

2020

“Improbable Allies”—The North Korean Downing of a U.S. Navy EC-121 and U.S.-Soviet Cooperation during the Cold War

Bill Streifer

Irek Sabitov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Streifer, Bill and Sabitov, Irek (2020) “Improbable Allies”—The North Korean Downing of a U.S. Navy EC-121 and U.S.-Soviet Cooperation during the Cold War,” *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 73 : No. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

"IMPROBABLE ALLIES"

The North Korean Downing of a U.S. Navy EC-121 and U.S.-Soviet Cooperation during the Cold War

Bill Streifer and Irek Sabitov

A U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane with 31 men aboard is reported missing in the Sea of Japan. The North Koreans are boasting that they have "shot down an American spy plane." The information triggers a unique, massive, multinational sea and air search for possible survivors of the EC-121. The cast includes improbable rescuers—Russian warships which happen to be in the area and volunteer their services.

CAPTAIN RON MARLAR, USN, "THE THINGS THEY'LL DO . . .,"
AIR RESERVIST, JUNE 1969

On 15 April 1969, North Koreans were engaged in celebrating the birthday of Kim Il-sung, the founder and leader of the so-called Hermit Kingdom. However, the cheers quickly were replaced by the familiar shouts of "Down with U.S. imperialism!" and "Liberate the South!" when it was announced that a pair of MiG fighters had shot down a U.S. Navy (USN) EC-121 reconnaissance plane, which North Korea claimed had intruded into its airspace.¹ The celebration of Kim Il-sung's birthday (in this case, his fifty-seventh) was the nation's most important national holiday: a day filled with festivals, artistic performances, sports competitions, and academic seminars and debates. Freed from their daily routines, workers and students were in a cheerful mood as they carried banners and placards bearing the image and slogans of their leader in the numerous parades held during the day. But the festive mood changed radically when the crowds became aware of early-evening bulletins announcing a "brilliant battle success."²

Bill Streifer is a researcher and freelance journalist, and the only American on the editorial board of Vostok (East): Journal of Oriental Studies, published by the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.

Irek Sabitov is a journalist and former newspaper editor and a resident of Ufa, Bashkiria, Southern Urals (Russia).

The doomed EC-121 was an electronic intelligence (ELINT) version of the Lockheed Super Constellation, a four-engine, propeller-driven, three-hundred-miles-per-hour, unarmed aircraft.³ A bulbous radar dome (radome) on the top of the fuselage housed a special antenna capable of determining the

frequency of an adversary's air-defense radar.⁴ EC-121 Big Look aircraft were tasked with conducting ELINT to intercept, locate, and record radar and communications emissions.⁵ Operating under the umbrella of the National Security Agency (NSA), the specific aircraft in question had been assigned to take off from Atsugi, Japan, transit across the Sea of Japan to a point off the northern coast of North Korea, fly two and a half orbits, and land at Osan Air Force Base in South Korea.⁶

Following the attack, the United States put ships and planes en route to the site. But before they arrived, the Nixon administration requested foreign assistance. Robert J. McCloskey, the chief State Department spokesman, stated that the United States had asked the Soviet Union, Japan, and South Korea for any assistance they might render in helping to locate the plane's missing crewmen. The requests were made in the capitals of the three countries.⁷

Owing to the EC-121 crash site's proximity (about 150 miles south) to Vladivostok—the main Far East naval base of the Soviet Union's Pacific Fleet—the first vessels on the scene were Soviet, not American. The first hard evidence that the EC-121 had gone down came the next morning when a USN P-3 rescue plane spotted debris two nautical miles northeast of the reported downing location; it consisted of such items as uninflated life rafts, paper, and dye markers.

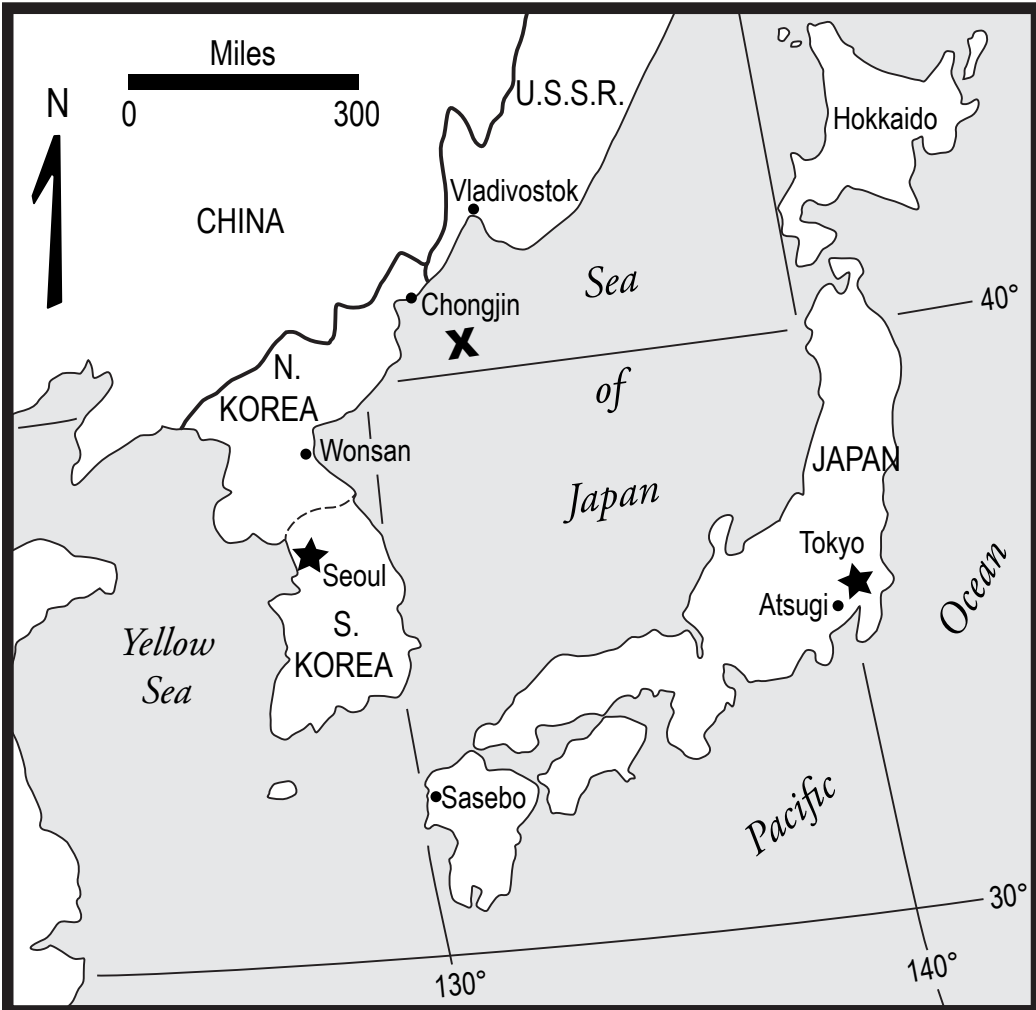
A joint U.S.-Soviet search-and-rescue (SAR) operation began later that day when the rescue plane made contact with two Soviet ships in the vicinity of the downed plane. That afternoon, aided by American rescue-aircraft personnel who dropped identifying smoke bombs, the Soviet destroyers began to pick up debris from the downed aircraft.⁸

Although the ships at sea picked up pieces of the spy plane and assorted debris and the downed plane reportedly had carried enough life rafts to hold the entire crew, no survivors were spotted from the air.⁹ Despite the lack of confirmed reports of survivors, the size of the rescue operation was being "substantially expanded" at that time, the Pentagon said.¹⁰

Sometime after the shootdown, Captain Wayne Whitten, U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), who had flown several missions with EC-121 aircraft in the Gulf of Tonkin during the Vietnam War, took a phone call from Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. At the time, Whitten was in Hawaii on a watch team at the Joint Reconnaissance Center (JRC) at the headquarters of the commander in chief, Pacific Fleet, at the time Admiral John S. McCain Jr.¹¹ "It was really confusing[,] with reports first of Soviet ships going to the crash site and no one sure if they were going to help or hinder," Whitten later recalled. Secretary Laird had heard, erroneously, that there were survivors. Whitten was the one who had to give the Secretary of Defense the sad news: all on board the EC-121 had perished.¹²

The joint U.S.-Soviet SAR operation that unfolded over four days became a rare example of cooperation between traditional Cold War adversaries. The June

FIGURE 1
CHART SHOWING EC-121 CRASH SITE SOUTH OF VLADIVOSTOK



Source: *Washington Post*, 1969.

1969 issue of *Air Reservist* magazine, the official publication of the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, described them as “improbable allies.”¹³

With the passage of over fifty years since the North Korean downing of this EC-121 in the Sea of Japan, much has been written on the topic, both in books and in academic journals. But no works previous to this article have relied so heavily on declassified congressional reports, documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), contemporaneous press reports, and the testimony of former Soviet participants, nor have others delved so deeply into the surprising role the Soviet navy played during this joint SAR operation.

This article tells the story of the EC-121 incident, with an emphasis on the participation of the Soviet navy. Those whom the authors interviewed for this article

FIGURE 2
FELIX GROMOV, SOVIET NAVY, AS PACIFIC FLEET CRUISER COMMANDER, CIRCA 1970s (INSET), AND IN 1992



Sources: Yuri Panachev and Sputnik Image Archive, respectively.

include three former members of the crew of *Vdokhnovennyi*, one of the three Soviet vessels that took part in the operation. Felix Gromov, the ship's executive officer, also provided a handwritten response to the authors' questions. Gromov, a lieutenant commander in 1969, later would be promoted to admiral and go on to become the commander in chief of the Russian navy (1992–97). Others interviewed include Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Georgy Kondratiyev, the foreman of the mine command of Combat Unit–3 (mines/torpedoes), and Yuri Panachev, a senior seaman. Also interviewed was Colonel Wayne Whitten, USMC (Ret.), who as a captain passed on to the Secretary of Defense the sad news of the EC-121 deaths.

THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION: THE COLD WAR

According to a declassified top secret UMBRA NSA report titled *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, the North Korean MiGs that shot

down the EC-121 “represented the military forces of a small, hostile Communist nation . . . that itself was a Cold War creation.”¹⁴

The forces that collided on 15 April 1969—the United States Navy reconnaissance plane and the MIG-21s of the North Korean Air Force—were symbols of the Cold War that had developed following World War II. The EC-121 was a part of the Peacetime Aerial Reconnaissance Program (PARPRO) conducted [jointly] by the United States Navy and Air Force [USAF]. These programs were developed in the early 1950s as a way of providing intelligence on the Soviet Union and its Communist neighbors.¹⁵

The Soviet Union

Richard M. Nixon was a renowned Cold Warrior and the Soviet Union was his particular focus. According to an NSA report titled *American Cryptology during the Cold War*, within the NSA’s production organization fully 50 percent of the staff worked “the Soviet problem.”¹⁶ Whenever anything happened between the West and a Communist entity, the ever-present question was what role, if any, were the Soviets playing in the matter.

