



## H-Gram 014: 50th Anniversary of the Seizure of USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2)

22 January 2018

### The Seizure of the USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2)

On 23 January 1968, an overwhelming force of North Korean naval vessels fired on and hit USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2) before boarding and seizing the ship in international waters off the east coast of North Korea. At the start of the incident, *Pueblo* was dead-in-the-water about 16 nautical miles from the nearest North Korean territory (an island), conducting an intelligence-collection mission. During the attack, one U.S. crewman (Fireman Duane Hodges) was mortally wounded and would die before the ship reached North Korean port. Ten other U.S. crewmen, including the commanding officer, Commander Lloyd M. "Pete" Bucher, were wounded to varying degrees. *Pueblo* initially maneuvered to avoid being boarded, but Bucher determined that armed resistance was futile. After capture, *Pueblo*'s surviving crew of 82 (including two Marines and two civilians) would endure months of torture, beatings, food deprivation, and inadequate medical care before being released in December 1968. Some of *Pueblo*'s crew would be paraded before camera at an international news conference to demonstrate how well they were being cared for, during which several of the crewmen displayed the "Hawaiian Good Luck Symbol" (their middle finger). More torture ensued when the North Koreans learned the



Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, USN, former commanding officer of USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2) receives the Purple Heart medal for injuries he received while he was a prisoner of the North Koreans, in ceremonies held in 1969, shortly after he and his crew were released. *Pueblo* and her crew were captured off Wonsan, North Korea, on 23 January 1968. The crew were released on 23 December 1969 (NH 75565).

true meaning of the gesture. Bucher's crew would receive one Navy Cross, two Silver Stars (one posthumously, for Hodges) and six Bronze Stars (with Combat V), mostly for their actions during captivity. Bucher's decision to place the lives of his crew ahead of the axiom "Don't Give Up the Ship" would be one of the most hotly debated in U.S. Navy history. For more on the USS *Pueblo*, please see the attachment H-014-1.



*USS Pueblo (AGER-2) off San Diego, California, 19 October 1967 (USN 1129208).*

## **H-014-1: The Seizure of USS *Pueblo* (AGER-2)**

*H-Gram 014, Attachment 1*

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At 1430 (local) on 23 January 1968, Commander Lloyd M. "Pete" Bucher, commanding officer of the intelligence-collection ship USS *Pueblo*, had to make a command decision, one that would become among the most second-guessed in U.S. Navy history.

At a position just outside internationally recognized North Korean territorial waters, and

hundreds of miles from any possible help, *Pueblo* was penned in by four North Korean P-4 motor torpedo boats (eight torpedoes total - at least one launcher uncovered and turned out, plus 14.5-mm machine guns on each), two modified S.O.1 submarine chasers (57-mm and 37-mm guns, anti-submarine rockets and torpedoes), and two Mig-21 fighters buzzing 1,500 feet overhead, which had already fired rockets into the sea nearby as a demonstration. For just over two hours, Bucher had maneuvered, stalled, at times ignoring North Korean signals to heave to and other instructions, in an attempt to avoid being boarded, as the number of North Korean vessels involved increased. Bucher had thwarted the first boarding attempt and tried to clear the area, but with no real hope of actually outrunning the much faster North Korean units. From point-blank range (35-50 yards for the P-4s, 800 yards for an S.O.1), the

North Koreans had fired 10 to 15 30-second bursts (6-15 rounds per burst) of 57-mm gunfire and well over a thousand rounds of machine-gun fire from all quarters into *Pueblo*, taking out radar and radio masts, and causing other damage. The firing was controlled, and was a fraction of what the North Koreans could have directed at the ship; they had sufficient firepower to blow the small ship out of the water if they chose. Ten of *Pueblo's* 83-man crew were wounded, one mortally, and Bucher himself had been wounded in the leg in the first salvo as well as taking a painful shard of glass in his rectum. As a P-4 closed in with a ten-man armed boarding party, Bucher was pretty much out of options.

