

## **Jan 1969 - North Koreans release Crew of U.S.S. "Pueblo."**

After 10 months of secret negotiations at Panmunjom, during which 28 meetings were held by the U.S. and North Korean negotiators, the 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship *Pueblo* were released by the North Korean authorities on Dec. 23. The body of the 83rd crew member, who had been seriously wounded during the *Pueblo's* capture and died shortly after, was also handed over to the U.S. authorities.

The release of the crew of the *Pueblo* (the vessel itself remained impounded by the North Koreans) followed what Mr. Dean Rusk (the U.S. Secretary of State) described as an "unprecedented" procedure under which the chief U.S. negotiator at Panmunjom, Major-General Gilbert H. Woodward, signed a document constituting a formal "admission" by the American side that the *Pueblo* had entered North Korean waters, "solemnly apologizing" for the vessel's "grave acts of sabotage," and giving a "firm assurance" against any repetition of such acts. At the same time, however, General Woodward publicly repudiated this document and made it clear that he had signed it only to secure the release of the *Pueblo's* crew. This procedure—a formal apology to the North Koreans, and its simultaneous repudiation by the American side—had apparently been agreed by the U.S. and North Korean negotiators at Panmunjom at the final meeting which preceded the release of the crew of the *Pueblo*.

The text of the statement signed by Major-General Woodward was worded as follows:

"The Government of the United States of America:

"Acknowledging the validity of the confessions of the crew of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* and of the documents of evidence produced by the representative of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the effect that the ship, which was seized by... naval vessels of the Korean People's Army in the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on Jan. 23, 1968, had illegally intruded into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on many occasions and conducted espionage activities of spying out important military and state secrets of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;

"Shoulders full responsibility and solemnly apologizes for the grave acts of espionage committed by the U.S. ship against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea after having intruded into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;

"And gives firm assurance that no U.S. ships will intrude again in the future into the territorial waters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

"Meanwhile, the Government of the United States of America earnestly requests the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to deal leniently with the former crew members of the U.S.S. *Pueblo*,... taking into consideration the fact that these crew members have confessed

honestly to their crimes and petitioned the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for leniency.

“Simultaneously with the signing of this document, the undersigned acknowledges receipt of 82 former crew members of the *Pueblo* and one corpse.”

Before signing the above document, however, Major-General Woodward made the following statement:

“The position of the U.S. Government with regard to the *Pueblo*, as consistently expressed in the negotiations at Panmunjom and in public, has been that the ship was not engaged in illegal activity, that there is no convincing evidence that the ship at any time intruded into the territorial waters claimed by North Korea, and that we could not apologize for actions which we did not believe took place. The document which I am going to sign was prepared by the North Koreans and is at variance with the above position, but my signature will not and cannot alter the facts. I will sign the document to free the crew and only to free the crew.”

In Washington, the following statement was issued on Dec. 23 by Mr. Dean Rusk:

“The men were released after long and difficult negotiations. The North Korean negotiator insisted from the beginning that the men would not be released unless the United States falsely confessed to espionage and to violations of North Korean territory and apologized for such alleged actions.

“We necessarily refused these demands. We repeatedly offered to express our regrets if shown valid evidence of a transgression. But this Government had—and has now—no reliable evidence that the *Pueblo* in any way violated her sailing orders and intruded into waters claimed by North Korea.

“After 10 months of negotiations, during which we made every sort of reasonable offer, all of which were harshly rejected, we had come squarely up against a most painful problem: how to obtain the release of the crew without having this Government seem to attest to statements which simply are not true. Then, within the past week, a way which does just that was found, and a strange procedure was accepted by the North Koreans. Apparently the North Koreans believe there is propaganda value even in a worthless document which General Woodward publicly labelled false before he signed it.

“If you ask me why these two contradictory statements proved to be the key to effect the release of our men, the North Koreans would have to explain it. I know of no precedent in my 19 years of public service. The simple fact is that the men are free and our position on the facts of the case is unchanged.

“We regret that the ship itself, U.S.S. *Pueblo*, has not yet been returned; that will have to be pursued further....”

