

Navy Is Seeking Reasons Pueblo Lacked Protection

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 26—Behind closed doors in the classified portion of the Pueblo inquiry, the Navy is trying to determine why no provision was made to have fast reaction forces ready to go to the spy ship's aid in the event of serious trouble.

Nine months before the Pueblo's cruise off the coast of North Korea, her electronic intelligence sister ship, the Banner, made a similar voyage.

During the Banner's trip, a number of American jet fighter-bombers were kept on "strip alert," presumably in South Korea, to assist the ship

if necessary. The planes were fueled and armed, and the pilots were on standby, ready to take off in minutes if they received an SOS.

This was part of the detailed contingency planning that preceded the Banner's voyage in May, 1967. As it turned out, she was not bothered by North Korean vessels.

But on other intelligence gathering missions in the Far East, the Banner on several occasions was harassed by Communist Chinese and Russian ships, on one occasion by 11

Continued on Page 9, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

ships for more than 2½ hours. Nonetheless, despite this history, apparently no formal request was made by Navy planners to provide a similar contingency rescue squad for the Pueblo.

During her Korean mission, the Pueblo was to have reported to Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson, commander of Naval forces, Japan. Presumably, then, Admiral Johnson and his staff, who were familiar with previous harassment might have asked for standby air support.

The admiral and some of his former aides are appearing before the Navy Court of Inquiry at Coronado, Calif.

If they did not make such a request, was it because they did not believe jet fighters were necessary? Or might the planes have been inadequate to deal with possible trouble? Or were there not enough planes to spare, because of Vietnam war demand?

In testimony before the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee last year, Gen. Earl G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the Pueblo mission "was carefully planned and reviewed all the way from the fleet commander in the Pacific through the chain of command to the higher echelon of the Government, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"Not one individual nor one group reviewing this mission," he said, "recommended that there be any unusual contingency plans to protect it."

McNamara Backed Plans

In the same hearings, Robert S. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, tried to defend the lack of fighter cover.

Once the North Korean vessels were alongside, he said, fighters could not have attacked them without hitting the Pueblo, too.

The nearest available planes were in Japan, 80 minutes' flying time away, and Korea, 100 minutes away, and were not sufficient in number to take on either the 75 North Korean jets on nearby Wonsan Air Field or the 500 aircraft in their force, he said.

And, once the enemy boarded the Pueblo, there was nothing that planes overhead could do, Mr. McNamara added.

He did not mention it, but only eight American fighter aircraft were in South Korea at the time, and all of them were equipped with nuclear weapons.

Some Navy officers agree that nowhere near enough planes might have been put on standby to take on the entire North Korean Air Force or even the three squadrons of MIG's at Wonsan.

But they argue that if even a handful of American fighter bombers had been available in South Korea, armed with conventional weapons and ready to rush to the scene quickly, the North Koreans might have retreated because of unwillingness to shoot them down.

"Grabbing an unarmed ship on the high seas with exercise of minimum force is one thing," said a high ranking officer. "And apparently it was planned in advance, and they were willing to run the risks."

"But shooting down a number of American warplanes is quite another. For such an act of war they could almost certainly expect severe retaliation."

This thinking presumably now is shared at the policy-making level in Washington, for new instructions issued after the Pueblo's seizure require that in spy ship missions in areas considered dangerous, contingency plans be made for fast reaction rescue forces.