*Pueblo* was armed with two .50-caliber machine guns, one mounted forward and one amidships, both in exposed, unarmored and unprotected positions, for which his crew only had cursory training. Experience had shown that it would take about ten minutes to chip the ice, remove the tarp, and get the cantankerous, jam-prone weapon loaded and operational. Bucher had assessed that any Sailor attempting to man the weapon would have been cut down by overwhelming North Korean machine-gun fire long before the weapons could be employed effectively. *Pueblo* also had ten Thompson sub-machine guns with only about 300 rounds of ammo, plus 50 anti-swimmer concussion grenades, stowed below decks. Although these weapons might have taken out some of the North Korean boarding team, the North Koreans had all portholes and exposed areas of *Pueblo* effectively covered with fire (brief exposures of crew had drawn just such fire). Bucher made the decision that armed resistance was futile, although he had thrown his coffee cup at the nearest North Korean vessel.

The reality was that no one in the U.S. chain of command had believed that *Pueblo* would actually have to defend herself. Her real defense was viewed as International Law and naval tradition. No U.S. naval vessel had been forcibly

boarded in peacetime since the infamous USS *Chesapeake*/HMS *Leopard* affair in 1807. As long as naval vessels conducted themselves in accordance with the "rules" such as remaining out of legally claimed territorial water except when engaged in innocent passage, they were generally unmolested. In the days before the signing of the U.S.-Soviet "Incidents at Sea Agreement" in the 1970s, various kinds of harassment of vessels conducting intelligence-collection missions happened with a degree of regularity. Both sides engaged in such activity, which was potentially dangerous, but there were unstated (at the time) limits. In previous intelligence-collection missions against the Soviets and Chinese, the machine guns of *Pueblo's* sister ship USS *Banner* (AGER-1) had actually remained stowed below throughout. The intent was for the intelligence collection ships to remain as un-provocative as possible and avoid attracting attention. Bucher's guidance from COMNAVFORJAPAN was the same: Avoid provoking any kind of international incident because the United States had its hands full with Vietnam at the moment. Unfortunately, planning for *Pueblo's* mission (up and down the chain of command) made the mistaken assumption that the "rules" that applied to intelligence collection missions along the Soviet coast (and People's Republic of China coast) also applied to North Korea. Despite the fact that *Pueblo's* very first mission would also be the first against North Korea, the official assessments provided to Bucher and the entire chain of command were that the threat was "low" and that the mission would be "routine." The result was that there was no realistic reaction plan by U.S. forces in the Far East, certainly none that had ever been rehearsed, in the event *Pueblo* got into trouble.

At the time, the prevailing view in the U.S. Navy was that using warships such as destroyers for intelligence-collection missions was a "waste," and U.S. Navy escort ships were stretched thin with Vietnam gun line and worldwide commitments. The larger intelligence-collection

ships (AGTRs,) such as USS *Liberty* (AGTR-5), were viewed as being too focused on national-level intelligence rather than on naval intelligence requirements. The result was a hastily conceived and executed plan to convert small World War II-vintage U.S. Army transport ships into intelligence-collection ships, and to do it on the cheap. As a result, Bucher's ship had a very long list of material deficiencies, most of which Bucher had tried to get corrected before her first mission, with necessary repairs denied due to lack of funding. *Pueblo's* engines were unreliable and she frequently broke down. With the addition of the "research" (intelligence-collection) spaces, *Pueblo* was top-heavy, dangerously so during the heavy seas and heavy icing conditions that prevailed during most of her first mission (and which kept most of her crew sick in their bunks when they were not on watch or chipping ice, which also severely limited any kind of training such as "repel boarders"). *Pueblo* also had no efficient means to scuttle herself (it would have taken about two hours, and required loss of power—including radios—to the ship).

One of the most significant material deficiencies of *Pueblo* was that she had no efficient means to conduct a rapid emergency destruction of classified material and equipment. Bucher had used money from the ship's MWR fund to buy and install an incinerator because the Navy would not pay for one. As it turned out, the incinerator was exposed to enemy fire, and could not rapidly burn bulk publications. Burning papers in the passageways and in the small unventilated "research" space when the ship was at Zebra, turned out to be not the best solution, although it was attempted. Using sledgehammers on the collection equipment broke the sledgehammers; axes worked somewhat better, but not much. The ship had way too many classified publications on board, which the crew had been unable to offload in the rush to conduct the mission. At the time of the incident, *Pueblo* was in water that was too shallow for classified material to be weighted and thrown overboard (according to regulation). Crew

who did try to throw things out of portholes immediately drew fire. The emergency-destruction watch bill was also designed to be executed during General Quarters, but Bucher had delayed going to GQ so as not to "provoke" the first North Korean ship on scene. So, the correct personnel were not in the correct places when the destruction order came. Bucher also did not know what was really in the research space because he had been deemed not to have a "need-to-know." The ambiguity in the chain of command between the ship CO and the OIC of the research detachment had not been resolved before the mission commenced (but would be a significant "lesson learned" after the fact). There were also no secure communications between the research space and the bridge. (I would note that many of the "lessons learned" regarding emergency destruction had to be re-learned when a U.S. Navy EP-3 made an emergency landing in Hainan, China in 2001.)

