

9-3-2003

The Death Flight of Larry McDonald

Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

Repository Citation

Wilkes, Donald E. Jr., "The Death Flight of Larry McDonald" (2003). *Popular Media*. Paper 49.
http://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/fac_pm/49

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Popular Media by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. For more information, please contact tstriepe@uga.edu.

THE DEATH FLIGHT OF LARRY MCDONALD

Published in slightly abridged form in *Flagpole Magazine*, p. 7 (September 3, 2003).

Author: Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law.

Twenty years ago, on Thursday, Sept. 1, 1983, Georgia Congressman Larry McDonald suffered a horrible death when the Boeing 747 airliner he was aboard was shot down by a Soviet fighter interceptor over the Sea of Japan. The 268 other persons on the plane also perished. The airliner, Korean Air Lines Flight 007, on its way to Seoul, South Korea, had twice entered Soviet airspace and was downed as it was about to leave Soviet airspace for the second time. Although many of the specific facts surrounding the shootdown of KAL 007 are unknown or disputed to this day, the violent death of the rabidly anti-Communist McDonald at the hands of the Soviet Union's Air Force appears to be a breathtaking example of the inscrutable workings of human fate and human destiny.

Lawrence Patton McDonald was born in Atlanta on Apr. 1, 1935, and graduated from the exclusive private Darlington High School in Rome in Floyd County in 1951. He then attended Davison College in North Carolina, and in 1957 received an M.D. degree from Emory University. He took postgraduate training in his speciality, urology, at the University of Michigan from 1963 to 1966. He later resided in Marietta and in 1974 was elected as a Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives seat for affluent, ultraconservative Cobb County, and was serving his fifth term as congressman for that district at the time of his death.

Conservative to a psychopathic degree, the very embodiment of the lunatic fringe of the political far right, chairman of the John Birch Society, Larry McDonald was the most vociferous and fanatical right-wing extremist ever to sit in Congress. Although McDonald imagined that his political views were those of the Founding Fathers and as American as apple pie, in truth the reactionary conservative positions he staked out as to public policy issues were out of cloud-cuckoo-land. He voted against making Martin Luther King's birthday a holiday. He voted against funding of fair housing laws. "On Capitol Hill there was nobody more anti-Communist, anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, anti-gun control, or anti-big government (except where the military was concerned)," writes David E. Pearson in *KAL 007: The Cover-Up* (1987). McDonald's anti-Communism, like his other political posturing, was infatuated to the point of being fascistic. According to R. W. Johnson's *Shootdown: Flight 007 and the American Connection* (1986), McDonald once even attempted to nominate Rudolf Hess—the convicted Nazi war criminal then serving a life imprisonment sentence imposed at the Nuremberg Trial—for the Nobel Peace Prize, on the ground "that even a Nazi war criminal was a useful asset in the struggle against Communism." A political pariah during his nearly nine years in the House of Representatives, McDonald failed to obtain enactment of any legislation and was one of the most ineffectual congressmen in history.

Larry McDonald, the most famous person on board KAL 007, had not originally planned to be on the flight and ended up on the ill-fated airliner solely because of chance. Intending to travel to Seoul to participate in the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of the United States-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty, McDonald set out on his fatal journey on Sunday, Aug. 28, 1983 when he departed the Atlanta Airport on a flight bound for Kennedy Airport in New York City.

Due to bad weather, McDonald's plane was diverted to Baltimore and when McDonald finally arrived at Kennedy he discovered he had missed his intended flight to Seoul by two or three minutes. He therefore decided to stay in New York City for two days and fly to Seoul on the KAL 007 flight which was scheduled to depart from Kennedy early on Wednesday, Aug. 31. In his last telephone conversation with his wife before boarding KAL 007, McDonald's wife (who had uneasy feelings about his trip) pleaded with him to cancel his visit to South Korea and come home, but McDonald refused.

