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NAVY CHANGES 'KILLED' PILOT'S STATUS TO MISSING IN ACTION JACKSONVILLE FLIER WAS SHOT DOWN IN GULF WAR ACTION 10 YEARS AGO

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Prompted by substantial evidence that a Jacksonville pilot may have survived the downing of his fighter jet during the Gulf War, the Navy on Thursday changed the status of Lt. Cmdr. Michael **Speicher** from killed in action to **missing**.

Speicher was listed as the first casualty of the Gulf War when his F/A-18 Hornet was shot down on Jan. 17, 1991. He now becomes the last still unaccounted for.

The State Department is demanding an accounting from **Iraq** and is awaiting a response. A diplomatic note was delivered to the Iraqi Interest Section at the Algerian Embassy in Washington, a State Department official said, and a similar message is being delivered to **Iraq's** representatives in New York and Geneva.

UNCERTAIN FATE

The evidence in the hands of U.S. officials does not necessarily suggest that **Speicher** is still alive, but rather that he may well have survived the crash of his fighter in the Iraqi desert. In the 10 years since **Speicher's** plane went down, **Iraq** has never given a sign that he had been captured.

However, President Clinton took the Navy's announcement a step further. Asked in a CBS Radio interview about the case, he raised the possibility that **Speicher** could still be living.

Clinton said the information about the case "makes us believe that at least he survived his crash . . . and that he might be alive." He said U.S. officials have begun trying to determine whether **Speicher** is alive, and "if he is, where he is and how we can get him out."

The president cautioned, however, that he did not want the change in **Speicher's** status to "raise false hopes."

A U.S. official told the Associated Press that the evidence that launched the new inquiry is "substantial in nature, in the totality," but it was not disclosed.

"The demarche [diplomatic note] demanded accounting for Cmdr. **Speicher**, which they are obligated to do under international law and under United Nations Security Council resolution," the official said. "The simple point is that we believe they hold additional information that could help resolve the case of Cmdr. **Speicher**, and they're obligated to provide it."

Navy Secretary Richard Danzig made the change of status official on Thursday, after informing **Speicher's** family of his decision the day before.

TWO CHILDREN

Speicher, then 33, married with two children, was stationed aboard the USS Saratoga, which is based in Jacksonville. **Speicher's** family moved to Jacksonville from Kansas City, Mo., when he was 15. He graduated from Forrest High School, just a few miles from his church, Lakeshore United Methodist.

He earned a degree in accounting and management from Florida State University.

After college, **Speicher** joined the Navy and spent several years teaching pilots how to fly the F/A-18 Hornet jet. In 1990, he transferred to a fighter squadron based in Jacksonville.

His wife, JoAnne **Speicher** Harris, has remarried and is suing the manufacturer of his survival radio, alleging that **Speicher** survived the crash only to be left for dead when his radio failed.

She was not available for comment Thursday. Someone who answered the phone at the church said the family had instructed them not to give out any information or to speak on their behalf.

Speicher taught Sunday school and was known as a devoted father to his two children, a daughter who is now 14, and a son now 12.

Questions about whether **Speicher** was killed in action began to surface in 1997 after Pentagon documents revealed that a spy satellite flying over the crash site in 1994 "detected a man-made symbol in the area of the ejection seat."

It wasn't until years after the war's end that the wreckage of the plane was discovered. A military officer from Qatar was led there by desert nomads who were selling parts from an F/A-18 Hornet at a bazaar. **Speicher's** flight suit was discovered about two miles northeast of the wreckage. It had bloodstains on it but nothing suggesting severe external bleeding, according to a report from the Pentagon.

Sen. Bob Smith, R-N.H., was one of the first to challenge to the Pentagon's official "finding of death" for **Speicher**. He was joined by Sen. Rod Grams, R-Minn., and last March they asked Danzig to change **Speicher's** status to **missing** in action.

In a letter dated Dec. 18, Sandy Berger, Clinton's national security advisor, told Smith a recent intelligence assessment "had stimulated a high-level review of this case - several new actions are under way and additional steps are under intense review." NAVY'S ACCOUNT

According to the Navy, **Speicher's** plane was shot down by enemy fire and he was listed as **missing** in action. On May 22, 1991, following a secretary of the Navy status review that found "no credible evidence" to suggest he had survived, his status was changed to Killed in Action.

INFORMATION SOUGHT

"Over the years since that determination was made, the Navy and the U.S. government have consistently sought new information and continued to analyze all available information to resolve **Speicher's** fate," according to a statement issued by the Navy:

"This additional information and analysis, when added to the information considered in 1996, underscored the need for a new review."

Speicher is the only American killed on Iraqi territory whose remains have not been recovered, according to the Pentagon.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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