

Pueblo's Officers Disagree on Who Stopped the Ship

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MONTEREY, Calif., July 20 —A bitter dispute flared up among officers of the Pueblo while the crew of the electronic surveillance vessel was in jail following her capture off North Korea in January, 1968.

The dispute is over this question, which was never raised at a months-long court of inquiry last year: Who ordered the engines shut down to end the Pueblo's lumbering attempt to flee from the Korean gunboats, which were three times as fast as she was?

The dispute has become known now through advance copies of Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher's memoirs, "My Story," scheduled for publication Aug. 7. Commander Bucher expects to net about \$100,000 from his book after taxes.

Interviews with crew members this week showed them to be disturbed by the dispute. Of five men present at the event in question, only Commander Bucher, captain of the Pueblo, told it one way; three others told a different version, and the fifth would not comment at all.

Agree on Risk

Both sides agree that the ship would have been shot to pieces and most of her crew killed had she not stopped. Even so, one man was killed in the shelling before she halted.

The protagonists are Commander Bucher, living here while assigned to the Navy Post Graduate School, and Chief Warrant Officer Gene H. Lacy, the pueblo's chief engineer, now security chief on a Navy supply dock in Seattle.

In his narration of the capture, Commander Bucher in his book gave his version of the engine shutdown. The description came after passages that recounted how three volleys of cannon and machine-gun fire were sent into Pueblo by the North Koreans.

The event became, in Commander Bucher's account, the basis for an allegation that the ship's officers let him down when he needed them most. The effect of this was to focus on Mr. Lacy the onus for these failures that the skipper alleged.

Commander Bucher wrote: "I was stunned by Gene Lacy's wild-eyed look as he dragged himself back to his feet and suddenly yelled at me: 'Are you going to stop this son of a bitch or not?'"

'Yanked the Handles'

"There was only a fraction of hesitation before he reached out himself and yanked the handles of the annunciator TO ALL. The blindly alert engineers, isolated three decks down, instantly rang the answering bells. There followed an abrupt break in the wheezing exhaust throb of our perforated stack, then a rapid deceleration downward of our 12-knot speed.

"I kept staring at Gene in utter disbelief for another 15 seconds. Fifteen seconds that brought the stark realization that my most experienced officer, my most trusted friend aboard this ill-starred little ship, had robbed me of the last vestige of support in my efforts to save the mission, leaving me alone with an executive officer who had proven to be unreliable and two very young and inexperienced junior officers on my bridge.

"Suddenly the complete uselessness of further resistance flooded my brain. It would only result in our being shot to pieces and a lot of good men killed to no avail, because the North Koreans would in the end get most of our secret documents.

"Instead of lunging for the annunciator and racking it back to ALL AHEAD FULL, I turned my back on it and Gene and walked out on the starboard wing of the bridge."

Says He Got Order

Mr. Lacy, badly shaken by the recurrence of a dispute he thought was over and forgotten, insisted in an interview in Seattle that Commander Bucher had ordered him to signal the engines to stop.

"I don't know whether he's grasping at straws or what the hell the deal is on it," Mr. Lacy said of Commander Bucher.

Mr. Lacy described Commander Bucher's appearance as he and Quartermaster First Class Charles B. Law came down off the flying bridge onto

the bridge deck during a lull in the attack:

"He was kind of wild-eyed, which was normal under the situation. He walked back and forth across the bridge, didn't say anything to anybody and I asked him if he was going to stop the ship."

Mr. Lacy said the Commander "nodded assent to me and I did bring the annunciators back." The firing then stopped. The Korean torpedo boat signaled the Pueblo to follow her into harbor, which Commander Bucher ordered done. He said in his book he intended to use the time to destroy secret documents and electronic equipment.

In an interview at his rented home here, Commander Bucher insisted that he had not indicated by word or conscious motion that he wanted the ship stopped. He agreed he could have instantly ordered the engines restarted merely by ringing the telegraph.

While he told his version of the events in his debriefing after repatriation late in 1968, he purposely avoided bringing it up on the court of inquiry in 1969 because he did not want the court to think he was trying to shift responsibility to a subordinate. The Navy has treated records of the debriefing interviews as classified material.

He told his men to avoid bringing it up, he said. He told them they could talk about it if asked directly but that no member of the court asked.

Commander Bucher said he believed the story had to be told in his book. He said he was puzzled by Mr. Lacy's attitude and pointed out he had praised Mr. Lacy in the highest terms elsewhere in the book.

"Hell, if I'd done it, I'd sure as hell want somebody to say it," Commander Bucher said. He also referred to crew mem-

bers who he said would support his version.

One of these is Quartermaster Law, now a chief petty officer at Whidbey Island Navy Base in Puget Sound. Interviewed by telephone, Mr. Law supported not the captain but Mr. Lacy.

"We came in and they had stopped firing, and they started again," said Mr. Law. "We took some more hits, and he [Bucher] cursed at them. I don't know the exact words. Then finally Gene Lacy said 'Let's stop this goddamned thing.' The skipper looked around a little bit and then he gave the order to ALL STOP, all emergency stop. Gene Lacy was on the indoor telegraph and he's the one that rang it up."

Ensign Is Quoted

Another man who was on the bridge was Ensign Timothy L. Harris, who was making notes for an official narrative of events. (The Koreans captured his manuscript). Now a lieutenant aboard an LST based in San Diego, Mr. Harris is at sea.

But his pro-Lacy account of the day of the Pueblo's capture appears in "The Last Voyage of U.S.S. Pueblo," a book published late last year. It was written by Ed Brandt, metropolitan editor of The Norfolk Virginian Pilot, and is based on interviews with crew members.

Mr. Brandt said Mr. Harris was the authority for the following paragraph:

"Gene Lacy got to his feet, he yelled: 'Let's stop this goddamn ship before we all get killed. Bucher said, 'Okay,' and ordered ALL STOP. Lacy rang up the emergency stop himself."

The helmsman that day, Ronald L. Berens, now in a Navy school in Florida, would not

comment on what he saw that day, beyond saying that he remembered very clearly what happened and had told his story to the Navy intelligence men who interviewed him after the Pueblo's crew was released.

The conflicting versions of the incident cropped up in July 1968, when Mr. Bucher asked his crew and officers to write down while in prison their recollections of what happened the day of capture. This had to be done surreptitiously and at some risk of discovery and punishment by the Korean jailers.

While the book was put together in its final form by Mark Rascovich, a professional writer, its basic form and language is Commander Bucher's.

The manuscript was sold to Doubleday through an agent who retained 10 per cent. Mr. Rascovich got 22.5 per cent. E. Miles Harvey, Mr. Bucher's lawyer during the court of inquiry, took 20 per cent. The remaining 47.5 per cent is retained by Mr. Bucher.

Doubleday paid \$375,000 for the book, he said, and he expects to have about \$100,000 left after paying taxes on the \$183,000 he calculates to be his share.