



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on August 8, 2023

Published in the August 28, 2023 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 39, No. 16

KAL Flight 007 Remembered

This article was [originally published](#) in our September 8, 2008 issue. It is reprinted here (condensed) to mark the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the downing of KAL 007. Warren Mass, a longtime contributor to this magazine, passed away in 2021.

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.

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 Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). Helms was 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



AP Images

A view of Korean Airlines plane number HL7442 on the runway in Hawaii in 1982. This same 747 flew as KAL Flight 007 on September 1, 1983. The most prominent passenger on the flight was U.S. Representative Larry McDonald, who was such a strident foe of the communists that a Soviet defector revealed that the KGB had assigned an intelligence desk to monitor him exclusively.



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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.

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 17.5 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.



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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



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— 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. [Descending quickly to get down to an altitude where there's sufficient oxygen and then slowing the rate of descent is what one would expect if the cabin depressurized and the pilot was able to control the plane.]

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. [Shortly after the attack, Representative Larry McDonald's press aide Tommy Toles received a call from an FAA spokesman who told him, "Japanese self-defense force confirms that the Hokkaido radar followed Air Korea to a landing in Soviet territory on the island of Sakhalinska."]

Did KAL 007 make an emergency landing in Soviet territory? Were there survivors? Avraham Shifrin, a former Soviet army major, prisoner of the Soviet gulag, and (after immigrating to Israel) founder of the Jerusalem-based Research Center for Prisons, Psych-Prisons, and Forced Labor Concentration Camps of the USSR, concluded that there were survivors, including Representative Larry McDonald. In 1991, he issued a press release saying this, and he conveyed his information to Senator Jesse Helms' staff. On February 11, 1992, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Staff Director (under Helms) Rear Admiral Bud Nance (Ret.) wrote a letter to Shifrin, saying, "The information which you conveyed ... is safe and protected.... [A] copy of it was given to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency for possible collaboration. The CIA found your information to be very interesting, and consistent with some of their information. Unfortunately, however, CIA was not able to either confirm or deny the balance of it." Shifrin passed away in 1998, and The New American never saw his information that ended up with the CIA. However, even without this information (and to be clear, we viewed Shifrin as a credible authority on the subject of the Soviet gulag), the evidence is strong (albeit not conclusive) that KAL 007 landed on Sakhalin, as initial reports claimed.

For more information, we recommend our most comprehensive article on the subject, "[KAL 007: The Questions Remain Unanswered](#)" by Robert W. Lee in our September 10, 1991 issue. We also recommend [Rescue 007: The Untold Story of KAL 007 and Its Survivors](#) by Bert Schlossberg, the son-in-



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law of one of the KAL passengers. The New American published a video interview with Schlossberg on September 18, 2020 titled "[Communists Kidnapped US Rep. McDonald After Shooting Down Airliner: Expert](#)." Both the Lee article and the Schlossberg interview are available online.



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