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Korean Airlines Flight 007: Accident or Intelligence Probe?

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Shortly after the presumed crash of Korean Airlines flight 007 on September 1, 1983, the United States government took the position that while the Soviet attack on the civilian airliner was a horrendous act, it seemed to have been the product of two accidents: the accidental drift of the airliner off course and the Soviet misidentification of it as a military aircraft. The twin accidents thesis governed most subsequent analysis, as scholars focused their attention on how the airliner could have flown off course and how the Soviets could have mistaken it for a military aircraft. Skeptics were in a minority and dismissed.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union additional information appeared. First, was the June 1991 draft report commissioned by Senator Jessie Helms: *Did KAL-007 Successfully Ditch at Sea and Were There Survivors?*[1] The study revealed previously classified NSA radio intercept data. Second, was the Russian release of materials to the International Civil Aviation

[1] The report, drafted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Republican staff, was not made public but subsequently leaked, and was later transcribed into electronic format. It can be accessed here: www.rescue007.org/republican_staff_study.htm.

Organization (ICAO), including the airliner's Black Box tapes, the digital flight data record and the cockpit voice tape, as well as some of their own tracking tapes. ICAO promptly produced a revised version of its original report incorporating this information.[2] Third, former 747 navigator Robert Allardyce and James Gollin analyzed the flight based on this new data in *Desired Track: The Tragic Flight of KAL-007.* And, fourth, Michel Brun published *Incident at Sakhalin: The True Mission of KAL Flight 007*, in which he presented new information from Japan—voice analysis of the Narita control tower tapes and radar information from the Japanese Defense Agency.

The new information and analyses show that KAL-007 was not accidentally off course; was hit by shrapnel from a missile proximity burst, but did not plunge into the sea; was in communication with two other Korean airliners and a third party; and landed on Sakhalin. Also revealed was the presence of other US and Soviet aircraft in the skies over Sakhalin during the incident, several of which were shot down. While this new information refuted the twin accidents thesis put out by the US government, the explanations in these accounts remained unsatisfactory.

Based on this new (and old) information, I advance the hypothesis that the flight was an intelligence probe to determine the status of the Soviet phased-array radar at Krasnoyarsk. The flight, despite its tragic outcome, produced an intelligence bonanza. According to espionage expert Ernest Volkman, KAL-

[2] *Destruction of Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 On 31 August 1983,* Report of the Completion of the ICAO Fact-Finding Investigation, (Quebec: International Civil Aviation Organization, June 1993). Hereafter referred to as ICAO-93.

007 prompted the Soviets to "turn on just about every single…electro-magnetic transmission over a period of about four hours and an area of approximately 7,000 square miles…everything…was detected—communications back and forth between Moscow, radar systems, computer tracking systems, communication systems, air defense systems…"[3] Most important, the intelligence enabled President Reagan to guide the nation through one of its most challenging moments.

The Strategic Context

The story begins with Leonid Brezhnev's speech on March 16, 1982. The Soviet leader declared that if the United States and NATO proceeded with the deployment of the Pershing II missile to West Germany, "this would compel us to take retaliatory steps that would put the other side, including the United States itself, its own territory, in an analogous position."[4]

Intelligence analysts quickly deduced how the Soviets could make good on this threat, what it would be, where they would make an analogous deployment, and within a reasonable timeframe, when they would do so. Going through the various possibilities, they concluded that the Soviets would attempt to deploy SS-20s by air into Grenada as soon as the airfield at Point Salinas was completed late in 1983. This would also be around

[3] As quoted in R. W. Johnson, *Shootdown: Flight 007 and the American Connection*, (New York: Viking, 1986), 265-66.

[4] "Brezhnev Speech to the 17th Trade Union Conference," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Soviet Union (FBIS-SU)*, March 16, 1982, R 1-9.

the time when the United States would deploy the Pershing II into West Germany.[5]

But analysts reasoned that under current circumstances such a deployment would amount to yet another Soviet adventure in the Caribbean and would stand little chance of success. The only way the Soviets could hope to succeed would be if they held a strategic advantage; and the only way to assure such an advantage would be by breaking out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and activating a nationwide ballistic missile defense. US intelligence analysts considered the prospect of such a breakout to be several years away, but recognized that a Soviet ABM system could be particularly effective against submarine-launched ballistic missiles "if adequate coverage of SLBM approaches were provided by battle management support radars." [6]

Then came a very disturbing discovery. Sometime in late 1982, a satellite scan discovered a huge phased-array radar facility under construction at Krasnoyarsk, in central Russia. Twice the size of a football field and one hundred feet tall, it was similar in size to the five existing Large Phased-Array Radars (LPARs) permitted by the 1972 ABM Treaty. There would be disagreement within the community over the state of construction and when the facility could become operational, but general acknowledgement of its legality and significance.

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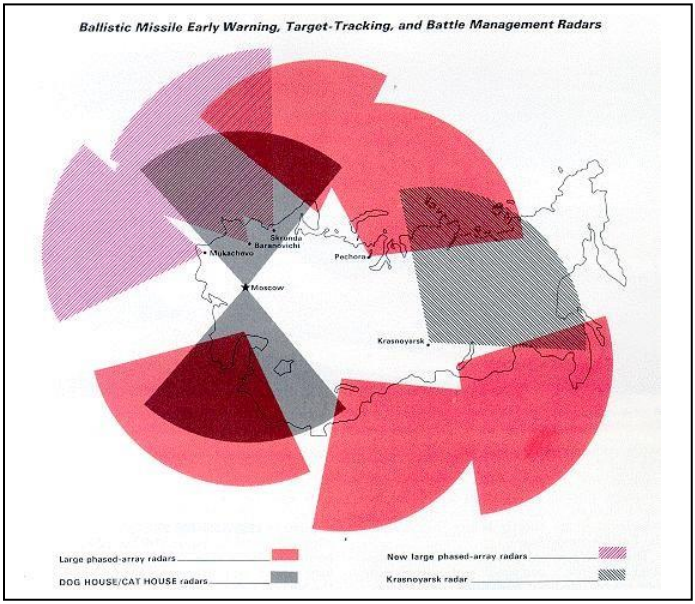
[5] For an analysis of the Soviet Grenada plan, see the author's *The Reagan Revolution, III: Defeating the Soviet Challenge* (Victoria: Trafford, 2009), 223-288.

