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What Really Happened to KAL Flight 007

BY VIKTOR BELENKO

At 6:26 a.m. on September 1, 1983, a Soviet Su-15 interceptor aircraft fired two missiles at a Korean Airlines Boeing 747 near the Soviet island of Sakhalin, north of Japan. Moments later, Japanese air controllers heard a faint, frantic message from the airliner: "All engines . . . rapid decompression." Power gone, fuselage punctured, the huge 747 spun uncontrollably downward for 12 minutes. At 6:38 a.m., KAL Flight 007 disappeared from Japanese radar screens. Everyone on board—269 men, women and children—perished.

Ever since this atrocity, the Soviet Union has labored to confuse and deceive the world about what actually happened. "The Soviet pilots, in stopping the actions of the intruder plane, could not know that it was a civilian aircraft," declared the official news agency, Tass. "It was flying without navigation lights, at the height of night, in conditions of bad visibility, and was not answering signals." Besides, claimed the Soviets, the Korean airliner really was a CIA spy plane.

This massive propaganda effort has succeeded in implanting genuine doubts in the minds of millions. Could the Soviets have misidentified the airliner? Did they try to warn it? Was it engaged in a spy mission?

Nobody in the West is better qualified to answer these questions than former Soviet Lt. Viktor Belenko. Before his daring escape to Japan in 1976 in a MiG-25, Belenko flew the Su-15 interceptor and served in the same Far East Air Defense Command whose radar and planes tracked and pursued the doomed airliner. He knows the mentality of Soviet commanders, pilots and ground controllers, as well as the fears and secret orders that govern them. Since his escape, he has acted as a consultant to the U.S. Air Force and American aircraft companies, and has thus been kept informed about the latest developments inside the Soviet air force. Also, at the request of the U.S. government, he has carefully listened to the voices of Soviet pilots recorded as they stalked and destroyed KAL 007. Here is his revealing analysis of how and why the tragedy took place.*

*See "MiG Pilot: The Final Escape of Lt. Belenko," Reader's Digest, January '80.

WHENEVER radar screens reveal an unidentified aircraft within 100 kilometers of Soviet borders, its position is immediately reported to the National Command Center at Kalinin, northwest of Moscow. So long as the aircraft remains in the 100-kilometer zone, its course, speed

and altitude are shown on a gigantic screen at the Command Center, where a general officer always is on duty.

In the early hours of September 1, Soviet radar spotted an American RC-135 reconnaissance plane in international airspace over the Bering Sea, east of the Kamchatka Penin-

sula. Subsequently, KAL 007 flew past the general vicinity where the U.S. plane had been earlier. The Soviets have tried to persuade the world that their air defenses mistook the civilian airliner for the U.S. military plane. Such a mistake is utterly impossible. I will tell you why.

Because Kamchatka is an important Soviet missile-testing site, RC-135s almost daily patrol over international waters off the peninsula.* So Soviet air-defense personnel, in both the Far East and Moscow, are very familiar with the RC-135 and its distinctive characteristics. A modified Boeing 707, the RC-135 is heavily laden with external antennas and electronic gear, which drastically reduce its speed. Moreover, once the RC-135 arrives in its patrol area, it circles lazily downward, flying as slowly as it can to conserve fuel and remain on station as long as possible.

Soviet air defenses also are very familiar with the Boeing 747. Every day, 747s belonging to different foreign airlines fly along international route R-20, which passes close to the southern tip of Kamchatka. Having tracked both types of aircraft daily for many years, the Soviets well know that the 747 cruises at least 125 knots faster than the RC-135 flies. So the speed alone of KAL 007 unmistakably told the Soviets that it was not an RC-135. And Soviet radar stations recorded and reported this speed for more than two hours.

A secret standing order, issued by the Soviet Ministry of Defense and sanctioned by the Politburo, dictates that once an alien aircraft ventures into Soviet airspace it must not be allowed to escape. Sovi-

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*There is nothing secret, sinister or illegal about these patrols. They are conducted in accordance with the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, which specifies that the United States and the Soviet Union will verify compliance by the other through their respective "national technical means of verification"—which means reconnaissance by aircraft and satellites.

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et pilots are supposed to fly ahead of the foreign plane, attract attention by firing tracers, rocking wings and, if it is dark, by flashing their navigational lights. If the foreign plane does not signal willingness to follow the interceptors, then Soviet pilots are to shoot it down.

Thus, as KAL 007, now disastrously off course, came within 25 kilometers of Kamchatka, local commanders launched interceptors. But the Soviet fighters failed to catch KAL 007. They did not even come close enough to warn the airliner or to fire at it successfully. Perhaps the ground commander was slow in scrambling his planes. Perhaps ground controllers were inept in vectoring them. Whatever, the standing order was unfulfilled; an unauthorized aircraft had transgressed Soviet airspace and been allowed to escape.

