

Navy Expert Says Pueblo Crew Had Time to Destroy Secrets

Intelligence Officer Testifies Papers Should Have Been Disposed of in an Hour With 'Maximum' Effort

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CORONADO, Calif., Feb. 7—A naval intelligence officer said today that the Pueblo crew should have destroyed the ton secret documents on the intelligence ship in a one-hour "maximum all-out effort."

"This envisioned the use of every capability that existed on the Pueblo and all personnel that could be spared," the officer, Capt. John H. D. Williams, told the Navy court of inquiry into the seizure of the ship.

At least 10 bags filled with secret papers were left to the North Koreans who boarded the Pueblo in the Sea of Japan on Jan. 23, 1968.

The ship's 83-man crew had a little more than an hour to burn and jettison the documents and equipment.

Comdr Lloyd M. Bucher ordered his crew to destroy secret papers and equipment at 1:30 P.M., moments after a North Korean submarine chaser opened fire on the Pueblo.

At 2:30 P.M., a North Korean boarding party of two officers and 10 enlisted men drew alongside the Pueblo and Commander Bucher surrendered the ship without a fight.

Sitting stiffly behind a table and speaking tersely, Captain Williams faced an intense and steady flow of questions from the five admirals on the court as well as from E. Miles Harvey, Commander Bucher's civilian attorney.

Captain Williams remained firm in his estimate that the crew should have taken only one hour to destroy the secret papers and equipment on the ship. "It is an ultimate emergency and it overrides everything," said the 44-year-old New Yorker, who is now an emergency destruction expert for the Chief of Naval Operations.

"All-Out Effort' Needed

"It requires a maximum all-out effort; using emergency cutting kits, pliers, hand tools, hand cutters, acetylene torches, gasoline or diesel fuel, duplicating fluid," he said. "My estimate is one hour."

Mr. Harvey asked the witness, "Which is more important, the destruction of classified material or the protection of human life?"

"This is a judgment matter," Captain Williams replied coolly. "The definition of 'top sec-

ret' should be read into this judgment."

He glanced at the book of Navy regulations before him on the table and read the definition in part: "The loss of this material would mean exceptionally grave danger to the nation and insofar as humanly possible it should not be permitted to fall into enemy hands."

Bucher Sits Nearby

As Captain Williams spoke, Commander Bucher sat four feet away, biting his lip and whispering to Mr. Harvey.

Commander Bucher and crewmen have said that destruction of the secret material aboard the ship was hampered by poor communications, the smoke of burning documents and the steady bursts of machine-gun and 57-mm. cannon fire made the decks impassable to crewmen.

One crewman, Fireman Duane D. Hodges, was fatally wounded by an exploding cannon in a passageway outside the secret area where numerous documents were left undestroyed.

"In the one-hour estimate," Mr. Harvey asked Captain Williams, "what contributing factors do you take into account for the wounding or death of a man? What effect does such a death have?"

"I can't predict what the results would be other than to reduce the personnel available to perform the vital function of destroying the documents."

Captain Williams, a tall, sharp-faced, bespectacled man,

said that the loss of the Pueblo had impelled the Navy into "an ongoing effort" to improve emergency destruction and scuttling devices.

He said that on Feb. 11, two weeks after the Pueblo was seized, the National Security Agency ordered "incendiary devices" aboard ships like the Pueblo. Plans are now under way to provide "assured" emergency destruction and scuttling equipment, he said.

When the Pueblo was seized, Captain Williams observed, the ship's destruction and scuttling equipment included fire axes, sledgehammers, shredders and incinerators, as well as perforated, weighted bags for documents thrown overboard.

Captain Williams said that

burning was the prime method of destroying secret material. "A secondary way is jettisoning it over the side," he said.

Danger of Losing Ship

"In the event of [large fires]" asked Rear Adm. Edward E. Grimm, a member of the court, "don't you risk losing the ship?"

"I was not proposing a Viking funeral pyre, admiral," Captain Williams said. "This could be confined to a locker. The trade-off of a gutted compartment against complete destruction is acceptable."

Captain Williams said that there were more than 2,000 pounds of secret papers on the Pueblo and that the Navy was now developing a program under which fleet commanders would "screen" documents before overloading ships with them.

"Is this post-Pueblo?" asked the president of the court, Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen.

"Yes, sir," Captain Williams said.

Difficulty in Destruction

Admiral Bowen, a baldish man with a thin, chiseled face, frowned and remarked, "It seems to me that, 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 of very durable and high-quality material, very difficult to destruct," said Captain Williams, whose duties include purchasing all cryptographic equipment for the navy.

"Paper in bulk is very difficult to destroy," he went on. "It resists thermite grenades for example. The Navy has new systems for emergency destruction available."

"The delay stemmed from safety aspects involved in the thermite and the scuttling."

During Captain Williams' morning testimony, the five admirals pressed him with questions about the lack of equipment on the Pueblo to destroy secret papers.

"When this ship was placed in conversion, who was responsible to see to it that it was equipped?" Rear Adm. Marshall W. White asked. "Why should the captain have to ask for incinerators?"

"A command failed properly to do their job, is that true?" Admiral White persisted.

"I could not say that," Captain Williams replied.

Calls for Better Planning

"Point is, there is an opening for better planning," said Admiral White, who is commander of the Pacific Missile Range.

"I quite concur, admiral," Captain Williams replied.