

The Ill-destined Voyage

A Matter of Accountability: The True Story of the Pueblo Affair, by Trevor Armbrister, *New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970. vii+408 pp. \$7.95.*

Bucher: My Story, by Commander Lloyd Bucher, USN (with Mark Rascovich), *Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970. viii+438 pp. Appendices, glossary. \$7.95.*

The Pueblo Incident, by Rear Admiral Daniel V. Gallery, USN Ret, *Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970. x+174 pp. Appendices. \$5.95.*

WHEN THE NAVY reconnaissance ship U.S. S. *Pueblo* was seized by communist forces off the coast of North Korea in January 1968, the event touched off a controversy whose effects continue to reverberate in the highest councils of the American military. Well they might, for the capture of the *Pueblo*—and the events surrounding it—raise questions of the most serious kind about the capacity of the United States to fulfill effectively its assumed global responsibilities under contemporary international conditions.

The lengthy study by Trevor Armbrister focuses on the nation's foreign policy decision-making system, and the way in which

it functioned—and failed to function—during the *Pueblo* crisis. How did it happen, asks Armbrister, that an ill-prepared nation came to send an unfit ship with an inexperienced crew on a mission of doubtful necessity off the shores of an unfriendly country without the slightest suspicion that serious dangers might be involved? The form of the question is only slightly hyperbolic, as Armbrister's extraordinarily detailed narrative clearly shows. It was the *Pueblo's* mission to investigate the extent of North Korean naval and air activity, pinpoint radar facilities above the 38th parallel and test their effectiveness, and shadow Soviet ships in the Tsushima Strait between Korea and Japan. Our intelligence apparatus also hoped to learn, in the words of the vessel's operations orders, the "Korcom and Soviet reaction respectively to an overt intelligence collector operating near Korcom periphery and actively conducting surveillance of USSR naval units."

The latter objective was certainly realized, although little else on the mission went as planned. The *Pueblo* was troubled from the start by equipment malfunctions, especially in the steering and internal communications systems. (Indeed, Armbrister suggests, perhaps the converted cargo vessel should never have been allowed to leave port at all: the Navy Board of Inspectors and Survey found 462 deficiencies, 77 of them rated serious, in a pre-voyage examination of the ship's mission readiness; among other problems, the Board found that the top of the stack was held in place with baling wire.) Authority on the *Pueblo* was divided between Bucher, the captain and thus finally responsible for the ship's operations, and Lt. Stephen Harris, an intelligence officer in charge of the electronic monitoring equipment and reporting directly to headquarters in the United States. Bucher's uncertain knowledge of and access to this area of the vessel, Armbrister makes clear, partly explains his failure to oversee properly the destruction of classified materials prior to capture. The two translators charged with keeping track of North Kor-

ean radio broadcasts were poorly trained (Bucher was not informed of their lack of competence until the crisis broke) and proved incapable of providing adequate warning concerning the intentions of the attacking vessels.

Finally, the Navy considered the mission to be of minimal risk, and ignored Bucher's repeated complaints about the excessive load of classified publications aboard the ship and the lack of a destruct apparatus. No plans were developed to deal with an enemy attack (although, as an afterthought, two aging 50-caliber machine guns were installed as a gesture toward preparedness). Bucher was told to expect only harassment, and was not informed of increasing North Korean activity along the DMZ prior to the voyage, nor of the Blue House raid on the residence of South Korean President Park four days before the capture. When the crisis finally broke, failures in the fleet communications system and the slowness of decision-makers to react eliminated whatever possibilities may have existed for sending aid to the beleaguered vessel. The nation's response was a familiar one in Cold War annals: diplomatic protests, accompanied by ineffectual public sputterings.

Although Armbrister is largely content to allow his narrative to speak for itself and offers little interpretive analysis, he appears to be of the view that the size and nature of the American defense system make incidents of the *Pueblo* type inevitable. And the day has passed, he argues, when an American leader can issue a contemporary equivalent of John Hay's "Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead." The United States has grown so powerful, and so aware of the consequences of the use of its power, that it is as bound to inaction as was Prometheus to his lonely mountain. It occurs no more to Armbrister than it does to the nation's leaders to ask why it is only the United States which is paralyzed by power in the modern world.