As KAL 007 flew blithely onward, its executioner sat in a Ready Room at the Dolinsk-Sokol air base on southern Sakhalin. I know the scene well.

The pilot reports at dusk, undergoes a cursory physical examination, and has a big meal followed by another at 11 p.m. Throughout the night he must wear his pressure suit, which is tight and uncomfortable. He may read and play chess; he is not supposed to sleep. Parked about 30 feet outside the Ready Room, all set for a quick takeoff, is the Su-15.

The wail of a siren shortly before 6 a.m. suddenly ended the boredom of the veteran pilot and summoned him to a mission, a real one. Within five minutes he was airborne. And now two fears preoccupied him:

Will I execute properly? During all of his career, a Soviet pilot is taught: *You may not think. You may not recommend. You may not judge. You may only execute. Your commander will think for you.* The pilot, of course, does think to himself: *I must do exactly as I am told. I must execute perfectly. If not, I and my family will be ruined.*

Will I have to ditch? From the moment a Soviet interceptor pilot takes off, his every action and ma-

neuver are dictated by ground control. Over water, the pilot continually worries about whether the controllers will guide him so far from land, or keep him airborne so long, that he will have to ditch at sea. Unlike American pilots, he does not wear an insulated, waterproof suit that would help him survive in frigid waters. So ditching at sea means death.

Because of an incessant stream of orders from the ground, the Su-15 pilot replied almost continuously to his controllers. The Japanese and Americans recorded his every word, and I have listened to the tape again and again. The tape I analyzed did not include transmissions from ground control. But the pilot's own words, frequently spoken in a tremulous voice that betrays extreme tension, prove many important and telling points:

The visibility above Sakhalin was very good. At 6:06 a.m., while the pilot was many kilometers away from KAL 007, he reported seeing it. At 6:12, while still far away, he reported, "I see it visually and on radar." Had the weather been bad, the pilot could not have seen the airliner from such distances.

The lights of KAL 007 shone brightly. At 6:10 a.m., apparently in response to a direct question from ground control, the pilot answered, "Roger. [The target's strobe] light is blinking." At 6:18 he reported, "The A.N.O. [air navigational lights] are burning. The [strobe] light is flashing." And at 6:21 he again volunteered, "The target's [strobe] light is blinking."

The Soviets made no realistic effort to warn KAL 007 or force it to land. To support their claim that they tried to warn the airliner, the Soviets state that the interceptor fired a burst of cannon fire. At 6:20 a.m. the pilot did indeed report, "I am firing cannon bursts." But at this time the interceptor was at least six kilometers behind and below KAL 007. The maximum range of an Su-15 cannon is only one kilometer. Thus, the Korean pilots in their cockpit atop the 747 could not possi-

bly see shells which spent themselves and fell earthward five kilometers behind and below them.

Ordered to close upon the "target," the Su-15 overshot and for a few seconds was ahead of the 747 before falling back alongside it. Had the pilot during those fleeting moments fired tracers or flashed his lights, he would have reported doing so. He made no such report. Neither did he mention any effort to contact KAL 007 by radio. And the transmissions from the Korean airliner after the interceptor fired its cannon clearly show that its crew had neither seen nor heard anything to suggest that there was a problem.

From the outset, the Soviet interceptor flew to attack, not to warn. At 6:20 a.m., the pilot positioned the Su-15, not ahead of the airliner where he could signal it, but below and behind it—the attack position. Then the pilot, manifestly in obedience to orders from the ground, reported that his missiles were locked on the airliner and ready to strike.

But suddenly, because of indecision on the ground—whether at Sakhalin, the Regional Command Center at Khabarovsk or in Moscow—the pilot was ordered to break the missile lock-on and to move closer to KAL 007. His voice reflects disgust at the order.

Soviet indecision ended about two minutes later, and the pilot received the fateful order. Obediently, he dropped back and beneath KAL 007, positioning himself to kill. At 6:23 a.m. he said, "Now I will try rockets." He flew very close to the 747—probably within two kilometers—and his panel lights signaled that the missile-guidance systems were fixed on the airliner. At 6:26 a.m. he reported, "I have executed the launch." Two seconds later he said, "The target is destroyed."

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THE Soviet Air Defense Command had tracked and evaluated KAL 007 for almost 2½ hours. The familiar speed of the airliner, its direct flight path, its distinctive configuration—unlike any other aircraft in the world—its gleaming navigation lights and flashing strobe light all identified KAL 007 as a civilian 747, not an RC-135. Why then did the Soviets finally make the calculated decision to blow up the airliner and kill its innocent passengers?

Certainly, KAL 007 was far off course (see box, page 77). It violated Soviet airspace for about 12 minutes over Kamchatka and again for a shorter time over Sakhalin. This was wrong. But when Soviet planes, even military ones, have violated American sovereign airspace—as they did at least twice in 1983—they have not been shot down. Typically, our interceptors warn and lead straying aircraft away, in accordance with international agreements. Why could not the Soviets have done the same?

