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“Newly Declassified CIA Documents Tell an Entirely Different 'Pueblo Incident' Story”

by Bill Streifer

“The Pueblo incident, in North Korea’s view, appears to have been a windfall opportunity to sharpen the diversionary confrontation in Korea, to stimulate U.S.-South Korean differences, and to put greater pressures on U.S. policy in Asia. The seizure of the Pueblo was not part of an elaborate scenario prepared in advance.”

CIA “Weekly Summary”
Jan. 26, 1968

The USS Pueblo (AGER-2) was an American ELINT and SIGINT Banner-class technical research ship, boarded and captured by North Korean forces on January 23, 1968 in what is now known as the "Pueblo Incident." When the Pueblo steamed out of Japan with 83 crewman on board, most were inexperienced at sea, unaware of any possible threat and unsure of the intelligence ship’s mission.¹ In “Pueblo’s Main Task Was to Survey Russian Fleet,”² special to the *New York Times*, written after the crew’s release, Bernard Weinraub noted:

More than half of the crewmen had never been to sea before, including 20 of the 29 communications and decoding specialists in the secret “research space.” Although the ship was on an intelligence gathering mission, only two crew members spoke Korean. About six enlisted men and officers, however, spoke Russian.³

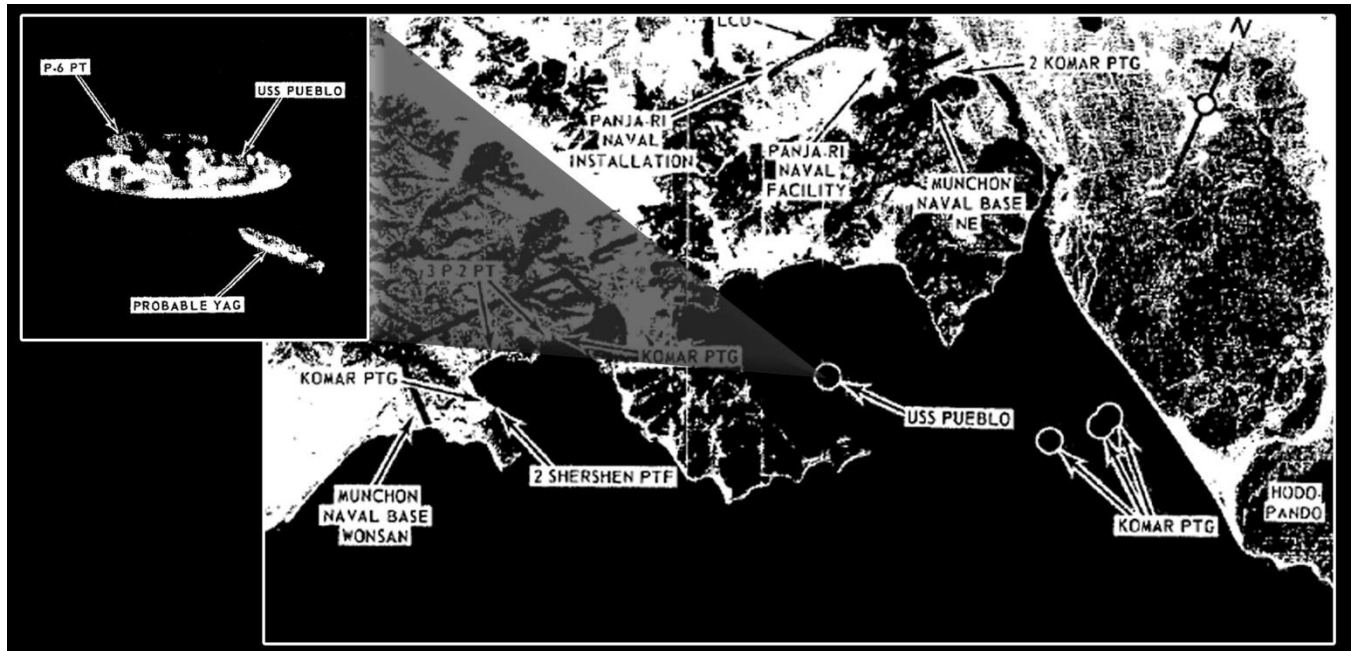
According to testimony at the court of inquiry and conversations with Naval officials, Weinraub said “the primary phase of the Pueblo’s final mission was to collect data on Russian naval operations in the Sea of Japan.”⁴ The secondary mission, he said, was to move along the North Korean coast to check on radar installations and the movement of submarines in the area.⁵ According to Weinraub, the relative importance that the U.S. Navy placed on the Pueblo’s two missions was underscored by the fact that the ship’s two Korean-speaking crewmen joined the Pueblo in December 1967, that’s only two weeks before the former cargo ship set sail for North Korea from Yokosuka, Japan.⁶

Initially a U.S. Army general purpose supply vessel, the Pueblo (FS-344⁷) was built in 1944, and retired ten years later.⁸ Then in 1966, it was brought back into service under Operation Clickbeetle, a joint Naval Intelligence and NSA effort.⁹ The conversion of cargo ships to spy vessels (actually inspired by Soviet surveillance operations dating back to the late-1950s),¹⁰ Clickbeetle was a top-secret Navy program to pack refurbished freighters with advanced electronics, outfitting them with state-of-the art equipment to intercept signals/communications intelligence.¹¹ The repairs also involved the creation of metal rooms known as the “Sod Hut” where technicians would operate the surveillance gear to intercept and gather sonar, radar, and other types of electronic traffic.¹²

