

Perplexing Questions

Congressmen and the Pentagon Ask Why Ship Was Seized Without Fight

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23—The capture of an American intelligence-gathering ship, assertedly on the high seas, by North Korean patrol boats gave rise today to a number of embarrassing questions both in Congress and the Pentagon.

Why were Jet fighters not rushed to the scene to protect the outgunned vessel? There were

at least a dozen Air Force F-4 and F-105 fighter-bombers on hand

in South Korea, 54 Air Force fighters in Japan and scores of Navy fighters aboard the nuclear aircraft carrier Enterprise, which was steaming from Japan toward Vietnam.

Why did the captain not try to immobilize or even scuttle the ship rather than permit her seizure? Navy officers said that if the ship's rudder had been jammed and her anchor dropped, she would have been hard to tow the 25 miles from the scene of the encounter to the North Korean port of Wonsan. The ship could have been sunk with the explosives believed to have been on board.

Why did the ship apparently offer no resistance, at least enough to delay the harassers long enough for a decision to be made to send help and for that help to arrive? An official Pentagon statement said the ship, the Pueblo, had radioed back that she "had not used any weapons."

The Pueblo is believed to have carried only two 50-caliber machine guns and small arms, but it has long been a basic tenet among Navy officers not to surrender an armed vessel without a fight. The Pentagon had to reach back to the War of 1812 to remember the last time a Navy skipper had give up his ship without a fight. The ship was the Chesapeake. The skipper was subsequently court-martialed.

Four Reported Wounded

There was one report that four crewmen—out of a ship's complement of six officers, 75 enlisted men and two civilians—had been wounded in the incident, but it was unclear whether they had been injured in forcibly blocking a boarding party or during the destruction of some of the electronic intelligence equipment aboard.

Was the Pueblo being operated by the Navy for the super-secret National Security agency or for itself? The Pentagon would say officially only that the vessel was an "intelligence-collection auxiliary ship."

Authoritative sources insisted that unlike the Liberty, which was attacked by Israeli PT boats and aircraft off the Sinai Peninsula during the Middle Eastern war last June, the Pueblo was not directly associated with Na-

tional Security Agency and was involved in naval intelligence work under the direct command of Pacific Fleet headquarters in Honolulu.

There are said to be a "handful" of similar electronic intelligence ships that are operated for the Navy and a handful of other ships, such as the Liberty, operated by the Navy for National Security Agency.

Russians Keep Watch, Too

The Russians keep at least seven or eight similar electronic intelligence ships on station at any given time all over the world. They maintain a constant vigil in international waters of Holy Loch, Scotland; Rota, Spain, and Guam in the Pacific, where United States submarines equipped with Polaris missiles are based.

They also stay close to the United States Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean and the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific, trying to intercept operational orders, to determine the radio and radar frequencies most commonly used, and to obtain other intelligence data.

Lack of Escort Questioned

Why did the Pueblo not carry heavier weapons or, lacking a capability for effective self-defense, why was a destroyer escort not maintained in the vicinity?

Pentagon sources said that since such vessels operated only in international waters, it had been assumed they would not be attacked. As for a warship escort, the Navy is sorely pressed to maintain required destroyers off Vietnam and in the other major fleets patrolling the world's oceans, the sources remarked, without the added requirement of providing an escort for electronic intelligence vessels.

There were some hints last night that the Pueblo may have belatedly requested help when she was about to be seized, but no explanation for why that help did not come. It was noted out by some Pentagon sources that American aircraft would have been within their rights to strafe and bomb the North Korean vessels, at least while they remained in international waters, once they had seized the Pueblo.

Defense Department planners suggest some of these and related questions may not be satisfactorily answered until a full-scale investigation has been held. A high-level inquiry is almost inevitable.

"With the Liberty and the Pueblo we've now experienced two unprovoked attacks in seven months," one angry Pentagon officer said. "Maybe now, instead of using practically defenseless merchant-type ships, we'll mount the special equipment aboard old destroyer picket ships that could at least defend themselves."

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