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Pueblo Crew Recalls Captors in Hatred and Awe

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CORONADO, Calif., Feb. 25 — For 11 months, the Pueblo's 82 surviving crewmen rose at dawn in locked rooms with single naked light bulbs that dangled over rickety wooden floors.

Through their imprisonment, they faced a bizarre and shadowy life of confusion and confusion, of joking with North Korean guards one day and being beaten the next, of playing basketball and football on the grass outdoors and then being hauled indoors to be kicked and hit with rifle butts.

Today, once more, the five admirals on the Navy court of inquiry here into the capture of the intelligence ship heard the Pueblo enlisted men describe their imprisonment in a heavily guarded three-story barracks overlooking rice and wheat fields outside Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. The ship was captured Jan. 23, 1968, in the Sea of Japan.

Blend of Hatred and Awe

The sessions held today were closed. But, as before in the last few weeks in open and closed sessions, the crewmen mentioned the cast of characters that interrogated and broke them into signing espionage confessions—a fascinating and curious group that the crew discusses with a blend of hatred and awe.

There was the key interrogator, "Super C" or "Super Colonel," as the crew called him, who was later promoted to "Glorious General." A small, thin-lipped officer who walked stiffly and was fond of clicking his shiny shoes, the general always wore green-tinted glasses and often chatted quietly with Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the Pueblo's skipper, about Shakespeare and Greek and Roman mythology.

"He was very intelligent," Commander Bucher has said. "I thought he was probably a very good field officer."

When the general laughed with Commander Bucher or the crew, his horse-like teeth dominated his open mouth. As he spoke, he inevitably flourished a pack of cigarettes or a lighter as he made his point.

The general had a solid shock of black hair combed immaculately straight back, without

Memories of Interrogators in North Korea Mark Their Accounts of Imprisonment

a part. He was in his early forties, appeared well-groomed, and sometimes mentioned his two children. During the 11 months, he never struck Commander Bucher or, apparently, any other member of the crew.

There was "Wheez," an unusually tall Korean—about 5 feet 6 inches—who trembled as he lit cigarettes and coughed continually.

The officer, who was part Japanese, appeared hunched and weary as he spoke in English to the Pueblo crew. His hair line was receding. He kept nervously adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. One Pueblo crewman described his physique as "decrepit."

A third officer, "Colonel Specs," spoke to the crewmen in a quiet, even bored monotone. The colonel was in his mid-forties and apparently neither smoked nor drank. He would politely tell the Pueblo's crewmen that he was a moral man.

He appeared disenchanted, the crewmen recalled, and his pudgy, round face rarely displayed any emotion, except, perhaps, cool indifference.

Rooms Damp, Chilly

There was, finally, "Colonel Scar," a character who might have stepped out of a James Bond film. Burly, thick-necked and muscular, he resembled a college wrestler. He would sit stiffly before the crewmen, fold first one leg, then the other under his body, and sit on his feet.

He spoke English and smoked with grandiose and theatrical gestures. He spoke sternly and evenly. In the rare moments that "Colonel Scar" smiled, his entire face appeared amused and grinning. One crewman described his smile as "engulfing."

The enlisted men's rooms were damp and chilly in the winter, steamy in the summer. The rooms generally had eight bunks, each 6 feet long, with mattresses supported by wooden slats. Pillows were stuffed with rice husks. Some rooms had a wooden table in the center with

eight wooden chairs. The windows were usually covered with sheets by the North Koreans. The Pueblo's six officers had small, separate rooms. The officers and enlisted men met, exchanged rumors, news and gossip, in the bathroom and outdoors in the morning exercise period of 10 to 15 minutes.

"During the summertime we were sent out to cut grass in the morning," Commander Bucher recalled. "I was able to talk occasionally surreptitiously with members of my crew. Generally speaking, though, unless we could meet in the head, it was not possible for me to get together with my crew."

Between indoctrination and interrogation sessions, the Pueblo crewmen had hours free, sometimes days. They wrote rock 'n' roll songs and Japanese-English dictionaries, worked on intricate mathematical problems and played chess and games involving naming every state in the United States, or every country in the world.

The details of the crewmen's lives in prison have emerged in the last two weeks in prolonged and sometimes emotional inquiry sessions dealing with their detention. Most of these sessions have been open.

Panel Hears Technicians

Today, however, the sessions on the Naval Amphibious Base were closed and placed under armed Marine guard. The five admirals on the court heard a half-dozen naval communications technicians who worked on the Pueblo's secret "research space," where most of the ship's intelligence-gathering mission was performed.

"There are certain classified areas of detention, certain sensitive areas that cannot be discussed in open court," said Capt. Vincent Thomas, the public affairs officer for the commander in chief, United States Pacific Fleet.

The testimony this morning included some discussion of the secret papers and equipment that fell into the hands of the North Koreans who boarded the Pueblo. There were also indications that the inquiry focused on the extent to which the North Koreans had questioned the intelligence specialists — what the North Koreans had asked and how much they had learned.