[6] *Soviet Capabilities for Strategic Nuclear Conflict, 1982-1992*, NIE 11-3/8-82, February 15, 1983, as discussed in Thornton, *The Reagan Revolution, III*, 291-292.

The ABM Treaty of 1972 recognized the battle-management role of the LPAR for missile defense and for that reason ruled that such facilities could not be positioned inland near existing missile defense emplacements, with two exceptions. It permitted one LPAR for defense of the Moscow region and another at the Sary Shagan missile defense test facility. The treaty also permitted use of LPARs in an anti-aircraft, or anti-missile, warning role, so long as the radars were deployed on the border, facing outward. The Krasnoyarsk LPAR, in the center of the USSR, was a clear violation. It faced eastward, covering Sakhalin, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Kamchatka peninsula. Once operational, it would fill a major gap in radar coverage, giving the Soviets at least a nominal nationwide ballistic missile defense capability, as depicted below.[7]



[7] *Soviet Military Power, 1986* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986), 43.

In nuclear war scenarios, the United States would launch substantial missile strikes from submarines positioned in the North Pacific. Theoretically, the new Soviet defense would seriously degrade the American attack.

Should the radar become operational before, or in conjunction with, the deployment of SS-20s to Grenada, the Reagan administration would be confronted with a Cuba-in-reverse. In a situation opposite that of 1962, the Soviets would hold the strategic advantage, would be able to deploy to Grenada, and the United States would be unable to do anything about it. The Soviets would have achieved in 1983 what they had failed to achieve in 1962.

Casey's Plan

A great deal was at stake and it was obviously vital to determine the status of the Krasnoyarsk radar. According to Special Assistant to the President for International Security Affairs, Thomas Reed, in December 1982, CIA Director William Casey was "implementing a plan to spoof the entire electronic nervous system of the Soviet Union."[8] I believe that the KAL flight was part of that plan.

It was a common Cold War practice for each side to probe the other's air defense and radar systems, a practice referred to as spoofing. In 1983 alone US military aircraft carried

[8] Thomas Reed, *At the Abyss: An Insider's History of the Cold War* (New York: Presidio Press, 2004), 240. I believe the decision to spoof the Soviet electronic system in December 1982 means that the Krasnoyarsk radar had been detected prior to that time and not later, as has been suggested. See William T. Lee, *The ABM Treaty Charade* (Washington: Council for Social and Economic Studies, 1997), 97-105.

out a dozen probes from the Far East and from over the North Pole, but had failed to elicit a response from Krasnoyarsk.[9] The failure to determine the status of Krasnoyarsk by traditional means, I theorize, led Casey to decide on the extraordinary step of employing a civilian airliner to accomplish the same purpose. Casey's plan was for an airliner to deviate from its normal flight path to and from the Far East. It would "accidentally" go off course and fly directly into the center of the coverage area of the Krasnoyarsk radar—Kamchatka, the Sea of Okhotsk, and Sakhalin—before turning back toward its destination of Seoul.

Two aircraft from Korean Air Lines would be used, one to carry out the tickler role and one to provide radio cover.[10] As the tickler aircraft would be out of range of air traffic controllers monitoring its flight, the second plane would relay false reports to mask the actual flight path of the penetrating plane. The aircraft themselves were not involved in the collection of intelligence. Nevertheless, there was an obvious risk in having a commercial airliner fly over Soviet territory and there can be no doubt that such a risk would not have been taken if the situation were not so dire and time so short.

The Soviets had never shot down a commercial airliner, although they had forced two down. In 1968, a chartered aircraft ferrying troops to Vietnam had strayed into Soviet airspace over

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[9] Peter Schweitzer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 8-9; and V. Zakharov, "What Lies Behind the 'Incident,'" *Pravda*, September 7, 1983, in *FBIS-SU*, September 7, 1983, C3.

[10] For a discussion of the history of Korean Air Lines, see Richard Rohmer, *Massacre 747: The Story of Korean Air Lines Flight 007* (Ontario: Paperjacks Ltd, 1984), Chapter 4.

the Kuril Islands and been forced to land on Etorofu Island. And in 1978 a Korean airlines passenger plane on a flight from Paris to Anchorage over the North Pole had strayed into Soviet airspace over the Kola Peninsula and was forced down. Both incidents had been quickly resolved.[11]

Thus, the worst case seemed to be that, if things went wrong, the plane could be forced down on Soviet territory. But Casey did not want it to come to that. He would provide protection to preclude even the worst case. He would station spoofing aircraft and ships at key positions along KAL-007's route. These platforms would utilize electronic countermeasures to spoof, confuse, and defeat any hostile Soviet response and enable the airliner to execute its flight safely, or so he reasoned.

American intercept and radar stations, along with satellites, would record the events. For example, the Cobra Dane radar at Shemya Island at the western end of the Aleutians, the 6981st Electronic Security Command at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, the 6920th at Misawa, Japan, the Cobra Judy radar on the *USS Observation Island*, at sea off Kamchatka, and satellite no. 5504 hovering in geosynchronous orbit over Siberia, would all be in position to capture the entire spectrum of Soviet response. There was also the jointly operated US-Japanese radar and radio intercept station at Wakanai, Japan, located at the northern tip of Hokkaido, and other facilities in the Japanese collection network, which were in position to record events, as well.

