

KAL Flight 007 Remembered

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It has been 25 years since Korean Airlines Flight 007, carrying 269 passengers and crew, including Congressman Larry McDonald of Georgia, was fired on by a Soviet fighter jet off the coast of Siberia. At the time, McDonald was chairman of the John Birch Society (a subsidiary of which publishes THE NEW AMERICAN).

Although several speakers eulogized McDonald at a Washington, D.C., memorial service 10 days following the September 1, 1983 attack, the words most remembered by both this magazine's editor, Gary Benoit, and this writer were delivered by the late Senator Jesse Helms, who passed away on July 4. Senator Helms, along with Senator Steve Symms of Idaho and Representative Carroll Hubbard, Jr. of Kentucky, were headed for the same conference in Seoul, South Korea, as was Congressman McDonald, but on a different plane (KAL 015). Both planes, flying on schedules just minutes apart, stopped at Anchorage, Alaska, for refueling, and passengers from each could deplane and stretch their legs. McDonald decided to stay onboard, but Senator Helms opted to visit the terminal, where he mingled with passengers from the doomed KAL 007. During the layover, Helms met two little girls who were passengers on McDonald's plane, Noel Anne Grenfell, five, and her sister Stacy Marie, three. The senator spoke about the encounter to the 4,000 people gathered at the McDonald memorial service, and often again in the years that followed:

I'll never forget that night when that plane was just beside ours at Anchorage airport with two little girls and their parents. I taught them, among other things, to say I love you in deaf [sign] language, and the last thing they did when they turned the corner was stick up their little hands and tell me they loved me.

Few who heard the story forgot it, and there was not a dry eye in the house that sultry Washington afternoon.

President Ronald Reagan made a strongly worded speech on national television on September 5, 1983, during which he called the attack a "crime against humanity" that had "absolutely no justification, either legal or moral." He used the word "massacre" six times to describe the attack against a civilian airliner, and boldly proclaimed: "This attack was not just against ourselves or the Republic of Korea. This was the Soviet Union against the world and the moral precepts which guide human relations among people everywhere."

But the actions of the Reagan administration fell far short of the president's flamboyant rhetoric. Our government offered no meaningful resistance to the Soviet harassment of U.S. search-and-rescue efforts in the Sea of Japan as Soviet ships interfered with U.S. and Japanese naval vessels and helicopters attempting to find and recover KAL 007 and its black box.

More meaningfully, Reagan failed to follow through on his tough talk by employing any of the means possible to punish the Soviets, such as trade sanctions. In fact, over time, his administration increased trade with the Soviet Union. Already on September 1, 1984, the Associated Press reported: "Secretary of State George Shultz says the Soviet Union's shooting down of a South Korean airliner one year ago ... should not preclude improvement of relations."

That one or more Soviet fighter jets were responsible for shooting down a civilian airliner and that one of the passengers on that plane was a U.S. congressman and that the official U.S. response to the incident was pathetically weak are easily established facts. However, key details about exactly what happened to the plane and its passengers clash with the official conclusion that the stricken airliner plummeted into the sea killing all aboard.

What Really Happened?

Because the attack against KAL 007 took place just after it had exited Soviet airspace and the plane went down in Soviet territory, most of what we know comes from three sources: first, highly suspect early reports from the Soviets; second, radio transmissions to and from the Soviet fighter jets and their ground commanders (handed over by the Russian Federation years later); and, third, transmissions from the airliner's flight crew to Tokyo air traffic controllers. Radar tracking by Japanese stations also provided key information.

As mentioned earlier, KAL 007 was one of two Korean Airlines planes en route to Seoul, Korea, after both stopped at Anchorage for refueling. The aircraft's flight plan called for it to fly southwest from Anchorage to Japan, flying over the Pacific east of the Soviet Kamchatka Peninsula and Kuril Islands, then across the Sea of Japan to South Korea. The flight's designated corridor, Romeo 20, passed just 17 1/2 miles from Soviet airspace off the Kamchatka coast. However, for reasons still unexplained, the plane gradually, but steadily, deviated from its planned course until it crossed the Kamchatka Peninsula, home to the Soviet's Far East Fleet Inter-Continental Ballistic Nuclear Submarine Base. The timing for straying into this area could not have been

worse. It was but a few short hours before the time that Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, Soviet Chief of General Staff, had set for the test firing of the SS-25, an illegal (according to SALT II agreements) mobile Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). The Kamchatka Peninsula was the designated target area for the missile. Though the incursion sent Soviet air defenses on high alert and fighters were scrambled, the situation calmed down as KAL 007 crossed the peninsula and reentered international airspace over the Sea of Okhotsk.

