

BUCHER, MEN CLEARED, COURT OVERRULED

Pueblo Case Ruling Issued By Chafee

WASHINGTON (AP)—Navy Secretary John H. Chafee today ruled out any punishment for any U.S. personnel connected with North Korea's seizure of the spy ship Pueblo even though a Navy court of inquiry urged court-martials for skipper Lloyd M. Bucher and a chief assistant.

Setting aside major recommendations of the 80-day inquiry, Chafee declared of the men who served on the Pueblo: "They have suffered enough, and further punishment would not be justified."

While prisoners of the North Koreans, he noted, "They suffered extensively from physical abuse and torturous treatment."

ALL CHARGES against Pueblo crewmen will be dismissed.

"I am convinced," Chafee said, "that neither individual discipline, nor the state of discipline or morale in the Navy nor any other interest requires further legal proceedings with respect to any personnel involved in the Pueblo incident."

The Navy court of inquiry, he disclosed, recommended after piling up 4,350 pages of testimony that general court-martial trials be held for Cmdr. Bucher and Lt. Stephen R. Harris, his "research" officer.

Bucher would have faced five court-martial charges, dealing mainly with failing to resist the North Korea takeover of Jan. 23, 1968, and allowing classified information to fall into the North Koreans' hands.

Harris, the court of inquiry held, ought to be tried on three counts dealing with his so-called research detachment's lack of ability and readiness to destroy secret materials before the North Koreans boarded the vessel. But Chafee wiped out those charges.

HARRIS SAID at his mother's home in Melrose, Mass., that he is "very, very happy" with Chafee's decision not to take disciplinary action. He said he would go to Washington soon for a new assignment.

The Navy said the Pueblo's officers and men are now widely scattered—on leave, discharged or assigned to new stations. They all stayed in the San Diego, Calif., area while the court of inquiry was in session.

At a news conference explaining his position, Chafee said he had not talked to President Nixon about the course of action he chose.

There has been some public controversy over the question of whether the Navy was trying to saddle Bucher and his men with the blame for the Pueblo debacle when higher-ups ought to be held accountable, too.

SAID CHAFEE: "I think it is clear that everybody was advancing on a certain assumption and that assumption proved to be an invalid one"—mainly, that a ship operating on the high seas would always be safe from piracy. bravely holding the crew together during 11 months of captivity, was informed of his decision at 7:30 a.m. (PST) in San Diego.

Members of the court of inquiry, which sat at San Diego, were:

President-Vice Adm. Harold G. Bowen Jr. Other mem-

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bers—Rear Admirals Richard R. Pratt, Marshall W. White, Edward E. Grimm and Allan A. Berger.

Secretary Chafee said he does not feel Bucher now must go through life with the Pueblo cloud hanging over him. Chafee compared Bucher's position to that of a person who has been indicted by a grand jury "and it is decided that the charges be dropped."

HE WOULD NOT ANSWER directly whether Bucher will even be given command of another ship, saying only that Bucher's future assignments will be handled in the usual fashion, in competition with other officers.

He said the Navy has asked Bucher about his personal preferences for a new assignment and "then it will proceed from there."

Asked whether he considers the Pueblo case closed, Chafee replied: "I do."

Asked whether Bucher and the others can request courts-martial in an effort to clear their names, Chafee said they had this right, but that the Navy does not necessarily have to grant the request.

He said the full text of the court of inquiry's report is still secret and the Navy does not plan to release it publicly.

THE COURT OF INQUIRY, it was disclosed, also found that letters of reprimand should be given to Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson, commander of naval forces in Japan, and Capt. Everett B. Gladding, now retired.

The court held that Johnson, who has since moved to a new assignment, was "derelict in the performance of duty" by failing to plan properly for emergency support of the Pueblo in a confrontation and "negligently failing" to verify destruction procedures for classified documents.

Gladding, then director of the Navy security group in the Pacific, was held by the court to have been derelict for "failing to develop procedures to insure the readiness" of the Pueblo's research section.