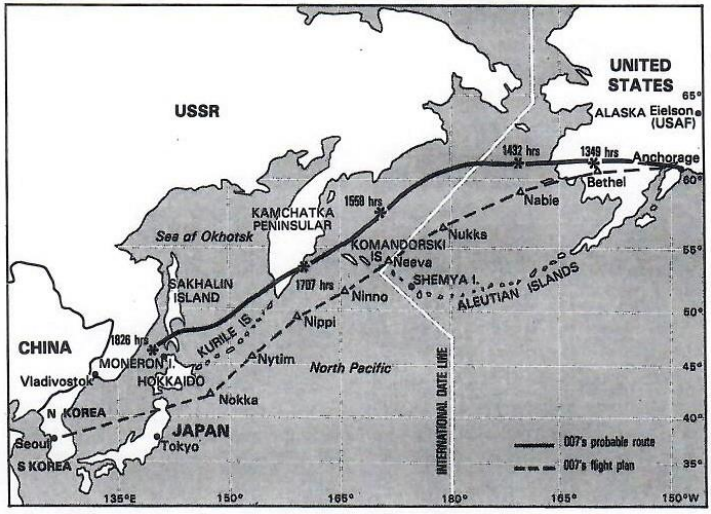
The mission was authorized because time was running out. The crisis period was fast approaching when the United States would deploy the Pershing II to West Germany and the

[11] For a detailed account of both incidents, see David E. Pearson, *KAL-007: The Cover-Up*, (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 88 and 103.

Soviets would move to deploy the SS-20 to Grenada. The results of the mission would determine whether President Reagan could face down the Soviets or be forced to cave in to them.

The Flight

Captain Chun Byung-in, in KAL-007, took off from Anchorage at 1300Z* and Captain Park Young-man, in KAL-015, took off fifteen minutes later. While Captain Park flew the standard route along R-20 toward Japan, Captain Chun immediately began to deviate northward, as illustrated below.[12]



007's probable route, and the Romeo 20 route which 007 was supposed to follow, with its waypoints marked NUKKS, NINNO and NYTIM are non-compulsory reporting waypoints: the route cuts the international dateline near NEEVA. Source: Robert W. Allardyce and James Gollin, "The Final Moments of KAL 007," *Pittsburgh Eagle*, 23 May 1985; Eugene Kozicharow, "FAA Studies Upgraded Pacific Navaids," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 19 September 1983.

[12] Johnson, *Shootdown*, 10, provides this map and explanation.
*Military times are used here, with "Zulu" denoting UTC/GMT.

Within an hour and a half KAL-007 had entered the US Distant Early Warning Identification Zone, the Alaskan DEWIZ, a restricted and heavily monitored flying area that is the military buffer zone off the coast between Alaska and Siberia. All unidentified aircraft entering this zone prompt an immediate scramble of jet interceptors to make a positive identification. Indeed, in 1983, US jets intercepted Soviet aircraft probing this zone on fourteen occasions.[13]

Captain Chun took his aircraft into and across the DEWIZ for twenty-five minutes without making radio contact, or provoking an aerial intercept, although he was obviously identified and tracked. All commercial airliners are equipped with secondary surveillance radar, or transponders, which enable ground and air inquiry as to their identity and altitude. These interrogations are called selective call checks, or Selcal checks. At 1445Z Anchorage International Flight Service Station executed a Selcal check. Having identified the airliner no interceptors were scrambled, but its unauthorized presence in the DEWIZ was noted.[14]

As Chun passed out of the Alaskan DEWIZ and headed into the Soviet early warning buffer zone, he turned off his transponder and flew dark, which prevented Soviet air defense radar from interrogating and identifying his aircraft as a civilian airliner. Casey counted on the Russians to adhere to their own

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[13] "The Spreading Impact," *US News and World Report*, September 19, 1983, 26.

[14] "Anchorage International Flight Service" transmissions 14:44 to 17:22Z, *Destruction of Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 On 31 August 1983,* ICAO-93*,* 4, 30.

intercept procedures, which required positive visual identification before taking hostile action.

An RC-135 electronic countermeasures aircraft designated Rivet Joint, based at Eielson Air Force Base outside Anchorage, performed the initial spoofing function for KAL-007 as it approached and then entered Soviet airspace over Kamchatka. The RC-135 jammed Soviet communications, confused radars and interceptors as to the presence, location, altitude, and even course heading of KAL-007. American officials initially claimed that the RC-135 was a Cobra Ball aircraft on an unrelated mission to monitor Soviet missile tests, but subsequent investigation revealed that, in fact, it had been the aforementioned Rivet Joint on a spoofing mission.[15]

Soviet radar had tracked both aircraft from 1542Z, and when KAL-007 unexpectedly turned toward Soviet airspace attempted to interrogate its transponder but could not. Unable to make contact, the Soviets designated the unidentified intruder plane as number "81," on track 6065. With their radars spoofed and KAL-007 flying dark, there was little doubt in the minds of Soviet air defense personnel that they were dealing with a military aircraft on an intelligence mission. They had seen this before.

When they sent interceptors up to identify the plane they flew in the wrong direction, vectored to the wrong altitude, and thus were unable to locate, let alone see it. Similarly, surface- to- air missiles could not lock onto the aircraft. At the same time Kamchatka controllers experienced a near total command and control breakdown between units in their sector

[15] George Wilson, "RC135 Was Assessing Soviet Air Defenses," *Washington Post*, September 7, 1983, 12.

as well as with those on Sakhalin and the Soviet mainland. They had been spoofed.