Bucher ordered emergency destruction when the North Koreans opened fire, which turned out to be far easier said than done. Bucher received assurance that it was going well, but actually had no idea of how much classified material had yet to be destroyed when time ran out. The result would be an intelligence collection bonanza for the North Koreans (and the Russians and the Chinese). (Of note, there is a theory that the *Pueblo* incident was instigated by the Soviets so that they could get the communications hardware to complement the COMSEC material they were getting from the Walker-Whitworth spy ring, which was up and running at the time. Although intriguing, most credible evidence indicates the Soviets were surprised by the incident, and not at all happy about being surprised.)

Although the mission had been characterized as routine, Bucher was also not aware of intelligence reports that indicated heightened North Korean military activity and statements about what the North Koreans viewed as provocative activity in their territorial waters (North Korea claimed

waters significantly in excess of that recognized by international law), which suggest the North Koreans were aware and concerned about what *Pueblo* was doing. Bucher was also not aware that two days before the incident a North Korean infiltration force had reached within a couple hundred yards of the Blue House (South Korea's version of the White House) in downtown Seoul in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the South Korean president, resulting in running gun battles that killed 26 South Koreans and most of the 31-man infiltration force. Some of the North Korean activity was buried in routine intelligence summaries addressed to *Pueblo* (and the rest of the Pacific Fleet), but none specifically warned the ship. *Pueblo* also had communications problems during the incident: The HICOM circuit failed, but secure communications were maintained via teletype from the research space to the Naval Security Group Activity at Kamiseya, Japan. It wouldn't have made much difference anyway, since there were no aircraft anywhere on strip alert (the Air Force had made the offer prior to *Pueblo* getting underway, but the Navy had declined, since the mission was "routine".) USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) was over 500 nautical miles away and her alert aircraft were not configured for anti-surface action.

Although the 1953 armistice had brought an end to fighting during the Korean War, lawyers could still argue that technically a state of war still existed between the United Nations (and the United States) and North Korea. The ambiguity would result in much debate after the incident. For example, did the "Code of Conduct" (which governs U.S. prisoner resistance to "enemy" interrogation) apply? Initially, the Navy said yes, but then changed position. (For the record, the crew of *Pueblo* conducted themselves in accordance with the spirit of the code, but the fact that the North Koreans had their personnel records and numerous classified documents regarding their mission made strict adherence problematic. Some of the crew chose to endure much more torture than others before agreeing to

sign phony "confessions.") The ambiguity also affected the award of the Prisoner of War Medal to the *Pueblo*'s survivors, initially denied by the Navy on grounds that they had been "illegally detained," but were not by definition "prisoners of war." A special act of Congress belatedly authorized the medal for the ship's survivors in the 1990s.

On 23 January 1968, none of the legality of whether the North Koreans were technically an "enemy" mattered to Commander Bucher. The North Koreans had demonstrated both hostile intent and hostile action. Bucher had resisted with maneuver and speed (i.e., deliberately slow) but his command to go to "all stop" just before following the S.O.1 into North Korean territorial waters (so he could buy more time for emergency destruction) had resulted in a determined barrage of fire and a renewed boarding attempt. Bucher could have tried to scuttle his ship, but the North Koreans most certainly would have detected it, and although he had a whaleboat and life rafts for his entire crew (assuming they weren't full of holes from the thousand rounds that had hit the ship), the prospects for survival in the near-freezing air and water were slim. Bucher could have tried to forcibly resist. The result would have been almost certainly the loss of the ship (in water depth where classified material could still be salvaged) and most, if not his entire, crew. Bucher gave the order to his line handlers to accept the line from the North Korean vessel with the boarding party. Bucher did not technically surrender his ship, nor did he strike his colors. The North Koreans hauled them down. Bucher and some of his crew were prodded with bayonets, pistol-whipped, and beaten with rifle butts during the initial boarding.