When the Pueblo mission began, tasked with conducting a general search for the North Korean Army’s and Navy’s use of low-powered VHF communications by units along the east coast,¹³ some of the crew understood the risk; others did not. In a letter home, Navy fireman Norman W. Spear of Portland, Maine wasn’t specific about the mission that he and the rest of the crew were about to embark upon¹⁴—a mission that would find the men held captive in hostile North Korea, subjected to torture and the threat of death, for precisely eleven months.¹⁵ Spear’s

letter, postmarked January 4, 1968, was written just before Navy Commander Lloyd “Pete” Bucher and his crew departed Japan.¹⁶ In that letter, Spear, 25, told his father that they were embarking on a 30-day cruise and that they wouldn’t hear from him again until after the Pueblo had returned to her base in Japan.¹⁷ Noting the uncertainty of the mission, Spear wrote, “anything could happen and that no one [knows] what to expect.”¹⁸ Three weeks later, an officer from Naval Air Station Brunswick in Maine would inform Norman’s mother that her son was aboard that intelligence ship seized by the North Koreans.¹⁹

The U.S. Response



Within two hours of the Pueblo’s seizure, Fifth Air Force began deployments from Japan to Korea.²⁰ President Lyndon B. Johnson approved the initial US Air Force (USAF) deployments and 12 Air National Guard (ANG) units were mobilized.²¹ By the 30th, 34 F-105s from Kadena Air Base (AB) were at Osan AB; 14 F-4Cs from Misawa AB were at Kunsan AB, and 22 F-102s from Naha AB were at Suwon AB.²² On Feb 4th, 14 RF-4Cs arrived at Taegu AB from South Vietnam.²³ And three U.S. Navy aircraft carriers took stations off the coast of South Korea.²⁴ The USAF response to the Pueblo crisis was named Operation COMBAT FOX.²⁵ The initial deployments of USAF units were eventually replaced by other active duty, Air Force Reserve, and ANG units.

In addition to the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), U.S. Air Force, deployments, Tactical Air Command deployed three squadrons of F-4Ds as well as EB-66 electronic warfare aircraft and F-105 Wild Weasels.²⁶ Strategic Air Command (SAC) deployed one squadron each of B-52 bombers and KC-135 tankers to Kadena AB. Aerospace Defense Command made their first ever overseas deployment, sending F-106s to Osan AB.²⁷ Meanwhile, PRIME BEEF and RED HORSE civil engineering teams from across the Pacific and the U.S. were rushed to South Korea to provide immediate construction and repair support.²⁸

Although the map above appears to show the Pueblo anchored in the middle of a small bay, the ship’s exact lat/long coordinates—as reported in declassified CIA reports—remain redacted.²⁹ Recipients of the report were cautioned that the scan of the photography was

accomplished over a short time, and therefore does not constitute a “finished intelligence judgment,” and that future detailed analysis might result in additional information.³⁰ The CIA Black Shield Missions, flown by Lockheed A-12 Blackbirds, covered the southern half of North Korea and the eastern tip of the Shandong Peninsula on the east coast of Communist China.³¹ Interpretability of the photography was said to be fair-to-good with approximately 90% cloud-free coverage over the land areas.³² According to one report, 108 of the 138 Committee for Imagery Requirements and Exploitation (COMIREX) targets fell within this coverage, although two were cloud covered.³³ In addition, three new targets were also reported.³⁴ Additional details, the report said, could be obtained from cabled reports disseminated by the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) and the 67th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron (RTS) out of Yokota Airbase in Japan.³⁵

The whereabouts of the USS Pueblo—“at an offshore anchorage in a small, isolated bay north of Wonsan” with “two North Korean patrol boats anchored alongside”—was first reported on January 26th, that’s three days after the ship was seized, in CIA Black Shield Mission Report #6847.³⁶ The Pueblo was seen anchored in Changjahwan Bay harbor, 2.4 nautical miles east by northeast of North Korea’s Munchon Naval Base, Wonsan,³⁷ which in turn was located a few kilometers north of Wonsan.³⁸ As seen in aerial reconnaissance photographs, a motor torpedo boat (P-6 PT) was moored alongside and a “probable” YAG (Yard Auxiliary General), a miscellaneous service craft, was situated off the Pueblo’s port beam.³⁹ It could not be determined, however, whether the Pueblo had been damaged or if any dismantling had taken place;⁴⁰ nor was there any evidence of salvage operations observed in the vicinity where the crew of the Pueblo may have jettisoned “special equipment.”⁴¹

The CIA’s Jan. 26, 1968 “Weekly Summary”

Since 2010, the National Security Agency (NSA) has released over 200 documents concerning the seizure in international waters of the USS Pueblo and the subsequent shoot-down in April 1969 of a Navy EC-121 signals intelligence (SIGINT) aircraft.⁴² According to Retired Navy Commander Richard A. Mobley, the two incidents are best considered together since they reveal related systemic flaws in indications and warning, intelligence analysis, military planning, and command and control.⁴³ Plus, Mobley said, “Many of the same U.S. national and theater decision makers and intelligence staffers participated in both incidents.”⁴⁴ Other documents, such as personnel and medical files, have been released but with redactions, exempt from disclosure since their release would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy. A third group of documents, produced by the CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence, pertain to the negotiations surrounding the return of the USS Pueblo and its crew.⁴⁵

