

## **"Hot Battle Amid Cold War. Boeing With 29 Spies on Board Was Shot Down in Russian Sky 22 Years Ago"**

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by Aleksandr Kolesnikov, military historian

*A South Korean Boeing passenger plane flying from Anchorage to Seoul on flight 007 was downed over Sakhalin on the night of 31-August-1 September 1983. The world was shocked. The American media reported the beastly murder of 269 persons including 69 US citizens. Demonstrations attended by thousands of people were held all over the world from Washington to Seoul. The demonstrators demanded the taking of resolute steps against the evil empire -- the USSR. The world froze in anticipation of a nuclear war.*

*"We can positively assert today that it was NATO's well-prepared intelligence operation," believes military historian Professor Aleksandr Kolesnikov who spent many years investigating the Boeing accident. "Both we and the Americans knew from the very beginning that it was a spy plane. In fact, it was a battle in which 29 intelligence officers died instead of the 269 passengers as was officially reported."*

*The historian and some participants in the incident shared their conclusions on the results of their investigations with Moskovskiy Komsomolets readers.*

Excerpt from the Soviet Government statement issued on 7 September 1983:  
"The Soviet pilots stopping the intruder plane had no way of knowing that it was a civilian aircraft. It was flying without navigation lights in poor visibility conditions and did not respond to radio signals."

A Boeing 747 crossed the Soviet border on the night of 1 September. These kinds of incidents had earlier happened quite often, but had always ended peacefully. The Soviet side would receive the "lost" signal from an intruder, after which the unwanted guest escorted by Soviet Air Force fighters would leave the USSR's airspace. On that occasion, however, the crew not only failed to leave our airspace, but also made a number of complicated evolutions in response to Soviet military's warnings, which allowed it to leave the zone in which it could be reached by the Soviet air defense. As a result, it entered an area above the naval base hosting a top-secret flotilla of Soviet nuclear-powered submarines equipped with ICBM.

For a long time military experts could not understand why the Soviet command did not shoot down the plane earlier before it approached the top-secret facility or did not force it to land on one of the airfields.

General Ivan Tretyak, former commander of the Far East Military District, hero of the Soviet Union and hero of socialist labor (he subsequently became

commander in chief of the Soviet Air Force) was the keeper of secrets about these events all these years. "I am an old combat general," Ivan Moiseyevich stated, "and I do not fear anything now. More than 20 years have passed. The Soviet Union no longer exists and neither do its secrets. I think it is time we told the truth. First, from the moment the Boeing entered our airspace we had full information about its crew's communication with NATO's intelligence bases and special services. We could have destroyed the plane on many occasions, but did not do this, for it could have caused irreparable damage if it had exploded over Kamchatka. Its explosion might have detonated nuclear munitions on submarines or elsewhere: An explosion would have been greater than in Hiroshima. Second, if we had forced the Boeing to land on our military airfield where strategic bombers with nuclear weapons on board were parked, the Americans might have blown up their aircraft in direct proximity to the bombers."

The possibility of this kind of explosion was confirmed immediately during the course of the investigation. Following the plane crash in neutral waters, experts noticed that fragments were scattered in a way that prompted an unequivocal conclusion: The plane had exploded from the inside. To be more precise, it was like this: The plane was first hit by a missile fired from the military fighter plane piloted by Nikolay Osipovich, but it flew another 17 kilometers and exploded when it was already above neutral waters. Therefore, explosives experts believe that there is every reason to assert that the plane was destroyed by an internal explosion equivalent to around four tons [of TNT]. The missile fired by Osipovich was not so powerful.

Ivan Tretyak: "Scientists immediately stated that there were explosives onboard. The first indication was the even dispersal of plane fragments, especially engine fragments, over an area the shape of a regular circle. They were scattered this way by the explosion and the dynamic strike against the water. There were no major fragments whatsoever, for the explosion was very powerful. Therefore, one can draw the conclusion that it was a reconnaissance plane. Explosives had been planted on it in case we would have forced the plane to land. Apparently, the crew had remote control to be able to blow it up on our airfield to ensure that nothing was left of either the plane or its reconnaissance equipment."

Another strange thing about preparations for the flight was that the plane had been filled with four additional tons of fuel before its takeoff from Anchorage, which it did not need at all provided that it was going to fly along the set route. Besides, the plane was delayed at the airport for 40 minutes. Thanks to the delay, it reached the Soviet border exactly when a US spy satellite was flying over Kamchatka.