The answer may be found back in April 1978, when a Korean Airlines 707, bound from Paris to Seoul, suffered navigational-equipment failure near the North Pole and blundered into Soviet airspace. Although fully aware that it was a civilian airliner, the Soviet Air Defense Command ordered it shot down. Struck by cannon fire from a Soviet interceptor, the crippled 707 nevertheless flew over Soviet territory for another 90 minutes before making an extraordinary crash landing on a frozen lake. Only two people were killed and 13 injured.

The Soviet military felt acute embarrassment for having allowed the airliner to fly aimlessly over Russian territory for another 90 minutes unmolested. The Politburo demanded answers. If you can't stop a civilian airliner from wandering around our territory for so long, they asked, how can we expect you to cope with advanced military aircraft? As a conse-

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Lured to Destruction?

THE LOST KOREAN AIRLINER possessed three separate computerized navigational systems—the same systems that each day safely and unerringly guide commercial aircraft to their destinations throughout the world. Additionally, there were radio beacons along the prescribed route of KAL 007 by which its pilots could verify their position. Yet sometime after the airliner passed beyond the range of radar in Alaska, it veered off course. Transmissions from the aircraft to Japan showed that the pilots did not realize they had strayed.

Perhaps the pilots misprogrammed their computers before takeoff. Perhaps in flight they set the wrong dial on the navigational control panel. Perhaps, seeing a landmass on their weather radar, they confused Kamchatka with a Japanese island. Unless the airliner's flight recorder is recovered from the ocean floor (now unlikely), the cause of their mistake will remain unclear.

Could the Soviets have deliberately lured KAL 007 off course? While no evidence to support such a charge has come to light, the possibility cannot be discounted. According to the Defense Department, in each of the past few years the Soviets have made dozens of electronic attempts to dupe and confuse American pilots into flying over forbidden territory where they could be shot at. The practice involves "meaconing"—the sending of misleading navigational signals from powerful portable transmitters—as well as radar and radio jamming. It continues today, and, in fact, reports of meaconing and jamming increased roughly 20 percent in 1983.

Sophisticated American countermeasures, coupled with special training of air crews, have reduced the effectiveness of this predatory deception. Nevertheless, the Soviets keep trying, hoping to create international incidents which their propagandists can exploit.

quence, several senior officers were cashiered.

Now the National Command Center was aware that Soviet air defenses at Kamchatka had failed again. I suspect the Moscow commanders reasoned that the risks of killing were less than those of embarrassing the Politburo anew.

But the worldwide outrage that the slaughter provoked embarrassed the Kremlin far more. Explanations had to be contrived.

Initially, the Soviets refused even to admit they had shot down KAL 007. Hours after its destruction, Tass reported that an "unidentified plane" had violated Soviet airspace over Kamchatka and Sakhalin. "The plane did not have navigation lights, did not respond to queries and did not enter into contact with the dispatcher service," Tass said. "Fighters of the anti-aircraft defense, which were sent aloft toward the intruder plane, tried to give it

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assistance in directing it to the nearest airfield. But the intruder plane did not react to the signals and warnings from the Soviet fighters and continued its flight in the direction of the Sea of Japan."*

The next day, Tass reiterated the Soviet claim that the missing plane flew without lights and stated that an interceptor fired warning shots at it. On September 3, Tass published an inordinately abusive diatribe against the United States and President Reagan, excoriating them for saying the Soviets had shot down KAL 007. This was followed by the assertion of Soviet Colonel-General Semyon Romanov that KAL 007 had its lights off and that in any case the "outlines" of a Boeing 747 "resemble much those of the American reconnaissance plane RC-135."

On September 5, President Reagan played the damning tape repro-

*In my time, there was no "dispatcher service" or ground-control system on either Kamchatka or Sakhalin capable of communication with foreign aircraft. Moreover, none of the half-dozen commercial planes in the air or ground-monitoring stations heard any warning over the international emergency frequency.

ducing the voice of the Su-15 pilot shooting down KAL 007. And finally, five days after the atrocity, the Soviets admitted the undeniable. "Since the intruder plane did not obey the demand to fly to a Soviet airfield and tried to evade pursuit, the interceptor-fighter plane of the anti-aircraft defenses fulfilled the order of the command post to stop the flight," Tass announced on September 6.

Ever since this confession, Soviet propagandists have reiterated the theme that KAL 007 was embarked upon some kind of espionage mission. But they have never presented any tangible evidence in support of this claim. Indeed, almost every substantive statement the Soviets have made in justification of the slaughter over Sakhalin is demonstrably false.

Listening to all the bellicose Soviet fabrications, I am reminded of an old Russian adage: "I will urinate in your eyes, and you will say it is Holy Water." That is the attitude the Soviets have adopted in trying to justify the slaughter of 269 innocent men, women and children.