The Soviet Pacific Fleet. The United States conducted aerial reconnaissance to learn what it could about the Soviet navy’s submarine and surface forces. One focus of such attention was Vladivostok. Known historically as the “pearl of Russia on the shores of the Pacific,” Vladivostok hosted the headquarters of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, one of the four Soviet navy *flot* (fleets).¹⁷ According to a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) published a decade after the EC-121 incident, the Soviet Pacific Fleet was a large force made up primarily of submarines, surface ships, and aircraft. The submarine force consisted of more than a hundred submarines, of which thirty-two were ballistic-missile and seventy-eight were cruise-missile or torpedo-attack units.¹⁸ The surface fleet, the report said, consisted of thirty-five cruisers, destroyers, and Krivak-class missile frigates, in addition to numerous smaller naval craft. Nearly all units in the fleet were based in either Vladivostok or Petropavlovsk, the latter home to the nuclear submarine fleet at the secret Rybachiy base.¹⁹ An example of the Soviet Pacific Fleet’s activities: in 1972, it would send several cruise-missile-firing submarines and between five and ten surface combatants and auxiliary ships to respond to the U.S. mining of North Vietnamese ports during the Vietnam War.²⁰

With more relevance to the 1969 EC-121 downing, *Vdokhnovennyi*, a Project 56 Soviet navy destroyer, was part of a detachment of ships known as a “sea force.” Together with a missile cruiser, an antisubmarine ship, a submarine tender, one or two tankers, and a support vessel, *Vdokhnovennyi* sailed to the Indian Ocean for “operational service” (training) on 22 October 1968. Until then the ship had

remained at Vladivostok, its home port. When the sea force was directed to the Indian Ocean it became the second such detachment of Soviet ships to visit the area. According to Vladimir Dukel'sky, the former head of intelligence of the 10th Operative Squadron of the Pacific Fleet (OPESK), this group of ships was formed and sent into the Indian Ocean to prevent the Americans from "privatizing" the area.²¹

Seaman Panachev reported that while aboard *Vdokhnovennyi* he often "met" Americans in the Indian Ocean—"We had neither grudge nor rage against them." The Soviet navy, he said, was "quite powerful and diverse in those days." Off Seychelles, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, *Vdokhnovennyi* also met Soviet ships from both the Black Sea and Northern Fleets, Panachev said. "Our cruisers, destroyers, large anti-submarine ships, and submarines were everywhere and continuously watched [U.S.] aircraft carriers," Panachev said.²²

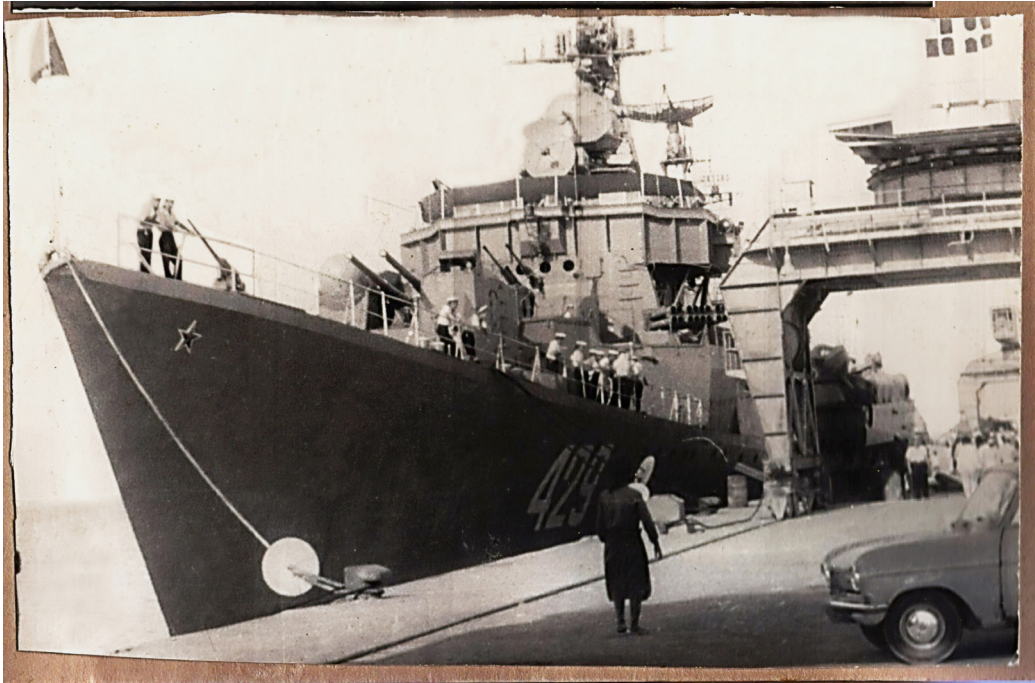
"We served this way, where they were, there we were. It's not like before now." By that Panachev meant that the situation today is not as it was during the Cold War. Back then, the Soviet navy opposed—and cursed—the American imperialists everywhere at sea, whereas today the sole superpower, America, does whatever it wants throughout the world. "I liked serving in the Navy," Panachev said. "I was on a combat ship, constantly in motion; we seldom stood near the moorage wall."²³

Following a period of training, but before *Vdokhnovennyi* arrived back at Vladivostok, its боевая служба (combat service) included several foreign port calls, including to Mombasa, Kenya; Aden, South Yemen; Al Hudaydah, North Yemen; Bandar 'Abbas, Iran; and Umm Qasr, Iraq (and by land to Basra). For example, *Vdokhnovennyi* was docked in North Yemen in early January 1969; the EC-121 was shot down about three months later. Had *Vdokhnovennyi* sailed directly from there to the Sea of Japan at the ship's top speed of thirty-eight knots, it would have taken a week or more.²⁴

According to Alexandr Rozin, a Russian expert and writer on topics that include the Soviet fleet, *Vdokhnovennyi*, and the EC-121 incident, this detachment of ships was due to return to Vladivostok in mid-March 1969. Later, however, the order was changed to apply only to *Vdokhnovennyi*, with the other vessels ordered to remain in the region; no reason was given for this decision.²⁵ So, on 15 March 1969, *Vdokhnovennyi* began moving toward Vladivostok, while the other ships of the detachment continued to visit various foreign ports. After sailing a total of 25,600 nautical miles, *Vdokhnovennyi* arrived back at Vladivostok on 4 April 1969—about ten days before the EC-121 incident.²⁶

The Soviet Union versus Aerial Reconnaissance. Over the decades that the United States conducted its aerial reconnaissance to learn about Soviet naval forces and their activities, it was commonplace for Soviet fighters to react to these peripheral reconnaissance missions, particularly in the vicinity of Vladivostok. The Russians

FIGURE 3
VDOKHNOVENNYI IN NORTH YEMEN



Source: Yuri Panachev.

often would send out fighters, in relays, that would pace the aircraft, staying between them and the Soviet coastline—usually without incident.²⁷ But in thirteen cases between 8 April 1950 and 10 March 1964, Soviet retaliation turned deadly when the Soviet fighters shot down U.S. reconnaissance planes. On 6 November 1951, for example, the U.S. Navy became the victim of Soviet aggression when a Lockheed P2V Neptune, with a crew of ten, was shot down over the Sea of Japan “somewhere off Vladivostok.”²⁸

Given the Soviets’ long history of using deadly force in retaliation against what they saw as intrusion into their airspace, might others—the North Koreans—have taken their cue, but not necessarily instructions, from the Soviets in the downing of an EC-121 reconnaissance plane?

Within this context of Cold War hostility and uncertainty, the joint Soviet-American SAR operation conducted after the downing of the EC-121 constitutes a stark contrast. When the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) ordered the destroyer USS *Henry W. Tucker* (DD 875) to rendezvous with *Vdokhnovennyi*, this was the first cooperative meeting of Soviet and American warships since the Cold War began at the close of World War II. Later, during a press conference ashore in which the captain and executive officer of *Tucker* answered questions from representatives of the world’s media—including ABC, CBS, NBC, and U.S.

wire services, as well as *Life* magazine and *Pacific Stars & Stripes*—the following “facts” came to light: *Tucker* was the first American ship under way to search for the EC-121, the first American ship to arrive on scene, the first to collect debris, the only ship to recover bodies, the only ship chosen to deliver bodies and consolidated aircraft debris to Sasebo, Japan—and the only ship to rendezvous peacefully with a Soviet destroyer in over twenty-five years.²⁹

North Korea

The Context: The Pueblo Incident. The EC-121 incident, which began in April 1969, came on the heels of the release of the crew of USS *Pueblo*. The *Pueblo* crisis, centered on the North Korean seizure of a USN reconnaissance vessel, had begun on 23 January 1968. Not since the British boarded USS *Chesapeake* off the coast of Virginia in 1807 had an American naval commander surrendered his ship in peacetime, but with *Pueblo* it happened again. USS *Pueblo* (AGER 2) was a lightly armed, 177-foot, *Banner*-class technical research ship with a crew of eighty-three officers and men. The North Koreans seized it in international waters.

About a week after the seizure of *Pueblo*, Semyon Kozyrev, the deputy minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union, met Robert Ford, the Canadian ambassador to the Soviet Union, at Kozyrev’s office in Moscow; two of Kozyrev’s subordinates also were present.³⁰ As recorded in a memorandum intended for distribution to Politburo members and candidates, Ford began by referring to their recent conversation concerning the North Korean seizure of *Pueblo*. According to Ford, the Soviet position vis-à-vis the *Pueblo* incident (if he understood it correctly) boiled down to four points: (1) the United States should not yield to emotion but instead should examine the issues associated with this incident in a calm, businesslike atmosphere; (2) the United States should abandon the threat to use force to settle the incident; (3) there should be direct talks about this issue between the Americans and North Koreans; and (4) it was necessary to eliminate the fever of propaganda and the campaign and uproar around discussion of the matter at the UN Security Council.³¹ Thus, representatives of the Soviet Union undertook to instruct the United States with regard to its interactions with North Korea.

After nearly a year of brutal internment, North Korea released the crew of *Pueblo* and the body of Petty Officer Duane Hodges, who as a twenty-one-year-old fireman had died when North Korean gunboats opened fire on the ship. The release followed a U.S. apology—an apology the U.S. government quickly disavowed. In Washington, Secretary of State D. Dean Rusk issued the following statement regarding *Pueblo*: “The men were released after long and difficult negotiations. The North Korean negotiator insisted from the beginning that the men would not be released unless the United States falsely confessed to espionage and to violations of North Korean territory and apologized for such alleged actions.”³²

During his 1968 presidential campaign, candidate Nixon described North Korea as a “fourth-rate power” and swore there never would be another “*Pueblo* incident.” Five months after his election, however, President Nixon faced his own North Korean crisis when the MiG-21s downed the EC-121 in the Sea of Japan. The shootdown of this Navy plane by one air-to-air missile (or perhaps two) took the lives of thirty-one Americans—thirty sailors and one Marine.³³

North Korea versus Aerial Reconnaissance. Well before the April 1969 EC-121 incident began, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) JRC in the Pentagon had decided that Asian Communist nations fell into a different category from those elsewhere—including the Soviet Union, despite its history of shooting down U.S. aircraft. As Dr. Thomas R. Johnson, an NSA historian, put it, “When one of them launched a fighter in reaction, which was rare, they meant business.”³⁴

By the middle of 1963, the JCS had implemented an elaborate White Wolf Advisory Warning Program to protect American aircraft flying reconnaissance missions, essentially worldwide. Then, in the mid-1960s, in response to what the JRC perceived as an elevated security threat, new conditions were inserted into the plan. Of these, Condition 3, which required a heightened state of alert aboard the aircraft and diversion to a fallback orbit farther off the coast, would be initiated any time a hostile fighter was seen headed over water within one hundred nautical miles of the mission. Should a fighter come within fifty nautical miles, Condition 5 was initiated, which required an automatic abort.³⁵

Following the institution of these new conditions the United States lost no missions to the People’s Republic of China, North Korea, or North Vietnam—until the April 1969 downing. At the time of the incident, USN and USAF signal intelligence (SIGINT) reconnaissance missions were frequent occurrences off the North Korean coast; for example, from January 1969 through the April incident, nearly two hundred similar missions—averaging about two a day—were flown. EC-121 missions were so commonplace, in fact, that they were categorized as “low risk.”³⁶

However, not long before this particular EC-121 mission began, General Charles H. Bonesteel III, the commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, had warned of unusually vehement language and surly protests by the North Koreans at Panmunjom.³⁷ The warning was passed on to the relevant squadron, which was advised to be extracautious. But the North Koreans appeared to suffer perpetually through profound mood swings at Armistice Commission meetings, so neither the Seventh Fleet nor CINCPAC changed the risk category from “hostile action unlikely.”³⁸ Besides, it was thought that Conditions 3 and 5 would cover any potential problems that might arise. Plus, there had been relatively few incidents since the White Wolf warning program was instituted in the early 1960s. However, according to a senior NSA official who was involved with White Wolf, the Navy had been an “unenthusiastic” player in the program.³⁹

The EC-121 was one of the most frequently used reconnaissance platforms in this area. While the aircraft's original configuration was designed to haul passengers, the EC-121 variant incorporated nearly six tons of sophisticated ELINT equipment in addition to its radome.⁴⁰ The EC-121 was larger than its sister collector, the USN EA-3B Skywarrior jet aircraft, and normally carried two crews that worked in relays, enabling it to remain on station for approximately eight hours. So while the large, slow, lumbering aircraft had become the easiest target in the Navy's aviation inventory, it remained the aircraft of choice for fleet support.⁴¹

