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Defector helping CIA translate radio tapes

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A Soviet pilot who defected to the United States is acting as a consultant to the Central Intelligence Agency to review taped radio conversations from the Soviet pilot who shot down the Korean Air Lines flight 007, The Washington Times has learned.

The defector — Lt. Viktor Belenko — is expected to shed more light on the downing of the airliner because of his knowledge of terminology used by Soviet pilots.

For example, one source who has reviewed the taped conversations commented that the word used by the Soviet pilot to refer to the KAL jumbo jet — “target” or “tsel” in Russian — is an ambiguous phrase that would not normally be used by Soviet fighters to describe an intruding aircraft of military origin.

“They would refer to a military aircraft as ‘samolet,’ or plane, not target,” the source said, indicating the Soviet pilot must have known it was a civilian airliner.

Belenko is said to be secluded by the CIA and is

expected to spend at least a month reviewing and analyzing the material. The CIA has assembled a small team of defectors and others familiar with Soviet terminology to review the tapes, but Belenko is said to be the most important analyst, because of his first-hand knowledge.

Before Belenko landed his MiG-25 jet aircraft in Japan in September 1976 and asked for political asylum in the United States, he had been serving in the Soviet anti-aircraft defense group, the 10th Army PDO, the same unit that intercepted and downed the Korean airliner.

“He (Belenko) knows all the procedures, terminology and even all the fellows who fly in the 10th Army PDO,” said a source close to the inquiry.

Sources also said the Japanese government has in its possession tape recordings of conversations from Soviet ground controllers and the aircraft that shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007, as well as ground-to-ground conversations between military commanders during much of the 2½ hours preceding the incident. White House Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes yesterday denied that the United States has these additional tapes.

The United States has thus far had to rely on intercepted air-to-ground transmissions from the pilot to his commanding base. These latter were the tapes U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick played before the United Nations to make the U.S. case of a Soviet “massacre.”

One source said that the Japanese have been “staggering” release of the intercepted communications to the United States. One suggested reason was concern over revealing how the tapes were obtained. The Japanese operate a sensitive listening post on their northernmost island of Hokkaido, information from which they share with the United States on a routine basis.

But some sources have suggested that the Japanese have other methods of intelligence-gathering, possibly including devices on the ground that would relay communications from within the Soviet Union.

Regardless, the effect of the staggered release of information has been to trap the Soviets in their own denials. For instance, the Soviets at first denied that their pilots had been involved in a shooting. Then they admitted the shooting but claimed the decision was made solely by the pilot. They later revised that to say a local ground commander had decided to shoot down the airliner.

How Flight 007 strayed 310 miles off-course with one of the world's most-advanced navigational systems aboard may remain forever unknown.

But yesterday, experts called by the House Subcommittee on Transportation, Aviation and Materials repeatedly emphasized the probability that human error was to blame.

“Errors caused by on-board navigational equipment are uncommon, bordering on rare,” said William D. Reynard, chairman of the Aviation Safety Reporting Systems program for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

NASA compiles “incidents” — accidents that have been avoided — that pilots have reported anonymously. During the past five years, out of 22,409 incidents reported, 21 involved planes that used the same navigational system

aboard Flight 007. On four occasions, pilots reported straying off course — once by 250 miles — because a member of the flight crew had punched the plane's position into the navigational system incorrectly.

Two-thirds of all the incidents were “clearly” caused by human error, Reynard said. The other one-third were caused by faulty equipment or by properly functioning equipment operated improperly.

The navigational system is so sophisticated, in fact, that several witnesses yesterday suggested it may cause a false sense of security by the flight crew.

“It's gotten to the point where you've got to be somewhat creative to overcome the complacency problem, because the things (navigational systems) are so doggone reliable,” Reynard said.

“One good cross-check on human error is to have someone on the ground watching you at all times,” said Capt. Henry A. Duffy, president of the Air Line Pilots Association.

Also yesterday, Rep. Don Bonker, D-Wash., sponsored legislation to seek compensation from the Soviet Union for American lives and property lost in the missile attack that destroyed Korean Air Lines Flight 007.

The measure would authorize and direct the U.S. Foreign Claims Settlement Commission to review claims of families and others suffering a loss and direct the State Department to begin negotiations with the Soviets for payment.

Mary Chollett contributed to this story.