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Pentagon  
Pueblo-Help 350

WASHINGTON AP - Navy Commanders in the Pacific area decided, without asking Washington, against sending warplanes to help the beleaguered Navy intelligence ship Pueblo, defense officials said Wednesday night.

They said there was no request from field commanders to Washington authorities for instructions and no instructions were transmitted from the capital to the ship, which was seized by four North Korean gunboats about midnight Monday.

The officials denied any intent to cover up any mishandling of the situation. As one put it: "I am not aware of any conspiracy to conceal a foul-up."

The question of apparent lack of assistance to the small, lightly armed Pueblo and its 83 crewmen has become a major one since the capture of the ship was disclosed Tuesday.

Defense officials, talking with newsmen, said Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara first was called about the Pueblo's troubles at 12:23 a.m. EST Tuesday-nine minutes, according to the Pentagon account, before the Pueblo's radio went out of action.

The 935-ton intelligence gathering vessel first was accosted by a North Korean Patrol at about 10 p.m. Monday.

The Pentagon has said that Cmr. Lloyd M. Bucher of Lincoln, Neb., skipper of the Pueblo, asked for help as he was being boarded about 11:45 p.m. Monday.

Defense officials reiterated that Wednesday night.

The officials said they were not able to be specific about what level of Navy field command decided against sending air help.

But they said "he reports to the Navy all the way through." The chain of command over the Pueblo goes at least as high as the commander in chief, Pacific, Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp, the officials said.

The officials said they were unable to state why help was not sent to the Pueblo. But they assumed that factors taken into account included the weather, the potential North Korean force on alert, and the possible North Korean reaction to American warplanes flying into the area.

Some Navy sources suggested possibly the U.S. aircraft in South Korea-apparently the nearest to the scene-were not in a state of immediate readiness and possibly could not have been made ready in time to have done much good for the Pueblo.

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