Previous to the incident, both J. Strom Thurmond (R-SC), the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Robert Hotz, former editor of *Aviation Week*, had referred to the EC-121 as a "flying *Pueblo*"—vulnerable to hostile action. In the aftermath of the April 1969 loss, Hotz criticized that, once again, the only excuse the U.S. Navy could offer was that "it had never happened before," and he described that response as "a tragic repeat of their pitiful wheeze after the *Pueblo* capture."⁴²

In any case, everything changed that day in April, when, for the second time in fifteen months, a small, isolated North Korea attacked the U.S. military, this time by shooting down an EC-121 aircraft.⁴³

The Soviet Union and North Korea

At the authors' request, a top secret portion of an NSA report on cryptology during the Cold War was declassified recently, revealing new details on the EC-121's flight path and the failure to issue an advisory warning. This new information shows, for example, that the EC-121 was illuminated by both Soviet and North Korean radars, but the North Korean detections were sporadic and, when compared with Soviet tracking, inaccurate. Since Soviet radar was reflecting (tracking) the EC-121 prior to the disaster, the Russians must have seen the plane disappear from their radar screens.⁴⁴

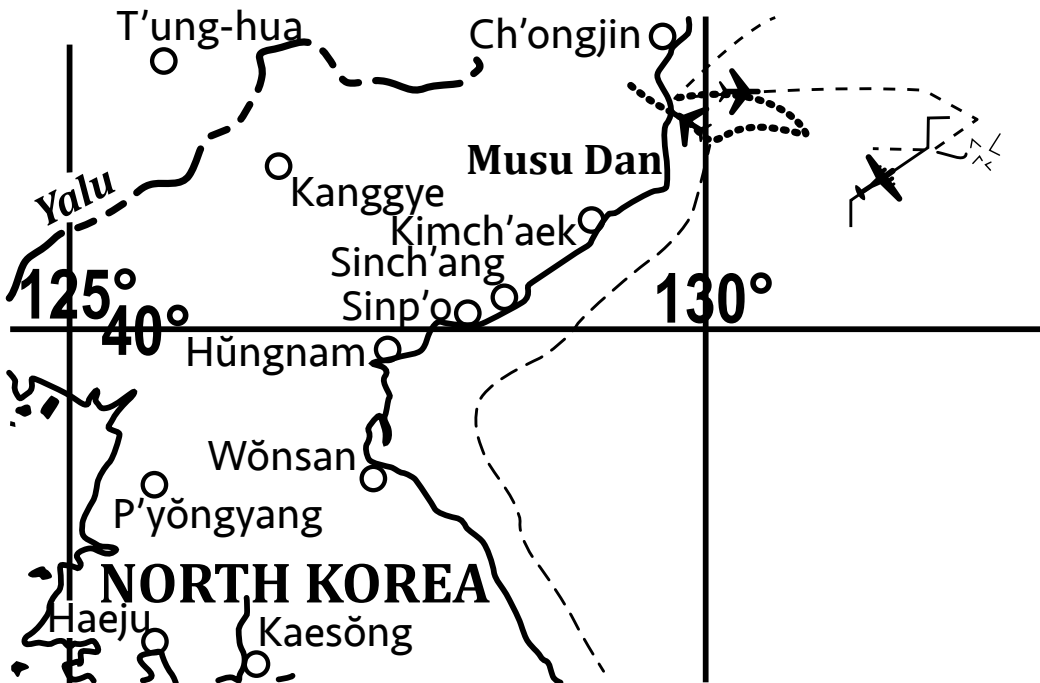
At the time of the incident, the USAF base at Osan, South Korea, was "flight-following" the EC-121.⁴⁵ The tracking of this USN spy plane, which the NSA report says began at 10:00 AM Korean local time, was "initially based on Soviet reflections."⁴⁶ Also according to this newly declassified information, the closest the EC-121 came to either North Korea or the Soviet Union was at 12:04 PM, when the So'ndok tracking facility showed it to be thirty-eight nautical miles off the North Korean coast. However, since the Soviet facilities showed it to be between eighty-five and one hundred nautical miles off the coast, Osan, the station that had primary advisory warning responsibility, declined to issue a Condition 4, which would have been required had the EC-121 come within eighty nautical miles of the Soviet coast. Also newly released is the NSA version of the track of the EC-121, which clearly shows the plane over international waters when it was shot down.⁴⁷

Why did the NSA believe that North Korean radar was inferior to what the Soviets were using? According to William Hickey, a USN cryptologic veteran, although the North Koreans probably obtained most of their radar systems from the Chinese or the Russians, they would have represented an older technology than the Soviets were using at that time. "You don't want to sell your best stuff to anyone, even your allies," Hickey said. The North Korean radar was inferior to that of the Soviets in a number of factors, including its age and power stability, which would impact frequency stability, timing errors, and more. As a result, the North Korean signal might have been "jittery," whereas the Soviet systems were known to be more reliable and accurate.⁴⁸ Thus, while the North Koreans may have been operating on poor information, the Soviets knew better.

THE FLIGHT AND THE DOWNING

The EC-121M was from the fleet air reconnaissance squadron designated VQ-1. It was commanded by Lieutenant Commander James H. Overstreet, USN, and carried thirty-one men, comprising the two full working crews and some excess members in training status.⁴⁹ According to *Air Reservist*, the flight (call sign Deep Sea 129) took off from Naval Air Station Atsugi, Japan, about thirty miles from

FIGURE 4
 FLIGHT PATH OF EC-121



Source: NSA.

Tokyo, on 15 April 1969 at 6:50 AM (local time), on what should have been a routine BEGGAR SHADOW reconnaissance mission over the Sea of Japan.⁵⁰

New details of the EC-121 incident came to light only after the declassification in 2013 of an undated Naval Scientific and Tech Group, Far East (NSTFE) intelligence report; meanwhile, other details, including the official track of the ill-fated spy plane, remained classified until more recently.⁵¹ However, it is established that at roughly 1:47 PM (local time) the plane was shot down by a pair of North Korean MiG-21 fighters off the North Korean coast. After the later recovery of the wreckage from the Sea of Japan, a joint USN-USAF investigative team would conclude that the EC-121 had sustained major structural damage from the detonation of a fragmenting warhead from one air-to-air missile, or possibly two.⁵²

The pilot credited with the kill was Kim Gin-ok, recognized in North Korea as the nation's top fighter ace; during the Korean War, Kim is said to have personally downed eleven American aircraft, including three B-29 Superfortress bombers.⁵³ North Korean defense minister General Choi Hyun hailed the downing of the EC-121 as a "heroic feat."⁵⁴

The first information concerning the possible plight of the EC-121 was obtained by the duty officer of VQ-1 when that command intercepted and copied a friendly warning—its origin unidentified in the record—that hostile aircraft were approaching the EC-121. The commanding officer of VQ-1 contacted Fuchu Air Station, Japan, for any communications from the mission aircraft and requested that personnel at the base check all sources for any message that may have caused the EC-121 to abort its mission. VQ-1 made numerous calls for more than half an hour, with negative results.⁵⁵

When VQ-1 lost all effective operational control over the EC-121, it appeared that Army, Air Force, and Navy units monitoring the flight must have assumed operational control of the aircraft—and if they did not, no one did. Thus, when these classified military units subsequently directed warning messages to the EC-121 aircraft, VQ-1 was never included as an addressee on any of those messages.⁵⁶ So just before 1:00 AM (eastern standard time)—about an hour after the apparent downing of the EC-121—the commanding officer of VQ-1 sent a Flash message to all appropriate units in the area requesting information on the mission aircraft. Shortly thereafter, VQ-1 received a copy of a Critic message sent by the USAF Security Service that indicated the possible shootdown of the EC-121 over the Sea of Japan.⁵⁷ The USN plane was listed as missing at 2:00 PM that afternoon.⁵⁸

At NSA headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland, the EC-121 downing caused a crisis situation. On the day of the shootdown, the NSA declared a SIGINT alert code-named BRAVO HANGAR, which it maintained for the remainder of the month.⁵⁹

Within seventeen minutes after receiving an alert, the 314th Air Division at Osan Air Base, South Korea, scrambled fighters. Yet no air unit initiated a SAR operation for over an hour after the shootdown.⁶⁰ And when the first U.S. aircraft finally reached the scene, Soviet ships already were in the area. But instead of acting aggressively toward the arriving U.S. aircraft, these Soviet ships invited cooperation with their long-standing Cold War adversaries.

THE U.S.-SOVIET SAR OPERATION

Surface units of the U.S. Navy responded immediately to the downing of the American aircraft; the commander in chief of the Seventh Fleet ordered USS *Tucker* and USS *Dale* (DLG 19) to get under way as soon as possible and proceed to the Sea of Japan to search for the downed plane. However, both ships—which happened to be nested together in berth 6 at Sasebo, Japan—were delayed in getting under way. *Tucker*, which needed three hours to light off boilers and make sufficient steam to get under way, executed an emergency recall of its crew. *Dale*, with major equipment out for repair at the ship-repair facility at Sasebo, estimated it would need ten to twelve hours to get underway; however, it beat its projection, managing to get under way only an hour behind *Tucker*.⁶¹

In contrast, at the time of the incident a Soviet Ugra-class Project 1886 submarine tender (hull number 945) and two Foxtrot-class submarines already were at sea and in the immediate area of the crash. Next, three large Soviet vessels moved in: *Vdokhnovennyi* (Inspiration), a Kotlin-class destroyer, hull number 429; *Steregushchiy* (Vigilant), a large antisubmarine ship, No. 580; and later *Dalnevostochnyi Komsomolets* (Far East Komsomol), No. 427.⁶² Seas in the area were described as moderate, running about four feet. The air temperature was estimated at 42 to 48 degrees Fahrenheit (5–9 degrees Celsius), with the sea slightly warmer.⁶³

Once the three large Soviet surface vessels were in the vicinity, Washington appealed to the Soviet government for them to help locate any survivors. When U.S. ambassador Jacob D. Beam in Moscow asked Georgy M. Korniyenko, head of the U.S. section of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, for assistance, Korniyenko said he had no knowledge of the incident or the missing aircraft but would inform his government of the American request.⁶⁴

In Washington, Secretary of State William P. Rogers called Soviet ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin into his office shortly after noon (local time) to discuss the shootdown. Rogers stated that the American plane had not violated North Korean airspace and that the United States was unsure, at that point, whether there were any survivors. Rogers then repeated the U.S. request, expressed earlier in Moscow, that the Soviet ships in the shootdown area assist in the search and rescue.⁶⁵ At the time he was unaware that Soviet ships already had begun retrieving EC-121 debris from the sea.

In line with the U.S. desire for Soviet aid, the JCS directed U.S. forces operating in the Sea of Japan not to interfere with rescue attempts by other ships, regardless of nationality. In addition, the Fifth Air Force was ordered not to interfere with any Soviet aircraft in the vicinity of the shootdown.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, back at the crash scene, American aircraft established radio contact with *Steregushchiy*. The ship revealed that it already had picked up pieces of the plane, but there was no sign of survivors. *Steregushchiy* personnel granted permission for an American plane to fly low over their ship to photograph the debris. U.S. aircraft located some additional debris and dropped a smoke signal to mark the spot, then guided one of the Soviet destroyers to the marker, where it put small boats in the water to recover some of the debris. Sadly, while these boats took aboard the only two bodies ever to be recovered, they found no survivors.⁶⁷

To establish communications, a USAF survival radio—a URC-10—was dropped to the Soviet ships. In addition to the radio, a U.S. Army sergeant who was a Russian linguist was put aboard one of the aircraft dispatched to the search area.⁶⁸

According to a later Pentagon statement, the air and sea search for survivors began in an area centered about seventy-five miles off North Korea in the Sea of Japan. A Navy search plane sighted debris that it said “could be associated with the missing aircraft” about 120 miles southeast of Chŏngjin, North Korea; however, the crew of the search plane did not report any evidence of survivors. The Department of Defense report stated that a Navy “patrol plane” had guided two Soviet destroyers that already were on scene in the area where the debris was spotted. At the time, there was no report of the ships’ findings.⁶⁹

In addition to the U.S. Air Force and Navy, the USAF Reserve figured prominently in these SAR activities. The members of the 305th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) were reservists from Selfridge Air Force Base, Michigan; the unit had been mobilized during the 1968 *Pueblo* incident. In June 1969, in a well-deserved expression of self-praise on behalf of the reserves, *Air Reservist* magazine would mention how the 305th had played a “key role” in the EC-121 matter, which it said had added “at least one instance of heroism to their record.” Flying Boeing HC-97 rescue aircraft, two aircrews of the 305th took off from Naha, Okinawa, in the early morning hours of 16 April. They flew to the area of the air-sea search, approximately eighty-three miles southeast of Chŏngjin and seventy-two miles due east of the North Korean coast, where they relieved a C-130 Hercules (a medium-range transport plane) of the 36th ARRS, based in Tachikawa, Japan, about twenty miles west of Tokyo.⁷⁰

On the morning of 17 April, two days after the shootdown, the waters of the Sea of Japan yielded the bodies of only two crewmen, that of Lieutenant (junior grade) Joseph R. Ribar and Aviation Electronics Technician First Class Richard E.

