



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 1, 2014

The Anniversary of KAL Flight 007 Prompts Another Look

On September 1, 1983, the airwaves were abuzz with reports that a Korean Airlines flight had either been shot down or forced down off the east coast of the Soviet Union. The *New York Times* noted that day: “Early reports said the plane ... had been forced down by Soviet Air Force planes and that all 240 passengers and 29 crew members were believed to be safe.”



It soon was revealed that among the passengers on the plane, KAL 007, was U.S. Rep. Larry McDonald (D-Ga.) — who at the time was chairman of The John Birch Society.

Early news broadcasts provided differing accounts of what had happened to the aircraft. Some reports the evening of the disappearance of KAL 007 said the missing aircraft had landed safely on Sakhalin Island, just a few miles across from the Siberian mainland.

C. K. Suh, manager of the American Regional Office of Korean Air Lines in Los Angeles, phoned Congressman McDonald’s press aide, Tommy Toles, telling him that he had “just called Korean Air Lines in Seoul” and that “the information I got from them is that [the] U.S. Embassy in Korea informed the Korean Government, Minister of Foreign Affairs ... that the plane has landed in Sakhalin.”

But by the following morning those early reports indicating that KAL 007 had landed intact were largely forgotten, and the media almost unanimously reported was that the plane had been destroyed by one or more air-to-air missiles fired by a Soviet Su-15 Flagon interceptor.

Thirty-one years later, it still cannot be determined with certainty exactly what happened to KAL Flight 007. The official Soviet line at the time was that their air defenses had mistaken KAL 007 (a Boeing 747) for an American RC-135S Cobra Ball surveillance plane that was flying off the Kamchatka Peninsula gathering electronic data about the same time KAL 007 crossed it. While this may have been plausible for Soviet radar operators on the ground, once the Soviet pilot made visual contact, it is highly unlikely that he would have confused the two planes.

The Boeing RC-135 is 136 feet, three inches in length, with a wingspan of 130 feet, 10 inches and a tail height of 41 feet, eight inches — and has a distinctive black nose. The Boeing 747-230B, in contrast, is 231 feet, 10 inches in length, with a wingspan of 195 feet, 8 inches and a tail height of 63 feet, 5 inches. Furthermore, with its double-deck configuration and distinctive fuselage “hump,” the 747 presents a silhouette unlike any other aircraft in the skies.

Major Gennadi Osipovich, the pilot of the SU-15 Interceptor that fired on KAL 007, later said: “I saw two rows of windows and knew that this was a Boeing. 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.”

Osipovich fired two missiles at the plane, after which he reported: “The target is destroyed.”



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But a minute later, another Soviet pilot radioed, “No, I don’t see it,” and Osipovich said, “I don’t see anything in this area. I just looked.”

With no visual confirmation that KAL 007 was actually destroyed immediately, the best guesses concerning what happened to it come from radar tracking of the plane during the minutes after the reported hit.

Thirty-nine seconds after the attack, air traffic controllers in Tokyo received a message from Captain Chun of KAL 007 that the plane was flying at “fifteen thousand ... holding with the rapid decompressions. Descending to one zero thousand [10,000 feet].”

This would have been standard procedure for an aircraft whose cabin had depressurized, since pressurization is required at altitudes of above 12,500 feet.

In his article, “[KAL 007 Remembered: The Questions Remain Unanswered](#),” in *The New American* for September 10, 1991, Robert W. Lee pointed out that the relatively slow rate of descent of KAL 007 following the attack indicated that the plane was still under some control and was inconsistent with the plane being destroyed by the missiles. He wrote: “Compelling evidence indicates that the jetliner remained airborne for at least 12 minutes after the attack... And to date, no one has adequately explained how a jetliner supposedly blown up and hurtling out of control toward the sea could take 12-plus minutes to fall 35,000 feet.”

While no one knows exactly where KAL 007 crashed or landed (possibly in the water, like United Airways Flight 1549 — the incident known as the “Miracle on the Hudson”), the Soviets’ radar told them 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. The Soviets immediately dispatched squadrons of KGB Border Guard boats, rescue helicopters, and even civilian trawlers to Moneron Island.

While no one knows the fate of the plane for sure, if Captain Chun managed to set KAL 007 down in shallow waters off Moneron, what happened to the passengers?

In 2008, we spoke with Bert Schlossberg, who had done extensive research into the fate of the Korean airliner in preparing his book, [Rescue 007: The Untold Story of KAL 007 and Its Survivors](#). Schlossberg had become closely acquainted with Avraham Shifrin, a former major in the Soviet army and criminal investigator in the Krasnodor area of the Crimea, who had been 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](#).

