

May 1969 - Shooting-down of U.S. Reconnaissance Plane by North Koreans with Loss of 31 Lives. - American Naval Build-up off Korea. - Statement by President Nixon.

A broadcast from Pyongyang Radio on April 15 claimed that North Korea had shot down a U.S. Navy electronic intelligence aircraft, described as a large modernly-equipped plane, which had intruded “deep into the territorial airspace of the northern part of the Republic to conduct reconnaissance.” It was not stated whether the U.S. plane had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire or by aerial action, but Pyongyang Radio said that it had been brought down “with a single shot at high altitude.” The North Korean announcement ended by saying that any “provocation” by the “U.S. imperialists” would be countered “instantly with a hundredfold, thousandfold retaliatory blow.”

The U.S. Defence Department issued a statement on April 16 announcing that an unarmed U.S. plane on a routine reconnaissance mission had been shot down over the Sea of Japan with the loss of 31 lives, and that the plane had at no time approached closer than 50 nautical miles to the North Korean coast.

The Defence Department said that at approximately 5 p.m. on April 14 a four-engined propeller-driven EC-121 Navy aircraft had taken off from Atsugi, Japan, for a reconnaissance mission in the Sea of Japan. The aircraft, which was unarmed, had 30 Navy personnel and one Marine on board and was on “a routine reconnaissance track over international waters.” After pointing out that there had been 190 similar flights in the same general area during the first three months of 1969, the Defence Department emphasized that standing instructions for this kind of mission were that the aircraft was not to approach closer than 40 nautical miles to the coast of North Korea. In this particular instance the aircraft commander was under orders from the C.-in-C., Pacific Fleet, to approach no closer than 50 nautical miles to the North Korean coast.

“During its mission,” the statement continued, “there were communications between the aircraft and its base. From a variety of sources, some of them sensitive, we were able to confirm that at all times during its mission the aircraft was far outside any claimed territorial airspace of North Korea. All evidence now available to us, including North Korean claims and debris sighting, leads us to believe that the aircraft was shot down by North Korean aircraft.”

After saying that there had been no report of any survivors, the statement said that U.S. planes from bases in Japan, South Korea, Okinawa, and the Philippines, together with two U.S. destroyers, the *Dale* and *Henry W. Tucker*, were carrying out searches in an area approximately 90 to 100 nautical miles south-east of Chongjin, North Korea. On April 15, the statement continued, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. William P. Rogers, had talked with the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Mr. Dobrynin, and requested his Government's assistance in search and rescue efforts. It had been subsequently reported on the same day that two Soviet destroyer-

type ships were operating in the immediate vicinity of the search area where a U.S. patrol plane had sighted debris in the water. U.S. aircraft had assisted in directing the Soviet ships to the scene and in the recovery of some debris.

The Defence Department's statement ended: "Reconnaissance missions of this type have been flown for more than 20 years in the Sea of Japan. There was nothing unusual about the mission. In recent years these missions have been approved by high Government authorities in the State and Defence Departments, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the White House. Each of these missions constitutes a lawful use of international airspace."

As stated in the Pentagon's announcement, both U.S. and Soviet warships were co-operating with U.S. aircraft in a search for survivors or debris from the American aircraft shot down by the North Koreans; on April 17 the U.S. destroyer *Henry W. Tucker* picked up the bodies of two men believed to have been crew members of the U.S. plane. On the previous day the Pentagon had reported that the destroyer U.S.S. *Dale* had picked up two pieces of aircraft fuselage riddled with shrapnel holes, and that one of the Soviet ships engaged in the search had also reported finding some debris. This had been laid out on the deck of the Soviet vessel and a U.S. plane allowed to fly over the ship and photograph the wreckage; it appeared to be a wheel and a ladder, but there was no certainty that it belonged to the missing aircraft.

At his news conference on April 18, President Nixon reiterated that the plane shot down—"an unarmed *Constellation*, propeller-driven"—had been on a reconnaissance mission which at no time took it closer than 40 miles to the North Korean coast. "And at the time the plane was shot down," the President added, "all of the evidence that we have indicates that it was shot down approximately 90 miles from the shore of North Korea while it was moving outward, aborting the mission on orders that had been received. We knew this based on our radar. What is even more important, the North Koreans knew it based on their radar. Therefore this attack was unprovoked. It was deliberate. It was without warning...." After recalling, as the Defence Department had done, that there had already been 190 such flights since the beginning of the year without incident, Mr. Nixon said: "They were discontinued immediately after this incident occurred. I have today ordered that these flights will be continued. They will be protected. This is not a threat; it is simply a statement of fact. As Commander-in-Chief of our armed forces, I cannot and will not ask our men to serve in Korea, and I cannot and will not ask our men to take flights like this in unarmed planes, without providing protection...."

In implementation of President Nixon's pledge that U.S. reconnaissance flights off the North Korean coast would be protected, a strong American naval task force — designated Task Force 71—began moving on April 21 into the Sea of Japan. According to reports in the U.S. press, it included the aircraft carriers *Enterprise*, *Ranger*, and *Ticonderoga*, the anti-submarine carrier *Hornet*, three cruisers (*Chicago*, *Oklahoma City*, and *Saint Paul*), and 16 destroyers, many of these vessels having been taken off station in Vietnamese waters. On April 26, however, Task Force 71 moved from the Sea of Japan into the Yellow Sea (i.e. from the western to the eastern side of the Korean peninsula), the U.S. Defence Department stating that the force was "proceeding south of Korea through the Tsushima Straits into the Yellow Sea." No official explanation was given for this movement, but it was assumed in U.S. newspapers that it was due to Soviet concern at the concentration in the Sea of Japan of a large naval force close to

Vladivostok.—(New York Times - International Herald Tribune - Times) (Prev. rep. "Pueblo"
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