With McDonald in aisle seat 02B in the first class section, KAL 007 duly took off on Aug. 31 at 12:24 a.m. local time, en route to Anchorage, Alaska for a scheduled stopover. After a 3,400 mile trip that lasted seven hours, the airliner landed in Anchorage. The plane remained on the ground for an hour and a half during which it was refueled, reprovisioned with food and drink, and cleaned and serviced. Four fortunate passengers, having completed their trips, disembarked at Anchorage, while several other passengers boarded the plane. The remaining passengers were given the option of leaving the aircraft and visiting the airport's huge duty-free shopping mall. Most did, but McDonald remained on the plane, catching up on his sleep. With a fresh flight crew, KAL 007 took off at 4 a.m. local time. The plane was scheduled to fly non-stop over the Pacific to Seoul's Kimpo International Airport, a nearly 4,500 mile stretch that would take slightly more than eight hours. There were 269 persons on board—246 passengers and 23 crew. "The passengers were a diverse group, including 75 South Koreans, 61 Americans, 23 Taiwanese, 28 Japanese, 15 Filipinos, 12 Chinese from Hong Kong, 10 Canadians, 6 Thais, and 4 Australians," Seymour Hersh writes in *"The Target is Destroyed: What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It"* (1986). "Twenty-three were children under twelve."

Although it was equipped with multiple sophisticated navigational systems and its cockpit crew was highly experienced and proficient, KAL 007 began deviating from its prescribed flight path within 10 minutes of takeoff. About three and a half hours into the flight, and by now hundreds of miles off course, KAL 007 began approaching Soviet territories where, as Oliver Clubb notes in *KAL Flight 007: The Hidden Story* (1985), "there [was] a highly important complex of Soviet strategic bases." Soon KAL 007 was flying over the Soviet Union's Kamchatka Peninsula, a barren and frozen 750-mile long land mass bristling with Soviet military and naval facilities, many of them top-secret. Soviet fighter jets were scrambled to deal with the intruder but failed to intercept the airliner. After flying through Soviet airspace for 38 minutes, Flight 007 exited Soviet territory. It then flew in international airspace over the Sea of Okhotsk for about an hour and a half. The airliner, which had now been aloft for five hours, then began to approach another part of the Soviet Union, Sakhalin Island, a long, thin island about half the size of Florida located southwest of the Sea of Okhotsk. Sakhalin was crammed with Soviet naval bases and shipyards, military airfields, and radar and intelligence-gathering facilities. KAL 007 actually re-entered Soviet airspace at 3:16 a.m. local time (it was still Aug. 31 in the United States, but now Sept. 1 here). As KAL 007 entered Soviet airspace for the second time in less than two hours, more Soviet fighter jets were sent up to deal with the intruder.

One of the planes sent up was an SU-15 supersonic fighter piloted by 39-year old Soviet Air Force Lt. Col. Gennadi Osipovich. After trailing the airliner for 60 miles, Osipovich was ordered to destroy the intruder, which in less than two minutes would exit Soviet airspace. At

precisely 3:26 a.m. local time, from a distance of about three miles behind, he fired two air to air missiles at the airliner, which was cruising at about 35,000 feet. One missile was heat-seeking, the other radar-guided. The missiles, which each weighed 600 pounds (including a 70-pound high explosive warhead), whooshed toward the target at over 1,600 miles mph.

Less than five seconds later one or possibly both of the missiles struck the airliner. The resulting explosion was witnessed by the crew of a Japanese fishing boat six miles below who after hearing a loud bang looked up and saw what they described as "a glowing orange-colored, expanding fireball" which illuminated the night sky for around six seconds. Fatally damaged, the airliner did not immediately plummet into the icy waters of the Sea of Japan below; instead, with the cockpit crew struggling to control it, the aircraft began descending rapidly in vast, ever-widening spirals. Four minutes after being hit, KAL 007 had spiraled down to 16,000 feet, and eight minutes later it was at 2,000 feet. "[T]hen," as Alexander Dallin puts it bluntly in *Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers* (1985), "having left Soviet territory, [the airliner] plunged vertically into the sea." From 2,000 feet about one minute would elapse until the doomed plane impacted with the sea. David E. Pearson writes that during those final 60 seconds, as the sea below appeared to be rushing up at them at fantastic speed, "time must have seemed an eternity for the innocent passengers on board. Their horror and fear must have been unbearable."

