

The Incomplete Inquiry

Pueblo Mystery Remains

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Coronado

The Pueblo affair, it now seems fair to say, proved too big for the naval court of inquiry which just adjourned its hearings here.

The answers to many of the most burning questions about this cold war disaster simply have not been given.

This is so despite a prodigious effort by the Navy in the eight-week inquiry. Vice Admiral Harold G. Bowen Jr., after declaring Thursday that "this court is closed," said the court he presided over was in session for 200 hours and heard 104 witnesses who filled 3392 pages of transcript.

FAILED

But just as Pentagon statistics failed to tell the story of the Vietnam War, so it is with the Pueblo.

The public still has received no explanation for monumental foulups in the Pueblo's communications; for the cutback in intelligence on North Korea; for the split personality of the Pueblo command — half "spook" and half Navy; the reason the National Security Agency suggestion that the Pueblo be protected never got through to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Nor have the public sessions given the whys of the spy ship program generally or of the Pueblo mission specifically.

Perhaps the Navy — sitting in judgment on itself — should not be expected to come up with all those explanations. However, attorneys on both sides at the outset of the inquiry predicted that the full story would indeed be told.

COURTS

Naval courts of inquiry are routinely convened to make an officer account for such things as damaging a ship. He must explain why he damaged or lost a piece of

Government property. Obviously, the loss of the Pueblo was more than that. But old court of inquiry traditions seemed to restrict the investigation.

For example, not a single full admiral was called as a witness. He would have outranked Bowen, the president of the court.

Admiral Ulysses S. G. Sharp, who was Commander in Chief in the Pacific when the Pueblo called for help, was never summoned as a witness to tell what he did on that fateful day. Sharp lives a few minutes from where the inquiry was held.

The same goes for Lieutenant General Seth McKee, who headed the Fifth Air Force when the SOS went out. He was in command of Air Force planes in the area.

In convening the court, Admiral John J. Hyland, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, instructed the admirals "to inquire into the circumstances relating to the seizure of the USS Pueblo" and "to inquire into all the facts and circumstances re-seizure of the USS Pueblo" and "to inquire into all the facts and circumstances relating to the subject incident."

MANDATE

Bowen and his four fellow admirals apparently decided that they could fulfill that mandate without going too far afield. This is evidenced by the absence of officials who were not called to testify.

Besides the omission of such high-ranking military leaders as Sharp and McKee, the complaints of Commander Lloyd M. Bucher about the Pueblo's hasty conversion work prompted no summoning of the responsible Bureau of Ships officials. Nor was the National Security Agency or anybody called from the National Security Agency or Navy Intelligence to explain

to the public why such sharply divided responsibilities aboard the Pueblo were necessary.

NSA, according to information gleaned here, at one point wanted to let civilians rather than navy officers run spy ships like the Pueblo. Intelligence leaders, then, were deeply involved. But the operational heads came in for no public accounting during the inquiry.

Former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara told Congress shortly after the Pueblo was captured that the decision against trying to rescue her was made in the field. But who — what officer — in the field? The President probably made the final decision, but the official who made the recommendation to him was not identified during the inquiry.

ANSWERS

Perhaps the admirals on the court obtained so meager these answers from the 70 hours of secret sessions that Bowen said they held, and will ultimately disclose them.

The court's record in this regard is not encouraging, however.

As opposed to congressional committee procedure, where actual testimony in censored form is released from a closed hearing, the Navy summarized the secret sessions with only a sprinkling of quotes.

Criticism of the Navy could be muffled by this system.

The naval summary of the closed session for the afternoon of February 10, for example, included only the briefest reference to what Richard A. MacKinnon, an intelligence officer who had specialized on North Korea while stationed in Honolulu, had talked about.

"Lieutenant Commander MacKinnon," the public summary said, "assigned to the

staff of commander-in-chief, Pacific Fleet, when the Pueblo was seized, gave the court a brief summary of his

duties at that time. The text of his testimony is classified."

What MacKinnon actually said in that closed session, it can be said authoritatively, is that the flow of intelligence information to the commander for Pueblo-like missions had been sharply reduced by orders of his new boss months before the Pueblo set sail. MacKinnon thought this was a mistake. He asked for a new assignment rather than tolerate the situation. No part of this testimony was made public.

At another closed session, Lieutenant Stephen R. Harris, who was in charge of the intelligence center on the ship, reportedly said that the Pueblo's mission off North Korea "was a complete waste of time and money." The muffled summary for public consumption said that the mission proved "unproductive."

What the court did concentrate on was why Bucher gave up the ship and how the men lived up to the code of conduct for American prisoners of war while in captivity. Bucher had a full and fair opportunity to justify his decisions. But the weeks spent in quizzing the 82 Pueblo crewmen on the 1955 code of conduct seemed to distort the whole inquiry for no apparent gain.