

Adm. Crowe Denies Coverup in 1988

By John Lancaster
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Retired Adm. William J. Crowe Jr. yesterday labeled as "absolutely outrageous" news media reports that accuse the former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman of covering up the truth behind the downing of an Iranian airliner by a U.S. warship four years ago.

Reports last week on the ABC News program "Nightline" and this week in Newsweek magazine assert that the USS Vincennes had been operating illegally in Iranian territorial waters when it fired two anti-aircraft missiles at the unarmed civilian Airbus on July 3, 1988, killing 290 people.

The reports portrayed the skipper of the Vincennes, Capt. Will Rogers III, as "overeager" and spoiling for a fight, contributing to a series of blunders that led the crew to its mistaken conclusion that the ship was under attack by an Iranian F-14 fighter. Newsweek and ABC conducted a joint investigation into the incident.

The reports said, moreover, that the Vincennes and other U.S. warships in the region had been fighting a "secret war" against Iran that went well beyond their publicly acknowledged mission of protecting neutral shipping from attacks by Iranian gunboats. Crowe subsequently approved an elaborate "pastiche of omissions, half-truths and outright deceptions" to mask the true circumstances of the downing, Newsweek said.

In a telephone interview, Crowe heatedly denied that he had done any such thing. "I just reject and am offended by the idea that this was an orchestrated coverup," Crowe said. "Granted, we were feeling our way. Granted, we made some mistakes. But to leap from that to an orchestrated coverup to deceive the American people—it simply isn't true."

Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, on Thursday wrote Defense Secretary Richard B. Cheney to request "an expeditious inquiry

Downing of Iranian Airliner

into these serious allegations."

The Pentagon said initially that the crew had acted properly because the airliner had been operating outside the prescribed commercial air corridor, was emitting a military electronic code and was descending with what appeared to be hostile intent.

But the Pentagon acknowledged in an investigation released five weeks later that none of those assumptions had been correct, blaming the decision to fire the missiles on a series of errors and miscues by the Vincennes crew. The incident occurred during the "tanker war"

phase of the Iran-Iraq war, when U.S. warships were deployed in the Persian Gulf to protect merchant vessels from mines and attacks by Iranian gunboats.

Newsweek reports that Crowe's initial public briefing placed the Vincennes in international waters at the time of the downing, an assertion repeated by then-Vice President Bush in a July 14, 1988, address to the United Nations. Pentagon officials have said the ship was responding to an attack on one of its helicopters by Iranian gunboats.

But the magazine says the ship actually had been operating in Iran's territorial waters, making the Pentagon's claims of self-defense seem less plausible.

Crowe said yesterday that the Vincennes had, in fact, crossed Iran's 12-mile coastal limit—but only after the helicopter had been attacked by the gunboats. At that point, he said, the location of the

ship became "sort of immaterial, both operationally and legally. You have the right to be there if you're attacked."

In any event, he said, in the fall of 1988 the Pentagon disclosed the ship's coordinates at the time of the downing to international civil aviation authorities, so "this information has been in the public domain for a long time."

Some of the information in the Newsweek article has been previously reported. In 1989, for example, Cmdr. David Carlson, skipper of a frigate that also had been operating in the area, caused a stir when he wrote an article describing the Vincennes as a hyper-aggressive "robo-cruiser" that had probably provoked the clash with the Iranian gunboats.

Press reports also had described some of the more aggressive countermeasures carried out by U.S. forces in the gulf during the tanker war, such as the April 1988 de-

struction of two oil-drilling platforms used by the Iranians in military operations. But the Newsweek account asserts that U.S. naval forces went considerably further than public accounts, setting elaborate traps to snare the harassing gunboats.

Navy officials reported, for example, that on the morning of July 3, U.S. warships had gone to the aid of a Liberian ship, the Stoval, which was under attack by Iranian gunboats. Newsweek says, however, that the ship did not exist; U.S. naval forces, the report says, had faked radio transmissions from the phantom vessel to lure the gunboats from their island hideouts.

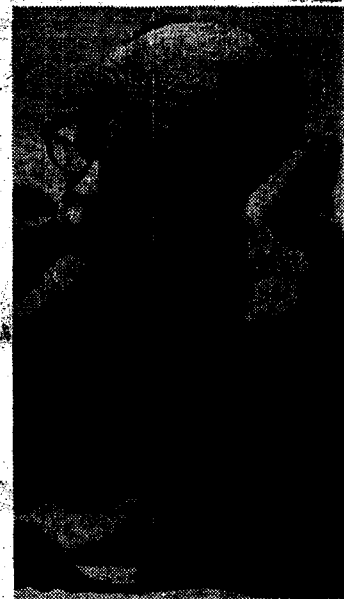
Crowe said yesterday, "I've been over at the Pentagon all morning and I can't find anyone who knows anything about it. . . . I'm not sure that's a true story."

The Newsweek story was written by reporter John Barry and Roger Charles, a retired Marine

lieutenant colonel who now works as a freelance writer. In an interview yesterday, Barry disputed Crowe's account, saying the Vincennes "was in Iranian waters before it opened fire on the gunboats. . . . I think Rogers went looking for a fight."

Barry said he based his conclusions of a coverup at least partly on public statements by Pentagon officials that the Vincennes had been responding to attacks on neutral merchant shipping—statements that Navy officials now acknowledge were erroneous.

Ronald O'Rourke, a naval affairs analyst at the Congressional Research Service who has studied the Vincennes incident, said yesterday he found the new report "interesting" but inconclusive. "They seem to have uncovered things on the periphery, things that have to do with the context [of the downing] The main point is, they have raised some questions."



ADM. WILLIAM J. CROWE JR.
... calls news reports "outrageous"