



Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on May 11, 2008

The Story of the Pueblo

I was shocked that my son had never heard of the *USS Pueblo* before. And embarrassed that the answer to his question was “yes.” Somehow, that whole sorry episode had been blotted out of the history books. I wonder — how many of you reading these pages now know the story? How about your children — or their children?

At the time the *Pueblo* was captured, the sum total of our country’s efforts to engineer the release of the sailors was to “protest vigorously.” Many of us did everything possible to get our leaders to act, but to no avail. After the sailors were finally released, I helped set up a nationwide speaking tour for one of them, radio officer Lee R. Hayes, when I was on the staff of the John Birch Society. Hayes gave hundreds of speeches arranged by the JBS Speakers Bureau and participated in thousands of media interviews. The loyalty, sacrifices, and patriotism of Hayes and his fellow crewmen were an inspiration to all of us at the time.



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The story of the *Pueblo* deserves to be much better known today.

Seizure and Imprisonment

The ship that became known as the *Pueblo* was launched at the Kewaunee Shipbuilding and Engineering Company in Kewaunee, Wisconsin, on April 16, 1944. It was known simply as Army cargo ship FS-344. In 1966, it was transferred to the Navy, renamed the *Pueblo*, and began service as a light cargo ship.

The following year, the *Pueblo* was converted into an intelligence-gathering ship. In May 1967, it was redesignated AGER-2 — AGER standing for Auxiliary General Environmental Research, a euphemism for spying operations the ship would conduct on behalf of the National Security Agency.

In January 1968, the *Pueblo* was ordered to patrol off the coast of Communist North Korea. The ship left the Navy base in Sasebo, Japan, to conduct surveillance of Soviet naval activity in the Tsushima Straits. The ship was also ordered to eavesdrop on any electronic transmissions it could intercept that originated in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, as that communist captive called itself.

Within hours of reaching its destination in the Tsushima Straits, the *Pueblo* was harassed by Soviet or North Korean vessels, despite the fact that it was in international waters. On January 21, the ship reported that a modified Soviet-style sub-chaser passed within two miles of its bow. The next day, two



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apparent fishing trawlers from North Korea (which were probably Soviet spy ships) passed within 25 yards of the *Pueblo*.

The next day, January 23, 1968, the *Pueblo* was accosted by a sub-chaser that demanded to know its identity. In response, Commanding Officer Lloyd M. Bucher ordered that the U.S. flag be raised. The North Korean vessel then ordered the ship to stand down or be fired upon.

Instead, the *Pueblo* followed the orders it had been given back in Japan and tried to leave the area. It could not outrun the sub-chaser, however. Shortly after, three torpedo boats appeared on the horizon and joined in the chase. The attackers were subsequently joined by two MiG-21 jet fighters. Soon, a fourth torpedo boat and a second sub-chaser appeared on the horizon.

The North Koreans pulled alongside the *Pueblo* and tried to board the ship. When Commander Bucher ordered the *Pueblo* to take evasive maneuvers, two North Korean vessels opened fire on the ship. Suddenly, cannon fire and machine-gun bullets were raking the vessel.

The *Pueblo* was ill-prepared to withstand such an attack. Its armament consisted of two Browning .50-caliber machine guns — hardly a match for rockets and missiles. Moreover, the machine guns were wrapped in cold-weather tarpaulins and the ammunition for them was stored below decks.

As the cannon fire continued, Commander Bucher gave the order to “stop engines” and signaled the North Koreans that he would comply with their orders. He also ordered his own crewmen to begin destroying as much of the sensitive materiel as possible that was on board the ship.

The North Koreans ordered the *Pueblo* to follow them to the mainland. At first, the ship complied. But again — following orders it had been given in Japan — the ship stopped before it crossed the 12-mile limit into North Korean waters.

When this happened, the North Koreans once again opened fire on the ship. This time, one sailor — Fireman Apprentice Duane Hodges — was killed. North Korean forces from a torpedo boat and a sub-chaser boarded the *Pueblo*. Our sailors were blindfolded and had their hands tied behind their backs. Once they were helpless, they were beaten and prodded with bayonets.

The *Pueblo* had been in radio contact with Naval security back in Japan throughout the incident. The Seventh Fleet command told Commander Bucher that help was on the way. It turns out this was a lie; no jets or ships were ever dispatched to come to the aid of the ship.

No one at Seventh Fleet headquarters was willing to give the order to try to rescue the *Pueblo*. The decision was bucked back to Washington — first to the Pentagon, then to the White House. By the time then-President Lyndon Johnson was informed of the situation, the *Pueblo* was in North Korean waters. It was decided that any rescue attempt would be too dangerous.

There is considerable controversy about where the *Pueblo* was when it was captured. Commander Bucher and the other ship’s officers subsequently testified under oath that at no time did the *Pueblo* enter within 12 nautical miles of the North Korean coast. This is the generally accepted limit of claims for territorial waters. At the time, however, the North Koreans claimed a 50-nautical-mile sea boundary. No one disputes that the *Pueblo* was within 50 miles of the Korean coast.

In any case, once the ship was within 12 miles of North Korea, the *Pueblo* was boarded again — this time by some high-ranking North Korean officials. The *Pueblo* was taken into port at Wonsan on the eastern coast of North Korea. The 82 surviving U.S. crewmembers were taken to a prisoner-of-war camp somewhere in the interior of the country. The men were starved and repeatedly tortured. Their



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treatment got worse when someone realized that crewmen were secretly giving them “the finger” in staged propaganda photos.