The last minutes of Larry McDonald's life had to have been worse than a nightmare. "The scene inside the plane must have been utterly terrifying—people falling and sliding, children screaming and an icy, knifelike wind shrieking into the plane as it fell and fell through an age of blackness," R. W. Johnson relates. "One cannot read, let alone write, about such scenes without experiencing the strongest and most elemental emotions.... A few of the passengers may have been lucky enough to have been killed outright by the metal fragments tearing through the plane. Those who were asleep would have been awoken by an immense shock wave and a terrifying crash. The oxygen would have been rapidly sucked out of the plane and the onrush of thin, freezing air would have produced both a thick mist and a tremendous drop in temperature. In these conditions, with people screaming and probably thrown about the cabin, many—most notably the babies and smaller children—would have failed to get their oxygen masks on.... [The passengers] who did not suffer rapid asphyxiation would have begun, quite rapidly, to freeze to death. Unfortunately, though, some would have got their oxygen masks on and the residual warmth of the cabin (plus their sleeping blankets) and the plane's rapid descent into more breathable air would have meant that some—perhaps many—of the 269 people aboard would have survived to live through another 12 minutes of utter terror before meeting their deaths."

Seymour Hersh also gives us a vivid description of how horrific those final moments must have been for McDonald and the other persons on KAL 007: "The attack came at a time when passengers would be asleep or trying to sleep; the last twelve minutes could only have been agonizing. The cabin, whether directly hit or penetrated by missile fragments, would immediately lose air pressure and would begin turning cold; some passengers, still strapped into their seats, may have been killed outright by shrapnel or debris as others watched terror-stricken. Those who suffered the most would be the ones who survived the first moments. The cabin would fog as the drop in air density caused the water vapor in the air to precipitate immediately. Within seconds the airliner's air-conditioning units, reacting to the sudden drop in temperature, would begin pumping heat into the cabin. Many of the passengers, protected by blankets and

breathing through oxygen masks, would have survived the initial missile impact—and the descent to the sea—knowing that they were going to their death."

The KAL 007 shootdown unleashed ugly exchanges of recriminations between the United States and the Soviet Union. As Marilyn J. Young and Michael K. Launer astutely observe in *Flights of Fancy, Flight of Doom: KAL 007 and Soviet-American Rhetoric* (1988): "In mounting their respective propaganda campaigns, both the Reagan administration and the Andropov government withheld information, distorted the facts, and engaged in the 'creation of truth.'"

Today, two decades after the KAL 007 death flight, the Soviet Union and its Communist regime no longer exist, and passions have cooled. Some new evidence concerning the tragedy is also available. Furthermore, an event occurring in 1988 has sapped noticeably American outrage about the downing of Larry McDonald's plane. Much of the revulsion Americans felt about the KAL 007 shootdown was premised on the instinctive assumption that (as Richard Rohmer asserts in *Massacre 747* (1984)) "the shooting down of a civilian airliner has no justification in human, moral or civilized terms." Americans reacting to the KAL 007 deaths firmly thought that, as *The New York Times* wrote at the time, "There is no conceivable excuse for any nation shooting down a harmless airliner ... and no circumstance whatever justifies attacking an innocent plane." However, on July 3, 1988, less than five years after the KAL 007 disaster, a U.S. Navy vessel in the Persian Gulf, under the mistaken impression that it was threatened with attack by a hostile airplane, fired a ground to air missile at an innocent commercial airliner, Iran Air Flight 655, which in broad daylight was flying within its approved flight path over international waters and had not strayed into any unauthorized airspace. The missile destroyed Flight 655, and all 290 persons aboard were killed. Both the Reagan administration and the American press trotted out various excuses for the downing of the Iranian airliner, expressed sympathy for the captain of the vessel that fired the missile, and claimed that the flight crew of the airliner was partly at fault for what happened. But the Flight 655 incident forever ended this country's previous confident assumption that military attacks destroying civilian airliners were in all cases outrageous, barbaric, and uncivilized.

What, then, are some of the dispassionate conclusions which at the present time may be drawn about the KAL 007 tragedy?

First, contrary to what the United States maintained at the time, it is now definitely established that prior to the shootdown the Soviets made unsuccessful efforts to communicate with the airliner by radio, that before any missiles were launched the fighters used their cannons to fire bursts of warning shots which the airliner ignored, and that the Soviets did not know that the plane they were attacking was a civilian airliner. Furthermore, it is almost certain that the Soviets mistook the airliner for a Boeing 707 American intelligence aircraft which was operating off the coast of Kamchatka and was in the vicinity of KAL 007 two hours before the shootdown.

Second, although it was kept secret at the time, within a day or two of the shootdown American intelligence agencies knew that the Soviets had attacked KAL 007 without realizing it was a civilian airliner.

