

Remembering the crew of PB4Y-2 Privateer

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<https://stationhypo.com/2017/04/08/remembering-the-crew-of-pb4y-2-privateer/>

67 years ago today, on April 8, 1950, 10 crewmen of PB4Y-2 Privateer 59645 were the first to be MIA during the Cold War!

The Official Position of the United States

It is the official position of the United States Government that all or some of these men were captured and held in the Soviet Gulag.

The official DoD case study dated, 4 November, 1992 prepared by LTC Jim Caswell, USA, Asia-Pacific division/POW/MIA/5-8135 is available for download on this posting.



According to a report at the Cold War Museum, on April 8, 1950 (see below), a version of the wartime Liberator

bomber, the PB4Y-2 Privateer 59645, operated by a Navy detachment based in Morocco, became the first casualty of the missions to probe the boundaries of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The aircraft took off from Weisbaden in West Germany and headed north toward the Baltic Sea, with a goal of gathering intelligence on Soviet naval activity along the Latvian coast.

It's not clear whether the plane, whose crew included Purcell, was shot down or forced down — the Soviets claimed they knew nothing about it. For years, stories circulated that life rafts were seen in the Baltic Sea after the plane was reported missing.

The crew was reported missing in action on April 9, 1950 in the Baltic Sea, 80 miles southeast of Libau, Latvia. Each of the crew members were posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Below are the names of the ten sailors, including CT3 Edward J. Purcell, from the Naval Security Group that were PB4Y-2 Privateer, flight 59645.

AT1 Frank L. Beckman

AL3 Joseph J. Bourassa

ENS Tommy L. Burgess

AD 1 Joseph H. Danens

LT John H. Fette

CT3 Edward J. Purcell

LTJG Robert D. Reynolds

AN Joseph N. Rinnier

LT Howard W. Seeschaf

AD 1 Jack W. Thomas

4 November, 1992

Subject: U.S. Cold War Losses From 1946 to 1991 – Update

A Case Study

8 April 1950

Baltic Sea

U.S. Navy PB4Y2 (Privateer)

On 8 April 1950, a U.S. Navy PB4Y2 Privateer on an electronic reconnaissance mission was shot down over the Baltic Sea by Soviet fighters. Although the search and rescue effort was unsuccessful, two unmanned life rafts from the aircraft were eventually recovered, as well as some wreckage (found by commercial fishing vessels). None of the ten crew members were recovered, dead or alive. All remain unaccounted for.

THE RUSSIAN POSITION:

Shortly after the shootdown, the Soviet government acknowledged that its fighters had attacked the Privateer. Further, Stalin's Foreign Ministry stated that the aircraft was attacked because it was flying in Soviet airspace, and had fired on Soviet fighters when they attempted to signal it to land. The Soviet government also stated at the time (and subsequently) that it had no information about survivors from this flight.

Since the establishment of the Joint Commission, the Russian government has provided considerable documentation on this incident, most of it contemporaneous to 1950. Soviet documents, including after-action reports of the participating pilots and other air defense officers, all appear to support the long-held position that the aircraft violated Soviet airspace and opened fire

on Soviet fighters. Another formerly classified document, a report from the Soviet Navy to Stalin and Bulganin, describes in detail extensive, unsuccessful efforts by forty-five vessels between 22 April and 14 June to locate the submerged aircraft. A 1975 Central Committee document, classified SECRET, appears to be an information paper to reassure the Party that there were no survivors of the flight prosecuted or incarcerated in the Soviet Union. This document seems to have been prepared in response to a resurgence of interest in the case in the American press, with allegations that documents reviewed are interviews conducted in late 1992 by Task Force Russian and Jane Reynolds Howard, widow of LTJG Robert D. Reynolds, one of the unaccounted for crew members, including discussions with retired General-Colonel Fedor Ivanovich Shinkarenko, who commanded the Soviet fighter unit that shot down the Privateer. The Shinkarenko interviews support some, but not all, of what the Soviet government had stated in 1950, as well as the version of events described in the above-mentioned documents. Shinkorenko recalled that his pilots did not actually see the plane crash due to cloud cover. In his opinion, "all pilots of the plane died...it's sad, we had no confirmation that we have found the bodies...they were washed away...If there had been one member of the crew, dead or alive, after the search was carried out...I should have known this..." Shinkarenko also stated that the Soviet had monitored an extensive American search and rescue efforts; that the Soviet Navy had been given orders to recover the aircraft, if possible, to show to the United Nations; and, significantly, that he had been told that "remnants of the plane" had indeed been recovered (contrary to the assertions in the document described above"). General Shinkarenko also

recalled that Stalin himself had given the order not to show the recovered parts to the UN, “once he knew what the plane contained.”

THE AMERICAN POSITION:

As with many of these incidents, research in the American archives reveals a fundamental disagreement with the soviet government concerning both the location of the incident and who opened fired on whom. (The American government insisted that the Privateer was over international waters, and that, with the exception of a single .38 caliber, the aircraft was unarmed.) The American position in 1950 was that the aircraft was on a “training flight” from West Germany to Denmark when it was attacked. (Later, in 1975, the Naval Investigative Board report of the incident was declassified, which admitted that the Privateer was engaged in a “special electronic search project mission.”) there are also differences in various Soviet and American accounts concerning the exact time of the incident, as well as a somewhat confusing reference in some soviet accounts to the aircraft was a “B-29.” However, the Commission believes that these facts are not relevant to our current task of accounting for the ten mission men. The American side concurs with the Soviets that the aircraft fell or landed in the Baltic Sea, approximately 15 miles northwest of the city of Liepaya. There are no indications in the American archives that would point to any eyewitnesses to the shootdown, or to any radio “mayday” transmissions by the crew. Nor are there any indications whatsoever that any of the crew might have bailed out of the aircraft, as, for example, had occurred in some other flights. Thus, the U.S. government had no information at the time of the incident that any of the crew had survived and been picked up by the Soviets. However, by 1956, new information had apparently convinced the American government to reconsider this

