

# TRIDENT

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NOVEMBER 1972

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CONFLICT: THE POLITICAL SOLDIER AND THE STATE

# TRIDENT



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THE PROFESSIONAL MAGAZINE OF THE BRIGADE OF MIDSHIPMEN



# The Pueblo Incident

## A Study in Concept

By ENS. R. D. SMITH, USN

The tragic chapter in the book of United States Naval History entitled "The Capture of the USS *Pueblo*" describes a series of events which probability suggests should not have happened, yet when carefully scrutinized, the road to capture appears logical and well-defined. Every mission of the Navy should carry importance commensurate with the significance of its objectives; yet the *Pueblo* incident is characterized by a gross misplacement of priorities. On every ship of the Navy, there should be an inherent "readiness" to deal with the type of situation which arose; yet the *Pueblo* was ill-equipped, poorly commanded, and totally non-supported. The mission should, without exception, stand foremost in any Naval operation; yet bureaucracy and a non-willingness to act decisively or accept responsibility, at all echelons, led the *Pueblo* not to the accomplishment of her mission, but into the hands of the North Koreans. Hindsight, it is agreed, is a valuable tool when reproaching the conduct of men involved in a Naval operation, but it, without question, reveals innumerable "sins of omission" in the operation, most of them human, most of them avoidable. Each, individually, may have seemed insignificant, but when added together they produced a tragic and humiliating experience for the United States Navy and the individuals involved.

This paper is divided into two primary sections: first, concerning the problems arising prior to the *Pueblo's* voyage, and second, concerning the problems which arose during the voyage. Each section is sub-divided into three points of investigation. Again, it must be emphasized that no single human error caused the *Pueblo* incident. It resulted from a combination of mistakes, from the conception of the *Pueblo's* mission to her boarding by the North Korean Communists.

A 935-ton converted World War II Army light cargo vessel, the *Pueblo* has been referred to as everything from a "spit kit" to an "ancient rust bucket," and with some degree of accuracy. Her mission was ELINT (electronics intelligence), to "snoop in compliance with international law" using the cover of an oceanographic vessel. In short, she was to obtain information concerning the radars and radio transmissions of Communist countries without intruding into their claimed territorial waters. Though manned by an ordinary crew and commanded by an ordinary captain, the *Pueblo* was far

from the normal Naval ship with a normal mission. The problems which led to her eventual boarding and capture began to emerge even before her recommissioning, in the Naval shipyard at Bremerton, Washington.

These early problems can be considered threefold, the first, as previously mentioned, being one of misplaced priorities. The Joint Chiefs of Staff mistakenly considered *Pueblo's* task a "minimal risk mission," and placed severe budgetary restrictions on her conversion. The result was an extensive matériel deficiency, in terms of weapons systems, navigational equipment, and classified material destruction systems. Reduced from five million dollars to one million dollars, the budget afforded *Pueblo* little means by which to defend herself, or destroy herself and the classified papers and equipment aboard in case of trouble. In addition, the *Pueblo* suffered a personnel deficiency, not quantitatively, but in terms of the qualification of, in particular, her captain. Then LCdr. Lloyd M. Bucher was assuming his first command when he took over the *Pueblo*, and even more amazing, he was a submariner, with a limited knowledge of surface warfare strategy and tactics. He was to lead a crew which would be hardly trained "beyond briefings."

Had the *Pueblo's* mission involved little risk, the mentioned matériel and personnel deficiencies would have been relatively insignificant; yet sufficient knowledge of the nature of these type missions existed before the *Pueblo* set to sea. During extensive conversation with the commanding officer of the *USS Banner*, *Pueblo's* predecessor, LCdr. Bucher was informed of the constant harassment received from the North Koreans. In addition, prior to the *Pueblo's* departure, the Koreans broadcast a message to the United States which stated, in part, that there would be "drastic action taken against any future snooper ships" in North Korean waters. The National Security Agency forwarded this message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but governmental "red tape" prevented its reaching either the Joint Chiefs or LCdr. Bucher. It can be seen that the *Pueblo's* mission was far from the "minimal risk" variety, and that higher priority and increased funds should have been provided.