KAL-007 exited into international airspace over the Sea of Okhotsk at 1708Z and over the next two minutes co-pilot Son Dong-Hwin radioed Tokyo Air Traffic Control at Narita six times, including a mandatory position report to confirm that he was on course and crossing NIPPI, the waypoint demarcating the Anchorage and Tokyo Flight Information Zones apportioning control of transoceanic passage.

As Chun was still outside Japanese radar coverage, Tokyo could not independently verify his position, but Soviet controllers intercepting his reports could not fail to note the discrepancy between where Sohn said he was and the aircraft they were monitoring over two hundred miles to the north. Radio contacts with Narita ATC offered the slightest glimmer of a suggestion that the plane they were tracking was not a military aircraft on a spy mission, but what was it?

When Soviet controllers scrambled two more interceptors from the base on Paramushir Island in the Kurils, these, too, could not get close enough to make visual contact. The Soviets claimed that a P-3C *Orion* was loitering off the northern Kurils, but it may have been an EF-111 *Raven,* which performed the same electronic jamming function for KAL-007 as it exited Kamchatka that the RC-135 *Rivet Joint* performed when it first crossed into Soviet territory.[16]

[16] *Destruction of Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 Over Sea of Japan, 31 August 1983: Report of the ICAO Fact-Finding Investigation*, (Montreal: ICAO, 1983) See the flight diagram, F-16. (Hereafter referred to as ICAO-83.)

As KAL-007 sped across the Sea of Okhotsk, US jamming ceased over Kamchatka and, according to the 1993 ICAO report, by 1720Z the Kamchatka command had regained control of its communications and was able to send word to Sakhalin of the intruder aircraft. [17] Sakhalin, in turn, quickly forwarded this information to the air defense command at Kalinin north of Moscow and to the Kremlin itself.

Soviet Politics

At this point, Casey's carefully crafted probe fell victim to Kremlin politics. No one, not even the CIA Director, could have anticipated the crisis unfolding in Moscow and how it would impact his probe. A few days earlier, Party Chairman Yuri Andropov had died of a heart attack, and would not be seen nor heard from again, until his death was announced the following February. The Soviet leadership decided to cover up his death, in what dissident historian Zhores Medvedev termed a "medical deception aimed at misleading even Politburo members." Nevertheless, Andropov's absence opened the door for the Konstantin Chernenko faction to gain control and for Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, Chief of the General Staff, to put forward his preferred response to the Pershing II deployment. That response now involved KAL-007.[18]

The Soviet leadership had decided that its response to the Pershing II deployment would be to counter deploy SS-20s to Grenada and thus put the United States in an "analogous position." But there were differences over the timing of the response. Andropov wanted to deploy after the United States

[17] ICAO-93, 49.

[18] Zhores A. Medvedev, *Andropov* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 224.

did, while Ogarkov, of the Chernenko faction, wanted to deploy first and present the United States with a *fait accompli*. Andropov's death combined with the unexpected appearance of the intruder aircraft offered Ogarkov the opportunity to take control of Soviet policy and gain acceptance of his proposal to preempt the United States.

When Ogarkov learned of the intruder aircraft's successful transit of Kamchatka airspace he realized that whatever its identity or mission Soviet air defenses had been spoofed. And he knew that if KAL-007 entered Sakhalin airspace the entire Soviet air defense network would turn on, revealing the true function of Krasnoyarsk, even if only by default. However, flying over the Sea of Okhotsk, KAL-007 was on a course heading of 240 degrees. If the airliner maintained that course, it would pass just south of Sakhalin over the Le Perouse Strait and not cross into Soviet airspace.

Ogarkov's proposal, reconstructed from subsequent Soviet behavior, was that if the unidentified intruder aircraft veered into Soviet airspace, then it would mean that it was indeed a spy plane. In that case the air defense command would be authorized to dispense with formal intercept procedures, which required positive visual identification before taking hostile action, and shoot down the aircraft. In the crisis that would ensue, in an intensified war scare, the Soviets would surreptitiously deploy SS-20s to Grenada before the United States could deploy the Pershing IIs to West Germany.

In Andropov's absence, Chernenko, acting under his authority as second in command, and with the concurrence of Politburo member Mikhail Gorbachev and Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov, authorized Ogarkov to carry out his plan. His first

step was to set a trap for the ECM aircraft protecting KAL-007. Earlier that summer, the Soviets had secretly deployed a new jammer aircraft to the Far East, known as the Mig-31 *Foxhound*. The *Foxhound* was a long-range two-seater, designed along the lines of the EF-111 *Raven,* with similar capabilities, except that it was armed, and the *Raven* was not.

The *Foxhounds* were to drive off the *Ravens*, enabling the Soviet interceptors to find and attack KAL-007. Thus, two separate but related engagements took place over Sakhalin. One was the air battle between the *Foxhounds* and *Ravens*, or other similar aircraft, and the other was the interception of the Korean airliner. The evidence for these two engagements, however, is opposite. As the *Foxhounds* were not guided by Soviet ground control, but operated independently, much like American aircraft, there are no air to ground tapes. There are, however, radar tracks and debris from aircraft shot down. (According to Brun, debris was found from as many as ten aircraft.)[19] For the interception of KAL-007, on the other hand, there are radar tracks and partial air to ground tapes, but no ground to air tapes, and no wreckage.

