

~~TOP SECRET//COMINT//SI~~

(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) The TRS Program Part II: The Capture of the Pueblo

(b)(1)
(b)(3)-50 USC 403
(b)(3)-18 USC 798
(b)(3)-P.L. 86-36

~~(TS//SI)~~ The 23 January 1968 capture of the Pueblo was the worst disaster the U.S. cryptologic community has ever faced. Not only were several U.S. cryptologic devices compromised, but American capabilities [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] All this was coupled with the fact that one American was killed and eighty-two others spent almost a year as prisoners of the North Koreans.

~~(S//SI)~~ (U) The USS Pueblo was a Technical Research Ship (TRS) used by the U.S. Navy to intercept the signals of targeted countries. Floating collection platforms, like the Pueblo, had been developed in response to various crises in the 1950s. The first TRS, the Oxford, launched in 1961, proved its worth during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This success led to other surplus World War II freight-hauling ships being reconditioned for signal collection work. However, the enthusiasm for TRSs outstripped the U.S. government's ability to finance such a fleet. As a result, smaller, less powerful vessels which could be converted more cheaply were adapted for collection use. Originally, the Pueblo was a small WWII Army freight and supply vessel. Taken out of moth-balls, it was reconditioned in 1966. The Pueblo was the smallest type of TRS, [REDACTED] The January 1968 voyage was its first cruise.

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(U) The mission was ill-prepared from the start. The Pueblo commander, Lloyd M. Bucher, was a submarine officer with no experience in electronic espionage. Only two members of the COMINT crew had ever been to sea before. The Korean linguists were inexperienced and later proved unable to understand North Korean radio chatter. Finally, the crew had received no materials destruction training prior to the voyage.

(U) Another problem with the mission was the target. Since 1966, tensions between North and South Korea had been on the rise, resulting in an increased number of infiltrations, firefights along the DMZ, and acts of terrorism. NSA warned that the Pueblo's mission was particularly sensitive and probably not wise. However, because the warning came over the holidays, because NSA was tentative in expressing its concerns, and because it was a Navy mission, these misgivings did not carry much weight.

(U) The Pueblo was tasked to sail along the eastern coast of North Korea from north to south, in international waters, intercepting North Korean signals. The route was not untested. Another TRS, the USS Banner, had followed the same route successfully about a year earlier. The Banner had been harassed, but not impeded in its operations. It was assumed that since the route was through international waters and since SIGINT vessels from the USSR made similar cruises off the coasts of noncommunist states, an unarmed U.S. ship would not be molested.

(U) The Pueblo left Japan on 10 January 1968 and arrived at its mission area on 16 January. From 10 to 22 January, the cruise was unremarkable. The North Koreans were obviously aware of the Pueblo, but did not harass the ship. Pueblo reported that eighteen vessels examined it through the night of 22 January, but no vessel came closer than 3,000 yards. To this point, the mission seemed routine.

(U) However, on 23 January the North Koreans attacked and captured the Pueblo using one subchaser and three torpedo boats. During the attack, one person was killed and several were wounded. A radio operator was able to send a message, notifying the U.S. that the ship was being boarded, before radio communications were stopped. The ship was taken to Wonsan, North Korea, where U.S. personnel were marched off into captivity. Neither the ship nor anything the crew left on board was ever returned.

(U) A vicious press battle between North Korea and the United States followed the capture. North Korea announced that the Pueblo had been in its territorial waters and that "the criminals who have violated the sovereignty of another country and perpetrated a provocative act must receive due punishment." The U.S. said that it would "consider any [such] move to be a deliberate aggravation of an already serious situation." Several "confessions" from Commander Bucher and the Pueblo crew appeared on North Korean television, along with a sample of the captured COMINT materials, as part of an anti-U.S. propaganda campaign. For example, Bucher supposedly "admitted" that the Pueblo had deliberately entered North Korean waters on a spying mission for the CIA. Obviously false, the U.S. denied this "confession." Further, U.S. Defense Department pointed out that the North Koreans knew the Pueblo was in international waters -- their own radar clearly showed it.

~~(TS//SI)~~ Immediately after the attack, NSA attempted to formulate some sort of COMSEC/COMINT damage assessment. While uncertain about what COMINT-related documents were on the ship and how much of the data had been destroyed, NSA already saw the Pueblo loss as "a major intelligence coup [for the North Koreans] without parallel in history." Four major U.S. COMSEC devices had been on board (KW-7, KW-37, KL-47, and KG-14) and had obviously been captured.

(U) The U.S. tried to pressure the North Koreans to release the Pueblo crew through the

United Nations and the Soviet Union. North Korea ignored the demands. The Soviets claimed that this was a matter between the U.S. and the North Koreans involving a violation of territorial waters and was none of their business. Although many believed that the Soviets were somehow behind the incident, the Soviets denied it, and there has never been any proof of their involvement. The U.S. searched for some way to force the release of the Pueblo crew, but proved unable to find a suitable route. Options like striking a North Korean ship, attacking North Korea, and putting more U.S. forces in South Korea were all discussed. The U.S. had to settle for an increased presence in South Korea, but no return act of aggression. In order to get the captain and crew home, the U.S. signed a "confession" and apologized, although it was announced at the time that the confession was signed only to obtain the release of the crew. The men were finally released on 23 December 1968.

(U) After some initial medical checkups in South Korea, the Pueblo crew was flown to San Diego for further medical examinations and debriefing. As a result of several days of interviews, the Navy decided that Commander Bucher and another Pueblo officer should be court-martialed for their actions during the attack. This was overruled by the secretary of the navy, John Chafee, who felt that the men had suffered enough and further punishment was not necessary.

~~(TS//SI)~~ The crew debriefings also allowed NSA to make a complete damage assessment. The original, which seemed dreadful, fell far short of reality. Because the order to destroy classified materials came belatedly and the crew had little or no training in the procedures, few documents and little equipment were destroyed, and great quantities fell into North Korean hands. Interviews with crew members revealed that

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(U) Discussions also quickly began on how to conduct such COMINT efforts in the future. How does one protect a TRS like the Pueblo? An escort for each TRS was not practical. Although the TRS Banner was sent out to cruise off the coast of North Korea shortly after the attack with a large escort, this was a show of defiance and not a real solution to the problem.

(U) By 1969 severe problems were beginning to cripple the TRS program. The old World

War II-vintage ships used as TRSs were becoming too expensive to maintain and were proving too difficult to protect from attack. After considerable debate, the program was canceled in October 1969, less than a year after the Pueblo crew was released. Although the attack on the Liberty and the loss of the Pueblo contributed to the cancellation of this program, they were not the direct cause.

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