

# A USS Pueblo sailor begins to tell the story

*First in a series*

by Dave FEATHERLY

These words of the popular Toby Keith song of 2002 rang hollow for the officers and crew of the USS Pueblo after it had been captured by North Korean national pirates in January of 1968.

**Justice will be served**

**And the battle will rage**

**This big dog will fight**

**When you rattle his cage**

**And you'll be sorry that you messed with The U.S. of A.**

**'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass**

**It's the American way**

*Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)*

Battlefield scenes in popular movies have been highlighted that instill a feeling of patriotism and pride in Americans: We never leave a wounded comrade behind.

But jingoistic lyrics and fictional movie scenes meant nothing in the days following the seizure of the unprotected Pueblo. We - the U.S. government - didn't put a boot anywhere. And we did leave behind wounded comrades. In addition to the death of Fireman Duane Hodges, there were serious injuries inflicted on several others of the Pueblo, including Commanding Officer Lloyd "Pete" Bucher (pronounced "Boo-kur").

It is shocking that there has never been more of a national outcry demanding the return of the Pueblo. Time erases memories and, in 1968, the country was mired in the quagmire of Vietnam and some just want to forget that period of time in our history. Some Americans may not even be familiar with the story of the Pueblo but many probably are. All should be.

In the next couple issues of the Cheyenne Herald, we'll review the Pueblo story and bring the harrowing experience to life with the words of a survivor of those 11 months of captivity. Alvin Plucker now lives near Greeley and is the vice president of the USS Pueblo Veterans Association and a Pueblo incident historian. He has an incredible collection of memorabilia related to the piracy and retention of the Pueblo.

He and I spoke about the incident and his experiences in a lengthy interview on Monday, February 11, 2008.

What happened on January 23, 1968, forty years ago, and the following 11 months will forever be etched in his memory. He has handled physical injuries and mental strain resulting from his terrible experiences very well.

At the time, he was on his way out of the Navy. His enlistment was due to expire in four months and normally the Navy didn't assign a sailor to a duty station for less than a year. As a Quartermaster, Alvin Plucker interacted with the C.O. on the bridge and became close friends with

Cdr. Pete Bucher, who he came to know well.

*In the United States Navy, "Quartermaster" derives from "master of the quarterdeck", the quarterdeck being the deck where the helm was situated and navigation was generally performed. The quartermaster is thus the enlisted member in charge of the watch-to-watch navigation and the maintenance, correction, and preparation of nautical charts and navigation publications. He is also responsible for navigational instruments and clocks and the training of ship's lookouts and helmsmen.*

The Pueblo was retrofitted in Bremerton, Washington and made the long trip across the Pacific to Japan before departing on its first mission off the coasts of Russia and North Korea. By 1968, the world was familiar with these intelligence gathering ships. In fact, the sister ship of the Pueblo, the USS Banner, had been on duty in the same area before the Pueblo was deployed there. During 15 months on the scene, the Banner had been harassed - by as many as 11 patrol boats for 2 1/2 hours once.

The possibility of harassment - make that the likelihood of harassment - was real for the Pueblo.

Unknown to the Pueblo's skipper at the time, two days before the boarding of his ship, a group of North Korean infiltrators was stopped within blocks of the South Korean Presidential Palace in Seoul. The objective of that group was to assassinate South Korea's president Chung Hee Park and others. North Korea had stepped up its aggression, knowing the United States had its hand full in Vietnam, where Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces would soon launch the Tet Offensive.

Alvin Plucker grew up in southwestern Nebraska and was in the final graduating class in Parks before the town's high school was closed and consolidated. After graduation, he moved to Colorado Springs and worked for an uncle doing tree trimming until the season ended. He then quickly joined the Navy and had completed most of his enlistment, including three tours in Vietnam and aboard the USS Hornet, when he was assigned to the yet-to-be-completed new spy ship, the USS Pueblo.

In spite of an attempt by the Hornet's Admiral to allow Plucker to complete his active duty service aboard the Hornet, the request was not approved and he traveled to Bremerton to join up with what he called a "piece of junk" sitting in "partial dry-docks" with only four sailors assigned to a to-be-built ship. Spending time on the beach and fishing while the ship was being built, duty was ideal for Plucker and the others who had arrived.

Originally, it was an Army support ship that had been given to South Korea and bought back, along with what would become the Banner and the Palm Beach.

Plucker saw \$64 million of high tech equipment brought on board and the ship was refitted to accommodate the mission ahead of it. In the center of the main deck (amid ship) would be the "Spook Shack," where Communication Technicians (CT's) with Top Secret - Crypto clearances would work for the brief period of time until the Pueblo was captured.