The captain of the *Pueblo*, Commander Lloyd M. Bucher (39), and the other 81 members of the crew were handed over to the American authorities at Panmunjom. At a news conference the same day (Dec. 23) Commander Bucher emphatically denied that the *Pueblo* had ever entered North Korean waters and said that his public “confession” while in North Korean hands had been made “in order to save some people from fairly serious misfortune.” During the final weeks of their captivity, he stated, about half the crew members had been badly beaten and they had gone through a “concentrated form of terror.” He himself had been kept in solitary confinement throughout the 11 months of captivity and on occasion had been struck and punched, though never hit with sticks and clubs as some of his men were. On the whole, however, the North Koreans did not make their captives’ lives “so miserable that it was unbearable.”

As stated in 22585 A, alleged “confessions” by Commander Bucher and crew members of the *Pueblo* had been published by the North Korean authorities following the capture of the vessel. On Aug. 15 the North Korean news agency quoted Commander Bucher as having told a press conference two days earlier that the *Pueblo* was deep inside North Korean territorial waters when she was seized; that the crew were “sincerely repentant” for the “espionage and hostile acts” which they had committed; and that they had asked for the press conference to help realize their “earnest desire for repatriation.”

Pyongyang Radio stated on Sept. 12 that the crew of the *Pueblo* had given a further press conference on that date in which, it was claimed, an admission had been made that the vessel had been authorized to carry out patrols up to the three-mile limit off North Korea [the North Korea authorities claim a 12-mile limit for their territorial waters]. In view of this allegation, the following statement was made in Washington on Sept. 13 by Mr. Robert J. McCloskey, the State Department spokesman:

“At the press conference in North Korea on Sept. 12, at which members of the *Pueblo* crew were produced, there was, according to the North Korean radio, a reference to a document supposedly authorizing surface patrols to the three-mile limit off North Korea. The document to which the broadcast refers was a U.S. Navy document dated Feb. 28, 1966, containing general instructions on conducting reconnaissance operations. It was issued to a great many U.S. Navy ships and was on board the *Pueblo*. The broadcast quotation from this instruction is, as far as it goes, accurate. The general instruction was, however, explicitly superseded by the *Pueblo*’s sailing order dated Jan. 5, 1968, which set a clear limit of 13 miles.... We continue to have no reason to believe that the captain of the *Pueblo* did not adhere to the 13-mile restriction....”

Later the same day the State Department took the unprecedented step of making public the *Pueblo*’s secret sailing orders of Jan. 5, 1968. These showed that the *Pueblo* had been instructed to depart from Sasebo (Japan) about Jan. 8 and to proceed through the Straits of Tsushima to arrive at its operational area about Jan. 10 off the coast of North Korea; the closest point of approach to the North Korean coast, the instructions said, “will be 13 nautical miles.”

After medical check-ups, Commander Bucher and the crew of the *Pueblo* were flown to the United States and reunited at San Diego, California, with their families, with whom they were able to spend Christmas.

U.S. State Department officials said on Dec. 29 that Commander Bucher had told the U.S. Government that his widely-publicized “confession” asserting that the *Pueblo* was inside North Korean waters at the time of her capture had been extorted when his captors threatened to kill one member of the crew a day until he signed the document. The North Koreans, the officials said, had threatened to start shooting the youngest crew members of the *Pueblo* first, gradually ascending in order of age, until Commander Bucher had confessed to having violated North Korean territorial waters for the purpose of sabotage. Commander Bucher had reportedly dared his captors to shoot him first and had signed the spurious “confession” after they had refused to do so.

Commander Bucher's account of the circumstances in which his “confession” had been signed came from a tape-recorded report made by him in hospital at San Diego, where he was recovering from a combination of exhaustion and influenza. The report had been specially requested by Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

It was stated that an inquiry would be held into the behaviour of the *Pueblo*'s crew during their captivity and into the circumstances in which the vessel had been captured by the North Koreans.—(U.S. Information Service - International Herald Tribune - Times - Daily Telegraph) (Prev. rep. “*Pueblo*” Capture, [22585 A.](#))