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U.S. Military's Performance Is Praised

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 11 — Pentagon officials said today that the aerial operation that thwarted the escape of four hijackers over the Mediterranean was a firm rebuttal to critics of recent military budgets and organization.

"What this demonstrates," said Secretary of the Navy John F. Lehman Jr., "is despite the cheap-shot artists that try to portray the military as not being able to tie their shoelaces, we have the highest quality we've ever had."

A senior Pentagon official, briefing reporters on the incident, said today that the incident proved the value of the money spent on new equipment and combat readiness during the last four years.

"We really do have readiness, in spite of what people have been saying on the Hill about spending a lot of money and not getting anything for it," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

View in Congress

Members of Congress cautioned against making so much of the incident, but they agreed that the interception was a well-executed operation that showed good military training and, especially, a high quality of intelligence.

"They carried off a very well planned, very well executed, extraordinarily difficult mission," said Senator Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It feels damn good to be able to respond to a terrorist attack on innocent American civilians."

In the operation, F-14 Tomcat fighters, E-2C Hawkeye communications planes, and K-A6 tankers took off from the aircraft carrier Saratoga as it steamed south of Greece, flew 150 miles, and circled for hours in the flight path of the chartered Egyptian Boeing 737, refueling repeatedly.

Pentagon officials said the Hawkeyes picked the Egyptian plane from

"several" aircraft using the commercial airline routes across the Mediterranean. The Navy planes, their running lights out and radios silenced, trailed the Egyptian airliner until it was refused landing rights in Tunis and Athens.

Plane Ordered to Sicily

Then four F-14s flanked the Egyptian plane and a Hawkeye ordered it to land at an Italian-American naval air facility in Sicily.

At the Pentagon, the interception quickly was taken up as an argument in defense of President Reagan's military buildup, and against the mounting campaign to change the way the military is organized.

The senior Pentagon official, citing the numbers of F-14's and E-2C's purchased by the Reagan Administration, asserted that "we have a greater capacity to do this now on a day-to-day basis than we did four, five, six years ago."

The official said the operation also proved the importance of having more aircraft carriers to carry air power to remote parts of the world.

The Navy has come under attack for its costly plan to expand the number of aircraft carriers from 13 to 15. Critics say that proposal is too expensive.

Controversy Over Ashtrays

The F-14 and the E-2C have not been targets of criticism or budget cuts in recent years, except earlier this year when it was disclosed the Navy was being charged \$850 apiece for spare ashtrays for the communications plane.

Mr. Lehman, in several interviews today, said the exercise over the Mediterranean also disproved the idea that the Pentagon is too riddled with factions to operate smoothly.

The belief has gained a number of influential adherents, including the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, and the committee's senior Democrat, Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, who have been

pushing to streamline the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Pentagon and Congress in grooming and running the military.

"Contrary to the parlor-room Pershings around this town, we have a fully integrated multiservice unified command structure to operate these people," Mr. Lehman told Cable News Network this morning.

The House Armed Services Committee Chairman, Representative Les Aspin, Democrat of Wisconsin, who has recently begun a series of hearings questioning whether the Reagan Administration's military buildup was worth the cost, disputed Mr. Lehman in an interview.

'Very Well Executed'

"The operation was terrific," he said. "It was very appropriate and very well executed. But it doesn't answer the questions of how good our military is overall, what have we got for our trillion dollars, and how do we stack up against the Soviet Union compared to where we were in 1960."

"It's very dangerous to draw enormous conclusions from single operations," he added. Referring to the failed 1979 military effort to rescue American hostages in Iran, he said, "Because Desert One didn't work didn't demonstrate that our overall military preparedness was bad. And this doesn't demonstrate that everything is in good shape."

Officials were particularly pleased with the performance of American intelligence networks, which have been widely criticized for failing to foresee crises in the Middle East or to trace terrorists.

"Our intelligence services worked the way they're supposed to, and then some," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "They were so good I'm sure we'll hear about it at budget time."

Senator Leahy said that he had been briefed throughout the day Thursday and had visited the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Va., to read cable messages exchanged during the operation. He said his review confirmed Administration accounts that American intelligence services,

without help from allied services, were able to keep track of the terrorists from the time they left the hijacked Italian cruise ship in Port Said until the airliner was intercepted, even during a day of confusing and contradictory reports from Egyptian Government officials.