

Message on 'Risk' To Pueblo Strayed

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A message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff warning that the ill-fated last mission assigned the USS Pueblo might be quite risky never reached the Chiefs, Congressional investigators charged yesterday.

The warning by the National Security Agency was sent on the same day as the Joint Chiefs approved the mission as a low-risk operation, Rep. Otis Pike (D-N.Y.) declared.

The message carried the signature of the director of the NSA, "suggesting that the characterization of the mission as minimal risk might be wrong," Pike said.

Pike is chairman of a special House Armed Services Subcommittee that has been investigating the seizure of the Pueblo by Communist North Korea on Jan. 23, 1968. He said the NSA message did not object to sending the spy ship off the coast of North Korea but said consideration should be given to protecting it.

The Pueblo carried out its mission and was captured without any sea or air protection.

Opening yesterday's session, Pike said the Subcommittee had unanimously reached agreement on certain "facts"—among them that the message went astray.

"The message was directed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Pike said. "No member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff received the message.

"The message was received at the staff level of the Joint Chiefs and redirected to the Commander in Chief, Pacific. The Commander in Chief, Pacific, apparently never received the message. It was received at the staff level in his office, and not brought to his attention.

"At the same time that the message was redirected to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, an information copy was sent to the Chief of Naval Operations. The information copy was never delivered.

"This message, over the signature of the director of the National Security Agency, was sent by a member of his staff. The director never saw it until after the Pueblo was captured."

Pike said hundreds of people in NSA are authorized to send messages signed "director" and acknowledged that NSA "had neither the responsibility nor the authority" to question the risk of the Pueblo mission.

He added, however: "There was, and remains, a great deal of confusion at high Navy levels as to the rating of missions in terms of risk."

For its second open session, the Subcommittee summoned the Admiral who sent the Pueblo on its final mission—Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson, who was commander of Naval Forces in Japan at the time.

Johnson, now commandant of the 13th Naval District in Seattle, Wash., repeated testimony given before the Naval Court of Inquiry in Coronado, Calif. He added one new piece of information about Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher, the Pueblo's skipper. Johnson said the skipper asked at a briefing if he should use the machine guns against a boarding party attempt. Johnson said the answer given was "yes." When North Koreans did board the Pueblo, Bucher did not fire back. He told the Court of Inquiry that to do so would have been a futile gesture leading to the "complete slaughter" of his men.