

Naval vessel's capture dragged crew's families through unbearable agony

by Steve Liewer

American Forces Network radio chattered in the background as Pat Kell fed and dressed her four children in Japan the morning of Jan. 23, 1968.

A month earlier, her husband - Chief Petty Officer James Kell - volunteered for a secret mission aboard a World War II cargo ship newly refitted with communications gear. The vessel deployed from Yokosuka, Japan, after a voyage from San Diego.

REMEMBERING THE PUEBLO - Rose Bucher, wife of Pueblo captain Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher, became the Pueblo families' spokesman during the crew's 11-month ordeal in North Korea. Her husband was featured on the cover of Time magazine during that time. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. Through the broadcast buzz, Pat Kell thought she heard the name of her husband's ship: Pueblo.

That can't be right, she thought. None of the crew members' families had known where the ship was going. In fact, few in the Navy had heard of the operation.

Pat Kell and the other crewmen's spouses would learn the sketchy details first from the media, not the Navy: The Pueblo was a spy ship. North Korean navy boats seized it in international waters near that nation's coast. One sailor was killed during the incident and 82 shipmates were taken prisoner by the communist regime.

"I was only 27, I was in a strange country and I was so scared," said Pat Kell, who lives in Chula Vista, Calif. She recalled the crisis during a recent interview in San Diego with several Pueblo survivors and their wives.

Forty years ago, the Pueblo crew began an ordeal of interrogations, beatings, starvation and humiliation that would stretch for 11 months. The U.S. government finally secured the crew's release with a sham apology to North Korea.

The shipmates flew to San Diego on Dec. 24, 1968, to a public that greeted them as heroes and a Navy that treated them as outcasts for surrendering their vessel without a fight.

The Pueblo story has been told in books, a TV drama, a stage play and several film documentaries.

Less well-known is the story of the crew's family members, who endured their own form of torture at home. An indifferent military bureaucracy told them little.

"It was a lot harder for the wives than for us," said James Kell, 71. "We knew what was happening, and we could cope with it. But they didn't know. They could only imagine."

Carol Murphy and her young son lived near Yokosuka when her husband - Lt. Ed Murphy, the ship's executive officer - was taken prisoner. The North Koreans released a photo that showed the Pueblo's five other officers, but not Ed.

Three days after the ship's capture, Ed's mother died in California. Carol Murphy, eight months pregnant with her second child, caught a flight home for her mother-in-law's services.

"When I went to her funeral, I didn't know if I was going for two funerals," said Carol Murphy, now 65 and living with her husband near San Diego.

Hardly anyone felt as lonely as Mimi Strickland, who had married Seaman Larry Strickland 14 months earlier. A native of the Philippines, she knew almost no one in the United States. So she moved to Michigan to live with her in-laws.

Her tense relationship with Larry's family, which disapproved of his marriage to an Asian woman, worsened after the Pueblo's capture. Mimi Strickland felt she and her baby daughter had to move out. She took a job as a live-in caregiver for a quadriplegic woman and avoided contact with almost everyone.

"The whole year the Pueblo was captured, nobody knew where I was," said Mimi Strickland, now 71 and living with her husband in rural San Diego County. "I wanted to hide from the world. ... I was so scared."

If Rose Bucher was frightened, she didn't show it.

The wife of the Pueblo's captain, Cmdr. Lloyd "Pete" Bucher, heard a report about the ship's seizure while watching a news show at San Diego's Bahia Hotel, where she was staying with her two teenage sons. Pete, a career submariner, would be assigned to San Diego after his Pueblo tour ended.

Within minutes, news reporters tracked down Rose Bucher at the hotel.

She reluctantly embraced the role as the Pueblo families' morale-booster and spokeswoman. She asked a senior Navy officer for the names and addresses of all the crewmen's families so she could keep them informed, a longtime tradition in the service. He told her no.

