

Review of the History Channel documentary on the Secrets of the Black Box: KAL 007

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Undoubtedly, high quality, intriguing, and utterly absorbing in the mixture of interview and visual re-enactment, this document created illusions in the matters that most concern us - the possibility of the survival of both KAL 007 from the attack upon it, and the likelihood of its passengers and crew to survive its downing in the Tatar straits of Sakhalin Island.

The Minor Illusion we were shown:

We see the Sukhoi 15 interceptor piloted by Major Gennadie Osipovich from the rear a few kilometers behind KAL 007 which is directly in front and slightly above the Soviet interceptor. Two missiles, one after the other, are launched and streak toward the jumbo jet. The first misses, going past the left side of 007. The second hits bull to the tail and the greater part of the plane is engulfed momentarily in a cloud of black smoke and fire. We are shortly shown (mock-up, of course) the left side of the fuselage toward the rear. There are a number of wedge shaped gashes each about 2-3 square feet in area. As we have seen that the missile was launched from directly behind 007, we imagine that the right side of the passenger plane is likewise pocked by such ruptures. We are later informed by a short clip of an expert that the hydraulics (which provide actuation for all the primary flight controls; all secondary flight controls except leading edge flaps) were destroyed. The strange thing is in all this conflagration, we see the tail section of 007 intact! The aircraft immediately begins its out of control flight down toward destruction.

The Reality:

Of the two R-98 medium range air-to-air "Anab" missiles launched, the first, the "heat seeker", designed to home in on the engine, did miss KAL 007 as shown by the Cockpit Voice Recorder tapes twice after the launch " Engines normal, Sir". But the second missile also did not hit KAL 007. It was a "proximity fused" one, designed to detonate 50 meters behind an aircraft throwing its fragments forward - which it did. But far from the area of destruction shown by the documentary, the total area combined of all the ruptures to the skin of the fuselage was only 1 and 3/4 square feet. (determined by ICAO analysis by the 11 seconds it took after the sound of detonation picked up by the Cockpit Voice Recorder and the alert warning heard indicating that air was escaping from the cabin)

Furthermore, KAL 007, a Boeing 747, had four hydraulic systems, which featured a "redundancy" advantage and which all fed into control of flight surfaces . Though systems 1, 2, and 3 were damaged or out, system number 4 was untouched.

Far from KAL 007 beginning a descent to destruction, it began to ascend- from 35,000 feet altitude to 38,250 ft!

The History Channel will pass over the following sequence entirely:

From the altitude of 38,250 ft., Capt Chun, struggling to lower the altitude, finally succeeds, having disengaged the auto pilot and switched to manual, and puts KAL 007 into a steep accelerating dive - from which he pulls out and in an ascent lasting 10 seconds, KAL 007 reaches its pre-missile attack altitude of 35,000 ft. Furthermore, acceleration is now back to normal "zero" acceleration, and "Indicated Air Speed" is now back almost exactly to what it had been just prior to the attack. We now (from the transcripts themselves) hear the following from the Flight Deck:

18:27:20: Now... We have to set this

18:27:23: speed

18:27:26: Stand by, stand by, stand by, stand by, set!

To its great discredit, the History Channel dislocates this dialogue, and changes it from a hopeful sign of determination and harbinger of success, to a futile act of despair and desperation by placing these words, at the very end of KAL 007's flight as we see the image of KAL 007 about to plunge into the sea. In actuality these words were spoken immediately after KAL 007's pull-up and less than 1 1/2 minutes after the attack at 18:26:02. (KAL 007's flight lasted at least 12 minutes)

The Greater Illusion:

We see the stricken jumbo jet in its plunge down in the night sky soon to be dawning. But for a moment, just a flicker - was the lay of those faintly lit clouds in the backdrop showing a level flying KAL 007?- but the flicker over, we see the aircraft in its relentness downward plunge to the sea and finally we see it's left wing dipping down and we see a great crash into the sea. We are told that that angle and speed explain the fact that there was such a dearth of wreckage despite the intensive search operation by Soviet, US, Japanese, and Korean search and rescue forces. We no longer wonder why this documentary conveys the strong impression that survivors of this great catastrophe would be utterly unthinkable. Truly, no could have survived that metal crushing end of Flight 007.