Continuing on a southwestward course, KAL 007 reentered Soviet airspace over Sakhalin Island, and fighters were scrambled with orders to “destroy the target.” An exchange of communications between General Valeri Kamensky, the Commander of the Soviet Far East District Air Defense Forces, and his subordinate, General Anatoli Kornukov, commander of Sokol Air Base, revealed a difference of opinion about how much verification was required before destroying the aircraft. A monitored radio transmission recorded Kamensky as stating: “We must find out, maybe it is some civilian craft or God knows who.” General Kornukov defiantly replied: “What civilian? [It] has flown over Kamchatka! It [came] from the ocean without identification. I am giving the order to attack if it crosses the State border.”

An article in the *New York Times* of December 9, 1996, quoted Major Gennadi Osipovich, the pilot of the SU-15 Interceptor that fired on the plane: “From the flashing lights and the configuration of the windows, he recognized the aircraft as a civilian type of plane.... ‘I saw two rows of windows and knew that this was a Boeing,’ he said. ‘I knew this was a civilian plane. But for me this meant nothing. It is easy to turn a civilian type of plane into one for military use.’ ”

During one exchange, General Kornukov expressed frustration with the amount of time Major Osipovich was taking to get into attack position: “Oh, [obscenities] how long does it take him to get into attack position, he is already getting out into neutral waters. Engage afterburner immediately. Bring in the MiG 23 as well.... While you are wasting time it will fly right out [of Soviet airspace].”

Major Osipovich reported starkly at one point in the transcript: “The target is destroyed.”

As it happened, however, Osipovich was wrong; the “target” had not been destroyed. Subsequent radio transmissions from KAL 007 indicated that while the crew had problems in controlling the altitude of the plane (it had climbed on its own) and that the cabin had depressurized, First Officer Son had reported to the plane’s Captain Chun: “Engines normal, sir.” Captain Chun then turned off the plane’s autopilot and took manual control of the plane, stabilizing it at 35,000 feet, its original altitude. He also contacted controllers at Tokyo, requested that they “give instructions,” and reported he was “descending to one zero thousand [10,000 feet].”

According to the transcripts, there was no further transmission from KAL 007, a factor that has been widely interpreted (or misinterpreted) to mean that the airliner either exploded or crashed into the sea at that point. But the plane was tracked on radar for more than 10 minutes after the last recorded transcript, and was picked up on radar flying at 16,424 feet four minutes after the attack. Eight minutes later, radar showed that the plane was still at 1,000 feet, indicating that the rate of descent had slowed — not what one would expect if the plane had plummeted into the sea as claimed. The pilot’s request for “instructions” also indicates that he still had control over the aircraft, or else such a request would have been pointless.

When Soviet General Kornukov was informed that the plane had changed course to the north he was incredulous: “Well, I understand [that the plane turned north], I do not understand the result, why is the target flying? Missiles were fired. Why is the target flying? [obscenities] Well, what is happening?” Of course, the fact that the plane changed direction suggests not only that the pilot was able to steer the aircraft but that he was going to attempt an emergency landing.

Kornukov then ordered that a MiG 23 be brought in to finish the job. However, due to KAL 007’s descent and heavy cloud cover, they could not locate the plane. The Soviet interceptors, low on fuel, returned to their base without having sighted the plane. The Soviets’ radar told them, however, that the plane had descended to 16,424 feet and was flying a spiral pattern over Moneron Island, in the Tartar Strait 24 miles west of Sakhalin Island.

Finally, 12 minutes after the attack, KAL 007 disappeared from radar, after dipping below the 1,000-foot level near Moneron Island. The Soviets immediately dispatched squadrons of KGB Border Guard boats, rescue helicopters, and even civilian trawlers to Moneron Island.

In the United States, the news broadcasts the evening of the disappearance of KAL 007 reported that the missing aircraft had landed safely on Sakhalin Island. But by the following morning those initial reports were forgotten, and the news was that the plane had been destroyed.

Putting the Pieces Together

For several reasons (not the least of which was that he had been invited by Rep. McDonald to travel with him on KAL 007 and that he also had that touching encounter with the two little girls from the plane), Senator Jesse Helms always took a strong interest in the mysterious fate of this airliner. During the two-year period

following the tragedy, Helms proposed eight specific sanctions against the Soviets to punish them for that heinous act, but both Congress and the Reagan White House worked to defeat those sanctions. In 1991, Senator Helms, as Minority Leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, issued a report that noted: "KAL 007 probably ditched successfully, there may have been survivors, the Soviets have been lying massively, and diplomatic efforts need to be made to return the possible survivors."

On December 10, 1991, just five days after Senator Helms had written to President Boris Yeltsin of the newly established Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic concerning the whereabouts of U.S. servicemen who were POWs or MIAs, he sent a second letter to Yeltsin concerning KAL 007. Helms wrote: "One of the greatest tragedies of the Cold War was the shoot-down of the Korean Airlines flight KAL-007 by the Armed Forces of what was then the Soviet Union on September 1, 1983.... The KAL-007 tragedy was one of the most tense incidences of the entire Cold War. However, now that relations between our two nations have improved substantially, I believe that it is time to resolve the mysteries surrounding this event."