Sweeney. Their bodies were recovered seventeen nautical miles north of the general incident area. Throughout the day, winds and currents continued to cause the debris to drift toward the North Korean and Soviet coasts. The Soviets again were requested to pick up any bodies or debris within twenty nautical miles of the coastlines—areas that were off-limits to American craft. Search operations by the two U.S. destroyers, a C-130, a P-3, and four F-106s from the Fifth Air Force continued throughout the day.⁷¹

At 10:02 PM (local) on 19 April, at the end of a fourth day of searching, the JCS terminated SAR operations, with twenty-nine of the thirty-one crewmen unaccounted for.⁷² Combat air patrols continued over the USN surface units until the following day, when the ships passed south of the thirty-eighth parallel.⁷³

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS

American Accounts

For the men of the 36th ARRS, a period of frantic activity began with the ringing of the scramble alarm. According to an Associated Press (AP) report out of Tachikawa, the plane was reported missing at 2:00 PM. "At 3:25 the horn blew and at 3:41 we were airborne," said the thirty-four-year-old pilot, Air Force major George W. Hillyer. First Lieutenant Roy B. Petit, who majored in Russian studies, the copilot of the first C-130 to take off, said he grabbed his oxygen mask and raced to his aircraft with other crewmembers. Moments later, Major Hillyer arrived from a briefing in the control center.⁷⁴

The crew of the C-130 knew only that an EC-121 was missing in the Sea of Japan. They were told that it had gone down approximately ninety nautical miles southeast of the North Korean port of Chŏngjin; however, Major Hillyer later reported that when he spotted the wreckage it was perhaps another forty-five nautical miles east of that position. When Hillyer's plane reached the EC-121's last known position, the sun was about to set. There was no sign of survivors or aircraft debris.

At one point, however, Major Hillyer and Lieutenant Petit both thought they saw two or three dim, steady lights floating on the waves. At 12:30 the next morning, with their plane running low on fuel, they were about to head to Osan for rest and refueling when they again saw lights on the water and realized they were the searchlights of a ship. Hillyer had the feeling it was a Soviet ship but had no idea what it was doing or whether it considered his presence unfriendly. However, "They were very friendly," Captain Thomas van Winkle, the pilot of a second C-130, said in an interview. "I was preoccupied with finding survivors. It never occurred to me that these people would be anything but friendly. They were obviously trying to help us in this catastrophe." Major Hillyer and Lieutenant Petit, also present in the interview, nodded in agreement with van Winkle's words.

The next day, Captain van Winkle positively identified and got in touch with the two Soviet destroyers in the search area. From the air, van Winkle saw orange and white debris scattered over a wide area, so he dropped smoke flares to guide the searching Soviet destroyers. He also dropped a survival radio to one of the Soviet ships, but they could not communicate satisfactorily with it. After dropping the radio, van Winkle recalled that Lieutenant Petit, then still resting at Osan, spoke Russian, so he urged that a C-130 return with Petit aboard.

When the press later interviewed Petit, he said he had been concentrating so heavily over the previous several months on learning to speak Japanese that at first only Japanese words came to mind when he was again on scene. From his C-130, Petit called down to the Soviet destroyer, in Russian: “Ship No. 580 [the large antisubmarine ship *Steregushchiy*]. This is No. 963. Do you understand?” He repeated that same message five or six times. Eventually an answer came in flat, expressionless Russian: “Greetings, I understand you.”

Then, in a voice expressing urgency, Petit asked, “Have you seen any survivors? Have you seen any people?” This was followed by a disappointing response: “No, we have not seen any. Have you?” When Petit responded in the negative, the conversation turned to aircraft debris, which was seen floating all about the ship. When the Americans asked the Soviet destroyer whether it had taken any aircraft parts aboard, a Russian voice answered yes. When Petit asked the Russians whether they would mind if his plane dropped down to have a better look at the debris on deck, the Russian voice said it would be okay. “We will come down low over the ship. Please don’t fear,” Petit said. The reply came back: “That’s fine.” What the American pilot described as a “cordial” conversation followed. When Major Hillyer brought the plane down to three hundred feet and made two or three passes near the ship, the Americans sighted a wheel, a ladder, and other aircraft parts on the deck of the Soviet ship. He then flew on to the other Soviet ship, the destroyer *Vdokhnovenniy*, and after a similar conversation dropped a radio to that ship as well.

When an American pilot asked *Vdokhnovenniy* what parts of the EC-121 it had aboard, the ship answered with the following list: a rubber life raft (no size given), cigarette packs, imperial pencils, an aircraft seat, parts of wood, a man’s coat (no name), and parts of the aircraft. All answers from *Vdokhnovenniy* were given in Russian. “Looking up names of these articles in Russian dictionary (our aircraft doing this)—will pass [on] this information later,” the American pilot said. Mysteriously, when the American asked whether the ships in the crash area the night before had been theirs, the Russians broke off communications. “Up until that point, communications were clear; it was a definite break off.” (This note came from the “scratch” desk log of VQ-1, which recorded events as they unfolded.)⁷⁵ When the Soviet destroyer provided the list of items that had been picked out of

the water, the Americans were unaware that *Vdokhnovennyyi* either soon would transfer a load of EC-121 debris to Vladivostok or had just done so.

When the 305th arrived, the HC-97 crew, commanded by Major Michael J. McLeod, took over as on-scene controllers, while another aircraft, flown by Captain Robert J. McClear, with Major Howard D. Coffman as backup pilot, began to fly a search pattern. At sundown, the searchers were joined by the U.S. destroyer *Tucker*. Both aircrews reported spotting pieces of debris. They remained in the vicinity throughout the night, controlling the efforts of other search aircraft and vessels while dropping flares to illuminate the area. After being out on the mission for more than fifteen hours, both aircrews were relieved by other rescue crews.⁷⁶ The Fifth Air Force Joint Rescue Coordination Center stated that a total of twenty-six aircraft would be operating in the search area by daylight.⁷⁷

On 19 April, at Tachikawa, Japan, Second Lieutenant Ronald Adinolfi of the 36th ARRS told reporters he had flown a mission in which his C-130 photographed the transfer of EC-121 debris from Soviet to American warships. As Adinolfi explained, after *Vdokhnovennyyi* gave Lieutenant Petit a list of the items it had picked up, Captain van Winkle and his crew received words of condolence from the Russians.⁷⁸ Takashi Oka, the *New York Times* Tokyo bureau chief, and the AP added further details.

As the Americans' C-130 circled overhead its pilot received a message in heavily accented but distinct English that said: "Soviet Destroyer 429 [*Vdokhnovennyyi*], Red Banner Pacific Fleet, sends condolences in connection with the loss of your aircraft." No explanation was given for the phrase "Red Banner."⁷⁹ The message was repeated several times as the Soviet destroyer steamed in the Sea of Japan, 150 miles from its home port of Vladivostok, toward its rendezvous with *Tucker*.⁸⁰

According to Adinolfi, at the time of the SAR operation, there initially were some nervous reactions, apparently because the Russians thought the USN men planned on coming aboard their ship. Eventually, however, the Americans got the Russians to understand that the transfer of EC-121 debris, from *Vdokhnovennyyi* to *Tucker*, could be accomplished using only the ships' small boats.

At 4:00 PM on 18 April, at the end of three days of search, *Vdokhnovennyyi* transferred the debris its crew had accumulated to *Tucker*, which already had taken aboard the bodies of the two EC-121 crewmen. Included in the transfer was a twenty-man lifeboat, three leather jackets, a parachute, two exposure suits, and various aircraft parts. Adinolfi noted that the Russians even returned the small radios dropped to them that had enabled communications between Soviet ships and U.S. aircraft. The transfer via whaleboats required only eight minutes or so. Then the Soviet ship turned northward and disappeared over the horizon. When *Vdokhnovennyyi* reappeared, it again rendezvoused with its American counterpart, *Tucker*.

When the SAR operation ended, *Tucker* proceeded to Sasebo, Japan, with the bodies of the two EC-121 crewmen, plus over five hundred pounds of debris. A gunner's mate on *Tucker* still remembers the details of his ship's participation in the operation. On the afternoon of the shootdown his ship had just pulled into Sasebo for liberty, but after crewmen had been on the beach for less than an hour the shore patrol ordered them back to the ship. "We got steam up and went all ahead flank for the crash site. Surface searches all the next day, the coldest watch I've ever stood. Recovered a lot of pieces of the plane, full of bullet holes. I helped bring the bodies aboard and carry them below, and I was in the dress honor guard as we brought the caskets ashore back in Sasebo." Then he said that they "went back to swapping rounds with the shore batteries in Haiphong Harbor. It was just more of the war to us."⁸¹

Soviet Accounts

Interesting and largely overlooked in the EC-121 incident are the details of this joint U.S.-Soviet SAR operation from the point of view of the Soviet sailors and officers who took part. The following is a rare look into this four-day-long cooperative effort between traditional Cold War adversaries, including firsthand accounts by three former crewmen of the Soviet destroyer *Vdokhnovenniy*.

In August 1992, Admiral Felix Gromov would be made commander in chief of the Russian navy.⁸² But in 1969, as a lieutenant commander, Gromov was serving as executive officer of *Vdokhnovenniy*, and years later he provided handwritten answers (in Russian) to the authors' questions on the events in question. Yuri Panachev, who served in the underwater weapons branch of the ship during Gromov's tenure, recalls him fondly. "[I'll] always remember the [ship's] Executive Officer with great warmth . . . good man."⁸³

As Admiral Gromov explained (in his letter to one of the authors), the Soviet Pacific fleet command held *Vdokhnovenniy's* operational service in high regard. The ship's main task was surveillance over the "potential enemy," a "show of flag," and "friendship visits" to the ports of friendly countries. "Of course, we [also] closely monitored the world atmosphere in connection with the *Pueblo* situation," Gromov wrote. After *Vdokhnovenniy* completed its mission pursuant to the downing of the EC-121, the crew received a short rest before returning to home port.⁸⁴

Panachev, a senior seaman, and Gromov, the ship's executive officer, recall certain details of the incident differently. For example, was *Vdokhnovenniy* at sea when the EC-121 was shot down? Panachev and Kondratiyev said yes. Did *Vdokhnovenniy's* crew recover classified materials from the wreckage of the EC-121 but fail to return them to the Americans? Panachev was unsure; Gromov said yes. The following are Admiral Gromov's closing remarks.

We were put on combat alert and, as the most combat-capable ship, ordered to be the first sent to the place of downing. The search task and approximate coordinates

were only assigned at sea. Arriving in the region, we started the search and found documents, body remains, and details of the plane's internal parts. We brought aboard everything we could during daylight hours. Various documents were there. As night approached, we rapidly got to Vladivostok, turned the documents over at staff headquarters, and just as rapidly returned to the search zone. Yes, during [our prior] service, our ships confronted the Americans all the time—even collisions took place—but we, believing that relations had to be equal, couldn't afford to have the Americans dominate. And the Soviet Navy succeeded in doing so. [Owing to the mission's classified nature,] [l]ikely, it is all that I can say on your questions.⁸⁵

In 2008, two sailors from the Soviet destroyer *Vdokhnovenniy*, CPO Georgy Kondratiyev and Yuri Panachev, described their roles in the U.S.-Soviet cooperative salvage effort.⁸⁶ Their comments came in response to a request from a naval club in Saint Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city, which had received a letter from American navy veterans who were attempting to locate Russian sailors who had taken part in the search for EC-121 debris.

