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Topics: *The Moral Dilemma of a Not-War Skipper*

By HERMAN WOUK

I have no prediction about the outcome of the Pueblo case; no quick judgment, from the fragmentary information at hand, on the rights and wrongs; no inferences about the state of the nation or of its armed forces. Speaking generally, novelists should hold their peace about current events, and leave topical insights to the journalists.

But the affair has set my mind going. For what occurred is one of those dramatic dilemmas that fall on a hairline edge between legal and moral principle. Such dilemmas haunt me.

Apparently, Commander Bucher did two things contrary to naval law, and to Western concepts of military honor. He surrendered his Navy ship rather than die fighting against overwhelming odds, and he confessed to untruths damaging to his country—as, indeed, his own country's high officials confessed to falsehoods in order to recover the crew from enemy captivity.

Now he is home with the

81 Americans he led back to life and freedom. The Navy and the nation are trying to decide whether he did well or ill.

Our current state of not-war created the feeble not-warship, the almost unarmed electronic snooper that this officer commanded. It was halted by well-armed vessels near an invisible boundary line on the high seas, on an accusation of trespassing in territorial waters. Commander Bucher had to submit to an arbitrary seizure, or shoot it out in peacetime with foreign warships, in a contest he could not win.

The skipper was trapped in a queer turn of a queer task, in the queerest of twilight situations. He elected to submit, rather than to die and to order his men to die.

Words and Life Values

The lack of communication between ourselves and the Communists is radical. It strikes down to the nature of man and the use of words. In the West, individual life has high value, and words are tested against a measuring-rod called truth. In

the realm of Communism, the individual loses himself in the state. Words are only tools for politics and war. The lie as such does not exist; truth is relative to state needs.

Trapped in that other world, Commander Bucher signed a document of tool-words, to keep alive the Americans he had saved with his first decision. Now, back in his own world, he must answer for the fact that in our terms the words were lies.

By the codes I learned as a wartime naval officer, Commander Bucher should perhaps be cashiered. The willingness of fighting men to die, even against hopeless odds, has been the test of a nation's ability to survive since Thermopylae. If our soldiers and sailors ever lose that willingness, we may be sure that other nations will march and sail against us soon enough. And the demands of honor, that a captured warrior refuse even on pain of death to testify falsely against his own country, are clear.

But do the demands of honor hold where honor, as we define

it, is not understood and does not exist?

A novelist could never get away with a story based on such a contrived, diagramed case to dramatize a moral dilemma. But God doesn't worry about plausibility. What He improvises, the audience swallows. The Talmud deals in such limiting cases as this one all the time, for it is used to God's inventiveness.

Old Codes, New Era

The limiting case, by its very extreme nature, throws the law into sharp relief, and forces a judgment striking to the root of the matter. Do the old codes hold in a fantastic new era; if not, how far shall they change? Therein lies the fascination of one not-war skipper's ordeal.

Whatever the verdict, our moral and military codes for fighting men are already bared under searching public gaze.

Herman Wouk, author of "The Caine Mutiny" and the play based on its court-martial scene, has a special interest in men at sea.