Bucher's own volume is, as might be expected, largely a personal apologia which adds little factual data to that gathered by

Armbrister. His pre-voyage briefings, he notes, stressed the low-risk character of the mission; and even in retrospect he appears astounded that the North Koreans would presume to violate the canons of international law. In this as in so many other ways he is typically American. Fully concurring with his supervisors' judgment that he would encounter no serious difficulty, he made little effort to drill his crew in procedures required to resist attack or destroy the classified materials. In reading his narrative one is left with the impression that his failure to resist was as much an effect of his surprise at the unexpected as it was a result of a judgment about the futility of resistance. To be sure, there was little that armed resistance could have accomplished: the *Pueblo* was completely outgunned, and a show of force on Bucher's part would have resulted in instantaneous death for the crew and the capture of all classified materials. Bucher can argue that his delaying tactics at least bought time for the destruction of a portion of these materials. He is, incidentally, notably contradictory in his arguments concerning the lack of effective armament on the *Pueblo*: although he admits to an initial protest against the installation of even the 50-caliber weapons on grounds that they might constitute a provocation to the enemy, he later bitterly complains that the Navy failed to provide his ship with adequate means of defense. Clearly he has had at least some second thoughts.

Pete Bucher was clearly no John Paul Jones on January 23, 1968, but few men are capable of extraordinary acts of heroism in any event. By all accounts—even the Navy Board of Inquiry's—he acted quite bravely while in communist captivity, and in his naive faith that somehow international law will protect American ships from communist predators he is the perfect embodiment of the worst aspects of the American view of international relations.

Retired Rear Admiral Daniel V. Gallery is not nearly so sanguine concerning Bucher's conduct. Gallery is a veteran of 43

years of Navy service, and a true "old salt." He sees the capture of the *Pueblo* as a "shameful milestone in the decline and fall of the United States." The nation is becoming "soft and decadent," Gallery believes, and "the Navy is declining with it." He questions whether Bucher had in fact exhausted all the options available to him before the surrender, suggesting that he might have crippled his main engines, or at least disabled the anchor or rudder engines, and thus bought further time for the destruction of classified materials; but basically he is disturbed because Bucher surrendered without firing a shot. Few can doubt that Gallery himself would have gone down with his ship, and become the hero he wishes Bucher had been.

But Admiral Gallery's book is more than a personal diatribe or a critical evaluation of Bucher's behavior. He raises, either directly or by implication, certain questions which go to the heart of the *Pueblo* affair and its relevance for the present and future. He is bitterly critical of the assumption of operational control over the fleet by the Pentagon, and at the failure of commanders at lower echelons to act decisively without higher approval when events demand it. If Gallery appears rather cavalier about the possible consequences of rash action by subordinate commanders in the nuclear age, he does cogently challenge the myth, created by magical thinking about the capabilities of modern technology, that total centralization of military decision-making power is compatible with speedy response to crisis. Washington's capacity to absorb and respond to the information which pours in hourly from the far-flung battlements of the Cold War is clearly more limited than it will acknowledge: the nation is suffering from hardening of its national security as well as of its domestic policy-making arteries.

By implication, moreover, Gallery raises still another fundamental question: does the training received by American military officers under contemporary conditions encourage original thinking and fos-

ter a capacity for decisive action under the press of crisis, or does it stultify and destroy creativity and discourage initiative? The performance of decision-makers at all levels during the *Pueblo* crisis does not provide the materials for an encouraging answer.

Finally, Gallery is sharply critical of the relevance of the Military Code of Conduct for Cold War conditions. The present code, he observes in his characteristically trenchant manner, is "unrealistic and unworkable when we are dealing with barbarians"; and he suggests that the nation publicly announce that, because of the harsh treatment normally meted out to Americans who fall into communist hands, American POW's will henceforth be permitted to say whatever is demanded of them. Whatever the merits of his proposal—and it is not without its difficulties—it is clear that the entire question of the military's expectations concerning the behavior of Americans captured by the enemy needs a fresh and thorough reexamination.

The key to the *Pueblo* crisis may well be, as both Bucher and Gallery believe, our refusal to recognize that our adversaries do not play by accepted rules. More fundamentally, however, the crisis and the events surrounding it indicate that the United States is at present ill-equipped, either in decision-making structure or in ideological outlook, to deal effectively with the Cold War in its present form, and is not capable of responding swiftly and efficaciously to the variety of challenges we will continue to receive. That is the real meaning of the affair, and it is for reminding us of this once again that the *Pueblo* ought to be remembered.

Reviewed by JAMES E. DORNAN, JR.