

Changes Pilot Status to 'Missing' After Gulf War

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By Charles Aldinger

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - In an unusual step, the Navy has decided to change the status of a U.S. fighter pilot shot down over Iraq early in the 1991 Gulf War from "killed in action" to "missing in action" because of evidence that he may have survived the crash, Navy officials said on Thursday. Navy Secretary Richard Danzig on Wednesday notified relatives of Lt. Cmdr. Michael Scott Speicher, who had been listed as killed since shortly after the war, according to the officials, who asked not to be identified.

Speicher became the first American lost on the first day of the air war when his Navy F-18 attack jet was apparently hit and crashed in a fireball during a battle with Iraqi jets on Jan. 17, 1991.

Although no wreckage was initially found, defense officials said Pentagon documents showed U.S. spy satellites more than three years later detected what was described as a man-made symbol at the crash scene. They declined to give details. Although most of the information in the case is classified, officials said a flight suit that could have been Speicher's was more recently found lying on the surface of the desert.

The New York Times reported on Thursday that the Defense Department intended to use Speicher's new "MIA" status to press Iraq for a full accounting on what might have happened to the pilot.

In 1990, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein ordered an invasion of neighboring Kuwait, triggering the Gulf War in which the United States led an allied force against Iraq.

RESCUE CONSIDERED, REJECTED

A senior Navy official said the move by Danzig was the latest step in a saga that began after a Navy review board approved listing Speicher as killed in action in May 1991 because there had been no communication from the pilot and no wreckage was initially found.

"Since then, evidence has come in and things have now reached critical mass. We almost made the change three years ago, but we can do so now," the official told Reuters. Nearly three years after the jet was downed, a hunting party found the wreckage. The leader of the group, a military officer from another Gulf country, provided U.S. officials with photographs of the wreckage, according to the defense officials. After the symbol was subsequently detected on the desert, officials said, there was a debate in high Pentagon military circles on whether to send a secret rescue mission to the area to search for the pilot.

But the Times reported that then-Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. John Shalikashvili rejected such a move as too dangerous, they said.

The Times said that the Pentagon instead sent investigators to the region under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross and with permission from Hussein. The officials confirmed to Reuters that the site had by then been excavated and that former Navy Secretary John Dalton in 1996 reaffirmed that Speicher, who had been based in Jacksonville, Florida, had been killed in the crash.