

At 9:30 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time, Ambassador Marshall Shulman in the State Department sent Ambassador Malcolm Toon at the Moscow embassy a Flash precedence, personal message that began "Secretary [Vance] requests." The terse, four-sentence cable asked Toon to contact the Soviet Ministry of Defense and seek rescue assistance for downed "U.S.A.F. aircraft personnel."¹ Shulman told Toon that a Soviet vessel was understood to be in the vicinity and, sharpening the sense of urgency, added that less than three hours of daylight remained at the ditching site.

Toon's staff moved quickly. Given the early hour, the embassy's contacts must have been with ministry operations centers, where duty officers would have passed the American request up the line for the attention of their principals, almost certainly still at home in bed. Shulman had his answer from Moscow before midnight. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Defense, Toon told him in reply, had been contacted at 5:30 A.M., Moscow time; the Soviet Navy had also been notified.

Capt. Tony Bracken, the U.S. naval attaché, had called the Soviet Navy's command center directly, bypassing the established diplomatic channels, to seek a duty officer's help. On Monday, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the embassy to complain about Bracken's impolitic end run. (The correct protocol would have been to pass his request through the liaison group at the defense ministry.) The spat blew over quickly, demonstrating that even in Moscow, if only sometimes, it was easier to get forgiveness than permission.

There was no good reason for the Americans to expect the Soviet Union to cooperate, and some reason to doubt that it would. AF 586's provocative mission could not have been unknown or a mystery to the Russian commanding general in charge of the Far Eastern air defense district or to his immediate superiors in Moscow. (Air defense forces had a separate chain of command direct to Moscow, and did not report to the local military district headquarters, in this case Vladivostok.) The United States had flown PARPRO missions off (and even over) the Russian Far East for years, beginning soon after the end of World War II, when the Strategic Air Command began planning its nuclear strike missions in earnest. By the early 1950s, such flights, featuring an assortment of aircraft varied enough for an aeronautical zoo, had become routine around the periphery of the USSR, provoking regular Soviet attempts to shoot down the more impudent missions and to file bitter diplomatic protests over the others.

For most of the twenty-five-year period following the Korean War, 1953-78, the Soviet Union had done all it could to disrupt these provocative intelligence-collection flights in any way possible, including taking them down. These were deliberate shoot-downs, not the inept Chinese airmanship that would nearly put an EP-3 into the water off Hainan in 2001.

Twenty-three years earlier, Patrol Squadron 9 had itself lost a PARPRO aircraft to Soviet fighters. On 23 June 1955, two Provideniya-based MiG-15s jumped one of the squadron's P-2V5s on a PARPRO mission in the Bering Sea. Before the MiGs