

Subj: P-3 Ditching
Date: 4/8/2001 1:25:39 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: LABracken
To: USNA55@ithink.com

There was an interesting incident that occurred in the Soviet Union similar, in some ways, to the present situation with the P-3 in China. When I was Naval Attache in Moscow in the late 78 or early 79, I received a call directly from the White House late on a Saturday night. I was told that a P-3 out of Adak, Alaska had ditched in the Pacific Ocean off of the Komchatka Peninsula. The crew was in the water, but there were lights in the area presumably from Soviet fishing ships. I was asked to contact the Soviet Navy and request assistance. Somehow, I got through to the duty officer at Main Navy Headquarters and relayed the information.

The crew was picked up by a Soviet trawler and taken to Petropavlovsk, a major Soviet naval base and an area closed to all foreign travel. On Monday, I caught all kinds of grief from the Soviets for not going through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but by that time the deed was done. I immediately requested travel to Petropavlovsk but naturally was denied. The crew and two bodies were flown to Khabarovsk, the capital of the Soviet Far East and the end of the Trans-Siberian railway. It was a city open to foreign travel. There, the officers and crewmen were placed in a Border Guard hospital. The border guards are a part of the old KGB.

The Soviets allowed three of us to go to Khabarovsk: the embassy doctor, a consular officer and me. I packed a couple of bags of toiletries and skiwies and off we went. We were allowed immediate access to the crew. By this time they were in good shape and very happy to see us. They had been interrogated on the ship and in Petropavlovsk but not to any extent. Certainly, there were no threats made. They had been well cared for on the ships and in the hospital.

The crew described the situation. The P-3 had a history of engine fire problems. The procedure was to shut down the engine, feather the prop and activate a fire extinguisher in the nacelle. Some times the engine would either not shut down or not feather causing the fire to re-ignite. This resulted in a wing fire and catastrophic failure of the wing. (P-3 pilots may have a better explanation, but that's the way I remember it) If a second shot of the fire extinguisher failed to halt the fire, the procedure was to land/ditch immediately.

I can't recall if the ditching was in daylight, but the seastate was 4-5 (described as 40-foot rollers), the water temperature was 50 degrees or less and the wind was howling. The Plane Commander, a Lt. Commander, had been a seaplane pilot, which may have been a life saving factor. He put the plane down crosswind on the back side of a wave in a very controlled ditching. The aircraft broke in half and two life rafts deployed. The crew got in the rafts except for the radioman, whose station was located where the plane broke into two parts, and the Plane Commander. The Lt. Commander made sure everyone was safely out of the aircraft then went into the water to swim to a raft. Unfortunately, the wind blew the rafts away before he could reach one and he was lost. Before being rescued two crewmembers died of exposure due to faulty survival suits.

Once the crew was declared fit, a USAF transport aircraft was flown in from Japan to pick up the crew. The hospital staff, including the chief doctor, gave a farewell luncheon for their guests. It was an affair to remember. Extraordinary amounts of food and vodka were served. Many toasts were made. The Russians don't sip their vodka, they take it all at once. There was a great sense of brotherhood. I was translating the Russian toasts for the Americans and vice-versa. Finally, the vodka ran out and the doctors brought in medicinal alcohol. It was time to leave.

The Soviets had placed the bodies of the dead crewmen in caskets and our doctor accompanied them to the aircraft. We took off and flew to Japan where the crew was debriefed. It was an interesting event and showed how two superpowers at the height of the cold war could cooperate in an international lifesaving mission. By the way, I received a letter sometime later that one of the bachelor NFOs on the aircraft married the Plane Commander's widow.