south along the coast.

"My mission was to conduct operations in two basic categories," he said. "First, we knew of Soviet naval operations in the Tsushima Strait area, the strait between Kyushu Island and the southern tip of South Korea."

Commander Bucher said that the Pueblo's mission had been to "surveil" and photograph Soviet ships. A second mission, which led to the Pueblo's capture, "was to proceed along the coast of North Korea into three operational areas."

Cites Order to Officers

Commander Bucher said that the Pueblo steamed north along the coast, moving 14 to 18 miles offshore during the day and 20 to 25 miles at night.

"At no time would we proceed within 14 miles [of the coast] without my permission," he said. "This was my order to officers of the deck."

"There was never any doubt in my mind where the ship was or that the ship was in danger of intruding in the waters claimed by the Democratic People's Government of North Korea," Commander Bucher said.

Later, Capt. William R. Newsome, counsel for the court, read a list of 17 intrusions, "alleged publicly by North Korea," of the Pueblo in Korean waters. "Did such an intrusion occur?" Captain Newsome asked after reading each allegation.

"No, sir, it did not," Commander Bucher replied.

On Jan. 24, one day after the Pueblo's capture, a broadcast over the North Korean radio attributed to Commander Bucher a statement that the Pueblo had been seized "after intruding deep into the territorial waters of North Korea."