The second area of "pre-mission" problems surrounded the concept of "divided responsibility." Since its conception, Naval doctrine has been based on the



*The "Environmental Research" Ship USS Pueblo backing down. The Pueblo was Bucher's first command. He was a submariner with a limited knowledge of surface warfare and tactics. He was to lead a crew which would hardly be trained in their mission.*

principle that the commanding officer of a ship is: 1) in command of everyone on board, and 2) ultimately responsible for all men and matériel on board. If performance is superior, he is commended. If performance is inadequate, the commanding officer is responsible. With respect to the authority and responsibility aboard *Pueblo*, however, there was a distinction between the words "command and control." While the safe operation of the ship and the tactical aspects of the mission were the responsibility of the commanding officer, Washington was directly involved with the crux of *Pueblo's* mission: ELINT, through the officer in charge of the classified material spaces. Lt. Steven Harris. Civilian authorities were therefore in "control" of the *Pueblo's* operations, a situation unheard of throughout Naval history, and a dilemma for the captain. Should someone in "control" be the cause of an incident, the responsibility, as always, would revert back to the individual in "command."

The final category of problems prior to the commencement of *Pueblo's* voyage involved an over-reliance upon statistics and a failure to take into account the improbable in developing plans for the mission. History dictated that the probability of the *Pueblo* incident was almost non-existent. Accordingly, the plans

for the *Pueblo* mission, coordinated by RAdm. Frank L. Johnson, allowed for little, if any, latitude in the decision-making of his subordinate, now Cdr. Bucher. Bucher states in his *Bucher: My Story* that his orders quite directly, were not to use his guns, that the *Pueblo* was "not out . . . to start a war." As it turned out, the orders were followed to the letter. Whether the reason for complete compliance was unwavering devotion, a lack of "guts," or the sincere belief that it was the right action to take will never be fully surfaced. Regardless of reasons, however, the commanding officer of a ship must, in a conventional warfare situation, have the latitude to defend his ship and his men if necessary. Any orders excluding this authority should be considered invalid.

To summarize to date, the *Pueblo*, an improperly equipped vessel with a "first time" commanding officer who was not in complete "control" of his ship, was about to embark on a mission of underestimated importance. She was venturing into hostile waters with a history of unfriendly welcomings, under orders not to provoke a showdown. To the student of history, the gravity of the situation is obvious, yet probability of an incident was still slight. Many of the mistakes thus far can be attributed to the intrinsic characteristics of

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the "system," yet human errors were beginning to emerge and played an increasingly dominant role as the crisis evolved.

The analysis and comprehension of the series of events leading to the capture of the *Pueblo* by the North Koreans is a challenging and difficult task, because a truly objective account of the incident does not exist. The undeniable facts, however, when pieced together, describe an occurrence in which three points become evident: 1) Readiness for the unexpected is mandatory in any Naval operation. This involves making certain that all equipment is operating properly, that emergency measures are completely understood, and that all effects of the environment are taken into account. 2) Some of the standard procedures of Naval operation must be disregarded in order to avoid the associated delays when the situation becomes critical. 3) The basic concepts of Naval doctrine, in particular, United States Navy Regulations and the Code of Conduct, are still fundamentally sound and provide the best guidelines for conduct.

Rather than condemning or condoning the actions of particular individuals, or attempting to discern whose version of the incident is the most truthful, the capture of the *Pueblo* will be discussed from a conceptual standpoint, focusing upon the above-mentioned points, in an attempt to provide a lesson for those associated with the strategy, tactics, and operations of vessels of the Navy.

Regarding the first point of departure, one of the primary topics of debate concerns the navigation systems aboard the *Pueblo*. Though every officer and enlisted man who checked the location of *Pueblo* before her capture stated positively that she was well beyond North Korean claimed territorial waters (out to 12 miles), proof was non-existent. Lt. Edward R. Murphy, Navigator and Executive Officer, in the February 5, 1969, *Washington Star*:

There were "no truly accurate navigational aids to rely on, with the exception of radar—and the use of radar was restricted by the need to maintain electronic silence while on the intelligence mission."

