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AMERICAN OFFICER KILLED BY RUSSIAN IN EAST GERMANY

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STUTTGART, West Germany, March 25 — A United States Army major on a reconnaissance mission in East Germany was fatally shot Sunday by a Soviet guard near a Soviet military installation, American officials said today.

The 37-year-old officer, identified in Washington as Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr., was shot in the chest near the East German town of Ludwigslust as he was observing Soviet tank sheds, according to various American sources.

Major Nicholson was a member of the 14-member American military liaison mission, which has been stationed in the East German town of Potsdam since 1947 with a mandate to observe activities in what was once the Soviet zone of occupied Germany.

Warning Ignored, Russians Say

The Soviet Union asserted that the officer had been in a prohibited area and had been shot after he disregarded warnings to halt. The United States rejected the Soviet account, calling the shooting "totally unjustified." Richard R. Burt, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, said in a statement in Washington that the major and his partner, a sergeant, had been fired on without warning and that the officer's death was tantamount to "murder."

Soviet liaison men conduct similar missions in West Germany. Both sides have long accepted what amounts to sanctioned espionage in the two Germanys.

'Unwarranted and Unjustified'

American officers attached to the secret mission, and their British and French counterparts, often report unpleasant confrontations with Soviet and East German units, including car ramming and short detentions.

Western diplomats said Major Nicholson's killing was the most serious incident in the 38-year history of the liaison missions. A year ago, a soldier attached to the French mission was killed near Halle when his car was rammed head-on by a heavy-duty East German military truck.

In Washington, Larry Speakes, the

White House spokesman, described the shooting as "unwarranted and unjustified." He said Robert C. McFarlane, the President's national security adviser, woke President Reagan early this morning to inform him of the incident.

In Bonn, American diplomats said the United States Mission in West Berlin had lodged what one called "a strong protest" with the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin. Several American officials familiar with the case said Major Nicholson was not in a restricted area when he was shot.

In Washington, however, a Soviet diplomat, Vladimir M. Kulagin, issued a statement saying the American officer had been caught "red-handed" photographing Soviet military equipment in a restricted area near Schwerin.

The Soviet diplomat said the American, wearing a camouflage uniform, failed to heed the warning shot and was killed while trying to flee the area. Mr. Kulagin said the American's driver was apprehended in their vehicle nearby.

"The Soviet side launched a resolute protest in this connection," Mr. Kulagin said.

American diplomats disputed the Soviet account, saying Major Nicholson had been shot without warning. "If you hit someone with a warning shot, they have to be pretty close," said an American envoy involved in the case.

Russians Said to Hold Body

According to another American, the Russians kept Major Nicholson's body for a day, turning it over at 4:30 P.M. today to the white stucco American Mission in Potsdam. This afternoon an American military ambulance brought the body across the Glienicke bridge to nearby West Berlin.

A United States Army sergeant who was with Major Nicholson, who was identified as Sgt. Jessie G. Schatz, was held for a few hours by the Russians near Ludwigslust and then released, according to the American sources. The town lies about 25 miles from the West German frontier and 70 miles northwest of East Berlin.

The Americans of the elite Potsdam mission speak Russian and some speak German as well. Their commanding officer is Col. Roland Lajoie, a former Army attaché in Moscow.

The missions were established in 1947 to coordinate activities in the four occupation zones in Germany.

Russians Move Unhindered

Soviet missions are accredited to the American forces in Frankfurt, to the British at Bünde and the French at Baden-Baden, and their cars move largely unhindered in West Germany.

The four erstwhile occupying powers, may declare certain areas off-limits to others. The Russians have considerably restricted a number of areas in East Germany to the British, French and Americans, marking such zones with warning signs.

The West German military must notify the nearest Allied unit in case of a Soviet intrusion into a restricted area. Like the existence of the missions, this rule is a reminder of West Germany's incomplete sovereignty.

The missions are part of a network of accords that has survived the postwar years and that in several instances impinges on the status of Berlin, which remains under the nominal control of the four powers.

The four regulate air traffic into Berlin, which sometimes leads to tension. Last April, the United States, Britain and France protested when the Soviet Union altered the 20-mile air corridors leading into West Berlin, forcing commercial jets to change their ascents and descents.