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All the Circumstances but Not All the Witnesses

CORONADO, Calif.—The admirals walk to their table and yawn. The counsels open up folders and speak with weary impatience. The Naval Amphitheatre is now half-filled, luring only some Navy dependents, retired officers, newsmen and a pudgy parade of Southern California housewives who see the Pueblo inquiry as a better daytime show than Art Linkletter.

The inquiry into the capture of the intelligence ship drones on. Now approaching its seventh week, the court hears the grim stories of the beatings and confessions unfold with such repetition that somehow the impact diminishes. Shock turns to a sleepy numbness. The weeping of grown men now yields only cool sympathy.

All the Facts

For some, though, emotions are still high. Last Friday the Pueblo's skipper, Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, was so affected by testimony of one of his sailors that he had to be led from the courtroom, weeping uncontrollably.

"The crew doesn't really want to testify," said one Navy officer close to the case. "On the one hand they don't want to get up in public and try to pat themselves on the back and come on like heroes. On the other hand, they don't want to make fools of themselves and talk about the confessions. Either way they feel in a jam."

From the outset, the Court of Inquiry here was set up to look into "all the facts and circumstances" involving the capture of the intelligence ship and the 11 bitter months of the crew's

North Korean imprisonment. Clearly the Navy had hoped publicly to answer the questions involving the capture of the Pueblo—and possibly resolve the guilt and embarrassment of so many senior officers who felt that the loss of a United States ship without a fight was hardly the Navy's finest hour.

And yet, even as these details continue to unfold, the inquiry appears to be only crawling forward going over details that have already emerged, shunning details that remain unexplored.

Crew's Reaction

Moreover, the ironies of five admirals conducting an investigation of other admirals—and the Navy—are clearly apparent. Whatever pressures and orders the admirals work under are sweeping enough to have blocked testimony by witnesses who could fill in key gaps in the inquiry. There appears to be a special reluctance, for example, to call senior Navy officials who were directly involved in the Pueblo's secret mission and the decision not to involve United States planes or ships when the Pueblo was seized last January.

What about Admiral Thomas C. Moorer, the Chief of Naval Operations (who is scheduled to be heard soon before a Congressional committee investigating the Pueblo) or Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific when the Pueblo was attacked? The retired admiral lives in this ocean resort city.

There are gaps in the testimony too that could possibly be filled by calling the commander of the Fifth Air Force in Japan

who could have ordered planes to rescue the Pueblo and officers at the Puget Naval Shipyard and the Naval Ships Systems Command responsible for outfitting the former cargo ship with poor communications, inadequate equipment and few destruction devices for secret papers and equipment.

Even more basic questions have been brushed aside, partly because of security, partly because the five admirals appear to have neither the power nor jurisdiction—nor, perhaps, the inclination—to deal with such delicate issues.

Is the gamble of sending 83 unarmed men, hundreds of pounds of top secret papers,

millions of dollars' worth of electronic equipment worth the risk? Do ships like the Pueblos actually uncover new data about North Korean radar and Russian submarine movements—or is the United States already aware of these details through planes and more modern technological methods?

Beyond even that, the link between the Pueblo — or the Navy—and the civilian intelligence agencies who guarded the mission remains unexplored. What were the Pueblo's ties with those agencies, and should these military-civilian relationships be overhauled as a result of the incident?

Blunting Criticism

Meanwhile, the Pueblo's crewmen are being called one by one before the court, a move designed by the Navy to blunt any possible criticism that the crew was unheard during the inquiry. With some variation, the admirals' questions and the crewmen's replies are now merged into a blurred ritual: the admirals ask the major reasons why the crewmen departed from the code of conduct which tells American servicemen to give only name, rank, serial number and date of birth if captured.

The crewmen reply: "There was no choice. . . . They would have got what they wanted eventually. . . . They captured all the documents with our personal records so what was the sense of denying something they already knew. . . . They held all the cards. . . . It was fear, Sir, just fear. . . ."

—BERNARD WEINRAUB

Tea and Cookies

The ordeal of the men of the Pueblo was not all beatings, interrogation and threats. There was also what they called the "Gypsy Tea Room."

During their captivity, almost every crewman was taken from his cell to a 12-by-15-foot room where wine, waitresses and cookies awaited. There were also interrogators interested in knowing which sailors would receive Korean visitors if the Pueblo men ever got back to the United States. "It had, I think, an intelligence effort to it," one crewman said at the inquiry last week. Another said he told the Koreans that if he got any visitors, "I'd call the F.B.I."