On January 23, 2015, the author filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the CIA concerning three specific aspects of the Pueblo Incident. Although documents concerning the first two were released within a few months, those concerning “Negotiations for the (USS Pueblo) ship’s return” weren’t released until very recently. One of those recently-released documents, a Weekly Summary by the CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence—originally marked “Secret,” dated a few days after the Pueblo was seized, and only declassified by the CIA on December 22, 2015—states: “North Korea’s audacious actions in attempting to assassinate South Korean President Pak Chong-hui and in seizing the USS Pueblo and its crew were apparently individual, uncoordinated actions,”⁴⁶ both incidents “probably aimed primarily at generating diversionary pressures on the U.S.” Around that same time, that CIA report said, Communist forces in South Vietnam were poised to launch a major country-wide offensive.⁴⁷ By

undertaking these “risky adventures,” the CIA thought the North Koreans were carrying out Kim Il-sung’s prescription for combating American power on a world-wide scale.⁴⁸

According to the CIA, Premier Kim, over the course of a year, had repeatedly described Vietnam as the “focal point of the world struggle,” urging all Communist regimes take “more positive actions” to aid Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, by forcing the U.S. to “disperse” its strength.⁴⁹ On January 19, 1968, the day the North Korean raiding party crossed the Demilitarized Zone on its way to Seoul, Pyongyang radio broadcast Kim Il-sung’s call for “blows” against the U.S. “in all parts of the world,” in order to “split its forces to the maximum degree.”⁵⁰ Kim insisted: “We must tie the U.S. up wherever it puts its feet, so that it cannot move around freely.”⁵¹

During an attempted attack on the South Korean Presidential Palace, 31 armed North Korean guerillas entered the South, disguised as South Korean soldiers, with plans to assassinate President Pak Chong-hui of South Korea and other top officials.⁵² The gunfight with South Korean authorities in the streets near the Palace caused many South Korean casualties.⁵³ Most of the armed guerillas were shot to death; only one, however, was arrested.⁵⁴ Although the heavily-armed North Korean raiding party failed to execute its assigned mission of blowing up the presidential mansion, the CIA Weekly Summary said it managed to penetrate to within 800 meters of ‘Blue House’ (*Chong Wa Dae*) before being drawn off by South Korean police.⁵⁵ But the mere fact that Korean leaders had ordered such a highly provocative venture, the CIA said, indicates they were prepared for a sharp confrontation on the 38th parallel.⁵⁶ In the CIA’s view, it also seemed likely that Pyongyang was counting heavily on the U.S. to restrain the South Koreans to prevent a military escalation in Korea that would require a major diversion of U.S. military resources from Vietnam.⁵⁷

During initial talks concerning the Pueblo Incident at Panmunjom, the CIA’s Weekly Summary said North Korea had adopted a “defiant stand” and “appeared determined to prolong the confrontation for some time.”⁵⁸ During a Military Armistice Commission meeting on January 24th, the senior North Korean representative flatly rejected the U.S. demand for the immediate return of the ship and its crew,⁵⁹ remaining silent on Pyongyang’s intentions regarding the disposition of the Pueblo.⁶⁰ Despite this provocative stand, CIA analysts believed that North Korea was probably “not prepared to press events to the point of an uncontrollable conflict.”⁶¹ Pyongyang was also seeing to avoid responsibility for the Seoul raid by portraying it as part of the South Korean people’s “heroic struggle” against the regime of President Park Chung-hee.⁶²

Also according to that CIA Weekly Summary, the events in Vietnam and North Korea would sharply increase pressure on the South Korean Government to mount strong retaliatory action.⁶³ The seizure of the Pueblo, following on the heels of the Seoul raid, had deepened public concern over North Korean intentions and over the security situation in the South.⁶⁴ The success of the North Korean team in penetrating Seoul had generated loud criticism of the government.⁶⁵ President Pak had urged the cabinet and party leaders to “Prepare measures to counter and root out once and for all such atrocious activities” as the Seoul raid.⁶⁶ Despite firm U.N. Command prohibitions against unilateral South Korean reprisals, the CIA said Pak had permitted some punitive raids against the North in the past.⁶⁷ “Any further aggravation of the confrontation,” the CIA Weekly Summary said, “might impel Pak to authorize more extensive retaliatory action and make it more difficult to control the course of events.”⁶⁸

“Heave to or I’ll fire on you”

Earlier this year (2016), *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of North Korea, published a story in English on the Pueblo Incident

entitled “Pueblo Can Never Be Sent Back to U.S.”⁶⁹ Only days earlier, the State Assembly of Colorado (which has a small city by the name of “Pueblo”) adopted a resolution demanding that North Korea return the American ship by that same name.⁷⁰ According to *Rodong Sinmun*, the resolution was then distributed to President Obama, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House, and the governor of the State of Colorado.⁷¹ The bill called for observing January 23rd—the day when the U.S. spyship was seized—as “USS Pueblo Day” every year, “praising the sacrificing spirit of the then crewmen and persistently demanding its return.”⁷² Indeed, Colorado House and Senate lawmakers had unanimously endorsed the joint resolution, repeating the demand that North Korea return the Navy spyship they surrounded and seized on that day in 1968.⁷³ Pyongyang’s response on Saturday, February 20, 2016 was swift, but not entirely unexpected:

It is very ridiculous for the U.S. to insist on the return of the ship which was captured by seamen of the Korean People's Army while conducting all sorts of despicable espionage to invade the inviolable DPRK nearly half a century ago. Great irony is that it is kicking up a row over the issue of the captured spy ship. No matter what noisy rackets the U.S. may kick up in demand of the return of the ship, they would get it nowhere. The U.S. more frequent “commemorations” of the day of ship Pueblo would bring bitterer sense of shame and humiliation to it. The electronic spying equipment, secret documents and the ship Pueblo can never be sent back as they were captured while conducting espionage in territorial waters of the DPRK. Those things belong to the victors. The ship Pueblo is on display in Pyongyang to tell the present and future generations and world people that it is a U.S. armed spy ship captured by seamen of the KPA. The DPRK will as ever mercilessly beat back those encroaching upon its sovereignty even a bit to protect the dignity of *Juche* Korea.⁷⁴

Pyongyang’s assertion that the Pueblo was “captured while conducting espionage in territorial waters of the DPRK,” however, remains a major point of contention; the U.S. Navy insisting that the American vessel remained in international waters the entire time. At some point



(the exact date is unknown), the Office of Naval Intelligence offered their analysis of the incident. A briefing,¹ held in secret by Lt. Douglas M. Hackett,² covered two aspects of the Pueblo Incident: a) the seizure of the ship and b) an analysis of the evidence that North Korea provided in support of its claim that the Pueblo had impeded in North Korean waters. The briefing began with a description of the mission and the instructions the crew received prior to departing for North Korea.⁷⁵

According to Lt. Hackett, the USS Pueblo sailed from Japan on January 11, 1968, according to her own report which was transmitted twelve days later;⁷⁶ and she entered her operation areas: Mars, Venus and Pluto (See

map) on January 12th.⁷⁷ The Pueblo’s mission was to gather data on electronic installations along the east coast of North Korea.⁷⁸ It’s clear from her sailing order, Hackett said, that the Pueblo had specific instructions that while carrying out her task, her closest point of approach was to be not nearer than 13 nautical miles from the North Korean land mass or offshore islands.⁷⁹

¹ The briefing was created by the Department of State Office of the Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and was sent to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) for Archiving.

² Lt. Hackett is now CDR Douglas Hackett, USN (Ret.). In 2015, Hackett gave a presentation on the Pueblo Incident in a joint presentation by Naval Intelligence Professionals (NIP) and the Int'l Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

“All position reports transmitted by the Pueblo with respect to events on or before [January on] the 23rd place her more than 13 nautical miles at sea in strict conformity with her orders ...”⁸⁰

The first indication that anything unusual had taken place came sometime after 11:30am (Korean time) on January 23rd when the Pueblo’s radio operator transmitted “more company,” and said that he intended to keep his circuit open.⁸¹ This radio circuit was maintained continuously during the incident, and the first formal report of the incident was sent out at approximately 1:00pm.⁸² The Pueblo, in describing the incident, said that a North Korean SO-1 class subchaser had been encountered at noon, Korean time. As the subchaser approached, the Pueblo took a radar fix to verify her position, which put her 15.8 nautical miles from the nearest land, the North Korean island of Ung-do.⁸³ [See nautical chart] When the SO-1 subchaser reported her noon position to a shore station, she was approximately two nautical miles from the Pueblo and 17.9 nautical miles from that island of Ung-do; that’s 5.9 nautical miles outside of the North Korean claimed waters.⁸⁴

Ten minutes later, the subchaser identified the Pueblo as “GER-2,” which was painted on both sides of the Pueblo’s bow.⁸⁵ The subchaser then reported the Pueblo’s position as 18.3 nautical miles from Ung-do; that’s 6.3 nautical miles outside North Korea’s claimed territorial waters.⁸⁶ During this period, the Pueblo was dead in the water while conducting a special hydrographic operation known as a “Hansen cast,”



which is accomplished by taking simultaneous water temperatures and samples at various predetermined depths.⁸⁷ The ship’s position must be precise in order to make seasonal comparisons with subsequent casts in the same exact position.⁸⁸

The Pueblo stated in her message that the subchaser had signaled requesting the Pueblo’s nationality, to which the Pueblo responded by hoisting the U.S. ensign (flag) and the international signal for hydrographer.⁸⁹ The subchaser then signaled, “Heave to or I’ll fire on you,” and the Pueblo responded, “I am in international waters.”⁹⁰ The subchaser continued to circle the Pueblo.⁹¹ This message concluded by indicating that the Pueblo intended to remain in the territory, if possible; this in accordance with the standing instructions regarding such harassment.⁹²

The next message from the Pueblo, sent just after 1:15 pm Korean time, described a rapidly worsening situation:⁹³ The subchaser had been joined by three motor torpedo boats; several MiG aircraft had appeared overhead; and one of the North Korea units signaled, “Follow in my wake”; and one was backing toward the Pueblo with an armed boarding party.⁹⁴ The first part of the Pueblo’s 1:15 pm message gave the relative position of the four North Korean vessels laying 200-300 yards away.⁹⁵ The message then changed tone saying, “Motor torpedo boat #604 is backing toward the bow with armed landing party, attempting to board. Pueblo: All ahead right full rudder. Departing the area under escort. Intention: Depart the area.”⁹⁶ The Pueblo sent no formal messages, but for the next hour and 17 minutes, her radio operator sent a stream of fragmentary reports, some of which were sent on instructions from the ship’s officer.⁹⁷ At 1:26 pm and 1:28 pm, the radio operator transmitted, “They plan to open fire on us now”; and for the next hour, the North Koreans fired on the Pueblo with both 57mm guns and machine guns.⁹⁸ Subsequent reports from the Pueblo and the North Koreans indicated that there were four