The Reality:

The black box recordings end abruptly at 1 minute and 44 seconds after missile detonation but containing the record of KAL 007, after it's 10 second pull up, showing the beginning a very gradual descent. Moreover, it has ceased its accelerating and now it is at zero acceleration and its Indicated Air Speed is nearly exactly what it was prior to the attack upon it. That may be the end of the Black Box recording but it is not the end of Soviet radar trackings as well as the actual Soviet military communications all the way up and down the hierarchy as top Generals and their subordinates view KAL 007's flight

after the attack. These trackings and communications were also available to History Channel but no indication of their use appears in the documentary. We are able to open up that "flicker" and learn the following -

KAL 007, in the duration of that flicker, which in actuality lasted almost 5 minutes (which partly explains why the death flight lasted more than 12 minutes rather than the 2 1/2 minutes it should have), leveled out at 18:31 and continued it's flight at 16,424 ft. altitude (5,000 meters) - so contrary to the impression created by the documentary.

The ICAO summation of the radar tracking - "The last plotted radar position of the target was 18:35 hours at 5,000 meters." (ICAO 1993, pg. 53, para. 2.15.8)
And we are also able to learn what the Soviets saw on their screen both before and during that flicker. To their amazement, shock, and horror, they saw KAL 007, flying, maneuvering, and in level flight, and escaping!

Novoseletski: (18:28)

Titovnin, well, what is happening?

Titovnin: Nothing for the moment.

Novoseletski: Well, what is happening, what is the matter, who guided him in, he locked on, why didn't he shoot it down?

Titovnin: They fired. They fired. We are now waiting for the result, Comrade Colonel.

At 18:28, General Kornukov has been made aware not only of KAL 007's survival, but also of its maneuverability.

Gerasimenko: The target turned to the north.

Kornukov: The target turned to the north?

Gerasimenko: Affirmative.

Kornukov: Bring the 23 [MiG] in to destroy it!

By 18:29, General Kornukov is furious over the failure to down KAL 007, and he lashes out at Lt. Col. Gerasimenko. His speech and his thoughts have become confused.

Gerasimenko: Comrade right turn.

Kornukov: Well, I understand, I do not understand the result, why is the target flying? Missiles were fired. Why is the target flying? [obscenities] Well, what is happening?

Gerasimenko: Yes.

Kornukov: Well, I am asking, give the order to the Controller, what is wrong with you there? Have you lost your tongues?

Gerasimenko: Comrade General, I gave the order to the Chief of Staff, the Chief of Staff to the Controller, and the Controller is giving the order to...

Kornukov (18:30): Well, how long does it take for this information to get through, well, what, [you] cannot ask the results of firing the missiles, where, what, did [he] not understand or what?

Kornukov (18:32): Tell 23 [MiG 23]...Afterburner. Open fire. Destroy the target, then land at home base.

Gerasimenko: Roger.

Kornukov: Altitude...what is altitude of our fighter and the altitude of the target? Quickly. the altitude of the target and the altitude of the fighter?...

Why don't you say anything?...Gerasimenko!...

Gerasimenko (18:33): Gerasimenko. Altitude is 5,000.

Kornukov: 5,000 already?

Gerasimenko (18:34): Affirmative, turning left, right, apparently it is descending.

At 18:34, then, eight minutes after missile impact, "attack" radar has lost contact with Flight 007, never again to regain it. KAL 007 is at this time at 16,400 feet altitude (5,000 meters).

Kornukov: Destroy it, use the 23 to destroy it, I said!

Gerasimenko: Roger, destroy it.

Kornukov: Well, where is the fighter, how far from the target?

Gerasimenko: Comrade General, they cannot see the target.

Kornukov: They cannot see the target?

What is clear from the transcripts is that the History Channel is wrong. KAL 007 did not go into an uncontrolled spiral descent upon missile detonation, but rather, after leveling off at 16,424 feet for a nearly 5 minute flight, it only then began its slow spiral descent. This suggests that that spiral flight was a purposeful and intentional maneuver. We would not know for which purpose that would be from the documentary, because there is no mention of the actual location of that spiral which is, indeed, specified in the transcripts.

The spiral descent took place precisely over 4 1/2 mile long and 3 1/2 mile wide Moneron Island about 24 miles off the west coast of Sakhalin Island. The purpose for the spiral descent, then, could only have been to seek a place close enough to land for a safe water ditching.

And it was to this Island, Moneron, that the Soviets sent out their long concealed rescue missions.

