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China Plane Attacks: Communists Down British Airliner

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U.S. Destroys 2 Communist Planes

2 Communist Chinese warplanes shot down a British airliner 30 miles south of Hainan Island in the South China Sea July 23. 10 of the 18 persons aboard were believed killed. [See 1953 [Far East: News in Brief](#)]

3 U.S. Navy carrier-based planes searching for survivors were attacked by 2 Communist Chinese warplanes July 26. The American planes shot down both attacking Chinese aircraft. [See 1953 [Far East: U.S. Plane Downed Off China; Other Developments](#)]

Communist China, responding to a British protest, admitted July 26 that its planes had downed the airliner. The Communist note expressed regret and promised to consider paying compensation. The Communists said that the attack was made in error--that the British aircraft had been mistaken for a National Chinese warplane.

But Communist China said July 27 that the clash between the U.S. and Chinese planes was all the U.S.' fault. It protested that the U.S. planes had committed an "act of aggression" by "invading China's territorial air...attacking and shooting down by surprise 2 Chinese aircraft...."

The Communist statement charged that the airliner incident happened because of "constant harassment" of the area by U.S. and Chiang Kai-shek air forces.

U.S. President Eisenhower said at his press conference July 28 that Peiping's apologetic attitude toward Britain and abusive tone toward the U.S. was part of the Communist plan to split the Western Allies. He denied that U.S. planes had invaded Chinese territory. He said the U.S. would defend its rights but would not be impulsive or truculent.

Communist Attack on Airliner

The British airliner, a DC-3 Sky-master operated by Cathay Pacific Airlines, was fired on at 6:45 a.m. July 23 by 2 Russian-built La-7 propeller-driven fighter planes. The Sky-master, with 14 passengers and crew-members aboard, was attacked en route from Singapore to Hong Kong.

Captain Philip Blown, the airliner's pilot, told rescuers that the Communist planes flew alongside the transport and looked it over before dropping back and opening fire. He incorrectly identified the Communist aircraft as "MIGs" and said he thought they were "piloted by Russians."

The 8 known survivors, including 3 of the 6 Americans aboard, were picked up from a rubber life raft about 3 miles off Hainan shortly after 1 p.m. the same afternoon. All suffered varying degrees of injury. A 9th person on the raft, a badly-injured Chinese woman, died during the rescue, which was made by a USAF SA-16 Albatross amphibian piloted by Captain Jack T. Woodyard, 34, of Washington. Witnesses said boats from Hainan picked up 3 other persons.

The rescue took place under cover of U.S. Navy carrier planes and French and British aircraft. Communist Chinese officials had warned that any military planes approaching the area would be shot down.

The 3 Americans believed dead were Captain Leonard Lee Parish of Iowa Park, Texas and his 2 sons, Laurence, 4, and Phillip, 2. 2 of the Americans saved were Parish's wife and daughter, Valerie, 6. The 3d rescued American was Peter S. Thatcher of Stonington, Connecticut, a U.S. Defense Department civilian employee. Thatcher said the 2 Communist planes continued to fire at the airliner as it plunged toward the sea.

Communist Attackers Shot Down

The attack on the U.S. planes, 2 propeller-driven Douglas AD Sky-raiders and a Corsair, took place at 10:05 a.m. July 26. It was made by 2 La-7s over the South China Sea more than 12 miles from Hainan. A Chinese gunboat joined in firing at the U.S. aircraft.

The U.S. planes shot down the La-7s but did not fire back at the gunboat. The Corsair was piloted by Lieutenant Comdr. Edgar B. Salsig of Menlo Park, California and the Sky-raiders by Lieutenant Roy M. Tatham of Del Mar, California and Ensign Richard B. Crooks of Los Angeles.

The U.S. aircraft had been launched from the Essex-class carrier Philippine Sea which, with the carrier Hornet and 8 destroyers, was ordered to the area July 24 "to provide fighter cover over the rescue operations to prevent interference."

Dispatch of the carriers was announced July 24 by U.S. State Secretary John Foster Dulles. Dulles, in a statement approved by President Eisenhower, said that his Government "takes the gravest view of this act of further barbarity [against the airliner], for which the Chinese Communist regime must be held responsible."

Communists Admit Responsibility

A protest against the shooting down of the airliner was delivered to the Communist Chinese Government July 24 by Humphrey Trevelyan, British charge d'affaires in Peiping⁴

Communist Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Chang Han-fun replied January 26 with a note in which he called "this unfortunate incident...entirely accidental." He said that the Communist planes mistook the airliner for a National Chinese warplane. His Government "expresses its regret...and has taken appropriate measures," Chang said. "It extends its sympathy, concern and condolences to the dead and injured...and to their relatives" and "is willing to give consideration to the payment of appropriate benefit and compensation...."