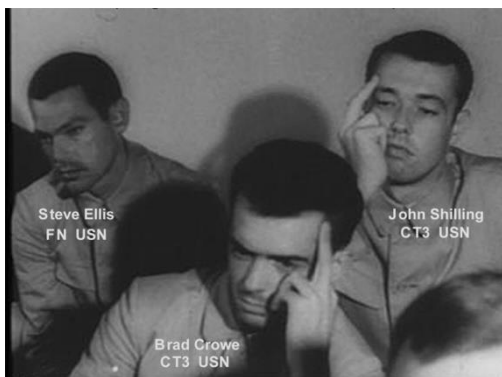
wounded onboard, one of whom later died,⁹⁹ the details of which were later described by a member of the Pueblo crew during an interview by BBC in 2012.¹⁰⁰

Skip Schumacher, 24, was the Operations Officer on the Pueblo when it was captured. As long as the Pueblo stayed in international waters no one imagined that the North Koreans might try to capture it; so the crew were totally unprepared when the unthinkable happened.¹⁰¹ At the time, the Pueblo was off the coast of Wonsan, North Korea's most active and largest cargo and military port, when a local harbor patrol vessel sent a message warning the crew that they should allow them to board. When the Americans refused, the North Koreans opened fire.¹⁰² "We didn't have anything to fire back with. The whole notion was that we were to be an unarmed trawler-like vessel; that was our disguise,"¹⁰³ Schumacher said. Although the captain of the Pueblo tried to buy the crew some time by heading out to sea, the ship's maximum speed was only about 15 miles per hour, no match for North Korean vessels.¹⁰⁴

During that time, the crew's main concern was to destroy all sensitive material on board before it fell into enemy hands; by burning documents in metal barrels or cans, a slow and painstaking process.¹⁰⁵ The North Koreans, who understood exactly what was going on, opened fire each time they saw smoke emerging from the ship.¹⁰⁶ In just over an hour, one sailor was dead and about a third of the crew were injured.¹⁰⁷ The captain of the ship, Commander Lloyd M Bucher, decided he had no choice but to surrender.¹⁰⁸

The crew were taken ashore, transported to Pyongyang, and thrown in prison.¹⁰⁹ North Korea's immediate concern was to extract confessions from the crew, so they began with Commander Bucher, beating him severely when he refused to admit that the ship had violated territorial waters and that it was a spy ship.¹¹⁰ As Schumacker recalls, they put a gun to his head and said, "That's it, we're going to kill you." And yet, despite clicking the revolver on an empty chamber, Schumacker said he still refused.¹¹¹ But when the interrogators threatened to shoot each member of the crew, one-by-one, starting with the youngest, Bucher gave in and signed the confession,¹¹² which each senior crew member was also made to sign.¹¹³ The crew's false confession, coerced under threat of death, and later published, was the North Korean Government's triumphant justification for the capture of the Pueblo.¹¹⁴

Back in the U.S., news of the Pueblo's capture was greeted with anger and dismay; but since there was no intelligence on where the men were being held, a rescue mission wasn't possible.¹¹⁵ So the slow process of negotiations began.¹¹⁶ In Pyongyang, while the men were being made to write endless confessions of guilt,¹¹⁷ they were busy planning their own acts of



defiance, using the North Korean's own propaganda machine to their advantage.¹¹⁸ On one occasion, a group of eight sailors were photographed by the North Koreans to demonstrate to the world how well the crew was being treated.¹¹⁹ In the photograph, every sailor held up his middle finger, a lewd gesture not recognized by their captors.¹²⁰ "We told them the finger was a Hawaiian good luck," Schumacher said, "so they thought that was wonderful."¹²¹ When the photograph was later published in *TIME Magazine*, the crew was praised for their courage.¹²² But when the photograph

made its way back to North Korea, and their captors realized they had been made fools of, they reacted with anger and violence.¹²³ They wanted to know all double entendre and slang they had used during their months of captivity; and they were beaten very badly. "It was really quite brutal," Schumacher said.¹²⁴

The CIA's Analysis of Commander Bucher's Initial Statements

A week after the Pueblo incident began, the CIA prepared a psychological and political analysis of Commander Bucher's public statements, unaware of the physical and psychological abuse the crew had endured (and would continue to endure for eleven months). According to the CIA, Pyongyang's "propaganda exploitation" of the seizure of the Pueblo consisted primarily of two "alleged statements" made by Commander Bucher.¹²⁵ His first statement, broadcast of January 24th, was a "confession."¹²⁶ [The CIA added the quotation marks] His second statement, broadcast two days later, was described as an interview by the North Korean press, which, except for a few exceptions, closely followed his first statement.¹²⁷ In the opinion of the CIA, the statements attributed to Bucher were for the most part "straight recitals of Communist propaganda and were obviously dictated by Pyongyang."¹²⁸ Bucher's statements, however, *did not* indicate some aspects of the position Pyongyang took later on with respect to the Pueblo's capture.

