

## RISK AND REWARD OF RECONNAISSANCE

It was a cool and cloudy morning on April 15, 1969, when a flight crew of thirty one was making its final pre-flight preparations. This crew was embarking on a routine reconnaissance mission off the coast of North Korea. These thirty sailors and one Marine had flown this mission many times before for Fleet Reconnaissance Squadron One based in Atsugi, Japan and had never failed to return to base.

This morning was an exception, for none of these men would ever see their families again. This day would bring the end of life for these thirty one brave souls and the start of newly innagurated President Richard M. Nixon's first international crisis. It would test the United States' resolve to act tough in light of the recent Pueblo Incident.

Secretary of State William P. Rogers addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors and stated, "The weak can be rash; the powerful must be more restrained. Great power does not mean great freedom of action. On the contrary, it often means very narrow choices of action and what we can do to influence events in any given case may well be marginal." This then was an early call for restraint from the White House to the American people. We could not start another war at the very time we were in the middle of Viet Nam.

North Korea had shot down an unarmed plane of the United States Navy over the Sea of Japan. And, as we knew from the Pueblo Incident, Washington discovered that short of war little could be done about it.

The plane was known as an EC 121, a converted Lockheed Super Constellation, four-engined with a top speed of three hundred miles per hour. The hull was dark gray on the bottom and white on the top, and the only ornamentation was a bar of red and white at the tip of each propeller. The long lean look of the Constellation was distorted by large bubbles or domes protruding from the top and bottom of the fuselage; a true humped back sitting duck.

The domes contained six tons of electronic gear with which to listen to alien communications, spot military bases, and keep a sensitive finger on the pulse of any potential enemy. The EC 121 was a flying international snoop.

The orders were issued to the crew of the EC 121 to conduct a normal recon mission off the coast of North Korea and to remain at least fifty miles off the coast. The Pyongyang government claimed only twelve miles as territorial waters.

The plane's mission was a methodical sweep over the coast gathering any data which could be gleaned from the North Koreans. When this mission reached its halfway point, about seven hours in the air, two unidentified blips were picked up on U.S. Military radar.

Abruptly, the blip that represented the EC 121 vanished. It was reported later through the Navy rumor mill that the last unscrambled message received by the base at Atsugi was, "those bastards are shooting at us." The crew realized that a pair of North Korean fighter planes were coming to investigate but never anticipated their real purpose. One version of the story is that the EC 121 tried to evade the attack and dropped to the lowest altitude possible and attempted to run for home. A more plausible version is that the crew never knew what hit them.

The first official word came from a boastful North Korean radio, "a large-size modernly-equipped plane of the insolent U.S. imperialist aggressor had committed the grave provocation of infiltrating deep into North Korean air and had been shot down in a brilliant battle success by showering fire of revenge upon it."

In Washington, the Pentagon replied: "All evidence available to us, including North Korean claims and debris sightings, leads us to believe that the aircraft was shot down by North Korean aircraft. From a variety of sources, some of them sensitive, we are able to confirm that, at all times during its mission, the aircraft was far outside any claimed territorial air space of North Korea." Later it was confirmed that the aircraft's position was fixed between 100 and 120 miles off the coast, southeast of the port of Chongjin.

A fleet of rescue ships fanned out from Japan and South Korean. Wreckage was found - pieces of fuselage torn by gunfire, lifejackets,

a flare, a parachute, a piece of rudder and two bodies were all that remained.

The Soviet Union joined the search with destroyers 429 and 580 from the Red Banner Pacific Fleet. They picked up debris and spread it on their deck for photographing by low-swooping U.S. planes. The Soviets sent "condolences in connection with the loss of your aircraft." A communist newspaper in Hong Kong assailed the action for "brazenly and shamelessly selling out North Korea."

Nothing was heard from the White House for three days as Nixon discussed with his advisors what our reaction should be.

North Korea summoned a meeting of the Military Armistice Commission on April 17th at Panmunjon to accuse the United States of 39 violations of the truce line in the preceding week. Accusations were hurled across the table until the U.S. delegation lead by Major General James B. Knopp walked out. The North Korean delegation sat in muted silence for two minutes then they too departed.

Richard Nixon broke his silence that same Thursday when he told reporters that the attack on the EC 121 was "deliberate" and a "completely surprise attack in every sense of the word." "I have today ordered that these flights be continued," he went on. "They will be protected. This is not a threat. It is simply a statement of fact."