Ivan Tretyak: "We received information that the plane was sending coded messages to the satellite and therefore, I was convinced that it was a reconnaissance plane. Besides, I was alerted by the fact that it was flying along the route where planes never flew. Two anti-aircraft missile divisions were

deployed nearby, but the plane was flying precisely in between them, specifically where they could not down it."

Now, about the people who directly took part in the operation. Those were fighter pilot Lieutenant Colonel Nikolay Osipovich, deputy regiment commander, and Major General Anatoliy Kornukov, aviation division commander (subsequently Russian Federation Air Force commander in 1998-2000). In routine circumstances a division commander or a pilot did not have the right to destroy an intruder plane without the defense minister's order from Moscow. In this situation, however, the intruder's actions were so unequivocal that Anatoliy Kornukov made the decision on his own without waiting for a "go ahead" from either Marshall Nikolay Ogarkov, chief of the General Staff, or even from District Commander Tretyak.

First, Osipovich tried to force the Boeing to land by means of conventional visual signals indicating "descend." He even fired warning shots and used all his ammunition firing right in front of the plane's nose. Fire blazing from his cannons was seen even from the ground. However, the Boeing crew did not react and then, all of a sudden sharply cut throttle and escaped the fighter plane.

Nikolay Osipovich: "I had been preparing all my life for what might have been the only battle in my life and then, I made such a mistake! I was cheated like a child. I took a tight turn on the verge of my possibilities and approached the plane from its tail end. When it started to leave Soviet airspace, Major General Kornukov ordered to down it. He was monitoring all my actions from the command post. My second missile hit the target. However, I did not shoot it down; I merely damaged it. I saw it fly away."

Why did Kornukov give the order to the pilot without waiting for Moscow's permission? He had seconds to assess the situation. He subsequently spoke about his doubts at his meeting with the families of the downed plane's crew, which he held on his commanders' orders.

Anatoliy Kornukov: "I want you to understand: We did not break the law or abuse our powers in any way. We acted in strict compliance with orders, instructions, and the Law on the State Border. Having said that, I have several questions on this situation: How come the crew of a Boeing 747, a plane equipped with modern air navigation equipment, failed to notice a major deviation from the R-20 route and failed to correct its 29-degree deviation from the route? Why did the crew chat about personal matters during the flight instead of controlling the plane's location with the help of onboard and ground equipment? How come the crew did not react to signals and shots fired by Osipovich? How could an experienced commander -- pilot Chun Byung-II who had a huge flight record and had been the [Korean] president's pilot for several years -- neglect basic rules? I have some questions for US and Japanese ground control services also: Why did they not take steps -- either at the very beginning of the

007 flight or during its final stage -- to prevent blatant violation of airspace and to return the plane to the R-20 international route? All these posts and people with surprising indifference silently witnessed the accident and were watching indifferently how those people were heading toward their tragic end. How come these services did not establish contact with the Soviet side and did not provide the necessary information about the Boeing 747 that had veered off the route by mistake?! How come the communications operators in Wakkanai [Air Station] on Hokkaido who monitor our aviation radio channels around the clock listened indifferently to combat orders and to reports by Russian fighter pilots as the tragic outcome approached? Meanwhile, this very post had often established radio contacts with Soviet fighter crews! I personally had repeatedly heard warnings from the Japanese side when I approached the Japanese border too closely. I did not receive answers to these questions either during or after the investigation."

Where was the Soviet leadership then? Why did a division commander make the decision that de facto placed the country on the verge of a nuclear war? Meanwhile, the events in Moscow were developing as follows (the story was told by Lieutenant General Aleksandr Korzhakov who was a bodyguard of CPSU General Secretary Yuriy Andropov in 1983). Andropov was hospitalized in the Central Clinical Hospital at that time.