The most obvious intent of Bucher's statements, the CIA report said, was to establish the credibility of North Korea's version of the incident; for example, his statement that the Pueblo had deliberately "deeply intruded into the coastal waters" of North Korea.¹²⁹ Once the crew was released and debriefed, however, the CIA realized that the statement was "induced by threat."¹³⁰ After stressing the point on the Pueblo's "intrusion," Bucher's statements give "detailed and somewhat lurid accounts" of the Pueblo's recent "provocative" activities.¹³¹ Bucher had also allegedly confessed that the Pueblo had violated the waters of "Peoples China and other socialist countries," and in fact had entered North Korean waters after performing "espionage assignments along the Soviet Union's maritime province."¹³² By doing so, the CIA report said, the North Koreans had perhaps hoped that such a charge would make it difficult for China and the Soviet Union to withhold full support for their position.¹³³ In fact, the Pueblo had traveled directly from Japan to its station along the North Korean coast.¹³⁴

In Bucher's statements, he labeled the Pueblo's mission as a "plain act of aggression," stating that the ship operated under the guise of an oceanographic research vessel.¹³⁵ He also allegedly stated that the Pueblo's mission was "laid on by the CIA," and that he and his men were tempted to undertake their mission by CIA "dollars and honor."¹³⁶ In addition, the two civilians on board the ship were described as "special espionage agents who are conducting military espionage missions"¹³⁷ as well as "other important, special assignments."¹³⁸ Such statements, the CIA report said, can be viewed largely as a predictable propaganda attempt to "publicize and discredit U.S. intelligence-gathering operations."¹³⁹ Bucher's statements also "plainly indicate Pyongyang's concern to publicize the case it rightly or wrongly feels it has for the retention of the Pueblo and its crew."¹⁴⁰ In the CIA's view, Pyongyang felt it was in a position to use the Pueblo as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the U.S.¹⁴¹ In a January 28 editorial in the authoritative North Korean newspaper *Nodong Sinmun*, the Pueblo incident was depicted as "a flagrant trampling on the Korean armistice agreement,"¹⁴² which strongly implied that Pyongyang saw the final disposition of the Pueblo and its crew as a "subject of negotiation—no doubt lengthy—at Panmunjom."¹⁴³

Commander Bucher's second statement, unlike in his first, drew a connection between the capture of the Pueblo and the war in Vietnam.¹⁴⁴ Bucher allegedly said the Pueblo's mission against North Korea was in preparation for "a new war of aggression in Asia,"¹⁴⁵ adding, the U.S. "regards Korea and Vietnam as two fronts" of the war.¹⁴⁶ The CIA found it worthy of note that Bucher's second statement—issued after Pyongyang had additional time to reflect upon the public position it wished to adopt—stressed a connection with Vietnam.¹⁴⁷ "Whatever the degree of premeditation involved in the capture of the Pueblo," a CIA report said, "Pyongyang now apparently sees its seizure of our ship as a way to support Hanoi by placing diversionary pressure

on the U.S.”¹⁴⁸ In recent months, the report said, North Korean propaganda was increasingly concerned with linking “U.S. imperialism” in Vietnam and South Korea,¹⁴⁹ and North Korea saw its possession of the *Pueblo* and its crew as a “golden opportunity to intensify this propaganda line—a factor militating against an early release of the crew.”¹⁵⁰

Another indication that Pyongyang probably wanted to hold the *Pueblo* and its crew for as long as feasible, the CIA said, was Bucher’s statement that he and his crew “should be punished in accordance with the criminal law” of North Korea.¹⁵¹ A day earlier, *Nodong Sinmun* likewise stated that members of the crew were “criminals” who must be “dealt with by law” and receive “due punishment.”¹⁵² So it seemed quite possible that the crew would not be brought to trial.¹⁵³ Instead, Commander Bucher was allowed to plead for his crew’s release.¹⁵⁴ Pyongyang had left open the option of releasing the crew at any time.¹⁵⁵

The Negotiations

From the moment the incident began on January 23rd, the North Koreans steadfastly refused to negotiate for the release of the *Pueblo* and crew. A CIA Situation Report (SITREP) the following day at 7am—large portions of which remain classified—states, “North Korea is continuing to take a hard line on the *Pueblo* Incident.”¹⁵⁶ At a Military Armistice Commission meeting at Panmunjom that day, the senior delegate, Maj. Gen. Pak Chung-kuk, flatly rejected a U.S. demand for the immediate release of the *Pueblo* and its crew.¹⁵⁷ He also falsely accused the *Pueblo* of committed “intolerable provocations” when it “illegally infiltrated [into North Korean waters] on an espionage mission.”¹⁵⁸ He further claimed the crew of the *Pueblo* had fired on North Korean patrol boats.¹⁵⁹ U.S. Rear Admiral John V. Smith had demanded that Pyongyang return the ship and its 83-man crew, apologize for the incident, and be aware that the U.S. reserves the right to demand compensation.¹⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the U.S. Task Force led by the nuclear powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, with destroyers *Higbee*, *Truxton*, and *Osborn* had moved to a new rendezvous area 120 nautical miles south of South Korea and 120 nautical miles southwest of Sasebo, Japan.¹⁶¹ The destroyers *Collett* and *O’Bannon* also steamed toward that same rendezvous point.¹⁶²

