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Pueblo 300

WASHINGTON AP - A National Security Agency message suggesting protection for the USS Pueblo floundered in military channels while the intelligence ship was being sent on its last mission, says a House subcommittee report.

Although the message was directed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the report says, it never reached them nor any other high command officers.

Rep. Otis G. Pike, D-N.Y., chairman of a House Armed Services subcommittee looking into the Pueblo capture by North Korea, read Friday what he called a statement of facts. The report came after eight closed sessions by the subcommittee.

The statement said the NSA suggestion for protecting the ship was made on the day the mission was approved. The message, sent over the signature of the NSA director, was drawn up by a staff member and the director did not see it until after the ship was captured.

"The message did not object to sending the Pueblo but said consideration should be given to protecting it," the report said. It noted, however, the agency did not have the responsibility nor authority to question the risk of the mission.

"The message was received at the staff level of the Joint Chiefs and redirected to the commander in chief, Pacific," the report said. But the message was never received by the commander.

An information copy of the message was sent to the chief of naval operations, the report said, but again it was not delivered.

After revealing the report, the subcommittee heard Rear Adm Frank L. Johnson testify that Pueblo Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher had been told to use the ship's machineguns to defend itself.

At the time of the Jan. 23, 1968, capture of the Pueblo, Johnson was commander of Naval Forces at Japan and had operational control of the ship.

Johnson said Bucher asked during a briefing on Jan. 4, 1968, in Japan whether he should use the machineguns to fend off boarders.

"And he was answered, 'Yes,' " Johnson said.

The admiral acknowledged under questioning that a matter of judgment could have been involved in Bucher's decision not to fire the guns against the North Koreans.

Johnson said Bucher had been ordered to keep the guns covered so they wouldn't arouse interest, and to use them only when there was a threat to survival.

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