Aleksandr Korzhakov: "I was with Yuriy Vladimirovich Andropov all the time on that day. He was living his last days. He was constantly hemodialysed in the Central Clinical Hospital. An artificial kidney machine without which he could no longer live was installed in his suite. There was no hope he would get better. Defense Minister Ustinov unexpectedly telephoned at night and tried to acquire permission to stop the flight of a South Korean Boeing over Kamchatka. However, Yuriy Vladimirovich was unwell and nobody wanted to wake him up. Ustinov was afraid to make a personal decision. His aide Colonel General Igor Illarionov telephoned later and said that the decision had been referred to Chief of the General Staff Ogarkov. However, Ogarkov did not have the guts to make the decision to down the plane either. Everybody -- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the KGB, and its First Main Directorate, the foreign intelligence service -- was waiting for valuable directives "from above." There was complete paralysis of initiative among the country's top leadership. Yuriy Vladimirovich then regained conscience for several minutes and listened to Ogarkov. While he was reporting, the defense minister was silent. It seemed that he wanted to avoid making any kinds of decisions. Andropov listened to the report and ordered: "Take all necessary steps." The general secretary was then taken away.

The Political Bureau meeting was reminiscent of a show. The youngest member of the Political Bureau, Central Committee Secretary of Agriculture Mikhail Sergeyeovich Gorbachev, put an end to the discussion: "Did they (NATO --

Kolesnikov note) notice our fighter's killing shot?" KGB Chairman Chebrikov: "They did not." "Then, we will deny everything," Gorbachev said.

For almost six following days the Soviet leadership pretended that nothing had happened. Meanwhile, the Soviet military command was carrying out an operation in the plane crash area to retrieve plane remnants and the remains of the people on board. NATO was cheated to ensure that it did not interfere with the work on the downed plane's fragments on the bottom of the sea.

Ivan Tretyak: "We decided to create a false crash site for the Americans by surrounding it with our ships. They swallowed the bait and immediately started to penetrate the area with their ships and helicopters. Incidentally, one helicopter crashed there. Everybody was preoccupied with the same question: How many bodies were discovered on board the Boeing? And can one speak about 269 passengers? I can say with confidence today: No. In reality, 29 bodies were identified. Most likely, the plane carried special electronic equipment. This explains why its crew was increased from 18 to 29 members although the same kind of plane at a Japanese airline was serviced by 15 crew members and at Pan American -- by 12. We believe that there were only the crew and the designer with a group of engineers monitoring our underwater facility with the help of reconnaissance equipment. There were no other passengers there."

All the specialists questioned by me confirmed these words: The character of retrieved objects does not allow to speak about the presence of more than 29 persons on the plane. Having said that, the luggage of 269 passengers was retrieved; admittedly, all the bags were attached to a steel cord that formed a closed loop. Have you ever seen anything of the kind on a usual plane? This was probably done to ensure that the bags were not carried away by underwater currents. Therefore, we can assert that the piece of evidence about the death of 269 people was thus fabricated.

In reality, I think that the passengers had simply been taken off the plane in Anchorage. Later on, they might have been hidden in line with the witness protection program. All the international commissions that had investigated the circumstances of the crash of the South Korean Boeing deemed the Russian side's actions as justified and corresponding to existing international rules and the Law on the State Border. The USSR was not officially declared responsible for the tragedy and did not pay any compensation to the victims' families.

However, it was a kind of deal with the American authorities: "We consider you not guilty and you will not produce the exhibits testifying that the downed Boeing was a reconnaissance plane" and so it was done, although the incident was subsequently used as a pretext for political and even economic speculations for a number of times.

According to some sources, Russian generals in 1993 tried to lobby for the sale of weapons, in particular, MiG fighters to South Korea. As makeweight the Koreans wanted to receive material compensation for the downed Boeing and for starters, demanded official apologies. Yeltsin gave in to persuasion by his aides who, apparently, were also entitled to commission from the arms deal. Besides, he wanted to deliver yet another strike against Gorbachev who had played not a very positive role in the Boeing saga. A commission was set up as a result under the leadership of Chief of the Presidential Staff Petrov. He prepared the documents confirming the USSR's guilt and Yeltsin expressed official apologies to South Korea. He also ceremoniously handed over the downed Boeing's "black boxes" to the Koreans.

The Koreans stated that they would soon tell the whole world what kinds of barbarians had lived in the USSR. However, they were greatly disappointed when they did not find any confirmation to this in the black boxes. There was nothing at all inside. Petrov had given Yeltsin dummies. When Yeltsin found out that he had been made a fool of, he immediately fired Petrov. Meanwhile, the tapes remained in Russia. They are still waiting for their hour. Somebody may want to win some political dividends on them again. Apparently, bargaining over this issue is considered acceptable.