Senator Helms attached a list of questions to his letter, some of which indicated that he believed that the passengers had survived the crash or landing. These included:

1. From Soviet reports of the incident, please provide:
 - a) A list of the names of any living passengers and crew members from the airplane;
 - b) A list of missing passengers and crew;
 - c) A list of dead passengers and crew;
 - d) A list and explanation of what happened to the bodies of any dead passengers and crew;

Helms also asked: "Please provide detailed information on the fate of U.S. Congressman Larry McDonald."

Finally, pressing the point even more bluntly, Helms asked:

1. How many KAL-007 family members and crew are being held in Soviet camps?
2. Please provide a detailed list of the camps containing live passengers and crew, together with a map showing their location.

Why did Senator Helms choose this particular time to make this request of Yeltsin? For one thing, the old Soviet Union was in the process of reinventing itself as the Russian Federation and other republics. This was seen as a period of "thaw" in U.S.-Russian relations and Senator Helms thought that Yeltsin might be more cooperative than his predecessors. However, he had also received information that led him to question not only the details of the attack, but the post-attack fate of the passengers and crew.

A major source of that information had been Avraham Shifrin, a former major in the Soviet army and criminal investigator in the Krasnodor area of the Crimea, who was employed at the Soviet Ministry of Weapons before becoming a slave-labor prisoner. Shifrin is best known for his 1980 book *The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union*. Shifrin, who passed away in 1998, immigrated to Israel, where he established the Research Centre for Prisons, Psych-Prisons, and Forced Labor Concentration Camps of the USSR. His contacts included not only former prisoners inside and outside the Soviet Union but even officials within the Soviet government. As he explained during an interview when on an extensive speaking tour in the United States sponsored by the John Birch Society in 1983-84, "Because I was the chief legal adviser in the [Soviet] Ministry of War Equipment, I have many contacts. When I was in prison, my friends became important in the war industry."

In 1991, Shifrin issued a press release saying his investigation into the fate of the KAL 007 passengers indicated that many, including Larry McDonald, were secretly kidnapped and held by the Soviet Union.

THE NEW AMERICAN recently contacted a former associate of Shifrin in Israel, Bert Schlossberg (the author of *Rescue 007: The Untold Story of KAL 007 and Its Survivors*), to find out what he had learned about Flight 007. Schlossberg immigrated to Israel about 20 years ago and settled in a small community north of Jerusalem just opposite the hill where Avraham Shifrin worked. He got to know Shifrin quite well and became privy to the information that was coming to him, mainly by people who had left the Soviet Union. He became director of an organization formed in 2001, the International Committee for the Rescue of KAL 007 Survivors, Inc., whose mission is "to uncover and disseminate the truth about the KAL 007 incident and to effect the rescue and return home of its survivors." When we reached Schlossberg in Jerusalem by phone, he was so eager to share his knowledge of KAL Flight 007 with us that we have space for only a small part of that interview:

THE NEW AMERICAN: *You are the son-in-law of one of the passengers of Korean Air Lines Flight 007. Was your interest in discovering the truth about the incident at first mainly a personal one?*

Bert Schlossberg: My wife's father and cousin, Alfredo Cruz and Edith Cruz, were passengers on the plane. All the years since it happened, until I met Avraham Shifrin, I had accepted, pretty much like everybody else did, that they were all dead. The hardest thing was to accept that they were alive, or might be alive and in a

bad situation. I asked for some kind of evidence. He put me in touch with a former military man, an immigrant to Israel that had worked at the radar station just opposite Sakhalin Island, across the Tartar Straits on the Siberian eastern coast. He worked in an underground headquarters (HQ 1848). It was a radar installation. And he told me the story of what they had seen on their radar scopes. They had tracked KAL 007 before it was hit and after it was hit and they said that it descended very gradually to a point that was 1,000 feet above the surface of the sea and then disappeared from their radar scope because of the curvature of the Earth. Because the original announcement that it disappeared from the radar screen, everybody assumed that was because it exploded but he said "no" it was not that — it was because they couldn't track it. That began my quest — as did the work of Avraham Shifrin, whose work was conveyed to Jesse Helms, and to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. And Jesse said the CIA could verify the materials and they did verify the most important part of what Avraham Shifrin was receiving — that the plane had landed and landed on the water.