At the time of the EC-121 incident, Kondratiyev said, his ship was conducting combat training missions in the Sea of Japan. Then suddenly it was announced that *Vdokhnovenniy* was going to begin searching for a crashed American plane. As he recalled, the ship arrived in the search area during the morning hours. Since American ships were "absent nearby," an agreement was reached between the Soviet and U.S. commands for the Soviet ships to assist in the search for plane debris while American planes—a Neptune (a Lockheed P-2) and an Orion (a Lockheed P-3)—flew over the area believed to be the crash site. According to a USN spokesman, it was a USN P-3 patrol plane that guided the Soviet destroyers to the area of the debris.⁸⁷

Kondratiyev said that before the search began the Americans had dropped portable transmitters into the water for coordinating the search from the air. Meanwhile, *Vdokhnovenniy* put a motorboat and a rowboat in the water. Kondratiyev, a rower on the ship's rowboat crew, said he "participated personally in the search and gathering [of] plane remains." Nearby, *Steregushchiy* also searched; Kondratiyev said he could not recall the name of the other ship since it was a missile antisubmarine ship and their naval units were stationed at different piers in the Vladivostok region.⁸⁸

Kondratiyev then described the range of debris retrieved from the sea. "We picked up all floating debris [and placed it into our motorboat]: logbooks, clothes, an inflatable raft, lifejackets, spare radio parts wrapped in polyethylene, plastic bags with some [unknown] powder, [and] pieces of hull." As Kondratiyev recalls, "Americans showed [us] the area where most of the debris gathered. Our command informed the Americans on search results. The search continued all day long."⁸⁹

As Kondratiyev recalls, *Tucker* was to rendezvous with his ship to receive the debris. That evening, however, when *Tucker* arrived, an order was issued to return to Vladivostok, urgently. “The Americans followed us up to our territorial waters,” Kondratiyev said, “not understanding our ‘getaway’ as we, ourselves, did not.” Only in Vladivostok, he said, was the crew told that North Korea had downed a reconnaissance aircraft with thirty-one men aboard. All the debris was taken out for examination at night; what they decided to hand over to the Americans (to determine the cause of the “accident”) was delivered the next morning. Kondratiyev’s words, however, contradict what Panachev and Gromov have said; namely, that the crew was told about the incident before heading to the search area. Some fifty years after the event, Kondratiyev may have been confused about some details.⁹⁰

Later that same day, Kondratiyev’s ship, the destroyer *Vdokhnovennyyi*, returned to the search area, where the items of debris were to be passed to the Americans. “At the rendezvous point,” Kondratiyev said, “our ships stood board-and-board by right sides, [and the Soviet crewmen were] piped over the side, as motorboats were set into the water.” Kondratiyev said there were four or five sailors, plus an officer interpreter, in each whaleboat. The recovered items then were transferred to the American motorboat.⁹¹

Senior seaman Yuri Panachev, from Yuzhnoukrainsk, Ukraine, who also served in the crew of *Vdokhnovennyyi*, later provided his firsthand recollections. After he left the service, Panachev said he studied medicine and became a physician. His medical training allowed him to identify later the body parts pulled from the water; at the time of the incident, however, Panachev said he only knew that they were human remains.⁹²

Panachev said his battle station was located at the stern of the ship. Among his duties as a senior electrician, Panachev maintained the rocket-assisted bomb launcher’s electrical system. Regarding the North Korean downing of the EC-121, Panachev also recalled “picking up debris of an American plane.” He said that each iteration always began the same way: “With the shrill ring of the alarm bells, ‘Stand by, General Quarters!!!’”⁹³

At the time of the incident, Panachev said his ship had been at sea for a few weeks—“All was as usual: a watch, rest, maintenance work, cleaning. . . . It was boring, but necessary. The sea was growing stormy a bit, but no one worried too much about this fact; a long ocean voyage was behind us, stretching . . . from Vladivostok to Africa!”⁹⁴

After supper, Panachev began standing watch at his battle station in the fourteenth compartment, near the aft rocket launcher. After examining the equipment, Panachev sat in his chair, put the earphone helmet on, and had just begun reporting readiness to the main control room when “the so-loved alarm gongs

rang." Surely, it was a call to military service, he thought. "I assumed that a military training exercise was starting, [so] I prepared to receive commands, but the earphone helmet kept silent. The ship stopped and then dashed forward."⁹⁵

After four hours the watch changed and Panachev went to bed. The next morning, he woke up to silence, not knowing where the destroyer had rushed to. Panachev recalled American planes dropping something red into the water by parachute, which turned out to be a portable transmitter. "It was brought to the [main control room] immediately," he said.⁹⁶

Panachev said his BCh-3 (Combat Unit-3) was responsible for the lowering of the working boat (located on the port side amidships) into the water.⁹⁷ The crewmen then climbed down into the boat by storm ladder. "There were five of us and an officer," he said. But the men were not given instructions until after the whaleboat had left the destroyer; at that point, the officer explained the tasks the men were to perform, which were to pick up everything floating on the sea surface and check attentively whether men were in the water.⁹⁸

No debris was spotted at first. The men then heard an odd sound that surprised them—a sound that appeared to come from tiny hammers striking the side of the boat. At first glance, it appeared the "hammers" were in fact a large mass of shattered glass bottles. But once the men began picking up the glass from the surface of the water with a skimmer, closer examination revealed that it actually consisted of the shattered remnants of radio vacuum tubes off the U.S. spy plane. The men placed the glass fragments into buckets.⁹⁹

Nothing else was seen on the water until they spotted a piece of EC-121 fuselage, which Panachev estimated to be approximately 2 by 1.5 meters in size; but he found it not to be too heavy, owing to its honeycomb construction. Later, a lot more debris began to pop up, including numerous thick books whose pages were filled with figures—presumably classified material. After the men loaded up their motorboat with debris they returned to their ship.¹⁰⁰

When their boat got under way again, the men were ordered to pick up "journals"—entire publications—that had floated to the surface. Other items retrieved included aircraft covering (notably inner covering), greenish in color, that was said to resemble a passenger car seat cover. There was so much of it, Panachev said, that it filled half the motorboat. The boatswain, Warrant Officer Kolosov, whom Panachev described as a "practical person," said everything picked up would be useful—and he was right; the covering, about 5 mm thick, later was used to line stools and cover lockers inside their ship.¹⁰¹

The men also pulled human remains out of the water, undoubtedly those of the crew of the EC-121—the inner organs of the abdomen (small bowel, a part of the large intestine, and a part of the liver with stomach)—which they placed in a small sack. Around lunchtime, a command was issued to hoist the motorboat

and rowboat into the ship, alarm bells rang, and *Vdokhnovennyi* rushed off (to Vladivostok, as the men found out later).¹⁰²

When the ship arrived in port that evening, Panachev said his ship was moored stern to at a pier to which they never had been before. At daybreak, Combat Unit-3 began off-loading the debris. Before arriving at Vladivostok, with the debris already wrapped in polyethylene, the executive officer of *Vdokhnovennyi* (Gromov) explained the next part of their mission to the crew over the intercom—with words to the effect that “we are going to a rendezvous with an American destroyer to pass the found plane fragments, so be vigilant.” Then the *zampolit*, the Communist Party official aboard the ship, added that “the enemy was crafty and very capable of provocation, but he didn’t clarify which one [i.e., specify the Americans]. Well, yes; we did not know this!” Panachev said sarcastically.¹⁰³

FIGURE 5
USN SMALL BOATS APPROACH THE SOVIET RESCUE AND SALVAGE TEAM, WITH TUCKER IN THE BACKGROUND



Source: Yuri Panachev, via *The Tin Can Sailor*.

When *Vdokhnovennyi* reached the rendezvous point, the American destroyer already was waiting around for them. "We stared at her severely," Panachev said. "Here he is, the visible enemy!" The Soviets then set a motorboat back into the water and began loading the collected debris into it. When they got under way, they imagined passing the load to the Americans: "So rugged and toothless enemies will sail now."¹⁰⁴

Just then, Panachev said, "a motorboat popped out from behind the American destroyer's aft and headed towards us. We moved slowly." But instead of "the enemy," he said that a light, swift motorboat with flag flying approached, with some "joyful Americans" aboard. "The Americans—young, smiling guys—were telling us something and waving. Our brains went numb, really. They were the same as us—tense anxiety disappeared immediately. I began taking photos, forgetting about the debris. Someone from their side gave the order. Stretching out their arms to take the load, we handed them all [over]."¹⁰⁵

As CPO Kondratiyev recalls, salvage operations ended with a courteous parting of the ways, when a USN officer thanked the Soviet command for assistance. After exchanging a few words, he handed a butane cigarette lighter in its case to the Russian interpreter, plus two more lighters to be passed along to the Soviet ship's commanding and executive officers. Kondratiyev said he was presented with a bunch of *Playboy* magazines—which the *zampolit* confiscated immediately after Kondratiyev's return to the ship. Kondratiyev also emphasized that no untoward incidents took place between the U.S. and Soviet motorboats.¹⁰⁶

RESPONSES

During the immediate aftermath of the April 1969 downing of the EC-121 and what followed, the incident was viewed through the prism of the Cold War. The passage of time, however, brought additional information forward. In the years since, greater access to additional records and documents, as well as accounts by those who experienced the incident firsthand, has clarified some of the events; however, some questions remain—as do differing interpretations of those events.

North Korea

Suffice it to say, North Korea made no contribution to the SAR effort its actions had made necessary; on the other hand, neither did it interfere. Although no North Korean ships were sighted during the joint SAR operation, Soviet sailor Yuri Panachev recalls that two North Korean MiGs flew over at low altitude. "They dipped their wings [mockingly] and disappeared." Someone shouted that they were Korean aircraft, Panachev said.¹⁰⁷ What a shock it must have been for those North Korean pilots to witness their supposed friends (the Russians) working cooperatively with their sworn enemies (the Americans).

Four days after the search came to a halt, word reached Washington of a statement from Pyongyang that suggested North Korea might shoot down additional

U.S. reconnaissance planes in the future.¹⁰⁸ Would there continue to be such reconnaissance flights? A 1969 article in *Newsweek* titled “An Exercise in Restraint” claimed that the downing of the EC-121 and crew in the frigid waters of the Sea of Japan had “immediately plunged the U.S. into a soul-searching examination of the parameters of its global power.”¹⁰⁹

According to a Nixon administration source, “a lot of problems [had] to be sorted out” before EC-121 flights could be resumed on a regular basis—but flights continued nonetheless.¹¹⁰ According to United Press International, about a week after the downing, the Japanese press and television outlets reported from Tokyo that an EC-121 had taken off from an air base in Japan, and Japanese television filmed the plane as it took off from the base at Atsugi. A U.S. military spokesman declined to comment.¹¹¹

North Korea’s official press agency responded by issuing a 2,300-word declaration from Pyongyang. The message, monitored in Tokyo, castigated President Nixon for his decision to continue reconnaissance flights—now with fighter cover—and for forming a powerful USN task force (TF 71) in the Sea of Japan, which clearly was designed to intimidate Kim Il-sung’s regime.¹¹² A segment of the message specifically concerning the EC-121 incident read as follows:

Even though the U.S. imperialists insist, in word, that their planes will fly over high seas, there is no ground to guarantee that they will not intrude into the territorial air of our country again.

FIGURE 6
UGRA-CLASS SUB TENDER



Source: Smart Maritime Group website.

... If the reconnaissance planes of the U.S. imperialists intrude into the territorial air of our country, we will not sit with folded arms, but will take resolute measures for safeguarding our sovereignty as ever.

