

## Navy Changes Status of Gulf War Pilot

Updated 7:14 PM ET January 10, 2001

By ROBERT BURNS, AP Military Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - In a highly unusual move, the Navy has changed the status of Lt. Cmdr. Michael Speicher, shot down in an F-18 fighter on the opening night of the 1991 Gulf War, from killed in action to missing, officials said Wednesday. Navy Secretary Richard Danzig notified the Speicher family of the decision Wednesday, according to officials in the office of Sen. Bob Smith, R-N.H., who has long challenged the Pentagon's official "finding of death" for Speicher. The officials discussed the matter on condition they not be identified. Pentagon officials confirmed the information.

Pentagon officials said Danzig acted because of substantial evidence that Speicher may not have died in the crash. "It's substantial in nature, in the totality," one official said. He would not elaborate. The official said the State Department sent a new diplomatic note to Baghdad demanding that the Iraqi government tell all it knows about Speicher's fate.

Last March, Smith and Sen. Rod Grams, R-Minn., asked Danzig to change Speicher's status to missing in action, reflecting evidence of doubt about whether he survived the crash. Smith met with Danzig again Dec. 20 on the matter, officials said. In a letter dated Dec. 18, Sandy Berger, President Clinton's national security adviser, told Smith a recent intelligence assessment "has stimulated a high-level review of this case - several new actions are under way and additional steps are under intense review."

Berger's letter, which was provided to The Associated Press on Wednesday, did not specify what actions were contemplated. Speicher, of Jacksonville, Fla., went missing when his Navy F-18 Hornet was shot down on Jan. 16, 1991, in an air-to-air battle with an Iraqi fighter. He was the first American lost in the war and the last still unaccounted for.

The late Adm. Mike Boorda, then the chief of naval operations, approved the official "finding of death" on May 22, 1991. That action changed his official status from missing in action to killed in action.

In September 1998, after efforts by Smith and Grams to learn more about what U.S. intelligence agencies knew of Speicher's fate, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was given a classified chronology of the agencies' activities on the matter.

"We strongly believe that the information contained therein supports the request we are making of you with this letter," Smith and Grams told Danzig in a letter last March. They did not cite any specific evidence, which is classified secret.

The senators said they were informed March 12 by the Defense Department's POW-Missing Personnel Office that its position on whether the available evidence indicates Speicher perished in the crash of his plane is, "We don't know."

Smith and Grams have said before that Pentagon officials initially told them evidence had not been found to indicate that Speicher could have survived the crash. However, in May 1994 - more than three years after Speicher went missing - Pentagon officials indicated in a secret memorandum that a U.S. spy satellite had photographed a “manmade symbol” at the crash site earlier that year. Some military officers said they interpreted the symbol as a sign that the Navy pilot might have survived the crash. Speicher was the only American killed on Iraqi territory whose remains were not recovered.

A plan was devised in 1994 to conduct a covert operation into Iraq to search the crash site for clues to Speicher’s fate, but it was scrapped in December 1994 by Army Gen. John Shalikashvili, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The general ruled the risk of casualties was too high to justify the secret mission. In 1995, U.S. crash site specialists from the Defense Department, working with the International Committee of the Red Cross, entered Iraq with President Saddam Hussein’s permission. When they got to the crash site they found it had been excavated, The New York Times reported in December 1997.