Commander Bucher was singled out for particularly harsh treatment, including facing a mock firing squad. He refused to buckle when faced with his own death, but finally relented and agreed to sign a confession when his captors threatened to murder his crewmen, one by one, in front of him.

Since his captors couldn't read English, Bucher was ordered to write his own confession. None of the North Koreans picked up on a play on words that Commander Bucher included in his “confession.” He wrote, “We paeen the North Korean state. We paeen their great leader, Kim Il Sung.” Read aloud, “we paeen” sounds remarkably like “we pee on.” Get it?

During the course of 1968, the men were moved to a second prisoner-of-war camp, while negotiations for their release dragged on. Finally, in December of that year — 11 long months after the *Pueblo* was captured — the United States gave North Korea a written apology acknowledging that the ship was spying and promising that it would never happen again.

On December 23, 1968, the crew of the *Pueblo* was taken by bus to the demilitarized zone separating North Korea from the south and the men were permitted to walk across “the Bridge of No Return.” Commander Bucher led the long line of crewmen, with his second-in-command, Executive Officer Lt. Ed Murphy, bringing up the rear.

Once the officers and crew reached safety in South Korea, the United States retracted its admission, apology, and assurance.

Betrayal and Loyalty

In the aftermath of the apparent collapse of the Soviet Union, we learned that the capture of the *Pueblo* was instigated by the Soviet Union, which very badly wanted a cryptographic machine that was on board. John Anthony Walker, an American traitor who had provided the Soviets with literally hundreds of thousands of secrets, had given them a key to deciphering our cyphers; now they needed to get their hands on the actual machine. Seizing the *Pueblo* provided that opportunity.

After the sailors' release, Commander Bucher and the 81 other surviving officers and crew aboard the *Pueblo* were then ordered to face a Naval Court of Inquiry, which concluded by recommending that Bucher and Lieutenant Steve Harris (the officer in charge of the intelligence equipment on board the ship) be court-martialed for their “dereliction of duty.” There was no apparent action taken against the Naval officers in Japan who lied to Commander Bucher about assistance being sent.

Secretary of the Navy John H. Chafee rejected the Naval Court's recommendation, saying, “They have suffered enough.” Commander Bucher was never found guilty of any malfeasance and remained on active duty until his retirement. He died in 2004, partly as a result of complications from the injuries he received while he was a prisoner of war in North Korea.

During the inquiry, there was some debate about whether or not Commander Bucher acted within his orders. He admitted that part of his orders were “not to spark an international incident.” But he and his officers were adamant that they had not come within 12 nautical miles of the Korean coast. (Today, of course, global positioning satellites could have confirmed the ship's location within a matter of inches.)

Some critics argued that the ship should have left the area after the first incident. But such encounters were considered routine at the time. U.S. forces frequently tested the territorial limits of Cold War opponents. If such actions caused the enemy to mobilize its military, there would be even more



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information to gather.

Moreover, testimony during the inquiry made it clear that the *Pueblo* had *not* been informed that Communist North Korea had become increasingly bellicose recently, threatening all sorts of reprisals against its enemies and even sending “hit squads” into South Korea. Such information might have caused Commander Bucher to act differently. So of course, there was no reason for the *Pueblo*’s crew to expect anything other than a normal and routine mission.

The *Pueblo* was eventually moved by the North Koreans from Wonson on the east coast of North Korea to Nampo on the west coast. The trip required moving the vessel through international waters for several days, as it was towed around South Korea. Although the U.S. military had to have been aware of the *Pueblo*’s location, no effort was made to retake or sink the ship. To the best of my knowledge, there was never a court of inquiry — or any embarrassing questions at a White House press conference — about why this was allowed to happen.

The *Pueblo* subsequently was taken to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, where it is the most popular tourist attraction in the city. Thousands of visitors have been shown the ship’s secret communications room, still in a partially disassembled state from when the ship was seized. A popular souvenir of a visit is a photograph taken while a tourist stands behind the machine gun mounted at the rear of the ship. Yes, the same guns that remained wrapped in a tarpaulin during the attack and seizure.

It has been claimed that the *USS Pueblo* was the first naval vessel to be seized by an enemy since the wars in Tripoli two centuries earlier. This is not quite true; on December 8, 1941 (one day after the attack at Pearl Harbor), the river gunboat *USS Wake* was captured by Japanese forces while moored in Shanghai.

It is true that the *USS Pueblo* remains a commissioned vessel of the United States Navy to this day. It is sad that the ship has been abandoned by our leaders. But it would be tragic if its story were forgotten by our citizens.

W.W. “Chip” Wood was the first news editor of The Review of the News and also wrote for American Opinion, our two predecessor publications. He now writes a weekly column called “Straight Talk,” which is free for the asking at www.straighttalkletter.com.

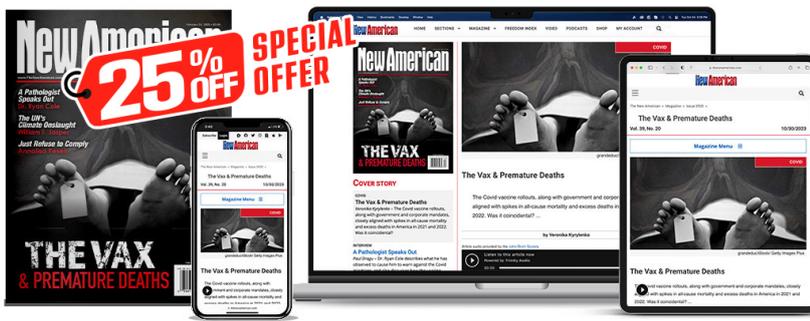


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