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U.S. Major Defects to Cuba In Personal Plane, Takes Son

By JEREMIAH O'LEARY
Star Staff Writer

Cuba said today it has granted political asylum to U.S. Army Major Richard Harwood Pearce, a Vietnam veteran cleared for top secret material.

Government sources here said they think that Pearce—the highest ranking American officer to defect to the Communists since the Cold War began—flew to Cuba because of marital

problems rather than political motives.

Radio Havana announced the defection this morning. It said Pearce had left the United States "for conscience reasons."

Pearce, 36, an aide to the commander of the 4th Army, took his 4-1/2-year-old son, Richard Jr., with him.

It has been known by the U.S. government since yesterday that Pearce landed his personal plane in Cuba on Sunday. The 90-mile flight was not detected

by U.S. radar installations in Florida because the radar is geared to scrutinize incoming aircraft, not outbound planes.

Indications are that Pearce, who has an unblemished Army record as well as the access to top-secret information, may have been primarily motivated by his personal problems. He was divorced and his wife was awarded custody of the son.

The wife, Mrs. Sandra Mitchell, has since remarried.

Pearce went on an authorized 12-day leave May 12 and apparently obtained temporary custody of the boy for what was to be a vacation trip. Father and son turned up in Key West, Fla., on May 17 in his newly purchased Cessna 150 plane and registered at a motel.

On Sunday, Pearce and the boy checked out of the Key Wester Motel and went to the airfield where he asked for a local clearance for a sightseeing flight of about one hour around the Key West area. Instead, he headed for Cuba.

A Question

Officials recall that Pearce acted strangely just before takeoff—his plane sat at the end of the runway for 45 minutes after receiving clearance from the tower.

U.S. officials said there was no way of knowing what secrets he might have possessed in view of his clearance, but they added that all classified documents to which he had access have been inventoried and accounted for.

As senior aide to Lt. Gen. Thomas W. Dunn, commander of the 4th Army at Ft. Sam Houston, Tex., Pearce may have

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been primarily a personal aide. However, Pearce had been connected with the operations office at the Texas post before becoming the general's aide.

Havana radio said the major was "head of the center of tactical operations of the 4th Army of South Vietnam until December of 1964."

The Defense Department recently reported that 138 U.S. servicemen had defected to Communist countries since July 1945. Of those, 69 later returned to U.S. control.

State Department press officer Carl Bartch said the United States was informed yesterday that Pearce had been granted asylum. The information came from the Cuban government through the Swiss ambassador in Washington, Bartch told the Associated Press.

Bartch said the question of possible legal action against Pearce would have to be left open. But, he added, the case is "different than a civilian case" because of Pearce's Army status.

Bartch said he had no further official comment.

Message Quoted

The Havana broadcast this morning said Pearce sent a message to the Revolutionary government saying "I decided to leave my country for conscience reasons."

The government-controlled Cuban radio announced in an official communique: "The revolutionary government decided to concede asylum to the major of the United States Army, Richard Harwood Pearce, or the facilities appropriate to go to another country, according to his request.

"Harwood accompanied by his son . . . arrived at Liberty Airport close to Havana last Sunday at noon piloting a Cessna plane, M-8546 J."

U.S. Asked Help

The broadcast commented that the U.S. had asked Cuban authorities to aid in searching for Pearce—whom the Cubans often referred to as Harwood because of Spanish-speaking use of middle names.

Yesterday in Houston, Mrs. Mitchell said Pearce picked up Richard Jr. Friday.

"He told me they were going on vacation. They were to be



-AP

MAJOR RICHARD H. PEARCE

back in a week," Mrs. Mitchell said. "He didn't say where they were going or anything.

"I know nothing about their disappearance. I only know I want my child back," Mrs. Mitchell said.

Virginia Military Institute records showed Pearce arrived in 1950 as a transfer student from Marion Institute at Marion, Ala.

He had an average scholastic record during 2½ years at VMI and was graduated 12th in a class of 25 history majors.

At Greenbrier Academy

In Atlanta, Ga., his stepmother said he began his military career at Ft. Benning, Ga., later serving with the 11th Airborne in West Germany and Ft. Devins, Mass. In 1960 he was a military instructor at Greenbrier Military Academy at Lewisburg, W.Va.

After serving as executive officer of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 7th Infantry Division, his stepmother said, Pearce went to Vietnam.