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Pueblo's Main Task Was to Survey Russian Fleet

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CORONADO, Calif., March 2—The Pueblo steamed out of Japan on January, 1968, with 83 crewmen, most of whom were inexperienced at sea, unaware of any possible threat and unsure of the intelligence ship's mission.

More than half of the crewmen had never been to sea before—including 20 of the 29 communications and decoding specialists in the secret "research space." Although the ship was on an intelligence gathering mission, only two crew members spoke Korean.

About six enlisted men and officers, however, spoke Russian.

Testimony at the court of inquiry and conversations with Navy officials indicate that the primary phase of the Pueblo's final mission was to collect data on Russian naval operations in the Sea of Japan.

The secondary mission of the Pueblo was to move along the coast of North Korea to check on radar installations and the movements of submarines in the area.

Relative Importance Weighed

The relative importance that the Navy placed on the two missions of the Pueblo was underscored by the fact that the ship's two Korean-speaking crewmen joined the Pueblo in December, 1967, two weeks before the former cargo ship sailed from Yokosuka, Japan, toward North Korea.

Most of the "research" or intelligence crewmen joined the Pueblo in May, when the vessel was converted into an intelligence craft. Her 177-foot hull was fitted with hypersensitive radar, navigation equipment and sonars.

At the time of the Pueblo's mission, Navy officials say, the "No. 1 priority" for intelligence ships was the coastal waters off Communist China. Armed

Chinese fishing boats in previous months harassed and steamed as close as five yards to naval intelligence ships in the East China Sea off Shanghai.

The second priority was off the coast of the Soviet Union in the Sea of Japan. Navy officials say that there was a "high degree of harassment" of United States intelligence ships in the zone, including "extremely close" passes by nuclear-powered guided missile submarines and destroyers.

Some of the harassing incidents—in which smaller Russian craft pointed 37-millimeter guns toward American ships at a distance of 20 yards—lasted several hours.

The third priority was off North Korea. The Pueblo's sister ship, the Banner, had two missions near Wonsan on her way north toward the Russian coast. One of the intelligence missions was for 11 hours; the other for a day and a half. There was little harassment.

The Pueblo's mission was di-

vided into two phases. The intelligence ship was to sail north in the Sea of Japan off North Korea. After collecting intelligence in three separate areas along the coast, she was to reverse course and steam south to watch and eavesdrop on Soviet Navy operations.

This was to be the major thrust of what turned out to be the Pueblo's final mission.

"We were to attempt to survey the Soviet naval units which were known to be operating in the Tsushima Strait area and had been operating there for many months," Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, the Pueblo's skipper, testified.

"We had placed these ships under surveillance by air and it was not known at the time what the ships exactly were doing there and why they were assigned to that location.

"What Pueblo hoped to do was to survey these ships and obtain photographs if possible.

"We were permitted to close their formation to a distance

of 500 yards for normal surveillance and to a distance of 200 yards to obtain photography. It was my intention to take care of this particular phase of my assignment as the final part of my operations."

Unprepared for Attack

Commander Bucher and the Pueblo's crewmen have repeated over and over that the ship had been unprepared for a North Korean attack or any hostile actions beyond harassment.

Since most crewmen were unaware of the ship's intelligence mission—they had only been told that the Pueblo was engaged in "oceanographic research"—there appears to have been considerable confusion in the feverish efforts to burn and scuttle the 600 pounds of secret papers on the ship.

Navy officers say that few of the crewmen, possibly even Commander Bucher, knew that the ship carried so many secret papers and so much decoding equipment.

