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Could Scott Speicher Be Alive?

Acting Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon R. England approved a Navy inquiry board report that has found there is no credible evidence that Persian Gulf War pilot Capt. Michael Scott Speicher was killed in action. England has ruled that the Navy aviator should still be carried as "missing in action."

Speicher's fate has been in doubt since his F/A-18 Hornet was brought down by a surface-to-air missile over Iraq on Jan. 17, 1991.

The possibility that Speicher was an unacknowledged prisoner of war in Iraq figured among President Bush's justifications for ousting Saddam Hussein's government.

The Navy announced on Sept. 8 that Speicher's status will remain "missing/captured" and will not be changed to "killed in action."

After Saddam was deposed, the Iraqi Survey Group searching for weapons of mass destruction also conducted a search for any evidence of the pilot, but found none to suggest that Speicher might be alive.

The Navy board noted in its report that the government of Saddam Hussein revealed items from Speicher's aircraft, as well as his flight suit, years after the crash. (See "Aerospace World: Navy Changes Status of Gulf War Casualty," March 2001, p. 13.)

Saddam was questioned about Speicher in 2003, but denied knowing the pilot's whereabouts, according to a US official.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, speaking to US forces in Saudi Arabia in April 2003, said the Pentagon was pursuing an investigation into Speicher's fate. A team sent to Iraq that month had found what could have been his initials carved into a prison wall.

A military probe of the initials did not find DNA or fingerprints belonging to Speicher. Handwriting analysis also was unable to identify the writing as his.

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The Speicher Mystery Continues

Addressing US forces at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, on April 29 Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said the Pentagon was pursuing efforts to determine the fate of Navy Capt. Michael Scott Speicher.

Speicher, a Naval aviator, was first listed as killed in action during Gulf War I, then was designated missing in action in 2002 because of newly acquired intelligence.

Tariq Aziz, the former Iraqi deputy prime minister taken into custody by the US in April, told interrogators that Speicher is dead. However, his statements by themselves are given little credibility.

US investigators sent to Iraq in April to search for signs of Speicher found what may be his initials carved in the wall of a prison.

Rumsfeld said that the searchers are pursuing "every single lead."

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DIA Follows Speicher Leads

The director of the Defense Intelligence Agency told Congress that the agency was pursuing leads as if missing Navy pilot Capt. Michael S. Speicher is "alive and being held by the Iraqis." The Iraqis know of his fate, said Vice Adm. Lowell Jacoby.

"They are not forthcoming with the information that they have available," he added.

Speicher was shot down during the 1991 Gulf War and listed as killed in action. The Navy changed that classification to "missing/captured" in October 2002, based on new intelligence information.

On Feb. 11, Jacoby told the Senate Intelligence Committee that DIA had "a number of leads" that it was pursuing "very aggressively."

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Senate Wants Speicher Updates

The Senate tacked an amendment onto its Fiscal 2003 defense authorization bill that requires written reports every three months on measures taken to locate a Navy pilot shot down during the Gulf War.

Senators unanimously agreed the Bush Administration should do more to determine the fate of Lt. Cmdr. Michael S. Speicher.

Iraq has said it has no information about Speicher, but it formally offered earlier this year to allow a US team to investigate. Administration officials have said they plan to determine Speicher's true status, but critics say the Pentagon is dragging its feet.

The Pentagon initially reported the Navy pilot was killed in 1991 when his F-18 was shot down. However, last year, the Navy changed his status to missing in action, based on new information.

Earlier this year, Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, wrote to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, asking him to change Speicher's classification once again, this time to prisoner of war, based on intelligence reports that he might still be alive. Roberts had been instrumental in getting the pilot's status changed last year.

Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) said defense officials told him July 10 that Secretary of State Colin Powell likely will be responding to a three-month-old offer from Baghdad via a diplomatic note to be sent to Iraq through the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Nelson said, "We need to be skeptical of anything Iraq offers, but confirming whether they have new information about Commander Speicher is the right thing to do."

Nelson and Roberts were chief sponsors of the budget amendment.