

Coast Guard Officers Relieved Of Duties in Defector Incident

By TERENCE SMITH DEC 5 1970
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WASHINGTON, Dec. 4 — Three Coast Guard officers closely associated with the decision to deny political asylum last week to a would-be defector from a Soviet fishing vessel have been relieved of their duties pending the results of an investigation.

The three men are Rear Adm. William B. Ellis, commanding

officer of the First Coast Guard District in Boston; his chief of staff, Capt. Fletcher W. Brown, and Comdr. Ralph W. Eustis, captain of the Coast Guard Cutter Vigilant.

The action was announced in a statement released by the Department of Transportation, which oversees the operations of the Coast Guard.

The statement said that the action "is not a punishment, nor does it reflect any judgment as to the culpability of the persons affected."

The incident occurred Nov. 23 while the Vigilant and a Soviet trawler were moored alongside each other about a mile off Martha's Vineyard, Mass., for a discussion of fish-

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ing problems.

The radio operator of the Russian ship, a 32-year-old Lithuanian later identified as Simas Kudirka, hurled himself onto the deck of the cutter and requested political sanctuary. After several hours of consultations, the sailor was beaten and forcibly dragged back to the Soviet ship by Russian crewmen who were permitted to board the cutter by Commander Eustis.

The decision to deny the sailor's request for asylum was made by Admiral Ellis, according to the Coast Guard. The third officer involved in today's action, Captain Brown, reportedly served as the primary contact between the cutter and the First District headquarters during the consultations over the incident.

The statement issued today said that the action had been taken "without prejudice to the rights of the officers involved." A spokesman for the Coast Guard said the three men would continue to receive their pay and the privileges of their rank pending the outcome of the investigation, which is being conducted by Vice Adm. Thomas R. Sargent 3d, vice commandant of the Coast Guard.

Admiral Sargent is expected to report shortly, perhaps over the weekend, to the Coast Guard commandant, Adm. Chester R. Bender, as to whether there are grounds for court-martial.

Meanwhile, the White House said today that it has found "some inconsistencies" in the separate reports it had received on the incident from the Departments of State and Transportation. The Presidential Press Secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, said additional information was being sought to reconcile the differences.

Mr. Ziegler indicated that



The officers relieved of duties pending an inquiry into the attempted defection are, from left: Rear Adm. William B. Ellis, First Coast Guard District commander; Comdr. Ralph W. Eustis, captain of the Vigilant, and Capt. Fletcher W. Brown, aide to the admiral.

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much of the information contained in the reports would be made public, probably early next week, as long as it did not compromise the position of any of the officers involved in the formal proceedings.

At the State Department, John F. King, press officer, said that no officials of the department had been disciplined or suspended as a result of the investigation. He

said he could not anticipate whether such action still might be taken.

The State Department has acknowledged that the guidance it provided the Coast Guard on the day of the inci-

dent was less specific than it should have been. But department officials maintain they were never fully informed of the details of the incident until the decision to return the sailor had already been made.