The area was so highly classified - not just the work being done but the area itself - that the ship's commanding officer would not have access, nor did Plucker. Because of his rating, he was responsible to set the clocks in the area. He was taken into the secure space blindfolded. Once where he needed to be, the blindfold was removed long enough for him to perform his duty and it would be replaced and he would be lead back out. On the Jamestown, we had a combination keypad that only those with the necessary clearance knew. The ship's crew knew they weren't allowed in the spaces and wouldn't have tried but they didn't have the combination either.

Of the 83 man complement aboard the Pueblo, 62 were CT's, according to Plucker. There were also two civilian oceanographers. Some of the work of oceanographers on these ships was for show - a subterfuge - and some was for real. The Pueblo also had two Filipino stewards, who served the officers only.

After shaking down off Bremerton and a trip to San Diego, the ship was deemed seaworthy and headed across the Pacific. Steadily encountering problems with the port engine and the ship's steering, they had to "limp" all the way to Japan. Even after arrival in Japan, repairs weren't possible at first as the ship was too old. Once in Japan, more CT's came aboard and the ship was ready to steam into duty.

Bucher realized that the ship was poorly equipped to destroy equipment and papers and sought to have the problem corrected but it was not done before the Pueblo set sail. A mission that would generate large volumes of paper had a small incinerator for the normal ship's paper destruction, a "small" paper shredder, and axes and hammers for damage to equipment. Wholly inadequate for a mission of this sort. There was as much as a ton and a half of top secret paper that fell into the hands of the North Koreans.

It was on the Pueblo's very first mission that it was hijacked at sea, in international waters. And in spite of the Captain's request to be outfitted with more armament, Navy officials decided that the pattern of harassment had never led to seizing the Banner or firing on it so being unarmed was not an undue risk. That is how the Pueblo went to sea. The initial cruise took the ship up the Sea of Japan to the vicinity of the Russian port city of Vladivostok, then back along the east coast of North Korea, where it was intercepted.

On that fateful day of January 23, 1968, there were subchasers and several torpedo boats that approached the unarmed

and defenseless Pueblo. The Pueblo was asked to identify itself and hoisted an American flag in response. The North Koreans then told the Pueblo "we wish to come aboard." Cdr. Bucher decided to depart after being told, "heave to or we will fire." He gave orders for "all engines full" and started to leave and that action was met with the first gunfire from machine guns. The first attack was on the bridge, from where the ship's captain commands a ship, and Bucher was hit.

He had issued an order to destroy all classified materials and sailors were doing their best to comply with the directive but they were wholly unprepared and equally without the means to do so. Fires were being set in security spaces to burn paper because the too-small incinerator was inaccessible due to the machine gun fire directed at any movement on the deck.

A cannon shot was fired and that shell pierced the bulkhead of the ship and killed Duane Hodges and injured a dozen or more others. Cdr. Bucher decided that the crew would die if he resisted further - either by enemy gunfire or in the freezing waters of the Sea of Japan. The air temperature was about 10° at that time of day - about 2 pm.

Once they boarded the Pueblo, the Koreans ordered the crew to the main deck, where they were bound and blindfolded and forced to sit on the frozen deck. Movement and noise were answered by kicks, rifle butts and bayonet pokes.

The Pueblo knew their distress calls were heard and crewmen expected the rescue to occur at any time. The last message back to the Pueblo was, "the birds are in the air," meaning airplanes were on the way. It has always been surmised that the reason there were eight Korean MIG21s in the air over the Pueblo that day was the expectation that American planes would intercede in the hijacking.

Cdr. Bucher stalled for all the time he could buy. He knew that in the area was enough aircraft cover to lay waste to the whole North Korean Navy. South Korea itself was heavily armed, an Air Force unit was headquartered in Okinawa, several air bases were in Japan, and the aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise, was in the Sea of Japan.

Why was no rescue attempted? It is said that President Lyndon Johnson, already under heavy criticism for the War in Vietnam and facing a re-election attempt in 1968, said he would not risk a second war. No boot in January of 1968.

Alvin Plucker told me that the officers and sailors of the Pueblo expected to die in a rescue attempt. Only after several weeks did they accept that their country had abandoned them. One intelligence gathering ship with fewer than 100 in the crew was not worth risking another war over, according to the President of the United States. Yes, we did abandon our wounded comrades on that battlefield. *The brutality inflicted in the next issue.*