As KAL-007 approached the Sakhalin coastal buffer zone sixty miles out (and now 365 miles off course), Soviet ground radar established contact, keeping the track number 6065, but renumbering the plane as "91," instead of "81," to indicate that they were now tracking a military aircraft. Three jets were scrambled at 1742Z, 1746Z, and 1754Z, call signs 805, 163, and 121. At 1753Z, Moscow issued an order to ground controllers that the contact was "a combat target, which was to be

[19] Michel Brun, *Incident at Sakhalin: The True Mission of KAL Flight 007* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1995), 19, 119-38, 217.

destroyed if it violated the state border."[20] In other words, if KAL-007 turned into Soviet airspace it would be attacked without prior visual identification.

It took Soviet ground controllers twenty-three minutes to vector their interceptors to KAL-007 because, as Johnson observes, the Soviets were "experiencing acute problems with their radars." They had "difficulties…in following [their] own fighters, let alone the 'target.'"[21] These "difficulties," however, were not of their own making. The ICAO-93 transcripts are filled with exasperating commentary about Soviet inability to communicate with their air interceptors, each other, or even to track the target, all of which indicated that they were being jammed.[22]

The 1993 ICAO report observed, however, that the Soviets were able to defeat the jamming in part by handing off control of the interceptors "from one ground control station to another." [23] Their efforts were greatly facilitated by the *Foxhounds'* attacks on the *Ravens.*

As KAL-007 approached the Sakhalin coast, still on a course heading of 240 degrees, at 1802Z Captain Chun turned his plane to the right and flew north for five minutes before turning

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[20] ICAO-93, 51.

[21] Johnson, *Shootdown*, 20-21.

[22] ICAO-93, track 2, reel 2, 111, 128-30.

[23] ICAO-93, track 1, reel 1, 51. The report claims that this procedure was adopted due to "limitations of radar coverage," but the radars in question were all within a few miles of each other.

left once again, at 1807Z, an aerial jog-step that put him back on a course heading of 240 degrees, but now positioned to pass over the southern tip of Sakhalin.[24] It was at this point, at 1809Z, that Gennadi Osipovich in 805 made his first visual contact, reporting that the plane had turned and was "flying with flashing lights." Despite this unusual report, which indicated that what Osipovich was observing was not a military aircraft, his controller ordered him to arm his missiles. At 1812Z, Osipovich responded to his controller that he was "locked-on."[25]

KAL-007 entered airspace over Sakhalin at 1816Z. As soon as it did so, the ground controller at Karnaval in communication with Osipovich began to experience difficulties. Before losing contact, however, he rescinded the "lock-on" order and, instead, instructed Osipovich to go through standard interception procedures to force the plane to "land at Sokol," an airbase in Southern Sakhalin. These procedures were to flash his lights, interrogate the transponder, and wag his wings. At 1819Z, he was ordered to "fire a warning burst with cannons and rock the wings to show the direction to Sokol."[26]

The change in instructions reflected a growing awareness by the Soviet controllers on Sakhalin that what they were tracking was not a military aircraft despite what Moscow said.

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[24] James Gollin and Robert Allardyce, *Desired Track: The Tragic Flight of KAL 007* (Findlay, Ohio: American Vision, 1994), 119-21.

[25] ICAO-93, reel 1, 62-63. According to the NOAA sunrise/sunset calculator, sunrise over La Perouse Strait was at 5:12AM local time, which means that the shootdown over an hour after sunrise occurred during daylight hours.

[26] Ibid., reel 2, track 2, 126-28.

From 1814Z KAL-007 had begun calling Tokyo Control for permission to increase altitude. More important, Tokyo executed a Selcal check positively identifying the airliner. Soviet ground control did the same, twice.[27] In other words, at this point, "aware that he was being intercepted," Captain Chun had not only turned on his running lights, but also his transponder, and was calling Tokyo on the radio to leave no doubt to Soviet air defense command that his was a civilian aircraft.[28]

The Soviets now knew for certain that the plane they had been tracking for the past two and a half hours was a civilian airliner in routine contact with Tokyo Control, but obviously well off course.[29] On the other hand, the dogfight going on in the airspace around it indicated that it must be more than a routine flight. Japanese radar indicated the presence of three US planes and at least three Soviet aircraft over Sakhalin between 1812Z and 1829Z. (See map below).[30]

Time, however, was rapidly running out, as the airliner was only minutes from international airspace.

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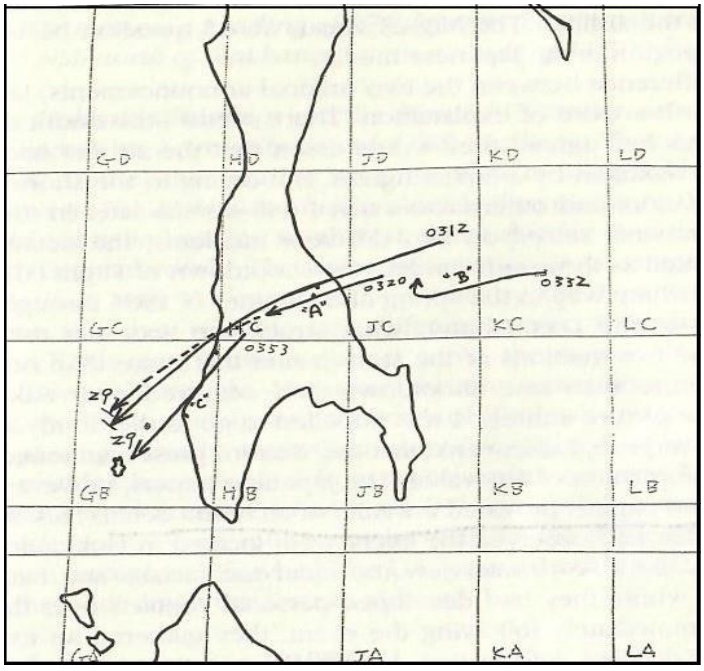
[27] According to NSA intercepts, the Soviets queried the airliner's transponder "at least twice." *Did KAL-007 Successfully Ditch…? 33.*

[28] Philip Taubman, "Korean Jet Signaled Russians, US Says," *The New York Times*, September 3, 1983, 2.