Third, from an examination of the cockpit conversation during the half-hour preceding the

missile attack it is now known that, to quote a 1993 report by the International Civil Aviation Organization, there was "a normal, relaxed atmosphere on the flight deck of KAL 007," and that "the flight crew of KAL 007 was not aware of the presence of the [Soviet] interceptor aircraft before or at the time of the attack." The ICAO's report is based on a transcript of the plane's cockpit voice recorder tapes. Those tapes, after being surreptitiously recovered and then hidden away by the Soviet Union, were handed over to the ICAO by the Russian Federation (the Soviet Union's successor) in 1992. The seven-page transcript, which tells us everything that was said by the flight crew during the period beginning 32 minutes before the plane was hit and ending one and a half minutes after the sound of an explosion, is available online and may be viewed by visiting the Aviation Safety Network Homepage (www.aviation-safety.net/cvr/cvr_ke007.htm). Thus, it may be definitely concluded that nothing in the known cockpit conversation indicates that KAL 007 was on a spy mission, that the aircraft took any evasive actions prior to the attack, or that it was even aware of the mortal danger facing it.

Fourth, in view of the United States's massive radar and electronic surveillance capabilities in the Far East, it is fairly certain that American intelligence agencies were lying when they claimed that during the flight they were unaware that KAL 007 was dangerously off course and that consequently they could not have arranged for the airliner to be warned that it was in peril.

Fifth, while it remains unknown why KAL 007 deviated from its authorized flight path and ended up flying into Soviet airspace, the numerous explanations once offered for the deviation have been reduced to two. The first is that KAL 007 innocently strayed from its course because the flight crew committed but failed to detect enormous navigational errors. The second is that the airliner was intentionally off course because it was on a spying mission (presumably for a United States intelligence agency).

The main problem with the first explanation is that it compels us to believe things that are impossibly unlikely—namely, that an experienced and skilled flight crew not only displayed a shocking lack of alertness and attentiveness, but also omitted to perform a huge number of required navigational instrument checks while ignoring a staggering number of warnings. As Oliver Clubb correctly notes, the theory that KAL 007 accidentally strayed "assume[s] that the airliner's crew did not properly carry out any of a whole series of routine procedures—any one of which, properly carried out, would have negated the possibility of gross deviation in the first instance or enabled the crew to discover that deviation and bring the aircraft back on course. The picture here is of an unbelievably incompetent, irresponsible, and careless air crew.... [T]he odds against all of these virtually inconceivable errors of commission and omission taking place ... are astronomical."

The principal problem with second explanation—that there was a deliberate diversion from the planned flight route for the purpose of intelligence-gathering—is that, while there are a number of highly suspicious circumstances pointing in the direction of this possibility, there is still no solid or conclusive evidence in support of this hypothesis. The KAL 007 cockpit tape recordings certainly do not give any indication of a possible espionage mission. On the other hand, it must be realized that American intelligence agencies had used civilian planes for spying operations in the past and that if they had done so in this case they would hardly admit it and would be expert at covering up their involvement.

The corpse of Larry McDonald was never recovered from the depths of the Sea of Japan, and today he seems a nearly forgotten figure from a bygone era.

John Calvin, the Reformation theologian, would not admit the existence of such a thing as fortune or chance; "we [do not] suppose fortune holds any dominion over the world and mankind, and whirls about all things," he wrote in his famous *Institutes*. "Fortune and chance are words ... with [no] signification." But the fate of Larry McDonald suggests the contrary. McDonald would not have died a violent death at age 48 if it had not been for a series of chance events. How different, we realize, McDonald's destiny might have been if, after his plane from Atlanta was diverted, he had arrived at the New York airport a few minutes earlier and been able to board his intended flight; if he had decided to reschedule his journey by taking some flight other than KAL 007; if his wife's forebodings had persuaded him to scrap his plans to go to South Korea and he had never boarded KAL 007; if after leaving Anchorage KAL 007 had remained on course, or had corrected its course when it strayed; if KAL 007 had entered Soviet airspace only once rather than twice; if no American reconnaissance aircraft had been in the same vicinity as KAL 007 at about the same time; if KAL 007 had responded to Soviet radio inquiries or heeded Soviet warnings; or if, before the fighter was prepared to launch its missiles, KAL 007 had been able to make it into the international airspace that was so near when the missiles were fired. The goddess of fortune, however, seems not to have smiled on him, and chance events appear to have inexorably doomed him. Because any of these "ifs" could have happened, and none of them did, was not Larry McDonald therefore fated to die?