TNA: *What resulted from Shifrin's report to Senator Helms?*

Schlossberg: Because the report was positive, and because it indicated that there was a probability of survivors, that encouraged Jesse Helms to write to Boris Yeltsin. We've got a letter (under "Documents") on our [website](#) from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Minority Staff Director under Helms, Rear Admiral Bud Nance, confirming that Jesse Helms wrote that letter on December 10, 1991 to Boris Yeltsin because of the information coming from Israel. [Note: THE NEW AMERICAN has reviewed the letter to Avraham Shifrin from Rear Admiral Nance, which said, in part: "The letter [to Boris Yeltsin] inquiring about the fate of KAL-007 is a direct result of your information."]

TNA: *Did Senator Helms' letter to Yeltsin produce any tangible results?*

Schlossberg: Boris Yeltsin came forth with ... the real-time Russian military communications, during shoot-down, after shoot-down.... The work of the International Committee for the Rescue of KAL 007 Survivors is based mainly or largely on these Russian military communications.... And basically, the picture that the committee was able to get from the tapes and coordinate with the military documents, was that the plane was rocketed, and the two missiles were set off by the interceptor pilot, Gennadi Osipovich, one rocket was a heat-seeking missile and it missed.... The pilot said he took off the left wing, well the plane can't fly without a left wing. But what the cockpit voice recorder shows — you see it on the transcript — the co-pilot [of KAL 007] reported twice back after the fact, "All engines normal, Sir." Plus the broadcast was made on a high-frequency radio and the high-frequency radio [antenna] was on the tip of the left wing — so that left wing was intact. The plane could be flown. The plane rose — because the crossover cable of the elevator was destroyed — then Captain Chun got control, took it out of auto-pilot and began to descend and level out at 5,000 meters.... This was not on the [black box] tape that the Russians returned and that's probably the reason why they did not return the whole tape, just a minute and 44 seconds of it.

Helms also asked in that letter for the locations of the camps where the passengers were kept, he asked for the fate of Larry McDonald, he asked for all the Russian military communications, the radio tracks, etc., and Yeltsin would reply to everything except about the passengers.

TNA: *Some reports have come out about sightings of Flight 007 passengers from people in prison camps. Have you received similar information?*

Schlossberg: We have.... Right after the shoot-down, there was a Russian pastor who was in a Soviet prison, and there were a whole bunch of Westerners who came into that prison the same week as the shoot-down, dressed in civilian clothes. After awhile they put on regular prison clothes. This pastor came to the United States, and actually we got in touch with him through a mission organization that had contact with this pastor in Russia. He wanted to tell his story why he believed they were the KAL 007 people, the Westerners. I might say, the report that came in to Avraham was that the passengers were taken off the plane by the patrol boats and they were brought to Sakhalin and at Sakhalin they were separated into groups. The children were brought over to the mainland and the children were basically distributed for adoption. When contacted, the Russian pastor refused to speak about the matter because he feared for the safety of his family still in Russia.

Larry McDonald has the most tracking. It's still not on the level of hard evidence, but credible evidence, meaning it is something that has got to be checked on by somebody who has the means to follow it through. According to our reports, McDonald wound up in Lubyanka [KGB prison] and was interrogated by Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the First Chief Directorate of the KGB. He was taken to Lefortovo KGB prison, also in Moscow, and then taken to Sukhanova, to a dascha [summer house], where he was interrogated under drugs, and the report from there was that he no longer had an identity, they robbed him of his ability to know who he was. Eventually he was taken to Karaganda, which is a transit prison, in Kazakhstan. Of course at that time, Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union. And that was the last tracking of him, at a prison north of Karaganda, called Temir Tau.

These reports are from people at the time in the Soviet Union, but there are other reports that we received. These are reports from people who are family members of the passengers, directed to us discreetly. One woman got a phone call, and she recognized immediately the voice of her husband who had been a

passenger on the plane, and then the conversation was cut off.... These are the types of things that we have. And it is still going on, we're still getting information and contacts.

TNA: *In recent years there has been a great deal of reporting about the new Russia and how it is not like the old Soviet Union. Do you think a lot of this is a myth — that if the Russian Federation truly were as democratic and as free as they're pretending to be that these prisons would be open and that they'd voluntarily be releasing these people on their own?*

Schlossberg: The KGB may not be there under the same name, but other people operate the same way. Avraham Shifrin made this comment to me: "Of course they're there, of course, the KGB still exists, forget about the name. What you do look at is the benefit, they're on the benefit role, the same people that were on the KGB are under a new name getting the same benefits, the same personnel."

Seeking Resolution

Such reports of KAL Flight 007 passengers still being held in Russia are, of course, disturbing. But given the amount of intelligence that is available from the Russian government and our own, we do not presently have the means to confirm them. Neither, however, do we have any reason to dismiss them, and as long as the possibility remains that any passengers have survived, no means should be spared to account for their whereabouts.

The late Robert W. Lee researched KAL 007 extensively for TNA. [Click Here](#) to read his last comprehensive article on the subject.