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TIE-UP OF U.S. JETS LAID TO ATOM ROLE

U.S. Officials Say Squadrons
Couldn't Be Refitted

By WILLIAM BEECHER
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WASHINGTON, Jan. 24—The closest jet fighter-bombers to the intelligence ship Pueblo were rigged solely for a nuclear mission, ranking Pentagon sources said today. Thus, they added, the planes could not have been readied in time to aid the beleaguered ship yesterday after she called for help.

This was offered as a principal reason North Korean gunboats were able to seize the Pueblo and force her into Wonsan harbor without opposition.

Contributing causes, some officials conceded, were a lack of ready American fighter planes with nonnuclear payloads, presumably because such planes were needed in the Vietnam theater and an apparent slowness on the part of local commanders in taking the initiative to prepare for possible action. Higher officers and civilian officials were also apparently slow to direct such preparations, it was said.

There were 12 Phantom F-4 jet fighters in South Korea at the time, officials said. Half of them were on alert for possible call to use nuclear weapons in any major crisis. The remaining planes were on standby to substitute for any alert aircraft that might suddenly develop mechanical difficulties.

2-Hour Delay Possible

All of the aircraft, authoritative sources said, were equipped with bomb racks and other equipment applicable only to the nuclear mission. It would have taken at least two to three hours for the nuclear bomb racks and associated devices to be replaced with conventional bomb racks, gun pods and air-to-air missile pylons.

There have been many cases of North Korean harassment of intelligence ships, according to this account, so neither the skipper of the Pueblo, Comdr. Lloyd M. Bucher, nor Air Force and Navy commanders expected any attempt to seize the vessel.

Such ships are often buzzed by aircraft, photographed by helicopters and closely approached by gunboats of other nations not only off North Korea but in many parts of the world. Soviet intelligence ships are often given the same kind of treatment, officials say.

Commander Bucher was concerned enough about the first threatening approach by one North Korean PT boat to report the incident by radio to Navy headquarters in Japan. From there, it was relayed up the line at least to Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu.

It cannot be ascertained whether the word was sent to Washington at that point. Officials who knew decline to say.



AT CLOSED SESSION: Secretary of State Rusk preparing to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on the international problems facing the United States.

It was an hour-and-a quarter, the Pentagon says, before the Pueblo's skipper flashed word that he was being boarded by North Koreans and for the first time called for help.

At that moment the seized vessel was said to be only about 17 miles off the North Koreans coast. Officially the Pentagon has said she was about 25 miles off shore.

Informed sources say she was actually about 17 miles from Ungdo, at the mouth of Wonsan harbor. But nearly 29 miles from port facilities of Wonsan.

Then after 25 minutes, the Pentagon said. The skipper reported that he had been told to follow the North Korean ships into Wonsan.

Half-Hour Trip Followed

From that moment, it would have taken the ship about half an hour to be shepherded inside Korean territorial waters, some officials noted, and there was not time to get fighters to the scene.

What they did not explain was why the Phantoms in South Korea had not been readied for dispatch well before the Pueblo called for help.

But some officials said that the 12 fighters in South Korea, even if they could have been readied in time, would hardly have been a match for the scores of advanced North Korean MIG-21's that could have come to meet them.

The three squadrons of Phantoms in Japan were too far away and didn't have aerial refueling tankers available, officials said. Similarly,

the Enterprise with its 90 planes, was about 600 miles away, steaming from Japan toward Vietnam.

Some officers suggested that

were it not for the war in Vietnam more conventionally equipped fighters would probably have been in South Korea. "But when you're fighting a war, priority must go to the combat zone," one officer said.

Military and civilian officials were reluctant to discuss the level at which the decision was made against trying to intervene with fighter-bombers, even after the seized ship was in North Korea's territorial waters.

"Let's just say the final gun sounded before we could mount a touchdown drive," one planner remarked.