Because of his close association with Shifrin, Schlossberg became privy to much of the information Shifrin had collected. He summarized it for us:

- “[Shifrin’s findings were] conveyed to Sen. 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.”
- Shifrin’s report to Sen. Helms, “because it indicated that there was a probability of survivors ... encouraged Jesse Helms to write to [Russian President] Boris Yeltsin.... Yeltsin came forth with ... the real-time Russian military communications, during shoot-down, after shoot-down.”
- These communications indicated that reports of the Soviet interceptor’s missiles taking out the plane’s left wing and an engine were impossible, because the plane could not have flown without a wing and — furthermore — Capt. Chun had reported twice back after the fact, “All engines normal,



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sir.”

- “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.”

Given the limited amount of intelligence that is available from the Russian government and our own, we do not presently have the means to confirm whether all passengers aboard KAL 007 were lost, as has been generally reported, or were picked up and detained by the Soviets and their Russian successors, as Shifrin (who died in 1998) and Scholssberg believed.

Since Rep. McDonald was the most high-profile passenger on KAL 007, his fate is of particular interest, and his stature as the leading anti-Communist in American government during his day might well have prompted the Soviet government (and its successors in the Russian government — President Vladimir Putin served as a KGB officer for 16 years) to cover up what happened to him (and, by extension, the other passengers).

In 1988, we interviewed McDonald’s wife, Kathryn, who replied to our question about whether her husband had any indication that he was a threat to the Communists. She replied:

Well, as a matter of fact we had dinner with a defector from the Soviet Union who had been in Soviet intelligence. I remember it very well. He said in the KGB there are desks. Whoever is at each desk is assigned so many cases of people that they are to watch — to track. I don’t remember the number of cases per desk, but each desk has several files on the people that they were in charge of monitoring. He told Larry: “You should feel very honored, Dr. McDonald, that you have a desk all your own!”

McDonald’s political rivals in the U.S. government and establishment types in the mainstream media may have tried to pretend that he did not exist, but the KGB was well aware of his presence. It would not be surprising at all if the Soviet and Russian governments did everything they could to keep the truth about McDonald’s fate from ever surfacing.

It is also worth looking at the KAL 007 incident in contrast with the shooting down of two other civilian airliners — Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, shot down (apparently by a missile fired by allies of Russia) on July 17 over eastern Ukraine, and Iran Air Flight 655, shot down on July 3, 1988 by a pair of surface-to-air missiles fired by a U.S. Navy warship, the *USS Vincennes*.

As Charles Scaliger noted in his [article](#) posted by *The New American* on July 23:

Both [Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and Iran Air Flight 655] involved catastrophically high casualty counts, with no survivors. Both involved civilian airliners flying over active combat zones. Both involved bitter international recriminations and refusal to accept blame after the fact. And both tragedies (based on what we now know) appear to have been terrible accidents, the result of mistaken identity.

Scaliger provided these summaries of both incidents:

- *Iran Air Flight 655*: “A chain of unfortunate errors led to the shooting down of a civilian passenger liner by the U.S. Navy. Fearing political retribution, Navy personnel and U.S. government officials distorted some of the facts, while many others, with memories of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 still fresh, accused the Iranian government of dastardly complicity in encouraging the incident. But in the end, Iran Air 655 was an accident. The Vincennes did not realize it was firing at a



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passenger airliner, and the souls who perished were victims of very unfortunate circumstances typical of combat zones, and not of any deliberate targeting of civilians on either side.”

- *Malaysia Airlines Flight 17*: “If, as now appears likely, the plane was shot down by Ukrainian insurgents, it is highly improbable that those who perpetrated the act knew they were firing on a civilian aircraft. From the evidence of intercepted broadcasts, the plane was mistaken for a Ukrainian military transport.”

Unlike Iran Air 655 and Malaysia Airlines 17, however, it is highly unlikely that the shooting down of KAL 007 was an accident. The Soviet interceptors had ample time to identify the plane as a civilian airliner and Major Osipovich acknowledged after the fact that he knew it was a civilian plane. So why did the Soviets not follow standard procedure in such case and force the aircraft to land at the closest military base?

The most obvious explanation is that the Soviets (who had dedicated a KGB agent exclusively to spying on Rep. McDonald) knew he was on board and viewed the plane’s inadvertent crossing of Soviet airspace as an opportunity to silence their most formidable foe once and for all.

Confident that this was the motive for the attack on KAL 007, the editors of *The New American’s* predecessor publication, *American Opinion*, frequently used the word “murder” to describe the attack on McDonald. Whether it was murder or merely attempted murder (as some analysts of the incident believe), the Soviets’ behavior was a typical example of how communist regimes operate.

It is important that those who continue McDonald’s legacy in the freedom fight never abandon the cause and remember him as a hero in the battle.

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