Gen. Kornukov (18:36): ...you know the range, where the target is. It is over Moneron... (ICAO, 1993, Information Paper No. 1, pg. 136.)

Lt. Col. Novoseletsky (commander, Smirykh Air Force Base) (18:39): So, the task. They say it has violated the State border again now?

Flight Controller Titovnin: Well, it is the area of Moneron, of course, over our territory.

Lt. Col. Novosletsky: Get it! Get it! Go ahead, bring in the MiG 23 (ICAO, 1993, Information Paper No. 1, pg. 90.)

Novoseletski (18:47): You don't have the sunrise there yet?

Titovnin: No, it will be in about thirty minutes.

Novoseletski: Prepare whatever helicopters there are. Rescue helicopters.

Titovnin: Rescue?

Novoseletski: Yes. And there will probably be a task set for the area where the target was lost.

Titovnin: Roger. Is this to be done through your SAR [Search and Rescue]?

Novoseletski: Eh?

Titovnin: Assign the task to Chaika through your SAR, Comrade Colonel, Khomutovo [Civilian and military airport at Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk City in southern Sakhalin] does not come under us and neither does Novoaleksandrovka. We have nothing here.

Novoseletski: Very well.

Titovnin: Novoaleksandrovka must be brought to readiness and Khomutovo. The border guards and KGB are at Khomutovo.

“Chaika” is the call sign of the Far East Military District (FEMD) Air Force Command Post. Consequently, this first documented rescue mission could only be effected by order

of the FEMD, which was second in jurisdiction to the Soviet Far East Military Theatre of Operations. Neither the shooting down nor the rescue of Flight 007 was, therefore, of local decision.

Apparently, neither Smirnykh Air Force Base in central Sakhalin (under the Tactical Air Command and from where the MiG23 ordered to guarantee destruction of KAL 007 was based) and Sokol Air Force base in southern Sakhalin (under the Air Defense Command where Osipovich and his SU-15 were based) had any available rescue helicopters. Therefore, the jurisdictional step up to the Far East Military District Air Force was required to bring the out-of-jurisdiction Khomutovo Air Base into action. Khomutovo was the civilian and military airbase at Yuzhno (Southern) Sakhalinsk City.

The second mission involved the civilian ships in the vicinity of Moneron as well as the border guards. This mission was ordered at 18:55; just 29 minutes after missile impact and 17 minutes after KAL 007 had reached point zero altitude.

(That at least one Soviet naval rescue mission had been ordered even before KAL007 had reached the surface of the waters off Moneron is attested by the following - taken from the Izvestia testimony of a Soviet Naval Specialist who had been involved in the rescue mission: "When we learned that the aircraft had been attacked, and that weapons had been used, we began to analyse when it might possibly come down. Ships were ordered to the anticipated [emphasis added] area. Several ships headed there at once at full speed...")

Gen. Strogov (18:54): Hello... Hello, Titovnin... You s... [obscenities] I'll lock you up in the guard house. Why don't you pick up the phone?

Titovnin: Comrade General, everyone was busy here.

Strogov: You have nothing there to be busy with. Busy! What kind of nonsense is that? So, where is Kornukov?

Titovnin: Kornukov is here.

Strogov: Put him on the phone.

Titovnin: One minute. He is reporting to Kamenski, Comrade General.

Strogov (18:55): So, what you need to do now. Contact these ... [obscenities], these sailors, these, what do you ... [obscenities]?

Titovnin: Border guards?

Strogov: Huh?

Titovnin: Border guards?

Strogov: Well, the civilian sailors.

Titovnin: Understood.

Strogov: The border guards. What ships do we now have near Moneron Island, if they are civilians, send [them] there immediately.

The Lost Opportunity

The History Channel documentary failed to exploit a wonderful opportunity which had opened to them - which they had opened for themselves. Hans Ephraimson, the head of the American Association for Families of the KAL 007 Victims, rightly stressed that, contrary to all other passenger plane crash incidents, there were no bodies or body parts found floating on the surface of the waters. He failed to mention that there was no luggage found as well. He most probably was suggesting Soviet culpability in concealing the bodies. The History Channel could have explored the shock of the Soviet civilian divers who had visited KAL 007 below just 7 days after the shootdown and finding the virtual absence of bodies, body parts, and luggage below as well.

For whatever reason, this History Channel documentary on KAL 007 rates high on visual imaging and reenactment, but low on what matters most- re-presenting what really happened.