

Laser investigation nearing completion

Doctors differ on Navy man's eye injury

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Pentagon has nearly completed its investigation into the West Coast incident involving a Russian freighter suspected of firing a laser at a Canadian helicopter and injuring a U.S. Navy cameraman on board, a spokesman said yesterday.

The Navy is finishing up tests on a series of navigational and range-finder lasers "to compare their signatures, their impact, their performance characteristics, et cetera," Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon said of the probe of the April 4 incident in the Strait of Juan De Fuca, north of Washington's Puget Sound.

"I don't know how much longer it will take," he said.

"They're in the final stages of completing those tests, and they'll analyze their findings," Mr. Bacon said. "And at some point we'll make a final report."

Mr. Bacon said military doctors reached different conclusions about whether a laser caused temporary eye damage to the Navy officer.

But, he added, it is a "possibility" that his eyes were damaged temporarily by a laser.

"There are contradictory reports on the cause of the eye injury," he said. "And that's one of the issues that will be resolved in the final report, if it can be resolved."

Mr. Cohen told reporters last month that a photograph of the ship purportedly showing the suspected laser beam would be re-

leased when the investigation is done. However, a Navy spokesman said the Office of Naval Intelligence, which has the photograph, declined to release the image because it might reveal intelligence capabilities.

"I don't believe the [defense] secretary is aware that the Navy has said something different about his plans" for releasing the photograph, Mr. Bacon said yesterday.

The Washington Times first reported the laser incident May 14, describing how the Russian freighter *Kapitan Man* is believed by U.S. officials to have fired some type of hand-held laser from its bridge toward a Canadian CH-124A helicopter circling overhead.

A classified Pentagon report on the incident obtained by The Times described the ship as a suspected intelligence-gathering platform that was entering the strait as the ballistic missile submarine *USS Ohio* was sailing outbound on April 4.

Navy Lt. Jack Daley, an intelligence liaison officer working with the Canadian military reported being injured by a light emanating from the ship that hit his eyes as he focused a digital camera on the ship's antenna, according to the report.

The report said the Pentagon was given a "back seat" role in handling the affair, which involved a search of the vessel.

A separate intelligence report said the State Department instructed the Coast Guard to only search "public" areas.