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U.S. Judge Heads Secret Probe of U-2 Pilot Powers

WASHINGTON, Feb. 22 (UPI).—Somewhere—the place is a secret—an unprecedented, formal inquiry is going on today into the story of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers.

The panel is headed by eminent judge — E. Barrett Prettyman— and includes "outstanding citizens" not yet named.

The choice of the panel appeared to reflect an Administration effort to give the official U. S. report on Powers the highest stamp of impartiality and judicial credibility.

The Powers case has raised issues ranging from the reputation of a man and what his back pay should be, to the security of a nation, the extent of Soviet weapons development and the degree to which U. S. intelligence systems may have been compromised.

WILL BE CLEARED

The panel was apparently chosen to report on these issues in a way which would reduce as much as possible lingering doubts among the American public and subsequent rumors and retortations.

All signs so far indicate that Powers himself will be cleared.

The form of the inquiry was revealed by President Kennedy at his press conference yesterday in what seemed a slip of the tongue.

"There is, as you know," Mr. Kennedy said, "a board of inquiry which is examining whether Mr. Powers completed his contract. That board is under leadership of Judge Prettyman and represents outstanding citizens."

Reporters had not known that Elijah Barrett Prettyman, 70, recently retired from the U. S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia and a jurist of national reputation, was in the case, and had no known much more, on the record, than the fact that an inquiry was going on.

Pumped for information on what was meant by completing "his contract," U. S. officials

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... "the contract is made... they indicate that on this question hinges a subsidiary legal issue of which of two possible accountings should determine Powers' back pay for the 18 months since his ill-starred flight.

Mr. Kennedy told reporters Powers "has been cooperating fully" with the U. S. investigation. The inquiry, he said, will be completed by the middle of next week.

Mr. Kennedy added: "I must say that there is so far no evidence that he did not comply with his contract."

Despite the intense secrecy surrounding the investigation, these facts have become known through reliable and authorized sources:

Up until Powers' dramatic release Feb. 10, in a swap for Soviet spy Rudolph Abel, nothing which U.S. officials saw or read indicated he had in any way violated his instructions or his contract.

Aside from humanitarian grounds, one of the main reasons U. S. officials sought Powers' release was to find out what the Russians might have learned about U.S. intelligence systems.

This would be not only a question of what Powers may have told Soviet interrogators, but also of finding out more about the circumstances of the crash and what the Russians might have deduced from the physical facts.

Powers, it is understood, has repeated to U.S. investigators much of what he publicly told the Soviet court. He told them of "A sort of hollow-sounding explosion" and an "orange flash" behind him, then of bailing out and falling.

But here they story of what Powers is telling U.S. interrogators ends for the moment.

Officials indicated it is a very ticklish job to reconstruct whether his plane met mechanical trouble or whether Russia had a rocket capable of bringing it down from high altitude "with the very first shot" as the Soviets claimed.

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