[29] Clarence Robinson, "US Says Soviets Knew Korean Air Lines 747 Was Commercial Flight," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, September 12, 1983, 18-21.

[30] Brun, *Incident at Sakhalin*, 19, is the source of this JSDF map released to the press on September 1, 1983.



Japanese Defense Agency map distributed at 9:10 p.m. in Tokyo on September 1, 1983.

The Attack on KAL-007

In a panic, Ogarkov himself issued the order to "destroy the target with missiles."[31] This was the most intense period of the flight as Osipovich maneuvered into position to fire and US ECM aircraft frantically attempted to jam his weapons and communications, while at the same time fending off the *Foxhound* attacks. The pilot in Soviet interceptor call sign 163 was

[31] Martin Sieff, "Akhromeyev: 'Shoot it down': General Who Killed Himself Blamed for Downing KAL Jet," *Washington Times*, August 30, 1991, A1.

shouting, "I see a dogfight! I see a dogfight!" but Osipovich, focused on his own task, noted that "I had no idea what dogfight he was talking about."[32]

Osipovich launched two missiles at KAL-007, the "a" and "b" versions of the Anab missile, at 1826:02Z.[33] Although he claimed that the "target is destroyed," not only was this not the case, but one of his missiles, the heat-seeking Anab "b," missed entirely, probably because it was successfully diverted by electronic countermeasures.[34] The Anab "a," on the other hand, a semi-active, radar homing missile designed to explode by proximity fuse within forty feet of its target, did detonate, ripping several holes in the airliner's fuselage and knocking off a small piece of the tail section.

Captain Chun immediately began to execute an emergency descent as he lost cabin pressure. The cockpit voice recorder transcript includes instructions to passengers to extinguish all cigarettes and don oxygen masks, but there were no instructions to prepare for ditching at sea. In the cockpit the reaction was similar. Captain Chun, after a struggle, gained control of his aircraft, but issued no May Day call, nor did he

[32] "Osipovich Interview," *Izvestia, January 23, 1991.*

[33] The time of launch has been given variously as 1835Z, 1826:02Z, and 1826:20Z. I use the 1826:02Z time here.

[34] Osipovich claimed the missile tore the left wing off the plane, but, as the aircraft's antenna is in the left wingtip and the co-pilot continued to broadcast, that claim was obviously incorrect.

switch the transponder code to 7700, the standard signal to indicate that the plane was going to ditch at sea.[35]

That is because the plane was substantially intact and under control. Although the missile explosion had knocked out three of the four hydraulic control systems, the number four system was operational and it could actuate all flight controls, brakes, and landing gear. Moreover, after checking, the crew noted that all four engines were still operating.[36] Chun took his aircraft down in a four-minute, turning descent, rapidly at first to reach 16,000 feet where there was oxygen, then gradually over the next eight minutes to descend from 16,000 to 1,000 feet.

By the time Captain Chun had begun his descent, KAL-007 was roughly four or five miles south of Moneron Island and in international airspace. The nearest airfield lay less than thirty miles directly south, on the Japanese island of Rebun, off the northwest coast of Hokkaido. Another island, Rishiri, was nearby, as was the airfield at Wakanai itself. In other words, at a conservatively estimated airspeed of 350 miles per hour, Chun was barely five minutes flying time from Rebun, and safety. But Captain Chun did not continue southward toward Rebun. Inexplicably, tapes show, at 1828Z he turned north, back into Soviet airspace toward Moneron Island.[37]

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[35] ICAO-93, CVR Transcript, 13-14.

[36] Ibid.

[37] ICAO-93, reel 2, track 2, 132. Lt. Col. Gerasimenko, commander of the air base at Burevestnik on Etorofu reported to Gen. Kornukov, commander of the air base at Sokol: "The target, the target turned north." "Say again." "The target turned north. "The target turned north?" "Affirmative."

Soviet base commanders were astonished by Captain Chun's decision, but the clues to why he turned north can be found in the cockpit recorder tape and the digital flight data recorder tape the Russians turned over to ICAO in 1993. Both tapes were cut at 1827:46Z, or one minute and forty-four seconds after the missile strike. I say they were cut deliberately and not disabled by the missile burst because, being placed on opposite sides of the fuselage near the tail and powered separately, there is a zero probability that the missile burst would have severed the tapes in both boxes at all, let alone simultaneously. And if it had, the cutoff would have occurred much closer to the missile impact time of 1826:02Z.

The Russians cut the tapes at that moment because they wanted to keep secret what occurred next, especially the fourteen seconds during which Captain Chun made the decision to turn north at 1828Z, and the communications that followed. The Russians cut the tapes at 1827:46Z because it was just after that that they contacted Captain Chun and compelled him to turn north. No doubt they contacted him on the international hailing frequency of 121.5MHz.[38]

Upon turning north at 1828Z, according to Japanese fishermen and Russian accounts, Captain Chun circled Moneron Island twice.[39] From there he headed for the coast and flew up the west side of Sakhalin. At an altitude of 1,000 feet, KAL-007

