

Pueblo Inquiry: 5 Admirals on Court
Were 'As Carefully Chosen as a Bride'

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CORONADO, Calif., Feb. 23—Shortly before 9 o'clock each weekday morning, five admirals step quickly into a yellow carpeted amphitheater and take their seats. "The court will come to order," murmurs Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen Jr.

For the next five or six hours, the admirals face a group of nervous, even trembling, officers and enlisted men of the Pueblo who quietly discuss the intelligence ship's capture in January, 1968, and their 11 months of captivity in North Korea.

Through these crowded sessions, the admirals sit behind a raised, green-felt-covered table in the center of the room and peer at the witnesses, question them—sometimes acidly, sometimes gently—smile, frown, whisper to one another and scrawl notes on large yellow pads of paper.

"This court," says one Navy official close to the case, "was as carefully chosen as a bride."

The five admirals were selected by the Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet, Adm. John J. Hyland. They were directed "to inquire into all the facts and circumstances" of the ship's seizure and the crew's detention.

Court To File Report

Shortly after the inquiry ends—probably in two weeks—the court will file a secret report of recommendations to Admiral Hyland. The Pacific commander will, in turn, file his own report to Washington.

It is up to the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations to decide what action, if any, to take against Comdr. Lloyd M.

Bucher and the Pueblo's crewmen. This action could range from commendations to court-martial.

All five highly decorated admirals are Annapolis graduates, and four of them saw heavy action in the same waters near the North Korean coast where the Pueblo was seized.

The admirals are studies in contrast. Admiral Bowen, the president of the court, is the commander of antisubmarine forces for the Pacific Fleet.

A thin, stoop-shouldered Navy officer with a chiseled patrician face and a fondness for tennis and squash, he speaks with dry precision and usually focuses on questions that require delicately complex answers.

Like the other officers seated besides him, Admiral Bowen addresses the Pueblo crewmen in a voice that betrays neither sympathy nor distaste. Possibly the only moments that the five admirals appear hesitant, even confused, arise when crewmen start weeping while recalling the bitter 11 months in prison.

Misses Gardening Chores

The admirals respond quickly. A break is called, a question is rephrased, the subject changed. The admirals turn and stare at the yellow wall as the crewman struggles to keep control upon returning to face the admirals.

Seated to the right of Admiral Bowen is Rear Adm. Marshall W. White, the commander of the Pacific missile range in Point Mugu, Calif. The 57-year-old admiral, who flew air missions in the South Pacific during World War II, speaks with a Missouri drawl and sighs about missing his gardening chores on weekends.

During the hearing, Admiral

White has repeatedly focused on the more or less controversial details of the Pueblo case:

The intelligence ship's equipment shortages, the lack of destruction devices for secret papers, the possible attempts that could have been made by commander Bucher to scuttle the Pueblo before capture and his decision not to fire her two 50-caliber machine guns at the heavily armed North Korean torpedo boats and submarine chasers that attacked the Pueblo.

On the other hand, Rear Adm. Richard R. Pratt, the head of the amphibious training command, Pacific, is fond of asking questions about the technical details of the Pueblo: "How many times did you light off the radar . . . What was the set and drift of the ship . . . Could you have steered from below decks?"

A fourth member of the court, Adm. Edward E. Grimm, is the head of the training command, Pacific Fleet. A gray-haired, blue-eyed veteran of 35 years in the Navy, he smiles vaguely and continually while listening to the testimony.

Rear Adm. Allen A. Bergner, the commander of the naval training center in San Diego, is the fifth member of the court. The 53-year-old white-haired submariner spends his free time making furniture cabinets. In recent days, he has asked questions mostly about the crewmen's "mental state" and "relationships."

The most acid questioning by the admirals has been aimed more toward officers based in Washington and Japan than toward the crew members.

One of the stiffest questioning periods involved Adm. Frank L. Johnson, the former chief of the United States Naval forces in Japan who had operational control of the Pueblo. He told the five admirals that his alert or "on call" air and sea forces would have taken two hours to help the Pueblo. "Then when we add it up," said Admiral White, "we had [on call] forces that did not exist."

"That's right," replied Admiral Johnson, whose face reddened.

The smiling Admiral Grimm has provided some of the bluntest comments during the in-

quiry. He and several other members of the court appeared especially uneasy about the testimony of a Washington-based intelligence officer who said that the Pueblo's crew should have destroyed all the ship's secret document in a one-hour "maximum all-out effort."

This officer, Capt. John H. D. Williams, spoke precisely of the numerous Navy regulations about the destruction of secret papers and what exactly destruction means.

"Tearing up publications, no matter how small, does not meet your criteria for destruction?" asked Admiral Grimm during Captain Williams's testimony.

Criteria Explained

"No sir," the bespectacled officer replied. "The criteria for shredding or tearing up publications requires pieces so small that a typewriter character cannot be put on it, so this is impractical. Burning is the preferred method of destruction."

"But shredders are obviously provided," replied Admiral Grimm.

"Shredders were provided to

permit much more rapid burning," Captain Williams said.

"In late 1967 . . . we furnished a policy to fleet commanders that crypto [decoding material] would be shredded and streamed over the fantail at dusk, providing at least six bags of material were streamed at once and providing that crypto material and other material had been intermixed in the shredding process."

Admiral Grimm shook his head. "It makes life a little bit difficult if it's not dusk, doesn't it?" he asked.

"This was intended for routine destruction, sir," said Captain Williams with an edge in his voice.

"This is routine destruction?" asked Admiral Grimm. "It's not emergency destruction we're talking about."

Moments later Admiral Bowen turned to the officer and said:

"It seems to me that in a highly technological Navy, in the area of emergency destruction of classified material on paper, we haven't come very far from the Stone Age."

Captain Williams stared at the admiral and said nothing.