One of the few Georgia memorials to Larry McDonald is the segment of I-75 running through Cobb county, which is named after him. In this way does Cobb county—the county where Leo Frank was lynched by respectable local citizens and where the lynchers were admired and protected and their identities concealed as part of a coverup by the local citizenry that continues to this day, the county that later elected Bob Barr to Congress, the county whose governing body a few years ago approved a resolution condemning "the gay lifestyle," the county where currently public school teaching of the scientific truths of biology is under attack and hamstrung due to the opposition of the right-wing political elements that regard evolution as against the Bible—pay its respects to Larry McDonald.

The incident in which Larry McDonald died was a catastrophic tragedy in which many innocent lives, including children and babies, were lost. It is also true, in the words of the old apothegm, that of the dead nothing should be said but good. But Larry McDonald was a demented, repulsive politician whose politics were so loathsome and his political career so vile that with regard to his death harsh judgments cannot be ameliorated by the awful circumstances of his demise.

The Appendix to this article contains a list of books about the KAL 007 tragedy.

APPENDIX

BOOKS ABOUT KAL 007

Richard Rohmer, *Massacre 747* (1984). Rohmer is a former WW2 fighter pilot. He believes that the pilot of KAL 007 deliberately flew into Soviet airspace in order to reduce flying time and save fuel.

Jeffrey St. John, *Day of the Cobra: The True Story of KAL Flight 007* (1984). This book, written by one of Larry McDonald's true believers, is a piece of hysterical twaddle premised on the false, absurd notion that the Soviets, using electronic devices, deliberately lured KAL 007 off course so that they could murder McDonald.

Oliver Clubb, *KAL Flight 007: The Hidden Story* (1985). Clubb is a political science professor at Syracuse University. He believes that KAL 007 was engaged in an intelligence mission when it was shot down.

Alexander Dallin, *Black Box: KAL 007 and the Superpowers* (1985). Dallin is a Stanford University history professor. His book is regarded as the best single work on KAL 007. He meticulously examines various explanations for KAL 007's route over Soviet territory.

Seymour Hersh, *"The Target is Destroyed:" What Really Happened to Flight 007 and What America Knew About It* (1986). Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist. His book is based in large part on candid interviews with anonymous members of the American intelligence community. He believes KAL 007 went off course due to unintended navigational errors by the flight crew.

R. W. Johnson, *Shootdown: Flight 007 and the American Connection* (1986). Johnson is an Oxford University professor. He believes that KAL 007 was on an intelligence mission.

David E. Pearson, *KAL 007: The Cover-Up* (1987). Pearson, a Yale University graduate student, thinks it likely that KAL 007 was on an intelligence mission.

Marilyn J. Young and Michael K. Launer, *Flights of Fancy, Flight of Doom: KAL 007 and Soviet-American Rhetoric* (1988). The authors, both graduate students at Florida State University, analyze the propaganda war between the United States and the Soviet Union which followed the KAL 007 shootdown.

James Gollin and Robert Allardyce, *Desired Track: The Tragic Flight of KAL 007* (1994) (2 vols.) The authors, both aircraft navigation experts, believe that KAL 007's flight crew flew their aircraft on a preplanned course designed to take it into Soviet airspace.

Michel Brun, *Incident at Sakhalin: The True Mission of KAL Flight 007* (1995). Brun is a French aviation expert. His book preposterously claims that (1) when the doomed airliner approached Soviet airspace there was a two hour air battle between American and Soviet military planes which resulted in the deaths of 30 American servicemen and the loss of 10 American military aircraft, and (2) the airliner never entered Soviet airspace and was destroyed 45 minutes later than generally thought and crashed in the Sea of Japan at a site hundreds of miles from the location everyone else thinks it went down.

Bert Schlossberg, *Rescue 007: The Untold Story of KAL 007 and Its Survivors* (2001). Schlossberg is an American-born Israeli scholar. His book makes the even more preposterous claim that after being attacked KAL 007 ditched safely in the Soviet territorial waters of the Sea of Japan, that 256 survivors were rescued by the Soviets, and that the survivors, including Larry McDonald, have been secretly detained ever since in Russian prisons and labor camps. (Schlossberg is International Director of an organization unbelievably entitled "The International Committee for the Rescue of KAL 007 Survivors." Its website: www.rescue007.org.)