I will cover the actions of Bucher and his crew in captivity in a future H-gram, but suffice to say that Bucher demonstrated extraordinary leadership and courage (especially during a mock execution). His crew also demonstrated significant heroism.

However, after release, a Navy court of inquiry composed of five flag officers recommended that Bucher be brought to trial by general court-martial for "permitting his ship to be seized while he had the power to resist, failing to take immediate and aggressive protective measures, complying with the orders of the North Koreans to follow in to port, failing to complete destruction of classified material, and permitting material to fall into the hands of the North Koreans, and for failing to ensure, before departure for sea, that his officers and crew were properly organized, stationed and trained in preparation for emergency destruction of classified material." In its opinion, the court of inquiry also noted that "during his internment, Commander Bucher upheld morale in a superior manner; that he provided leadership and that he contributed to the ability of the crew to hold together and withstand the trials of detention." The board also recommended trial by courts-martial of Lieutenant Steve Harris, OIC of the research detachment, for three offenses related to failure to inform the commanding officer of deficiencies and failure to train, drill, and complete emergency destruction. It was also recommended that the *Pueblo's* executive officer receive a letter of admonition. Additionally, a letter of reprimand was also recommended for Rear Admiral Frank Johnson, Commander Naval Forces Japan, for dereliction of duty for negligently failing to plan properly for the mission and to ensure the *Pueblo* had appropriate capability for emergency destruction. Finally, a letter of reprimand was recommended for Captain Gladding, head of the Naval Security Group Activity in Japan (to which *Pueblo's* research detachment reported) for similar reasons as Rear Admiral Johnson.

The recommendation for courts-martial set off a media and public relations firestorm. The majority of senior naval officers concurred with Commander in Chief U.S. Pacific Fleet Admiral John J. Hyland's endorsement letter, which used words like "incredible, shocking, and unforgivable" to describe Bucher's decision not to

fight. (This view was not universal, the court of inquiry itself was originally 3-2 in favor of courts-martial, before the two dissenters agreed to go along.) American public opinion, however, was strongly favorable to Bucher's decision not to sacrifice his crew in a hopeless battle. Disillusioned by the high casualties in Vietnam, particularly after the Communist Tet Offensive (that kicked off the week after *Pueblo's* capture), most American public opinion tended to believe that Bucher was being made a scapegoat for failures much higher in the chain of command. Admiral Hyland's recommendation to eliminate the most serious charge against Rear Admiral Johnson only further fueled that perception (although Hyland had also recommended letters of reprimand for Bucher and Harris instead of courts-martial). Bucher's incredible personal story, as a hard-scrabble abandoned orphan who overcame numerous hurdles to become a naval officer, also captured the public's favor.

In the end, the new Secretary of the Navy, John H. Chafee, adroitly diffused the issue (at least with the public) by noting the recommendations of the court of inquiry and Admiral Hyland, and stating that although he was not passing judgement on the guilt or innocence of the accused officers, it was his decision that there would be no disciplinary action for any of the crew of *Pueblo* on grounds that the torture and deprivation at the hands of the North Koreans was suffering enough. Chafee also dismissed the actions against Rear Admiral Johnson and Captain Gladding on grounds that there was more than enough blame to go around for many others involved in the planning for the whole affair.

Today, USS *Pueblo* remains the second-oldest commissioned ship in the U.S. Navy; however, it is a museum and tourist attraction on the river in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.

Much of my account is based on official Navy records held at NHHHC, but some great reading related to *Pueblo* includes:

*A Matter of Accountability*, Trevor Armbrister, 1970; *Bridge of No Return: The Ordeal of the USS Pueblo*, F. Carl Schumacher, Jr., and George C. Wilson, 1971; *Bucher: My Story*, Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, USN, with Mark Rascovich, 1970; and *My Anchor Held*, LCDR Stephen R. Harris, USN, 1970. I found *A Matter of Accountability* to be particularly good—and fair—especially considering how close to the highly emotional event it was written. *The Line of Fire*, by Admiral William J. Crowe, 1993, also includes some interesting “inside the Pentagon” observations made during the crisis.