position. On 17 July 1956, the department of State sent a demarche to the soviet government, in which Washington referred to reports concerning detained U.S. military personnel that had “become so persistent, detailed and credible” that they merited the attention of the Soviets. The demarche specifically referred to reports from persons formerly detained in the Soviet Union that they had “conversed with, seen, or heard reports concerning United States military aviation, “ in the Gulag, and concluded that the United States government “is compelled to believe that the Soviet government has had or continues to have under detention” members of the Privateer crew and the crew of another lost flight, an RB-29 shot down over the Sea of Japan on 13 June 1952. The soviet government rejected this assertion on 13 August 1956, stating that “no American from the personnel of the U.s. Air Force or U.s Naval Aviation are on the territory of the Soviet Union.”

CONCLUSIONS:

Unlike some incidents from which there were either survivors or credible eyewitnesses, the actual events of the 8 April 1950 shootdown itself are simply insufficiently clear to indicate whether or not there could have been survivors. We have thus left with the testimony of the only eyewitnesses, the Soviet aviators themselves, testimony which is both flawed and incomplete. For example, the formerly “top secret” statements of the four Soviet pilots seem flawed. (They are uncharacteristically brief and similar, and they read as if their contents were dictated to the aviators.) The statements are incomplete in the sense that they do not answer key questions of the Privateer’s ultimate fate (i.e. All four Soviet pilots state merely that the aircraft “sharply descended, entered the clouds at an altitude of 500 meters, “ and “supposedly crashed into the sea 5-10 kilometers from the coast.”) As a

result, we are left with the reality that no one saw the aircraft crash, while no “mayday” distress calls were heard that might indicate whether there was a change to bail out of ditch the aircraft. Thus, to the question of the possibility of survivors, we are left with the following:

1. No one saw the aircraft crash or break up. This, we simply cannot rule out the possibility of survivors, in spite of what General Shinkarenko believes.
2. There exist a number of reports from released Gulag inmates indicating that there were indeed survivors from this flight who were imprisoned in the Gulag. There are enough of these reports over the years to suggest that they cannot be ignored. Certainly the U.S. government, by 1956, placed sufficient credibility in these reports to send the above mentioned demarche to Moscow. More recently, Task Force Russia interviewed a Lithuanian citizen who stated that he was an inmate in a Soviet prison in Irkutsk in the summer of 1950 with an American intelligence officer named “Robert.” The Task Force has confirmed through official Russian sources in the Irkutsk Oblast that this man was indeed an inmate at the time held claims. Thus, while we do not dismiss his statement, we note that he was unable to identify Lt Reynolds when we showed him a photo lineup. While we had been unable to confirm that these sightings or reports were necessarily members of the Privateer crew, the Task Force believes that the frequency, content, and timeframe of these reports at a minimum suggest that some American aviators were detained in the Gulag.
3. The recovery of the Privateer’s intact lifeboats may not necessarily indicate survivors; however, we cannot ignore that lifeboats were found, and that this could indicate a soft landing rather than a catastrophic mid-air destruction of the aircraft. The Task Force has been unable, however, to confirm a persistent report that John Noble, after his repatriation from the Gulag, was shown a copy of a photo by his

U.S. Navy debriefer that showed the intact Privateer floating on the water with a Soviet patrol boat moored alongside. Nothing in the “Klaus File” or other U.S. archives supports the existence of this photo, and we cannot place credence in its existence absent any corroborating information.

4. From information obtained from interviews of family members and former participants in these reconnaissance flights, it is obvious that the crew was aware of the dangers inherent in their mission, and that they were well-drilled in emergency action procedures (ditching and bailout).
5. The aircraft went down within a relatively short distance from Soviet maritime facilities, which could have dispatched patrol craft that could have reached the site of the crash within 1-2 hours from the time they were alerted. The massive Soviet search for the wreckage, as well as open-source Russians articles on Soviet air defense, clearly indicate that Moscow was aware that the aircraft was most likely an intelligence collector. Hence the capture and interrogation of its crew would have been a clear objective of the intelligence services.

In view of the above information, we believe that further efforts are called for in investigating this incident. The Task Force notes that one Soviet document (referred to above) that describe the search of the crash site deals with salvage operations directed at locating the submerged Privateer, operations that only commenced two weeks after the incident. We believe it appropriate to direct our research at locating any possible records that would indicate possible patrol boat search and rescue operations in the 8-21 April time frame. Our study of other Cold War incidents in waters adjacent to the Soviet land mass in the proximity of Soviet naval bases indicates that such operations to recover survivors were routinely mounted.

In particular, we note that a colleague of General Shinkarenko, retired Colonel Nikolai Ivonovich Ryzhov, told Task Force Russia interviewers in 1992 that, although he had personally supervised the destruction of local files on this incident, more information could probably be located about it in Soviet Air Force "Bulletins on Lessons Learned from the Downing of U.S. Aircraft Violating Soviet Borders." In addition, Col Ryzhov suggested that it was normal for KGB to prepare "parallel report" on such incident, "since the KGB was directly involved in the prevention or resolution of border violation." The Task Force concurs with Col Ryzhov's suggestion, while noting that his statement is at odds with the assertions to the Commission by the intelligence services that they had no part to play in such events.

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