Then the U.S. imperialists will use this as a pretext to commit a full-scale armed attack against us, which may only lead to another total war in Korea in the end.¹¹³

The Press

It was press coverage of the unfolding events that first brought to the world's attention the role the Soviet Union was playing in the aftermath of the downing. The fact that the Soviets indeed were participating in the EC-121 SAR operation became public once the Fifth Air Force, headquartered in Japan, released photographs of Soviet destroyers in the general search area. The photos were taken from a 36th ARRS C-130.¹¹⁴

When planes of the USAF Reserve first flew low over the crash scene, they photographed *Steregushchiy*, a large Soviet antisubmarine ship. One of those photos then was released to the AP wire service, in what is known as a handout. A few days after the attack, a high-resolution photo of *Steregushchiy* with one of its whaleboats nearby, searching for debris and possible survivors, accompanied a front-page-headline story in the *New York Times*. The caption under the photo read, "IN THE SEA OF JAPAN: A motor launch moves away from a Soviet destroyer [*sic*] to pick up debris believed to be from the missing U.S. intelligence plane. Soviet ships are taking part in the search at the request of the United States."¹¹⁵

Another photo shows whaleboats of USS *Tucker* and the Soviet destroyer *Vdokhnovennyi* approaching each other, with a C-130 circling overhead.¹¹⁶ A third photo, said to be of poor quality, bore the handwritten caption: "Destroyer picking up piece of yellow metal from area."¹¹⁷ This photo, taken when debris had not yet been identified positively, shows a motor launch, apparently from a Soviet destroyer, with men leaning over the gunwales and possibly holding the yellow metal.¹¹⁸ As the operation was drawing to a close, the *New York Times* concluded its detailed account of the incident with a front-page story entitled "U.S. Fliers Describe Soviet Aid on Plane" that ended with the words "Thus closed an extraordinary three days [*sic*; actually four] of Soviet-American cooperation."¹¹⁹

However, not all press coverage took the opportunity to highlight the Soviet contribution. An article in *Pacific Stars & Stripes* (under the title "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane") mentioned how *Tucker* and the frigate USS *Dale* were expected to reach the search area, but it made hardly any mention of the Soviet ships that were first to arrive at the crash site, nor did an AP press release that appeared within that *Pacific Stars & Stripes* article make any mention of Soviet ships. The only other immediate mention, in fact, appeared in accounts of a press

conference held by Senator Everett M. Dirksen (R-IL). At a White House meeting, Dirksen said the EC-121 had possible survivors and that legislative leaders were informed that two ships, “believed to be Russian, were moving toward the spot where the plane was downed.”¹²⁰

Some of the later press coverage focused on questions, not answers. A June 1969 article in *Air Reservist* magazine wondered why Soviet ships “happen[ed] to be in the area” and why they arrived at the crash site before American ships.¹²¹ Part of the answer was simply the proximity of the last known position of the missing EC-121 to Vladivostok. In addition, we now know that the two U.S. ships involved in the SAR operation were delayed in getting under way, as noted previously. Whether there were any other reasons for the quick Soviet response remains a matter of speculation.

In 2004, Professor Narushige Michishita, now at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, referenced the North Korean downing of the USN EC-121 reconnaissance plane in an article in the *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*. The article makes no mention, however, of the joint U.S.-Soviet SAR effort. Instead, Michishita explains how 1966–72 represented the “genesis” of North Korean military-diplomatic campaigns. At the time of the incident, North Korea employed MiG-21 fighters, which he writes were “newly introduced from the Soviet Union.” The April 1969 incident marked the first successful interception, after failed attempts had been made in January 1954, February 1955, June 1959, and April 1965—a clear sign that the “military balance had been gradually shifting in favor of North Korea,” Michishita wrote.¹²²

In 2017, Van Jackson, an associate professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, wrote an essay on the EC-121 downing for the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. In accordance with what he describes as North Korea’s “coercive theory of victory,” Jackson states that the incident had “special meaning in the history of U.S.–North Korea relations.” Although the Soviets had exercised “little to no control” over North Korean foreign policy, Jackson avers that they had attempted to restrain North Korea on several occasions.¹²³ Again, there was no mention of this rare joint SAR effort between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The Nixon Administration

The separate but related questions of what role, if any, the Soviet Union might have played in North Korea’s downing of the American plane and the role it might play, and in fact already had played, in the resultant SAR case were intertwined from the start. On the day of the downing, Secretary of State William P. Rogers had a fifteen-minute conversation with Soviet ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin that was not in any way a protest but rather an appeal for assistance.¹²⁴ Behind the scenes, Rogers and Henry A. Kissinger, President Richard M. Nixon’s national

security advisor, had spoken on the telephone. According to a transcript of their conversation, Rogers said he was going to have Dobrynin in at noon. Kissinger said the president did not want any protests to anyone. In response, Rogers said he was not going to protest, he just wanted to talk to Dobrynin about helping to save the men. In a later telephone conversation, Nixon and Kissinger discussed the idea of a formal protest but "decided [it] should not be done with Soviets."¹²⁵

A few days after the attack, it was only in accompaniment to a headline story, entitled "U.S. to Emphasize Diplomatic Steps on Loss of Plane," quoting U.S. government officials that "[d]iplomatic action rather than military retaliation will be the Nixon Administration's essential response to North Korea's shooting down of a United States reconnaissance plane" that the *New York Times* printed the front-page photo of *Steregushchiy* and its whaleboat. As noted previously, the caption accompanying that photo noted that the Soviet ships were taking part in the search at the request of the United States.¹²⁶

During a press conference on 18 April, President Nixon addressed the downing of the EC-121. "As was pointed out in the protest that was filed at Panmunjom yesterday, and also in the Defense Department statement," the president said, "the plane involved was an unarmed Constellation, propeller driven." Nixon said that the plane was conducting reconnaissance, but at no time had it come closer than forty miles to the coast of North Korea. "[A]ll of the evidence that we have," the president said, "indicates that it was shot down approximately 90 miles from the shores of North Korea while it was moving outward, aborting the mission on orders that had been received." He said they knew this because of U.S. radar; more important was the fact that "the North Koreans knew it based on their radar." Therefore, the attack was unprovoked, Nixon stated. "It was deliberate. It was without warning. The protest has been filed: The North Koreans have not responded."¹²⁷

Nixon also said that such missions were not uncommon. "This year [and it was only mid-April] we have had already 190 of these flights without incident, without threat, without warning, at all." The president observed that, throughout the period of the Nixon administration, in response to an increasing number of North Korean incidents and threats of military action against South Korea and against the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, "[w]e have had a policy of reconnaissance flights in the Sea of Japan, similar to this flight."¹²⁸

When asked about North Korea's motives and whether he saw any parallels or patterns between the attacks against the EC-121 and USS *Pueblo*, the president said the *Pueblo* incident was "quite different," in two respects. As for *Pueblo*, there was some uncertainty for a time regarding the location of *Pueblo* at the moment of the attack. "Present indications are that the *Pueblo* was in international waters," the president said; in contrast, regarding the EC-121 there was no uncertainty: the United States *knew* what North Korean radar showed. "We incidentally [also] know

what the Russian radar showed,” the president said. “And all three radars [including America’s] showed exactly the same thing.” Under the circumstances, Nixon called it “completely [a] surprise attack.”¹²⁹ Subsequently, when North Korea asserted that the EC-121 had intruded into “the territorial air of our country,” the White House contradicted that contention, averring that the USN plane was over international waters and well off the coast of North Korea when the two MiG jets attacked it.¹³⁰

When asked what role, if any, the Soviet Union may have played in the EC-121 incident, Nixon replied as follows:

The Soviet role in the plane incident first is one of being of assistance to the United States in recovering the debris and looking for survivors. And we are most grateful to the Soviet Union for helping us in this respect. Our intelligence—and of course no one can be sure here—indicates that the Soviet Union was not aware that this attack was to be made. North Korea is not a nation that is predictable in terms of its actions. It is perhaps more than any other nation in the Communist bloc completely out of [the] control of either the Soviet Union or, for that matter, Communist China.¹³¹

While the U.S. government was appreciative of Soviet efforts to search for possible survivors of the EC-121 and remained uncertain about the degree of Soviet influence over North Korean actions, Ambassador Beam left the following cautionary note with Soviet premier Aleksey Kosygin during a face-to-face meeting in Moscow on 22 April 1969. “The shutdown of our aircraft is only the most recent example of developments in the area which lead to increased tension and which must be a source of concern to the Soviet Government as well as to us. We hope the Soviet Union will do what it can to restrain the North Koreans from such irresponsible acts since we believe it to be in our mutual interest to avoid further exacerbation of tension in the area.”¹³²

Pentagon analysts stated they believed that the Soviets “probably” had warned North Korea against a repetition of either the seizure of a ship such as *Pueblo* or the shooting down of an American plane. The Pentagon also believed the Soviets had warned the North Koreans that they would not support them with either war supplies or forces should a future attack lead to hostilities with the United States.¹³³ Fortunately, neither type of tragedy involving North Korea has occurred since.

In the short term, the U.S. Navy seems to have been less ambivalent regarding Soviet cooperation in the SAR operation than the rest of the government. Three months after the EC-121 incident, Fred S. Hoffman, a military writer for the AP in Washington, DC, noted a distinct thawing of the Cold War. He stated that American admirals, who had thundered for years about the growing Soviet naval challenge, were being “unusually restrained about a Russian squadron making a ‘show the flag’ voyage to Cuba.”¹³⁴ This was the first mention of any warming since the U.S. and Soviet navies had conducted their joint SAR operation in the Sea of Japan.

Critics

A few days after the joint SAR effort terminated on 19 April, the families of the crewmen who had perished, joined by fellow Navy pilots, gathered for simple, quiet memorial and prayer services. They were held under a "mild sun on the green, dandelion-speckled baseball field" of Naval Air Station Atsugi, Japan.¹³⁵

Even before the services began, however, some Navy men began to voice anger over what they said was Washington's failure to protect the crew of the reconnaissance plane. Others expressed frustration over the Nixon administration's decision to forgo a retaliatory strike against North Korea. President Nixon had castigated his predecessor for failing to retaliate after the North Korean seizure of USS *Pueblo*, yet Nixon did nothing more in retaliation following the EC-121 downing than President Lyndon B. Johnson had done fifteen months earlier. According to a young naval officer interviewed by a reporter off base, "After it happened, every man in the [Air] Station wanted to go and zap the North Koreans with everything we had. . . . I suppose Nixon had his reasons, but we cannot help feeling badly that nothing was done."¹³⁶

As noted, when Nixon was asked whether the U.S. government believed the Soviets knew in advance of the North Korean plan to shoot down a U.S. reconnaissance plane, he replied that U.S. intelligence indicated otherwise—but some Americans remained unconvinced. Soon after the EC-121 crisis began, the Reverend Paul D. Lindstrom of Prospect Heights, Illinois, the national chairman of the Remember the *Pueblo* Committee, began making a number of extraordinary, unfounded claims. According to Lindstrom, "possibly seven" members of the EC-121 crew had survived and were picked up by North Korean gunboats, and a supposed four-hour delay in advising President Nixon of the shootdown had "brought about the failure to rescue the known survivors of the EC-121 who parachuted into the Sea of Japan." Citing an unnamed U.S. government source, Reverend Lindstrom also claimed that the MiGs that shot down the EC-121 were based in the Soviet Union, not in North Korea—an accusation that Admiral Gromov and others later denied.¹³⁷

Any delay in responding to the incident, such as the one to which Lindstrom referred, might have been caused by Nixon being in a drunken state at the time. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour M. Hersh, "Nixon had become violently drunk early in the crisis."¹³⁸

Other questions posed by those addressing the incident with a critical eye are more general in nature. Yes, after the *Pueblo* incident the Soviets allegedly warned the North Koreans to cease further acts of aggression against the United States; yes, when the EC-121 was brought down nonetheless, the Soviets assisted in the SAR operation. But when it came to their eagerness to help recover debris, was this entirely unselfish? When top secret documents, cryptologic equipment,

and secret codes off USS *Pueblo* fell into Russian hands, the NSA had said it was “everyone’s worst nightmare, surpassing in damage anything that had ever happened to the cryptologic community.”¹³⁹ Fifteen months later, if similar material that Soviet sailors collected after the EC-121 crash was photographed before its return or never returned at all, the damage to American cryptology would have been no less catastrophic.

Tucker and *Dale* recovered a few pieces of classified material, among which were a radar antenna, a classified photograph, pages from a computer printout, and several pages of handwritten operator’s notes found in the personal effects of Richard E. Sweeney. Also recovered was “a piece of the bulkhead containing the crew’s positions”; presumably this was a chart (attached to a piece of EC-121 bulkhead) that showed where each crewman aboard the spy plane worked.¹⁴⁰

In contrast, according to a top secret NSA report on the incident, no classified material was in the debris exchanged between *Vdokhnovennyi* and *Tucker*. When Soviet seaman Yuri Panachev was asked whether all technical books from the EC-121 were returned to the U.S. Navy, he replied, “We threw thick books into plastic sacks as well; if they were returned, I am not aware.”¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, a complete list of the classified material aboard the EC-121 continues to be withheld from the public.¹⁴²

Congress

In addition to coverage in the press and statements and press releases issuing from the executive branch, the U.S.-Soviet cooperative effort also was discussed in Congress. A special subcommittee of the House Committee on Armed Services already had been established and was conducting a full and thorough inquiry arising from the capture and internment of USS *Pueblo* and its crew by the North Korean government; its scope was expanded to include the loss of the EC-121.¹⁴³ Thus, the parallels between the January 1968 *Pueblo* incident and the April 1969 downing of the EC-121 led to an expansion of the subcommittee’s authority.

