

Lloyd Bucher, captain of North Korea-seized Pueblo, dies at 76

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Retired Navy Cmdr. Lloyd "Pete" Bucher, who was the captain of the intelligence-gathering ship Pueblo when it was captured off North Korea in 1968 and its crew held in brutal captivity for 11 months, died Wednesday at a nursing home in the San Diego suburb of Poway after years of declining health. He was 76.



Lloyd "Pete" Bucher

Bucher was severely criticized by a Naval Court of Inquiry for surrendering his ship without firing a shot, but many of the 82 crew members credited his bravery and stoic example for helping them survive merciless beatings and torture in a North Korean prison camp.

"The man was a giant," said Stu Russell, a Pueblo crew member and president of the USS Pueblo Veterans Association. "I don't know where he got the strength and courage to go through what he did."

Quiet, almost diffident, Bucher was an orphan who was reared at Boys Town, the fabled home for homeless boys in Nebraska, and served two years in the Navy before attending the University of Nevada. He was commissioned in 1953 and began a slow but steady rise through the naval ranks.

In international waters off North Korea on the night of Jan. 23, 1968, with little time to ponder options, Bucher faced the classic dilemma of military leadership: whether to put the mission ahead of the men, whether to consign them to die in a hopeless cause.

Convinced that the North Koreans were bent on a massacre, Bucher chose to surrender his ship to save his sailors' lives. In the process, he became one of the most controversial figures in U.S. military history.

As six North Korean ships raked the Pueblo with 15 heavy shells and an estimated 2,200 smaller rounds, one sailor was killed and several, including Bucher, were wounded. Bucher ordered sailors to burn and destroy secret documents and equipment and send an SOS to other U.S. ships.

No help was dispatched although a carrier task force was in the region. "The U.S. at that time had enormous military forces in the western Pacific, within five minutes of flying time of us," Bucher said in a 1988 interview. "I would have thought something could have been mustered to come to our aid."

The America of 1968, of course, was different from that of today, and the difference is apparent in the reaction of the public and Navy to the seizure and later release of the Pueblo crew.

Captured Americans were not lionized and considered heroes, as they are today; in fact, many observers have said the military seemed to treat former prisoners as if they carried a stigma.

Even when Congress voted to establish a POW citation, the Pentagon initially argued that the Pueblo sailors were detainees, not POWs, and thus not eligible. The sailors finally got their POW medals in 1989.

Although the Navy opted not to court-martial him, the criticism from his peers was withering. After being hospitalized for his injuries, he returned to active duty, including involvement in the mining of Haiphong Harbor in North Vietnam. He retired in 1973.

The specter of a U.S. warship seized without firing a shot was humiliating for the Navy.

"The story of the Pueblo, in a nutshell, is one of a naval officer, his crew and his ship, set to do a thing; things went bad, and the Navy abandoned them," Bucher wrote in a 1989 letter published in two widely read naval magazines.

The letter set loose an immediate salvo.

"He never manned the guns," wrote retired Adm. John Hyland, former commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, who had convened the Court of Inquiry. "He didn't go to

general quarters until he'd already been fired upon.... Bucher got a completely failing grade."

The passage of time has done little to soften the view of many in the Navy.

"He had other options," said a retired Navy ship captain Thursday when asked to comment on Bucher. "He could have gone down fighting."

Wounded in the capture, Bucher was singled out for punishment by the North Koreans and was brutalized into signing an oddly worded "confession." In a picture taken by the Koreans, Pueblo crew members can be seen using a finger gesture to display their defiance.

Bucher wrote a book, "My Story," published in 1971. In retirement, he lived in Poway, painting seascapes and tending his garden. He gave innumerable interviews, kept a listed phone number and answered all questions in a gentle, thoughtful manner.

Bucher also lectured at colleges and conventions. Although he was tough in his criticism of the Navy, he stressed themes of patriotism and thankfulness for the opportunities America offers. He promoted the Navy as a great career for young people.

Although regarded by many as a victim of the Navy's lack of planning in case one of its ships was challenged by the North Koreans, Bucher suffered occasional indignities. When he was set to ride in a veterans parade in San Diego, a group of retired officers protested his appearance, which did go on.

"What do they want me to do?" Bucher asked when told of the protest. "I did what I thought was best. I can't change history."

Bucher is survived by his wife, Rose, and sons Mark and Michael.