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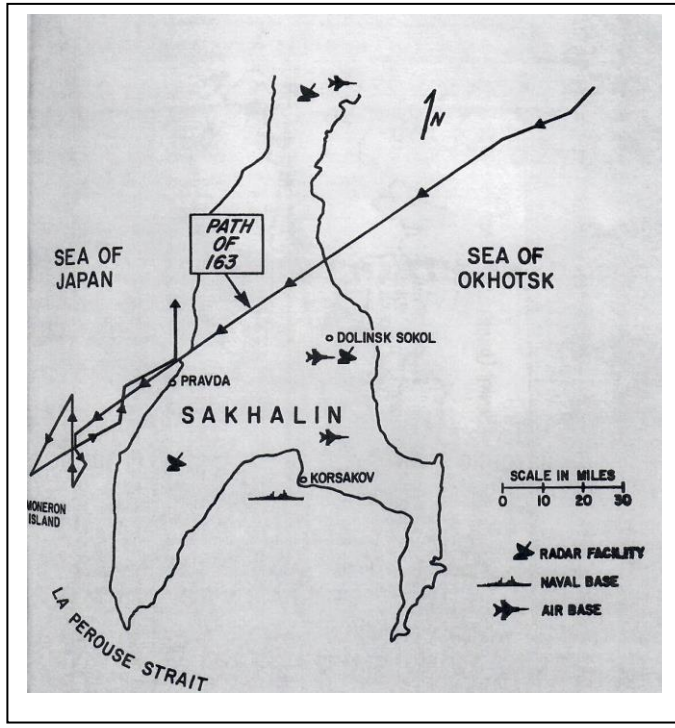
[38] The contact probably came from the controller "Kostroma" located at Kostromskoye on the southwestern end of Sakhalin, about 65 nautical miles north of Moneron Island. See Thornton*, The Reagan Revolution, III*, 332-333.

[39] "*Did KAL-007 Successfully Ditch…?*", 47.

flew below the level of the mountain range that stretches north to south at heights varying from two to three thousand feet and was therefore shielded from all radar coverage located east of the mountains. This shielding permitted the claim that the plane had crashed into the sea at 1838Z, but the fact is that it continued to fly until landing on the emergency airstrip at Kostromskoye, a few miles north of Kholmsk at about 1900Z. In the map below, The radar track of interceptor number 163 traces the probable flight path of KAL-007. It shows the airliner circling Moneron Island and then flying northward along the coast toward Kostromskoye.[40]



[40] Pearson, *The Cover-Up*, 81.

Michel Brun contributes greatly to our understanding of what happened during these critical moments, even though his interpretation of the entire "incident" is completely at variance with mine. Brun engaged the services of the Iwatsu Laboratory outside of Tokyo to conduct a computer analysis of the Tokyo air traffic control tapes. The analysis identified the voiceprint of co-pilot Sohn in six transmissions between 1830Z and 1913Z. The analysis shows that KAL-007 continued to fly for over thirty-five minutes *after* he was supposed to have crashed into the sea and was in contact with KAL-015, KAL-050, and a third unidentified party, which I take to have been Soviet ground control.[41]

Washington Offers A Way Out

Certainly, NSA and Air Force intelligence, if not Casey himself, followed the events in real time from beginning to end. As one Pentagon official declared: "nothing flies away, over, or close to Sakhalin, that we don't detect."[42] All were shocked and outraged by the Soviet ambush of US ECM aircraft and the attack on KAL-007, but the immediate objectives were to avoid an escalation into a major crisis and to bring the passengers home safely.[43]

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[41] Brun, *Incident at Sakhalin*, 77-91.

[42] David Shribman, "Side Effect: Peek at US Intelligence Abilities," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1983, A7.

[43] Seymour Hersh, *The Target Is Destroyed*, (New York: Random House, 1986), 74, notes that "some senior Air Force and Navy officers in the Pacific, who were provided with summaries of the NSA cable traffic, 'got emotional,' as one officer recalled, and began formulating action for retaliation against the Soviet Union, actions 'that could have started World War III.'"

The first decision was to offer the Russians a way out. Washington would ignore the ambush and focus entirely on the Korean airliner. Clearly, Casey expected the Russians to act along the lines of precedent, especially the 1978 force-down on the Kola Peninsula. Thus, the CIA put out the information, also broadcast by the Japanese and South Korean governments, that "The aircraft did not explode in flight and did not crash but is known to have landed on Sakhalin. The passengers and crew are safe, and the aircraft is undamaged."[44]

This message was sent some six-and-a-half hours after the attack. Clearly, the only way for the CIA to have known the specific details of the airliner's location and condition, as well as the circumstances of the passengers and crew, was by communication intercepts and photography—from satellite and perhaps also from an SR-71 stationed in Okinawa and a U-2 based at Osan AB in South Korea.[45] Indeed, radio intercept operators at Wakanai located at the northern tip of Hokkaido "had intercepted and recorded the communications between the pilots and their ground controllers" during the incident.[46]

The Russians had no intention of settling, having in hand the very object they intended to use to instigate a major crisis with the United States in the larger game of missile deployment. So, they stonewalled, denying any knowledge of the plane's

[44] Brun, *Incident at Sakhalin*, 5.

[45] See William Burrows, *Deep Black: Space Espionage and National Security* (New York: Random House, 1986), 182, 223-24. An SR-71 could have reached the site within two hours and a U-2 flying out of Osan AB in South Korea even sooner.

[46] Desmond Ball and Richard Tanter, *US Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) in Japan, 1945-2015*, (Berkeley: Nautilus Institute, 2015), 323.

whereabouts, and especially that it had landed on Sakhalin. Soviet denials moved Washington to adopt plan "B," which was to charge Moscow with commitment of a mass atrocity. Thus, Washington would win the public opinion war over the incident and strengthen arguments raging over the imminent deployment of the Pershing II to West Germany.