During an appearance before the subcommittee in connection with the loss of the EC-121, General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, provided a detailed account of the incident, including a fairly comprehensive discussion of the Soviet role in the SAR effort. General Wheeler noted to the subcommittee that “[t]he composition of the search and rescue force at various times subsequent to the loss of the EC-121 has been described in briefings and news releases.” He then went on to explain how two Soviet ships had joined the search, and that later a third ship, a destroyer, also was observed in the area. These three were the only Soviet ships known to have participated in the search. “Our search aircraft established contact with the Soviet ships,” Wheeler said.¹⁴⁴

But whatever goodwill developed between the U.S. and Soviet navies during the joint operation was short-lived, and mutual suspicions between these Cold

War adversaries did not abate. Spurred by the Soviet Union's expanding activities at sea, the U.S. Navy planned on stepping up and modernizing its intelligence operations around the world. Monies for an accelerated intelligence program were included in a large funding bill that was pending in the House and Senate in October 1969. Navy spokesmen stated that during their testimony behind closed doors they had urged that the sums be approved. Included in the Navy request was regular funding for "cloak-and-dagger intelligence and counter-intelligence activities of nearly 1,000 agents operating around the world." These activities ranged from sensitive espionage investigations to an increasing number of inquiries into Navy narcotics use. The proposed expansion was requested for surveillance on, over, and beneath the high seas; also involved were reports from visual sightings, as well as from radar, sound-sensitive sonobuoys, and other sophisticated sensors.¹⁴⁵

Rear Admiral Frederick J. "Fritz" Harlfinger II, commander of Naval Intelligence Command, told congressional committees that Russia's new interest in sea power was largely responsible for the step-up in requests for congressional funding. Referring specifically to the penetration by the modern and expanding Soviet fleet into the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean over the preceding two years, Harlfinger said, "The urgent effort to improve Naval intelligence capabilities has been provoked primarily by the steady and continuing expansion of Soviet sea power." The Soviets were showing "increasing competence" in using their modern ships and equipment, he said. "More Soviet ships and aircraft are going out to sea—going farther and staying out longer."¹⁴⁶

Over a decade later, an aspect of the incident again raised its head in congressional debate. In 1983, Congress was debating a bill on national security; specifically, the House was debating further consideration of a bill (H.R. 3231) to revise the Export Administration Act of 1979.¹⁴⁷ Although the MiG fighters that shot down the EC-121 were Soviet made, Representative Gerald B. H. Solomon (R-NY) claimed that the Atoll missiles that MiGs used were Soviet copies of American technology. An NSA report completed after the EC-121 incident had determined that the missiles that brought down the plane probably were of the infrared, heat-seeking, Atoll type—a Soviet reverse-engineered replica of the U.S. Sidewinder missile.¹⁴⁸ Solomon, in his debate remarks, stated that he believed the Soviet practice of stealing Western technology that had led to the Atoll missile would continue unless the House passed the amendment to the bill currently under debate. He was outraged that the House was being asked to vote on a bill that would make it easier for the Soviets to obtain U.S. missile technology. Solomon claimed there was a strong relationship between the national security sections of the bill and the recent "Korean airline massacre"—the September 1983 downing of Korean Air Lines (KAL) Flight 007 over the Sea of Japan. "At the same time,

we continue to search for the black box from the KAL destroyed by an Atoll missile. A Soviet missile which is an exact duplicate of the U.S. Sidewinder missile. The Soviet Atoll is a mirror image of U.S. technology and was built with Western methods, and Western know-how,” the congressman said.¹⁴⁹

At the time of the attack, President Nixon was extremely grateful to the Soviet Union for helping in this SAR effort. However, we now know, on the basis of the recent testimony of Soviet participants, that the Soviets did not participate entirely unselfishly. Following the *Pueblo* seizure, the North Koreans had passed on to the Russians the state-of-the-art ELINT equipment on board that USN spy ship. Similarly, in the case of the EC-121 incident, the Russians transferred to Vladivostok a load of classified material—perhaps even before the first U.S. warship had arrived on scene.

NOTES

- The authors thank the following individuals, without whom this story could not have been told: Admiral Felix Gromov, Yuri Panachev, Georgy Kondratiyev, Alexandr Rozin, Wayne Whitten, and William Hickey (U.S. Naval Cryptologic Veterans Association).
1. National Security Agency (NSA) / Central Security Service (CSS), *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, U.S. Cryptologic History, Special Series Crisis Collection 3 ([Fort Meade, MD]: Office of Archives and History, 1989), p. 1. The NSA, CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Staff, National Security Council, and Office of the Secretary of Defense declassified and approved this material for release in 2013.
 2. Tai Sung An, *North Korea in Transition: From Dictatorship to Dynasty* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983), p. 1, cited in NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 1.
 3. “N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane,” *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, 17 April 1969, pp. 1, 24.
 4. Ibid.; William Beecher, “U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost, Reported Downed by 2 North Korean MiGs,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1969, pp. 1, 14.
 5. “Index of Possible Actions” in response to the seizure of USS *Pueblo*, undated, page labeled “Airborne Reconnaissance Action No. 2d,” Records of Gen. Earle Wheeler, Chairman, JCS, box 29, tab 449, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, available at [nsarchive2.gwu.edu/](https://www.nsa.gov/NSA/NSA%20Archives/NSA%20Archives%20-%20Public%20Access%20-%20NSA%20Cryptologic%20Veterans%20Association/).
 6. Thomas R. Johnson, *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945–1989*, book 2, *Centralization Wins, 1960–1972*, U.S. Cryptologic History, Series 6: The NSA Period, 1952–Present 5 ([Fort Meade, MD]: National Security Agency Center for Cryptologic History, 1995), chap. 10, p. 464.
 7. “Now It’s Nixon’s Turn; How Will He React?,” *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), 16 April 1969, pp. 1, 3A.
 8. “N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane,” pp. 1, 24.
 9. Ron Marlur [Capt., USN], “The Things They’ll Do . . .,” *Air Reservist*, June 1969, pp. 6–7.
 10. Beecher, “U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost,” pp. 1, 14.
 11. Navy admiral John S. McCain Jr., the father of Senator John S. McCain III, was the commander of U.S. Pacific Command in Hawaii from 1968 to 1972.
 12. Wayne Whitten [Col., USMC (Ret.)], e-mail to author (Streifer), 12 June 2019.
 13. Marlur, “The Things They’ll Do . . .,” pp. 6–7.

14. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 4.
15. Ibid.
16. Johnson, *Centralization Wins*, p. 294.
17. Stepan Vostroin, "Russia's Crisis in the Far East: A Siberian View," *Slavonic and East European Review* 14, no. 40 (July 1935), p. 112.
18. Director of Central Intelligence, *Warsaw Pact Forces Opposite NATO*, NIE 11-14-79, vol. 2, *The Estimate* (31 January 1979), p. A-2, available at www.cia.gov/.
19. Ibid.; "Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy," GlobalSecurity.org.
20. "Soviet Navy: Intelligence and Analysis during the Cold War," *Central Intelligence Agency*, 6 September 2017, www.cia.gov/.
21. The reference is to Становление Индийской эскадры—ОПЭСК (Operative Squadron—OPESK). It is common knowledge in Russia that the main surface force of the Soviet Pacific Fleet stayed in Vladivostok. Regarding the travel of *Vdokhnovennyi* to the Indian Ocean, it is mentioned briefly in I. N. Khmel'nov [Adm., Soviet navy] et al., "The 10th OPESK: Navy's Vanguard during the 'Cold' War [in Russian]," chap. 5 in *The Pacific Squadron* [in Russian] (Moscow: Oruzhiye i tekhnologii, 2017). Details of *Vdokhnovennyi*'s voyages came from Yuri Panachev and in articles by Vladimir Dukel'sky and Alexandr Rozin, and from Russian Wikipedia; however, the Wikipedia article stated incorrectly that *Vdokhnovennyi* visited Bombay, India. On the formation of the 10th OPESK and concerns over America's Indian Ocean activity, see Vladimir Dukel'sky, "We Used to Do Tours Overseas [in Russian]," *Moskovsky zhurnal* [Moscow journal], 1 February 2004. Dukel'sky was an officer aboard the cruiser *Admiral Fokin* and later the head of intelligence of the 10th OPESK. See also Alexandr Rozin, "The Second Detachment of the Pacific Fleet in Indian Ocean and Submarines of the Expedition 'Inflow-2' [in Russian]," chap. 6 of the edited and updated version of his work, "8th OPESK: Evolvement of the Indian Ocean Squadron [in Russian]," 8 August 2016, available at alerozin.narod.ru/.
22. Yuri Panachev, interviews by Irek Sabitov, various dates over March–October 2018. Sabitov communicated with Yuri Panachev over the Russian social networking site Odnoklassniki (Classmates) and by e-mail. Panachev sent photos from his archive and Kondratiyev's memoirs, as well as his own. Sabitov and Georgy Kondratiyev then spoke briefly on the telephone.
23. Panachev to Sabitov over Odnoklassniki (Classmates), a Russian social networking site, ok.ru/.
24. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Kotlin-Class Destroyer," en.wikipedia.org/; Sea-Distances.org.
25. Alexandr Rozin, "8 OPESK—the Formation of the Indian Squadron," *Chronicle of Military Service*, alerozin.narod.ru/.
26. *Wikipedia* [in Russian], s.v. "*Vdokhnovennyi*," ru.wikipedia.org/.
27. Ibid.; "Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy."
28. Michael L. Peterson, "Maybe You Had to Be There: The SIGINT on Thirteen Soviet Shootdowns of U.S. Reconnaissance Aircraft," *Cryptologic Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 4, 9.
29. This information was obtained from USS *Tucker*'s captain, Cdr. S. D. Kully, and his executive officer, Lt. Cdr. James L. May, during a press conference ashore with representatives of the world's media. Although it was Soviet sailors who actually pulled the bodies from the water, they later were transferred to *Tucker*, which wrongly took credit for their recovery. This was a Cold War incident, after all, and these U.S. naval officers may have found it difficult to give credit to the Soviet sailors who pulled bodies from the water—even where that credit was due. "History of the USS Henry W. Tucker DD 875, sect. 5, 1965–1969," p. 130, *USS Henry W. Tucker DD 875 / DD(R) 875*, www.hwtucker2000.com/.
30. Evgeny N. Makeyev (Deputy Chief of the Second European Department) and Vyacheslav I. Dolgov (Third Secretary of the Second European Department).
31. "Record of a Conversation with Canadian Ambassador to the USSR R. Ford," 2 February 1968, trans. Gary Goldberg for the North Korea International Documentation Project, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/. The Russian original came from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, f. 102, op. 28, pap. 55, d. 2.

