

Books of The Times

Questions of Loyalty

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

BUCHER: MY STORY. By Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, U.S.N., with Mark Rascovich. Illustrated. 447 pages. Doubleday. \$7.95.

A MATTER OF ACCOUNTABILITY, The True Story of the Pueblo Affair. By Trevor Armbrister. Illustrated. 408 pages. Coward-McCann. \$7.95.

It seems thoroughly decadent to admit it, but the appeal of these two books on the Pueblo affair depends on the excitement they generate as sea stories in the vein of "The Caine Mutiny," "The Cruel Sea," and all the rest of those tales in which a miniature society, working under a rigid but simplified social contract, is threatened with extinction, but comes through. Herein the case of the Pueblo affair, in which the N. Koreans seized a United States Navy intelligence-gathering ship, we have the captain, an attractive, unusual man with his first command determined to prove himself against the odds of an unpredictable and ill-equipped vessel and a wholly unconventional mission in dangerous waters. Here we have the crew, with its idiosyncratic and conflicting personalities. The crisis, with its demands for split-second decisions on which great moral issues hang. The long ordeal of imprisonment, torture, and struggle to survive when one isn't even certain whether it's right to survive. Then release and triumphant return. And the inevitable trial and recapitulation, in which decisions made under fire are tested in the crucible of tradition and law. Classic.



U.S. Navy

Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher

Sincerity and Reverence

Commander Bucher, captain of the Pueblo, tells his version of the adventure with the help of Mark Rascovich, author of the best-selling doomsday novel, "The Bedford Incident," and they tell it with soul-rending sincerity, with genuinely becoming reverence for God, for Honor, for Country, and for Service, and with just the right note of fitness-report formality that makes phrases like "I . . . knew they would have no difficulty in fitting themselves in with we Navy types" seem entirely proper.

Trevor Armbrister, a former Saturday Evening Post bureau chief, slips Bucher's story into a bigger picture made up out of interviews with the Pueblo's crew, the Naval command structure that prepared the ill-fated mission and then found its hands tied when disaster struck, and the United States Government leaders who were forced to solve the agonizing problems presented by the Pueblo's seizure. As Armbrister's restless camera eye shifts from Pyongyang to Washington to Seoul to Kamiseya, Japan, one gets an extraordinary picture of what went on, one be-

comes fascinated by the developing conflict between bureaucracy and flesh, and one begins to anticipate a concluding blaze of eschatology. If only it hadn't all happened, these books would provide the sheerest entertainment.

But the Pueblo affair did happen. And it raised issues horrible to behold—issues that had super-patriots crying "Shame!" and "Revenge!" had New Leftists revering Bucher as a man who broke silly rules for the sake of humanity, and had other people wondering if the Military Code of Conduct ("Don't give up the ship; give only name, rank, and serial number," and all that) wasn't obsolete. And neither of these books really gets into the grips of those issues.

For all his profound heroism and loyalty to the Navy, and for all the proof he offers that the Naval court of inquiry (convened after the crew's release) was just in its conclusion that Bucher had "suffered enough," Bucher leaves the impression that he and his crew finally ended up the scapegoats in a Navy whitewash of itself. And Armbrister, for all his first-rate reporting and his salient suggestions that the men of the Pueblo were victims of a malfunctioning technocracy, reneges on the promise of a moral summing up that rests in his title, "A Matter of Accountability," and in the pitch of his prose.

Between Two Navies

Armbrister seems to conclude that Bucher wound up caught between the values of the "Old Navy," which condemned him for violating the Code, and the "New Navy," which admired him for placing humanity above the Code. But Armbrister, as well as everyone else in both books, fails to remind us that the Code of Conduct was itself designed to protect humanity.

Among the many terrifyingly complex questions that confronted Commander Bucher was, first, whether the preservation of Pueblo's secrets was worth the sacrifice of 83 lives; second, whether the sacrifice would even have achieved the goal of preservation, and, third, whether one ought to die and sacrifice uselessly simply out of respect for the Code. In Bucher's mind, apparently, the pragmatic solutions won out over the abstract, and he decided not to resist the North Koreans.

But was he right? The question breeds questions like splitting atoms. Even though we cannot know exactly what the Pueblo was doing off the coast of North Korea, how vital can its mission have been in the larger scheme of things? What are the priorities of loyalty in a cosmos that makes increasingly complex demands? Does the rigidity of abstract loyalty perhaps produce unfortunate side effects? When does loyalty merge with fanaticism?

The memory of the Pueblo has now congealed around such questions. Both these books provoke them anew, but neither seriously debates them. In the absence of debate, vital centers of the mind doze off, and one finds oneself sliding into the world of sea adventures.