

Staff Vetoed A Move to Guard Pueblo

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A National Security Agency suggestion that the Pueblo be protected before she sailed for North Korea was rejected by Navy staffers in Honolulu without consultation with the top commander in the Pacific, according to testimony released yesterday.

The members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not hear about the message until after the capture.

The disclosure is contained in the censored version of testimony taken in secret by a House armed services subcommittee last spring.

The hearings also disclosed that: Some subcommittee members decried the decision as a breakdown in command and control.

Admiral U.S.G. Sharpe, commander-in-chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific when the Pueblo was captured Jan. 3, 1968, said he was "lukewarm" to bombing North Korea in retaliation for the ship's capture. He said the U.S. did not have enough forces in the Pacific "to wage two wars at once."

While Sharpe said he could not remember recommending air strikes against North Korea, he asserted that he did want to station the destroyer Higbee off Wonsan. His idea was to put the destroyer there in case it was needed to recover the Pueblo crew. But higher authorities vetoed such recommendations for sending a naval task force off Wonsan.

Other aspects of the testimony included:

- The 303 Committee, a hush-hush civilian review panel which passes on intel-

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ligence missions, approved the Pueblo mission with no reservations. The cleared testimony deletes that committee's name but makes clear that this was the top review group involved.

The 303 committee included such high ranking civilians as the deputy secretary of defense, undersecretary of state, director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the presidential assistant for national security affairs at the White House. Its function is one of the things being reviewed in light of the Pueblo disaster.

- The Status of Forces Treaty played no part in the failure to send American planes from Japan to aid the Pueblo, according to Sharpe. Admiral Frank L. Johnson, commander of navy forces in Japan when the Pueblo sailed, cited the treaty as a factor when asked about rescue efforts by the Naval Court of Inquiry.

- American planes in Osan, South Korea, could have reached the Pueblo in 28 minutes flying time, but the bomb racks they needed for the rescue role were stored in Japan. General Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, cited the racks as a factor in explaining to the subcommittee why it would have taken about three and a half hours for the planes to reach the Pueblo. Another reason was that the few U.S. planes which were in South Korea at the time and suitable for a rescue attempt were armed with nuclear weapons, not conventional ones.

Before publication of the Pueblo hearings, subcommittee chairman Otis G. Pike (Dem-N.Y.), brought out that (Dem-N.Y.), brought out that the message telling of National Security Agency mis-

givings about sending the Pueblo out alone had gone astray. But just what happened to the message was not clear.

The closed door testimony traces the NSA message to Sharpe's staff in Honolulu. The staffers there, according to the testimony, rejected the NSA suggestion out of hand that the Pueblo be protected.

Sharpe himself said that the NSA message, which went out Dec. 29 before the Pueblo sailed, was for his information, not for any specific action. The latter category, he said, would have received higher level attention. He said the message was not brought to his attention at the time it was received in Honolulu.

The message most likely went to the Naval intelligence staff in Honolulu. This group was ripe with dissension before the Pueblo sailed — a situation which surfaced only briefly during the naval court of inquiry on the Pueblo last winter. Some Navy intelligence leaders fear that public discussion of problems within the naval security group will bring a new inquiry and are trying to keep the lid on.

The House Armed Services Committee is scheduled to release its report on the Pueblo inquiry within the next few days. A focus will be on the command and control problems revealed by the capture of the Pueblo and the shooting down of an EC-121 reconnaissance plane. The NSA message was discussed by the subcommittee in this context.

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