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Pueblo NL 480, two takes total 620

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CORONADO, Calif. AP - Capture of the USS Pueblo prompted the Navy to improve its emergency destruction devices, but the crew should have been able to destroy its classified material within an hour with what it had, a Pentagon expert testified Friday. A Navy court of inquiry into the intelligence ship's seizure was told earlier that at least two hours elapsed between the time North Korean gunboats threatened to fire and the time the ship was boarded - with some secret material still intact.

Capt. John B. Williams, from the office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, testified as a specialist in destruction of classified secrets.

He said he was aware classified documents and equipment on the Pueblo totaled more than a ton, but said he envisioned the use of damage control equipment, hand tools, pliers, hand cutters, acetylene torches and a massive fire fed by gasoline, diesel fuel and cleaning fluid to help in the destruction.

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PUEBLO INSERT

CORONADO, Calif. Pueblo NL A2611A insert after 4th graf: destruction.

The Navy said at a briefing for newsmen later that Williams revised his estimate from a ton down to 600 pounds but adhered to his time estimate of one hour for total destruction. A spokesman said Williams asked that the change be made in the court transcript.

Cmdr: 5th Graf

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Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the ship's skipper, has said he requested explosive devices to destroy the secret material, but was denied them - and furnished fire axes, sledge hammers, two paper shredders, an incinerator and weighted bags for jettisoning paper.

The president of the court, Vice Adm. Harold C. Bowen, said to Williams: "It seems to me in a highly technological Navy, in the area of emergency destruction of classified material and paper, we haven't come very far from the Stone Age. What's holding it up aside from money?"

"The crypto code material is put in wire boards which are made very durable and of high quality material very difficult to destruct," Williams said. "Paper in bulk is very difficult to destroy. It resists thermite grenades for example . . ."

"The delay was from a safety consideration involved in the thermite and the scuttling."

"Did it take a Pueblo type incident to spur . . . improvements to fruition?" asked Bowen.

"There was no ongoing effort until after Pueblo," Williams replied.

He said that at the time the Pueblo was seized, Navy publications included a prohibition against carrying incendiary destruct devices aboard ship, but that the prohibition was rescinded the next month.

"The Navy has new systems for emergency destruction available and at sea in some cases," said Williams. "Through research and development there are systems in being now to provide assured emergency destruction and to provide capability of scuttling . . . and increasing time for destruction."

The Pueblo's only gunner's mate, Kenneth Roy Wadley, 30, of Beaverton, Ore., testified next. He said he was inexperienced with the ship's two 50-caliber machine guns but could have manned them and had them ready to shoot in 5 or 10 minutes.

"The covers were iced up in the morning," he said, "but when I checked them I knocked the ice off of them."

Wadley said his men were not very accurate with the weapons, it concerned him that the guns had no protective shields for them and anyone firing them "wouldn't have survived."

"But if I had been called on to man them, I think I would have gone up to man them, yes sir . . . despite that there was no protection, yes sir," Wadley said in answer to a question from counsel for the court.

Nearly a dozen crewmen have so far testified in the Pueblo inquiry. The Navy said it will summon several others, perhaps as many as almost half of the 82 survivors.

"Which is more important?" Williams was asked by Bucher's attorney, E. Miles Harvey. ". . . The destruction of classified material which might fall into enemy hands, or the protection of human life?"

"This is a judgment matter, and the definition of top secret should be weighed in this judgment . . . that the loss of this material would mean exceptionally grave danger to the nation and . . . that insofar as humanly possible, it should not be permitted to fall into enemy hands," replied Williams.

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CORONADO Pueblo NL take two: Williams.

"I was not proposing a Viking funeral pyre," he added. "I was proposing a fire that could be controlled in the spaces . . . the trade off of a gutted compartment against complete destruction is acceptable, sir."

Bucher and several members of his crew have said publications and charts were burned in waste baskets. Lt. Stephen Harris, in charge of the ship's intelligence detail, called the process "painfully slow."

A Navy chronology of the Pueblo incident shows Bucher and his crew had two hours between the time the North Koreans first threatened to fire until they were boarded, an hour-and-a-half from the time he ordered preparations for destruction of classified material and an hour from the time the Koreans opened fire and he ordered destruction to begin.

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PUEBLO ADD

CORONADO, Calif. Pueblo NL A261-262 add: to begin.

Harris and his attorney, Cmdr. George Powell, were invited to attend a closed session of the court which heard classified testimony from Williams on Harris' intelligence field.

A Navy spokesman said Harris was not made a party to the court during the closed session nor was he warned that he was under suspicion of breaking any Navy regulations. Bucher has received such a warning.

Williams also asked that the record of the court be changed to show that his statement that there "was no ongoing effort" to improve destruct devices until after the Pueblo incident did not include the use of systems in aircraft.

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