The "built-in inaccuracies" of all other systems and a consistently overcast sky made a five-mile navigational error feasible. In addition, the charts used (1950-1953) provided questionable accuracy in terms of geographical positions and depth soundings. The need for accuracy of both charts and equipment is evident and, according to Navy Regulations, the responsibility of the commanding officer.

The knowledge of what to do in a critical situation was perhaps the greatest deficiency of *Pueblo's* commanding officer and crew. Many of the problems leading to the actual capture can be attributed to a slow "reaction time" to the reality of the crisis. The failure to call an immediate, full general quarters, the failure to commence departure from the area until 75 minutes

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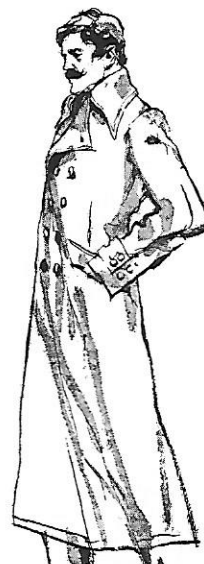
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after first contact was made with the enemy, the delay in the destruction of classified material until the enemy began firing, and the failure to devise a means of scuttling the ship all contributed to the final, embarrassing outcome. Though previous errors at all echelons set the stage for the capture, the poor "reaction time" of Cdr. Bucher rendered the situation hopeless.

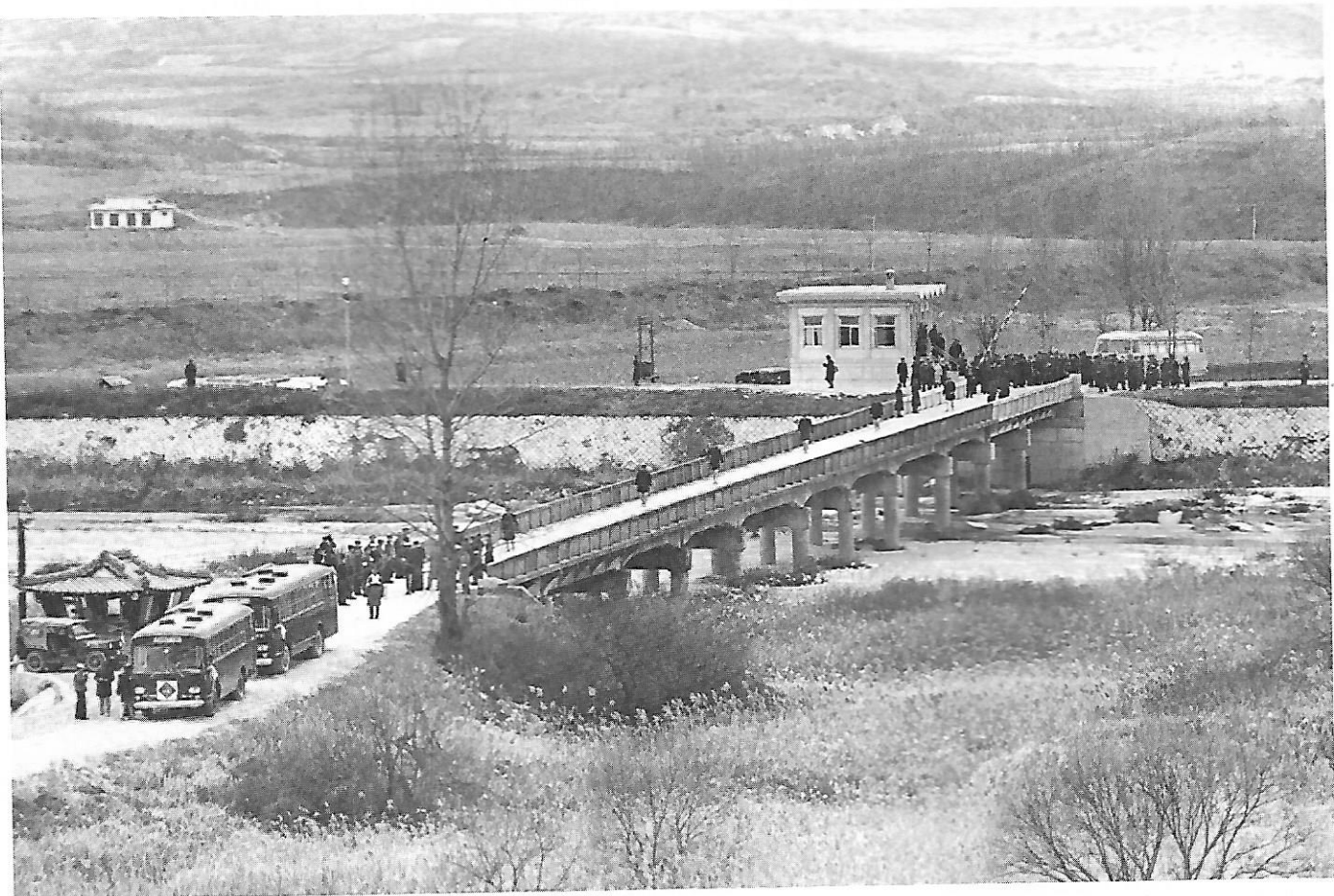
The failure to completely understand the influence of the air-ocean environment also detracted from Cdr. Bucher's performance. The three most significant parameters at the time were the air temperature, the sea surface temperature, and the visibility. Much controversy existed over whether or not icing due to the freezing air temperatures (23-27°F) rendered the 50-caliber machine guns aboard the *Pueblo* inoperable. There is also debate as to whether or not the ice was removed on the morning of the incident. Regardless of the resolutions to these arguments, it was the responsibility of Cdr. Bucher to realize that icing was a definite probability, to be completely familiar with this facet of environmental influence, and to have ready solutions for its control.