As a gesture of strength the United States launched Task Force 71. It consisted of three cruisers, 16 destroyers, four aircraft carriers

with 260 planes. A force large enough to do considerable damage to the North Koreans. This force sailed around Korea and Russia for about one week before they dispersed in early May.

Thus the Nixon Administration committed itself to nonviolent response to North Korea's belligerence. It was not a decision arrived at lightly. William Beecher reported in the New York Times on May 5th that the first inclination was for stern military retaliation. He quoted sources in several agencies of government "that planning went as far as the selection of two bombing targets."

The trigger was not pressed at the insistence of President Nixon's closest advisors, particularly Secretary of State Rogers, Beecher wrote later that it was the President's own belief that, "as time passed, the American people might consider bombing raids against North Korea as hauntingly similar" to the Gulf of Tonkin air strikes in August 1964 which led to deep U.S. involvement in Viet Nam.

The White House remembered all too clearly candidate Nixon's statements during the 1968 election campaign about the loss of Pueblo. Nixon said on one occasion "Unless the United States reacts to these slights you are bound to encourage bigger slights and you are going to have more Pueblos. In a new administration, I say we've got to stop that kind of action before it gets started."

In Congress there were few voices that raised the hue and cry for military retaliation. At this stage in our history we were deeply involved in Vietnam and few members of Congress wanted to start

another military engagement. A majority opinion either (1) questioned whether the spy flights were worth the risk, particularly with un-armed planes, or (2) took the practical viewpoint of Senator Jacob K. Javits that "Intelligence gathering is a very risky business and you don't go to war over every incident."

The administration concluded that there was no great pressure for strident talk or action. Nixon fell back on diplomacy and stated at a May 17th news conference: "I do not want to leave the implication that the announcement of the continuation of the reconnaissance flights is the final action that can or will be made here. Our action in this matter will be determined by what happens in the future." This statement again leads one to realize the essential impotence of the strong in dealing with the weak. We have seen many instances of this impotence since the EC 121 was shot down. Kidnappers in the Middle East, hostages in Iran, airline highjackings, bombs that destroy our embassies and innocent civilians killed at sea are all examples of our essential impotence. The American people often feel like hostages within our own borders.

Many Far Eastern affairs experts have insisted that the North Korean government's real target was South Korea and not the United States.

This EC 121 attack and the Pueblo affair were demonstrations to South Korea that the United States could not or would not be a fighting ally in case of a showdown.

Military people in the United States were convinced that, even in light of possible military conflicts with hostile powers, the reconnaissance flights should continue. The intelligence flights were considered insurance by the Pentagon against any surprises the communist world might have.

I reported to Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One in April of 1971.

Two years after this incident occurred there were still very bitter feelings in the squadron about Nixon's handling of this affair.

I did observe, however, that most of the members of the squadron treated it as an occupational hazard.

I flew 39 missions in two years off the coast of Viet Nam, China, and Russia but never off the coast of North Korea. Our squadron within 12 short months received orders from the Pentagon to discontinue our North Korean surveillance.

A few personal observations are in order. Our crew of thirty one consisted of four pilots, two flight engineers, two navigators, six radar operators, one radar officer, two radio operators, one

engine mechanic, one metal mechanic, and ten to twelve spooks, as we called them. The spooks were intelligence personnel trained in languages, radars, and general military strategy. Often a member of the Central Intelligence Agency or the Defense Intelligence Agency would be a member of our crew. The flight crew, of which I was a member, often were not allowed to know the nature of the mission unless we had a need to know and a top secret clearance.

Most of the missions we flew were of a routine intelligence gathering nature but every once in awhile we would be tasked with a special mission. Let me suffice to say, I have flown over Russia and North Viet Nam. These sea stories would be better told at a future date.

The free world must continue vigilant surveillance of our enemies but must be willing to pay the occasional price for this information. As in the EC 121 incident, we will have times when the very fibre of American resolve is tested to maintain the flow of information. Our impotence will be exposed when we cannot retaliate against those who attack our surveillance mission. Our diplomacy will be tested when we have to deal with the Khadafy's and the Khomeini's of the world. If we do attempt to protect this or any other mission we must have the ability to strike back on the spot of attack and that means fighting, and when fighting starts, who could tell where it would stop.