But the Japanese almost ruined this approach. At 8:10 a.m. Washington time on September 1, JDA head Kazuo Tanikawa held a press conference during which he released a map showing that Japanese radar had tracked three Soviet and three unidentified but obviously American aircraft in the skies above Sakhalin between 1812Z and 1829Z. Tanikawa said that "what was assumed to be the Korean airliner exploded in flight at an altitude of 32,000 feet at the moment when the plane's transponder emitting code 1300 in mode A, stopped working."[47]

The subtlety in the Japanese account lay in the revelation of the transponder data. Civilian aircraft flying *into* Japanese airspace are assigned a transponder number in the 2000 range, with a "mode C" designation. The 1300 number indicated an aircraft flying *out* of Japanese airspace and the "mode A" designation indicated that the aircraft was military and not civilian. This meant that the aircraft that had exploded in flight was not the airliner, but one of the military aircraft involved in the aerial dogfight. Compounding the problem, Japanese press accounts gave three different times for the presumed shoot down (1826Z, 1829Z, 1839Z), which indicated three separate events.[48]

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[47] Brun, 18-19. (See map, Fn.30.)

[48] Ibid., 26.

Washington had to act fast. At 10:45 a.m., two-and-a-half hours after the JDA press conference and nearly twenty hours after the attack, Secretary of State George Shultz announced that US intelligence had "confirmed that a Soviet fighter had shot down a Korean Air Lines 747 jumbo jet."[49]

Rhetoric aside, this put the United States in a "heads I win, tails you lose" situation. If the Russians admitted guilt, they stood condemned; if they refuted the accusation by producing the plane and its passengers, they would lose face for initially denying the attack. But the Russians chose yet a third course: to counterattack and charge the United States itself with arranging a spy flight.

After putting out several stories, on September 5, *Pravda* declared "Soviet forces had been tracking *seven* RC-135 reconnaissance planes on missions off the Soviet Far East coast…on the day of the incident. It [also] said there were *three* United States naval vessels just outside Soviet territorial waters in the area at the same time."[50] Washington only partially denied this charge and admitted that an RC-135 had been in the vicinity of KAL-007 off the Kamchatka coast, but insisted that the plane had no relationship to the airliner.

The Soviet case depended upon being able to show that the airliner was a spy plane. But, after five days of searching the plane, analyzing the black boxes, interrogating the passengers and crew, they had come up with nothing. There had been

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[49] Bernard Gwertzman, "An Angry Shultz Says He Can 'See No Excuse,'" *The New York Times,* September *2, 1983, 5.*

[50] John Burns, "Russian Version," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1983, 1.

nothing to connect the airliner to the ECM aircraft and ships. Thus, from September 7 onward, the Russians, too, focused solely on the airliner as part of a "deliberate, preplanned action."[51]

Still, the Russians sought to prolong the crisis to inflate the ongoing war scare and, if not prevent deployment of the Pershing II, then surreptitiously deploy SS-20s to Grenada to at the very least counterbalance the US deployment. To insure that there would be no settlement, Ogarkov himself held an unprecedented press conference to make the case that KAL-007 had been an "espionage flight," but offered no evidence for his charge except the behavior of the aircraft, its route, and "our analysis." He claimed that the attack on the aircraft occurred in full compliance with Soviet law and "was not an accident or an error."[52] The Russians, he maintained, were within their rights to shoot down the airliner. If apologies were in order, he maintained, they should come from President Reagan.

Still attempting to give the Russians a way out, even while excoriating them on the propaganda front, a curious American dualism emerged. While condemning the Russians for their heinous act, administration spokesmen began to admit that much of what the Russians had said about the attack on the plane was true.

US spokesmen, especially UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, initially declared that the Soviet pilot had known he

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[51] "Text of Statement by Soviet Government," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1983, A16.

[52] John Burns, "Soviet Says Order to Down Jet Came at A Local Level," *The New York Times*, September 10, 1983, 1.

was tracking a civilian aircraft because its navigation lights were on, had fired no warning shots, and made no attempt to signal the airliner to land in accordance with international procedures. From the second week in September, however, US officials backed away from these claims, admitting that the Soviet pilot may have been mistaken about the navigation lights, did fire warning bursts, and did attempt to communicate with the airliner, before firing his missiles. [53] In addition, the administration admitted that the RC-135 that was in the vicinity of Kamchatka was in fact on a mission to probe Soviet air defenses.[54]

Among the many mysteries of the incident was the failure to locate the wreckage of the airliner after a two-month search around Moneron island where it was said to have crashed into relatively shallow waters. Even more remarkable was the absence of any floating debris, oil slick, or bodies. A 747 is a huge aircraft weighing over half a million pounds before being loaded with fuel, cargo, and passengers. A sea crash would have produced a debris field several miles in circumference. Instead, the only debris recovered a week after the event was "cabin litter," loose material sucked through the holes made by the proximity burst, plus the small portion of the tail that had been blown off, the size of a desktop.

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[53] Robert Toth, "Airliner Reportedly Glided 12 Minutes Before Crash," *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1983, 1; Michael Getler, "Soviet Fired Gun Toward Jet, New Analysis Shows," *Washington Post*, September 12, 1983, 1; Richard Witkin, "New Tapes Show Korean Airliner Was Experiencing Radio Trouble," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1983, 1.

[54] George Wilson, "RC135 Was Assessing Soviet Air Defenses," *Washington Post*, September 7, 19983, 12.

And so the matter stood for ten years. A decade after the event and after the Soviet Union itself had been consigned to the ash heap of history, the Russians admitted to what had been suspected all along. They had the plane and all its contents. They turned over the "black boxes" to ICAO, returned the luggage to the relatives of the survivors, and acknowledged that they had buried the wreckage of the airliner in a silo near Nevelsk, not far from Kostromskoye.[55] In a final blasphemy they maintained that crabs had eaten all of the passengers, leaving no trace.

[55] "Debris from ROK Plane Downed in 1983 Unearthed," *FBIS-Russia*, June 10, 1993, I8.