A consideration in making the decision not to scuttle the ship was the temperature of the sea water and weather conditions in the area. Human survival in

waters of that temperature would have been less than 90 minutes had the Koreans refused any assistance. The *Pueblo* was equipped with a whaleboat; however, this also would have met with problems in the high winds (reaching 7 on the Beaufort scale) and bitter climate of the region.

Finally, perhaps the most significant environmental parameter was the visibility in the area. Constantly overcast skies made position navigation and celestial navigation impossible. This problem, compounded by the need to maintain radar silence, contributed to the lack of navigational proof so desperately needed in the investigation which followed the release of the *Pueblo* crew.

Moving to the second major topic of this section, concerning standard procedure and delays inherent to Naval operations, the question is raised as to the scope of authority from the commanding officer up through the chain of command. Was Cdr. Bucher to take RAdm. Johnson's order "not to act provocatively" literally? Was RAdm. Johnson to wait for authority from above to act against the North Koreans? According to the February 10, 1969, issue of *Time* "Three times during his one morning of open testimony, RAdm. Johnson found the need to respond, 'I had no authority or re-



Crew members of the *Pueblo* file across the Bridge of No Return separating North and South Korea. In the post-capture period, the men of the *Pueblo* disregarded the standards set by the Code of Conduct in order to avoid unnecessary torture.

sponsibility.” Was the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet to wait for permission from above to allow the USS *Enterprise* to launch its planes to provide assistance? Does the ultimate decision always originate in Washington? Standard procedure says “Yes”; however, in a critical situation such as the *Pueblo* crisis, action must precede questions of authority. If this had been done, many of the delays would have been eliminated, and the *Pueblo* might have been saved at any stage during her capture.

Similar delays were observed in terms of communications. While a Naval vessel was under attack and making a futile attempt to relay the situation to the Naval Command in Japan, the SOS, on the other end of the line, was being dismissed as “radio operator chatter” because the message lacked a date-time group. A realistic approach to such a crisis must supersede the requirements of standard communication procedure.

The third major point of concern involves two familiar segments of United States Naval doctrine: Navy Regulations and the Code of Conduct. Navy Regulations are the backbone of fleet operation. They have guided the actions of commanding officers since 1948, and have met with little controversy. In the *Pueblo* incident, several fundamental regulations were violated, the most significant being Article 0730 stating, in brief, that the commanding officer will not permit his command to be searched or his crew removed by foreigners.