On January 28th, there was still no hint of Pyongyang’s conditions for the release of the ship and crew.¹⁶³ Pyongyang, in an editorial in the official *Nodong Sinmun*, reiterated its rejection of U.N. consideration of the *Pueblo* case.¹⁶⁴ A day earlier, Boris Batrayev, a KGB officer with the Soviet Embassy in New Delhi, had suggested that Pyongyang may wish to swap the *Pueblo* and its men for North Koreans charged with terrorism in South Korea,¹⁶⁵ hinting that Soviet efforts to persuade Pyongyang to release the ship in return for an admission of guilt and perhaps the payment of a fine had been unsuccessful.¹⁶⁶

In a later conversation, Batrayev implied strongly that despite a hands-off posture, which the CIA said Moscow *had* to maintain toward the problem publically, the Soviet Union was interested in working behind the scenes to resolve it.¹⁶⁷ Batrayev said Moscow was gathering information on the crisis and interested in finding out from the U.S. and North Korea what each wanted and what each would give up to achieve a peaceful settlement.¹⁶⁸ According to the CIA, Batrayev was apparently the source of news reports to the effect that Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin told Indian Prime Minister Gandhi that the *Pueblo* incident could have been a “genuine mistake”—without saying on whose part—and that the dispute is a “routine matter.”¹⁶⁹

A few days later, on January 31st,¹⁷⁰ North Korea indicated that it might “eventually” be willing to discuss the Pueblo incident with the U.S. at Panmunjom.¹⁷¹ Kim Kwang-Hyop, a member of the secretariat of the central committee of North Korea’s communist party, said in Pyongyang that “there is precedent for the treatment of similar cases [as the Pueblo incident] at the Korean Military Armistice Commission.”¹⁷² “It is a miscalculation,” however, Kim said, “if the U.S. imperialists think they can solve the incident of the intrusion of the Pueblo into the territorial waters of our country by military threats or by the method of aggressive war or through illegal discussions at the United Nations,”¹⁷³ adding that “it will be a different story if they want to solve this question by method of the previous practice.”¹⁷⁴ According to the CIA, Kim was probably referring to negotiations at Panmunjom in 1963-64 which resulted in the release of two U.S. helicopter pilots downed in North Korea.¹⁷⁵



In the end, the release of the Pueblo crew—the ship itself remains in North Korea as a sort of trophy—didn’t come for eleven months. At all times, in fact, the Pueblo was in international waters; the Americans knew it and so did the North Koreans; and pretty much everything the North Koreans did and said from that point on was a lie. They falsely claimed the Pueblo was in North Korean waters; they falsely claimed the crew had fired on North Korean patrol boats; and when the commander refused to confess, they forged documents, altered the ship’s log, and doctored the commander’s **recorded confession**. The North Koreans wanted a confession, and no amount of negotiations or negotiating skill was going to get the crew back home safely until North Korea got their false confession. The Pueblo incident demonstrates the futility of trying to negotiate with an adversary that wants what it wants when it wants it, and won’t give in until they get it.

The Release of the Crew

Dateline: Panmunjom, Korea, Monday, Dec. 23, 1968: “As a light snow fell on the barren hills surrounding Panmunjom, the 82 surviving member crew members of the intelligence ship Pueblo crossed a narrow bridge between North and South Korea to end eleven months of captivity,” read a *New York Times* front-page headline story.¹⁷⁶ After nearly a year of “tortuous negotiations,” the U.S. Government obtained freedom for the Pueblo men by signing a document of “solemn apology” to the North Koreans, a document that was repudiated by the American representative even before it was signed.¹⁷⁷ To obtain their release, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward had also signed a North Korean document asserting that the Pueblo had violated North Korean territorial waters and had been spying when it was captured.¹⁷⁸ General Woodward, the senior representative of the United States in the Military Armistice Commission for Korea, protested that he was signing the statement “to free the crew and only to free the crew;”¹⁷⁹ adding there was no convincing evidence that the ship had violated North Korean waters or done anything illegal or improper.¹⁸⁰

The first to cross the bridge, known as the “Bridge of No Return” (ever since the time of the Korean War), was the body of Duane D. Hodges, a sailor who had died during the capture of the Pueblo.¹⁸¹ Then came Commander Bucher, followed by the rest of the crew in reverse order of rank.¹⁸² The men, all wearing dark blue North Korean uniforms and caps, were each identified

by Bucher as they came over the bridge.¹⁸³ From a distance, some of the men seemed to be smiling broadly; others appeared solemn.¹⁸⁴ Bucher, who had made tape-recorded confessions of having violated North Korean waters and engaged in espionage, said he had done so only because of what he termed “pretty vivid” threats to the safety of the crew made by their captors.¹⁸⁵ He also said that he and other crew members had been beaten and abused during their captivity.¹⁸⁶ But had the Pueblo strayed into North Korean territorial waters? On the day of their release, Commander Bucher said “at no times” had the ship intruded into the 12-mile territorial waters claimed by North Korea, adding, “we were attacked on the open sea and captured on the open sea. It is as clear and simple as that.”¹⁸⁷

