

Soviet Union: MiG-25 Pilot Defects

The pilot of a MiG-25 jet fighter, one of the Soviet Union's newest and most secret planes, landed his aircraft at a Japanese air base in Hakodate, Hokkaido Island September 6 and asked for asylum in the U.S.

The pilot, Lieut. Viktor Ivanovich Belenko, swerved off course during a routine training mission over eastern Siberia and landed at the Hokkaido base after evading two Japanese F-4 Phantom fighters sent up to intercept him. (The MiG-25 had disappeared from Japanese radar screens for 26 minutes before landing by flying lower and faster than radar could detect.)

Belenko's plane overshot the 2,000-meter-long runway and landed in an adjacent field. He fired two warning shots with a pistol to keep base workers away, but surrendered peacefully to Japanese police who arrived on the scene immediately afterward. Before being taken for questioning, Belenko asked that the plane be covered with a canvas because it contained military secrets.

The police said that during questioning Belenko told them that he had intended to fly to the U.S., but lack of fuel had forced him to land in Japan. The 29-year-old pilot, who left behind a wife and 3-year-old son, was quoted as having said that he had been planning his defection for two years. He wanted "freedom in the U.S." because life in the U.S.S.R. was no different from life in "the days of Czarist Russia."

The White House announced September 7 that President Ford had decided to grant Belenko asylum, but that he had left to Japan the question of the ultimate disposal of the MiG-25. (Japan did not grant political asylum, but it had allowed some people seeking asylum to pass through to other countries.)

Belenko was flown to Tokyo September 7, and he left for the U.S. September 9 after a brief meeting with Soviet officials at the request of the Soviet government. Upon arrival in Los Angeles that evening, he was quickly taken into hiding by U.S. security officials.

In a formal protest note delivered September 7 to the Japanese Foreign Ministry, the Soviet Union called Japan's refusal to return both the plane and pilot immediately an "unfriendly" act. The Soviet government said that it expected Japan to respect the inviolability of military secrets, and it warned Japan against "following any suggestion or influence from an external power," referring to the U.S.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry rejected the note, charging the Soviet Union with having violated Japanese air space. The government said that the plane would eventually be returned after a full investigation of the affair for which the plane was needed as material evidence.

In the U.S.S.R.'s first public statement on the affair, the news agency Tass charged September 14 that Japan and the U.S. had collaborated in preventing Belenko from returning to the Soviet Union. Tass said that Belenko had lost his bearings during a routine flight and had landed in Hakodate because of a lack of fuel. The news agency accused Japan of keeping Belenko drugged and in isolation and of transporting him to the U.S. with the aid of "American secret agencies."

Tass issued a second statement September 15, accusing Japan of disregarding "the standards of international law" and "aggravating Soviet-Japanese relations." The statement said that an American transport aircraft was being used to carry the MiG-25 to an unidentified military base for "careful study."

A group of Japanese military aviation specialists had begun to examine the MiG-25 September 8. Japan's Defense Agency denied September 8 reports from Washington that American specialists had inspected the plane, and would not say whether Americans would be permitted to examine the aircraft.

A Defense Agency senior official said that U.S. military experts would be asked to help Japanese technicians dismantle and examine the MiG-25, the Washington Post reported September 13. According to the report, the examination was thought to be too difficult for the Japanese alone, and the Japanese would seek U.S. assistance on an unofficial level to avoid straining Japanese-Soviet relations.

The MiG-25, code-named "Foxbat" by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was the most advanced Soviet jet fighter and one of the most advanced planes in the world, the London Times reported September 7. It reportedly had reached speeds of Mach 3.2 (3.2 times the speed of sound) and had a cruising speed of Mach 2.7, faster than NATO's most advanced plane, the F-16. It had set the world record for altitude at almost 119,000 feet.

Citation:

"Soviet Union: MiG-25 Pilot Defects." *Facts On File World News Digest*: n. pag. *World News Digest*. Facts On File News Services, 18 Sept. 1976. Web. 16 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.2facts.com/article/1976139860>>.

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Citation format:

The title of the article. (Year, Month Day). *Facts On File World News Digest*. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from World News Digest database.

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