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Cdr. Bucher's justification for his violation of the regulation was that it would have been a slaughter had he resisted. He was placed in a “final measure” situation, where in his mind, and probably in the minds of many others aboard the *Pueblo*, there was no alternative but to surrender. However, the sum of his actions to that point should have been directed toward avoiding being placed in this “final measure” situation. Cdr. Bucher's unquestionable failure lay not in the ultimate violation of the regulation, but in neglecting to direct every effort toward preventing its violation. Navy Regulations are still sound and just, and should in no way be affected by the circumstances surrounding the capture of the *Pueblo*.

The Code of Conduct for United States military men is another facet of the *Pueblo* incident which has been heavily scrutinized. Since its conception after the Korean War, it is interesting to note that it has not been applied in a single case. In the post-capture period, the men of the *Pueblo*, led by Cdr. Bucher, disregarded the standards set by the Code in order to avoid unnecessary torture. In the words of the commanding officer, they “relied on the American people to believe that the U.S. Government and the U.S. Navy did not send ships to sea that would do the things that we were admitting to have done.” The nature of the North Korean mind, their means of torture, and their singular goal of propaganda suggest that a

unique situation existed and had to be treated as such. While VAdm. Daniel V. Gallery proposes a universal code of falsely answering enemy questions as long as the lack of truth in such answers is common knowledge, it is necessary to limit such a policy to particular cases. The *Pueblo* case was a practical application of the more relaxed code. There was no classified information desired only confessions and apologies to support the North Korean propaganda program. The commanding officer must completely analyze the enemy's purposes and make the final decision concerning this point.

The propaganda-oriented conduct of the North Koreans, however, is far from representative of the Communists as a whole, and in this light, the present Code of Conduct remains valid. In the hands of a less savage and more intelligent foe, a crew could conceivably fall apart if the commanding officer abandoned the Code. Also, the possibility of "contradiction" and hence, more serious trouble, exists. A third point is that when one question is answered and not another, the latter becomes suspect, and the subject of future investigation. As a guideline for action, then, the present Code of Conduct offers the most protection for the individual and for the country, and should, unless a unique situation exists, receive strict adherence.

To conclude this section of the paper, matériel deficiencies, the slow "reaction time" of the commanding officer, and an incomplete understanding of environmental influence all contributed to the problems which led to the *Pueblo's* capture. The critical nature of the situation was greatly increased by the non-willingness on the part of individuals in the Chain of Command to assume authority and act decisively. Navy Regulations must remain foremost in the mind of any commanding officer at all times. This was not the case in the *Pueblo* crisis. Finally, the present Code of Conduct is sound and applicable in most instances; however, it should be subject to a relaxation in unique situations at the discretion of the commanding officer.

A fine line can be drawn between the terms "preparedness" and "readiness." The latter is interpreted, in the writer's mind, as a stronger term; one which not only carries the materialistic connotation of "preparedness," but which involves complete awareness of all conceivable occurrences and the knowledge of how to handle such situations should they arise. It requires mental concentration, knowledge of your own authority and responsibility, of your strengths and weaknesses. It requires familiarization with Navy Regulations, the



*Home at last, Cdr. Bucher embraces his wife. His failure lay not in allowing his ship to be searched and his crew removed by foreigners, but in neglecting to direct every effort toward preventing the action that occurred.*

Code of Conduct, and the many aspects of environmental influence. It involves decisiveness and a willingness to sacrifice your own ambitions for the accomplishment of the mission.

Neither the *Pueblo*, her captain, her crew, nor anyone in the associated chain of command were "ready" for the crisis which evolved. This is the most valuable lesson learned from the *Pueblo* incident. Each individual unit of the Navy must strive toward total "readiness," for the impossible is never so far from reality as it appears; and should it occur without those involved being "ready," as it has once before, 200 years of honor, pride, and tradition are at stake.

Author Ed Brandt noted in his book, *The Last Voyage of the USS Pueblo*:

... honor was lost, but it was found; tradition was breached, but it prevails; and patriotism was forgotten, but it returned. . . .

Only time can measure the truth of this statement.