The transfer of the crew from North to South appears to have gone smoothly. As they reached the Joint Security Area of Panmunjom, the men were put aboard buses, provided with warm clothing, and driven about four miles to the U.N. Command’s advance camp.¹⁸⁸ At the advance camp, they were greeted by General Charles H. Bonesteel 3rd, the commander of U.S. and U.N. forces in Korea.¹⁸⁹ After they were allowed to rest briefly there, eight helicopters flew the men to the 121st Army Evacuation Hospital, about ten miles west of Seoul, where they underwent examinations and received any necessary medical treatment.¹⁹⁰ The photo shows the men being escorted by Military Police (MP’s) to the evacuation hospital.¹⁹¹ According to a military spokesman, the crew was to be flown to San Diego the next day, after a night’s stay at the hospital.¹⁹² So Air Force jet transports stood by at Kimpo Airfield in Seoul to ferry the crew to the U.S.¹⁹³

In 1970, sometime after the crew had returned to the U.S., Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, Captain USS Pueblo, wrote the story of the Pueblo Incident. In “Bucher: My Story,”¹⁹⁴ Bucher reflected back on that fateful day in January 1968 when his ship was fired upon and boarded, and the crew held hostage by the North Koreans:

As I look back now on the great crisis of my life, the illegal seizure on the high seas of my ship, USS Pueblo, by North Korean warships on January 23, 1968, I cannot help wondering exactly when and where events took the first capricious turn toward disaster. I am not a man who has avoided adventure and excitement; to the contrary, I have sought them out, but always within the framework of careful planning and discipline. Yet, I ask myself why it happened that I, Lloyd March Bucher, a man of humble origin who had made himself a dedicated but otherwise anonymous naval officer, was singled out by fate to play a notorious key role in an incident that drastically affected the lives of hundreds of other people and shook to its foundation the defense policy of my country.¹⁹⁵

In 1977, nine years after North Korean gunboats seized the USS Pueblo, Bernard Weinraub again wrote on the Pueblo; this time, he interviewing Lloyd M. Bucher, its retired commander with 27 years in the Navy, who was living quietly in a secluded ranch house, growing avocados, painting and studying art.¹⁹⁶ Bucher said the U.S. Navy and U.S. Government had learned little from the Pueblo Incident and that the eleven months he spent as a prisoner in a North Korean prison had remained but a burning memory.¹⁹⁷ “It will be with me for the rest of my days,” Bucher said. “There are emotional wounds that won’t heal.”¹⁹⁸ By that time, Bucher had become a “hefty figure”; he spoke slowly and tensely about the past, and the future; and said the entire dark experience of the Pueblo was virtually meaningless for the Navy.¹⁹⁹ “What has the Navy learned, what has the Government learned?” Bucher was asked. “Very little.”²⁰⁰

At the start of that week, Korea had once again found itself prominently in the news, with attention focused first on the Carter Administration’s decision to withdraw U.S. ground troops from South Korea, and then on the attack on an American helicopter that left three crewmen dead; a fourth captured but was later released.²⁰¹ Bucher thought the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea was a profound error.²⁰² “The presence of American troops, perhaps

more than any other factor, keeps the North Koreans from pushing to the brink of war,” he said.²⁰³ “At some point in time, the North Koreans can mount a really vicious campaign, a guerrilla campaign, politically undermining the government, raising discontent among students, bringing tremendous pressures down on the government and finally destroying its credibility.” Could American troops help prevent this? “The North Koreans can be so cruel...They are willing to undertake all kinds of expeditions, take risks. It will be very difficult for South Korea to withstand those pressures from the North,”²⁰⁴ Bucher said.

¹ Weinraub, Bernard. “Pueblo’s Main Task Was to Survey Russian Fleet,” *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1969, p. 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

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⁶ Weinraub, Bernard. “Pueblo’s Main Task Was to Survey Russian Fleet,” *New York Times*, Mar. 3, 1969, p. 5.

⁷ <http://www.navy.mil/navsource.org/archives/09/61/6102.htm>

⁸ Lerner, Mitchell (Prof. of History, Ohio State University). “The USS Pueblo Incident,” a seminar on a “little-known chapter in Cold War history,” MIT, Wednesday Seminars Fall 2002, Nov. 13, 2002.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mobley, Richard A. “Lessons from the Capture of the USS Pueblo and the Shootdown of a US Navy EC-121—1968 and 1969,” *Studies in Intelligence*. Vol. 59, No. 1 (Extracts, March 2015), p. 1.

¹⁴ “Sailor on the Pueblo Wrote that ‘Anything Can Happen’,” *New York Times*, Jan, 25, 1968, p. 14.

¹⁵ The Pueblo was captured on January 23, 1968 and released on December 23, 1968.

¹⁶ “Sailor on the Pueblo Wrote that ‘Anything Can Happen’,” *New York Times*, Jan, 25, 1968, p. 14.

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¹⁸ Ibid.

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²⁰ “This Month in USAF and PACAF History,” Pacific Air Forces, US Air Force, OPR: PACAF/HO, Jan. 2016.

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⁴² Mobley, Richard A. “Lessons from the Capture of the USS Pueblo and the Shootdown of a US Navy EC-121—1968 and 1969,” *Studies in Intelligence*. Vol. 59, No. 1 (Extracts, March 2015), p. 1.

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44 Ibid.
45 The bulk of the documents upon which this article relies were declassified and approved for release on December 22, 2015.
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¹²⁵ "A Psychological and Political Analysis of Commander Bucher's Statements" (secret), CIA, Jan. 29, 1968.

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