British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden told Commons July 26 that his Government "welcomes this prompt offer to make amends for this savage and inexcusable attack upon an unarmed passenger aircraft." British Labor Party leader Clement R. Attlee agreed that it was "inexcusable" and urged "strongest" representations to prevent recurrences. The British Government, replying July 27 to the Chinese note, demanded punishment for those guilty and protested Communist refusal to let more than one plane search for survivors. Meantime Prime Minister Churchill ordered all RAF planes to keep clear of Hainan.

U.S. Orders: Shoot Back

Admiral Felix B. Stump, U.S. commander-in-chief in the Pacific, revealed at a Pentagon press conference July 26 that U.S. pilots had orders to "be quick on the trigger" if attacked. They were told: "Fire back if approached with hostile intent in peace or war.... You don't have to wait and get your head blown off before you shoot back."

U.S., Communists Trade Charges

Dulles, announcing the clash between U.S. and Communist planes, declared July 26 that this was "further evidence of the Chinese Communist brutality [& a] belligerent interference with a humanitarian rescue operation being conducted over the high seas."

The U.S. Government asked Britain July 27 to have its Peiping charge* deliver to the Communist Chinese Government 2 notes protesting (a) the killing and wounding of U.S. citizens in "the barbarous and lawless attack" on the airliner and (b) the attack on the carrier planes. The notes demanded punishment of those responsible, compensation for victims and their families and measures to prevent repetition of such incidents.

* In absence of U.S. diplomatic representation in Peiping.

Chang Han-fun announced almost simultaneously July 27 that the Peiping Government was protesting "most strongly" against U.S. destruction of the 2 Communist planes. He gave "serious warning" to the U.S. "to stop immediately such acts of aggression" or "suffer the consequences."

According to Chang's protest: 4 fighter planes from the U.S. carrier unit "invaded China's territorial air over Port Yulin" at

9:25 a.m. July 26. The 2 Communist planes were shot down by 12 U.S. fighter planes which "invaded the air above Lohwei of Hainan Island." "Thereafter another 2 U.S. fighter airplanes dived to strafe 2 Polish merchant ships and a Chinese escort vessel" but "fled when the Chinese escort vessel fired back in self defense."

"For several years the U.S. imperialists occupying [Formosa] have been providing the Chiang Kai-shek gang with large numbers of aircraft, naval vessels [& war material] and directing and supporting the Chiang Kai-shek gang to harass constantly China's coastal areas and islands, to drop secret agents over China and to practice piratical interception and robbery of various nations sailing to China for trade." [See 1954 [Far East: Chou, Nehru Meet; Other Developments](#)] Also, U.S. "naval and air forces have on many occasions invaded directly China's territorial waters and...air." U.S. "naval and air forces have recently extended their military activities along the South China coast. It was precisely because of the constant harassment of this area by the air forces of the U.S. and [Chiang Kai-shek] that the unfortunate incident of a British transport aircraft occurred."

Moscow radio charged July 27 that U.S. "military authorities used the [airliner] incident...for a provocative attack in order to maintain the state of tension in the Far East."

U.S. Reaction

Most U.S. Congress members of both parties gave full support to the action of Navy fliers in shooting down Communist planes that attacked them. Senate Minority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson (Texas) said July 26 that "this is a time for America to unite.... Chinese Communists are shooting at our men. There can be no partisanship...on such an issue." Senate Foreign Relations Com. Chairman Alexander Wiley (R., Wisconsin) said that "we are doing now what we did in the case of the pirates of Tripoli." Senator Stuart Symington (D., Missouri) recalled that he had warned only a week earlier(t) of "the growing strength of the Communists on the land and sea and in the air." "I don't believe we are taking adequate steps to defend ourselves," Symington declared. [See 1953 [Armed Forces: Pentagon Reorganized; Other Developments](#)]

Representative A. L. Miller (D., Nebraska) said, however, that "I don't think we are justified in bringing our planes, ships and personnel to patrol the coast of China to protect British shipping and planes. Let Britain do it."

U.S. Ambassador-to-UN Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. said July 26: The Communist Chinese "depredations...show such reckless contempt for law and order as to convince any one...that the Chinese Communist regime is wholly unfit to belong to the United Nations." [See 1954 [East-West Relations: Vs. UN Seat for Communist China; Other Developments](#)]

(t) In Senate speech July 21 protesting "incredible," "shameful" cuts in defense research funds and personnel while Russia stepped up development of intercontinental hydrogen weapons against which there was no known defense.

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