32. "Statement by Secretary Rusk, December 22 [1968]," *Department of State Bulletin* 60, nos. 1541–1566 (6 January–30 June 1969), p. 3.
33. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Thomas Van Hare, "Flight Stories: Beggar Shadow Down," *Historic Wings*, 15 April 2013, fly.historicwings.com/.
37. Panmunjom, a village on the border between North and South Korea, is where the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed and where the 1968 negotiations for the release of the *Pueblo* crew were held.
38. The 1950–53 Korean War ended in an armistice. A negotiated agreement provided for a suspension of open hostilities, a fixed demarcation line with a 2.4-mile buffer zone (the so-called Demilitarized Zone), and a mechanism for the transfer of prisoners of war. The agreement also called for the establishment of the Military Armistice Commission and other agencies to ensure that the truce held.
39. Johnson, *Centralization Wins*, p. 464.
40. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 15; Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 313.
41. Beecher, "U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost," pp. 1, 14; Johnson, *Centralization Wins*, pp. 462–65.
42. Robert Hotz, "The Flying *Pueblo*," *Aviation Week and Space Technology* 90, no. 17 (28 April 1969), p. 11.
43. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 1.
44. Bill Streifer filed a Freedom of Information Act request on or about 14 May 2018. The NSA approved the material for release on 2 October 2018, pursuant to Executive Order 13526—MDR 104508.
45. *Flight-following* means that the command at Osan was responsible for maintaining situational awareness concerning the EC-121's mission area. Therefore it was responsible for notifying the EC-121 if any other aircraft were in the area or the spy plane inadvertently had strayed into territorial waters.
46. When a radar pulse is sent out, it hits a target—in this case, the EC-121. The pulse then bounces back to the station that sent the pulse. However, the return pulse is not 100 percent of the signal. In other words, the pulse scatters and goes beyond the target it hits. Therefore, Osan likely would have seen the original pulse sent out by North Korean and Soviet radar systems, and it also would have seen the "reflected" pulse from the EC-121. In this way, the enemy's radar system can be used to track your target without having to send out your own radar signals, which would give away your position.
47. William P. Rogers, dispatch to [deleted], 171619Z April 1969; National Military Command Center, memorandum, "EC-121 SAR Operations," 191742Z April 1969. Both obtained from the NSA through FOIA, requested May–June 2018, received 8 October 2018.
48. William Hickey, e-mail to author (Streifer), 4 November 2018.
49. Beecher, "U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost," pp. 1, 14; Johnson, *Centralization Wins*, pp. 462–65.
50. Marlar, "The Things They'll Do . . ." pp. 6–7.
51. This NSTFE report is cited in NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*.
52. "Remembering Shootdown of EC-121M (PR 21), 15 April 1969—31 Crew Members KIA," *Station HYPO*, stationhypo.com/. When NSA personnel reported to work during the early hours of that April morning, they faced a confusing situation. NSA's role in the mission of the aircraft seemed unclear. Although the U.S. Navy dubbed the flight a BEGGAR SHADOW mission, implying that it was primarily a COMINT (i.e., communications intelligence) flight, and thus under NSA authority, the mission of the aircraft was primarily ELINT, in direct support of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet requirements. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*.
53. When the Korean War began, Kim Gin-ok was the commander of a squadron, flying

- Yak-9s as part of the 56th Regiment of the North Korean air force. He later flew MiG-15s as a squadron leader, then regimental commander, and eventually divisional commander. He died in November 2001 at the age of seventy-six. Anonymous comment on "The First Victories of Soviet Aviation in Korea," *Top War*, 7 August 2013, topwar.ru/.
54. "Correction, Please!," *Review of the News* 5 (1969), p. 2. The periodical *Review of the News* was published by Robert Welch, a cofounder of the John Birch Society. While similar to *American Opinion*, a monthly magazine that Welch also published, *Review of the News* was a weekly publication that covered similar themes but on a more frequent basis, following the breaking news of the week more closely.
 55. Special Subcomm. on the U.S.S. *Pueblo* of the H. Comm. on Armed Services, 91st Cong., Inquiry into the U.S.S. *Pueblo* and EC-121 Plane Incidents, H.A.S.C. 91-12, p. 1625 (1969).
 56. *Ibid.*
 57. Flash is a category of precedence reserved for initial enemy contact messages, or operational combat messages of extreme urgency in which brevity is mandatory. Critic indicates a message of such importance that it requires notifying the highest authorities of the government within ten minutes. Martin H. Weik, *Communications Standard Dictionary* (New York: Springer, 1989), p. 411; H.A.S.C. 91-12, p. 1625.
 58. Marlar, "The Things They'll Do . . .," p. 7 editor's note.
 59. During this crisis period, NSA officials and analysts would play major roles in providing answers to questions raised by the Nixon White House, the Pentagon, other intelligence agencies, Congress, and the press regarding the loss of this Navy intelligence aircraft. On the morning after the shootdown, the front-page headline of the *Washington Post* read, "N. Korea Claims It Downed U.S. Plane." "N. Korea Claims It Downed U.S. Plane," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1969, p. 1; NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 1.
 60. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 24.
 61. "History of the USS *Henry W. Tucker*," p. 128.
 62. According to Kondratiyev's memoir, the commander of *Vdokhnovennyi* was Capt. 2nd Rank V. M. Marin, not Marsh, as certain Russian-language newspapers had reported.
 63. "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane," pp. 1, 24.
 64. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Korniyenko had been an attaché at the Soviet embassy in Washington, DC. "Cuban Missile Crisis," *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/.
 65. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
 66. *Ibid.*
 67. *Ibid.*
 68. *Ibid.*
 69. Beecher, "U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost," pp. 1, 14.
 70. Marlar, "The Things They'll Do . . .," pp. 6–7; "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane," pp. 1, 24.
 71. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
 72. Associated Press, "Search for Bodies Ends," *New York Times*, 20 April 1969, p. 3.
 73. William C. Barnes, *The EC-121 Incident: 15 April 1969*, Project CHECO Report (Honolulu, HI: HQ Pacific Air Forces, 15 March 1970), p. 13.
 74. Takashi Oka, "U.S. Fliers Describe Soviet Aid on Plane," *New York Times*, 20 April 1969, pp. 1, 3; "Soviet Ships Aided Search," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 20 April 1969, p. 22-A; Takashi Oka, "Drama at Sea: U.S.-Soviet Co-operation," *Ottawa Journal* (Canada) via New York Times Service, 22 April 1969, p. 7. The succeeding five paragraphs are drawn from the same sources.
 75. "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane," pp. 1, 24; VQassociation.org.
 76. Marlar, "The Things They'll Do . . .," pp. 6–7.
 77. "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane," pp. 1, 24.

78. Associated Press, "Cold War Thaws in Debris Search," *Times Herald* (Port Huron, MI), 19 April 1969, p. 2.
79. A few years earlier, on 7 May 1965, the Northern Fleet of the Soviet navy had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner. "Day of the Northern Fleet. Dossier," TASS [the Russian news agency], 31 May 2018, tass.ru/.
80. Oka, "U.S. Fliers Describe Soviet Aid on Plane," pp. 1, 3; Associated Press, "Cold War Thaws in Debris Search." Both of these press reports were out of Tachikawa, Japan. The following two paragraphs are drawn from the same sources.
81. Oka, "U.S. Fliers Describe Soviet Aid on Plane," pp. 1, 3; Associated Press, "Cold War Thaws in Debris Search"; "15 April 1969: Deep Sea 129 Shootdown," *Naval History* (blog), 15 April 2010, www.navalhistory.org/.
82. RussianShips.info, created on 11 December 2009, concerns the postwar design of the ships of the navy of the USSR and the Russian Federation. As the website notes, all information was derived from public sources and none of it is secret.
83. Adm. Felix N. Gromov's military history, available at persona.rin.ru/. This is a Russian-language biography site of Russian celebrities and certain other persons.
84. Felix Gromov, e-mail to author (Irek Sabitov), 30 March 2018. Admiral Gromov sent his handwritten answers to Sabitov's questions. Gromov and Sabitov also spoke briefly on the telephone.
85. Ibid.
86. Born on 12 April 1948, Yuri Panachev was called up for military service in 1967 and served until 1970. He is now seventy years old. Georgy Kondratiyev likely is about the same age, since military recruits in the Soviet Union were called up for military service at eighteen or nineteen years old.
87. Takashi Oka, "Japan Advises U.S. against Reprisal," *New York Times*, 17 April 1969, p. 15.
88. Georgy Kondratiyev's memoir, in "The Shooting Down of an American Surveillance Plane," *Tin Can Sailors* 32, no. 3 (July–September 2008), www.destroyers.org/. Maintained by the National Association of Destroyer Veterans. Used with permission.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Panachev e-mail exchange.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. БЧ-3 (BCh-3) (Combat Unit-3) referred to both the Mine-Torpedo Department and the compartment of the ship.
98. Panachev e-mail exchange.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
106. Kondratiyev memoir.
107. Ibid.; Panachev e-mail exchange; NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
108. William Beecher, "Posting of U.S. Intelligence Ship off Korea Believed under Study," *New York Times*, 24 April 1969, p. 7.
109. "An Exercise in Restraint," *Newsweek* 73, no. 17 (28 April 1969), pp. 27–31; "Correction, Please!," p. 2.
110. Beecher, "Posting of U.S. Intelligence Ship off Korea Believed under Study," p. 7.
111. United Press International, "Take-Off of EC-121 Reported," *New York Times*, 23 April 1969, p. 14.
112. Takashi Oka, "Korea Reds Warn U.S. over Planes," *New York Times*, 24 April 1969, p. 1.
113. Ibid.
114. Oka, "Japan Advises U.S. against Reprisal," p. 15.
115. Max Frankel, "U.S. to Emphasize Diplomatic Steps on Loss of Plane," *New York Times*, 17 April 1969, p. 1. This photo appears on the cover of this issue.
116. "History of the USS *Henry W. Tucker*," p. 129.

117. This "yellow metal" was likely coated with zinc chromate primer, which is yellow in tone with a hint of green. It was used on the interior surfaces of EC-121 and other aircraft. When used as a pigment, zinc chromate also is known as zinc yellow, buttercup yellow, or yellow 36.
118. Oka, "Japan Advises U.S. against Reprisal," p. 15.
119. Oka, "U.S. Fliers Describe Soviet Aid on Plane," pp. 1, 3.
120. "N. Koreans Down Navy Recon Plane," pp. 1, 24.
121. Marlar, "The Things They'll Do . . .," pp. 6–7.
122. Narushige Michishita, "Calculated Adventurism: North Korea's Military-Diplomatic Campaigns," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 16, no. 2 (August 2004), pp. 181–226.
123. Van Jackson, "The EC-121 Shoot Down and North Korea's Coercive Theory of Victory," *Wilson Center*, 13 April 2017, www.wilsoncenter.org/.
124. Beecher, "U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost," pp. 1, 14.
125. "Telephone Records 1969–1976," Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers, box 359, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
126. Frankel, "U.S. to Emphasize Diplomatic Steps on Loss of Plane," p. 1.
127. "Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs," *New York Times*, 19 April 1969, p. 14.
128. *Ibid.*
129. *Ibid.*
130. Beecher, "U.S. Scout Plane with 31 Is Lost," pp. 1, 14.
131. "Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs," p. 14.
132. Oral Statements Made by Ambassador Jacob D. Beam to Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, 22 April 1969, doc. 39 in *Soviet Union, January 1969–October 1970*, ed. Erin R. Mahan, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–76, vol. 12 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006).
133. Beecher, "Posting of U.S. Intelligence Ship off Korea Believed under Study," p. 7.
134. Hoffman's article appeared under various headlines in Utah's *Ogden Standard-Examiner* and other regional newspapers on various dates in July 1969.
135. Philip Shabecoff, "Families of 31 U.S. Crewmen Mourn," *New York Times*, 24 April 1969, p. 6.
136. *Ibid.*
137. "7 Plane Survivors Are Reported Held by North Koreans," *New York Times*, 16 April 1969, p. 14; "MIG's Soviet-Based, *Pueblo* Group Says," *New York Times*, 17 April 1969, p. 1; Gromov e-mail to Sabitov.
138. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 88.
139. Johnson, *Centralization Wins*, p. 439.
140. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
141. Panachev e-mail exchange.
142. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, pp. 25–26.
143. H.A.S.C. 91-12, p. iii. In a letter to L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Committee on Armed Services, Representative Otis G. Pike (D-NY) referenced a letter, dated 18 February 1969, establishing a special subcommittee to conduct a full and thorough inquiry arising from the capture and internment of USS *Pueblo* and its crew by the North Korean government. Also referenced was a letter dated 22 April 1969 in which the inquiry was expanded to include the loss of a USN EC-121 aircraft. Of course, the details of the incident found in the resulting congressional report did not rely on interviews of Soviet naval participants.
144. *Ibid.*, p. 1676.
145. Robert S. Allen and John A. Goldsmith's 27 October 1969 Inside Washington column, in Texas's *El Paso Times*.
146. *Ibid.*
147. 129 Cong. Rec., p. 26,744 (1983) (remarks of Representative Solomon).
148. NSA/CSS, *The National Security Agency and the EC-121 Shootdown*, p. 26.
149. 129 Cong. Rec., p. 26,744 (1983) (remarks of Representative Solomon).