"He said, 'I think you might be a rabble-rouser,'" said Bucher, who lives in the Poway, Calif., home she

shared with Pete until his death in 2004.

The Pueblo families bridled at this and other Navy cruelties they endured. After the Pueblo was seized, the Navy temporarily stopped some of the crew members' pay, leaving their wives without that source of financial support.

"I went to get his paycheck, and there wasn't any," Pat Kell said. "I had to go to church to get some (money)."

The Navy forced Pat Kell and the other Pueblo spouses living in Japan to move, fearing they might be targeted by Japanese leftists. But Navy officials turned down her first two choices - Washington, D.C., and Long Beach. She finally agreed to move to Hawaii, although she knew no one there, because Navy commanders said the Pueblo crewmen would be sent there if they were released.

"I prayed and I prayed and I prayed," Pat Kell said. "I don't know what I would have done without my faith."

She put a "Remember the Pueblo" bumper sticker on her car. Navy officials said the vehicle wouldn't be allowed on a base because of that emblem.

In San Diego, Rose Bucher offered Kell a lifeline with letters and encouragement. They formed a close friendship that endures 40 years later.

"I was so far away. She kept me connected," Kell said.

The Pentagon had long advised the families of POWs to say nothing to the news media for fear of jeopardizing their loved ones' release. But Bucher heard from some widows of POWs from previous wars who said they had kept quiet and never saw their husbands again.

Bucher was determined to keep the Pueblo crew in the public spotlight. During a TV talk show, she held up a "Remember the Pueblo" bumper sticker and launched a national movement.

She traveled across the United States, giving speeches and interviews, appearing on television, publicly comforting the families of the crew. She buttonholed senators, congressmen and admirals. She didn't let up until her husband and his shipmates were freed.

It's not clear whether the campaign quickened the crew's release, but it certainly boosted the morale of the Pueblo women. Bucher's example also inspired the wives of Vietnam War POWs, who formed their own group in 1970 to keep prisoner issues before the public.

The Pueblo crewmen's Christmas Eve homecoming in San Diego didn't end the ordeal for them or their families.

The Navy forced the crew to testify before a military Court of Inquiry, which ran from mid-January until early March 1969. The men, who didn't have lawyers, were questioned at length about their captivity.

They were accused of peacefully surrendering the ship and letting so much classified material and equipment fall into North Korean hands. In the minutes before their capture, the crew members had tried frantically to burn secret documents with cigarette lighters.

The court ultimately recommended that five officers who had planned and executed the Pueblo's mission, including Pete Bucher and Ed Murphy, be disciplined. Navy Secretary John Chafee rejected the advice and dropped all charges.

"They have suffered enough," he said.

After years of lobbying by Pete Bucher, the Pentagon awarded the Pueblo crew members the Prisoner of War Medal in 1990. But neither clemency nor decorations ended the suffering for the crew and their families.

Some marriages didn't survive the captivity. Several crew members arrived home to find that their wives had new boyfriends, Ed Murphy recalled. One wife was pregnant with another man's child.

Many Pueblo sailors have suffered health problems and post-traumatic stress disorder from the 1968 ordeal.

"I hated to see the sun coming down, because I knew he would wake up screaming," Mimi Strickland said of her husband.

Some of the crewmen's wives suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as well. Several still do.

For Pat Kell, the sight of hijacked jets striking the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, brought back the

horror.

"After 9/11, I fell apart totally," she said. "I had never talked about what happened to me." A year of counseling helped her cope with what she and her husband went through decades ago.

The Kells have done their best to focus on the silver linings of the dark Pueblo cloud: the valuable lessons the military has learned in treating POW families, and the emotional reunions that have knitted the Pueblo crew closer and closer over the years.

But no matter what, the Pueblo trauma never quite disappears.

"It doesn't go away," Pat Kell said, "and maybe it shouldn't."

Naval vessel's capture dragged crew's families through unbearable agony by Steve Liewer