

A RADAR-OPERATING WITNESS SHEDS MORE LIGHT ON A MYSTERIOUS COLD WAR DOGFIGHT OFF VLADIVOSTOK IN 1952 ¹

[Military History] *Editor's note: In the April 1996 issue of Military History, we published a "Perspectives" department piece on a Korean War incident in which U.S. Navy jets were pitted against Soviet-flown Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-15s. The author, former U.S. Navy destroyerman Dale Tapp, stated that the incident was hushed up by both sides, and expressed the wish that more light be shed on it as a result of his article.*

Well, one letter received in regard to Tapp's story evokes the adage, "Be careful what you wish for . . .," because it pointed out numerous inaccuracies in the story. At the same time, though, the lengthy letter provided such a wealth of detail that we felt compelled to publish it, not in the "Letters" column but as a Perspectives piece in itself.

This letter is in reference to the article by Dale Tapp about Task Force 77's encounter with Soviet-piloted MiG-15s during the Korean War, published in *Military History*, April 1996. As a radarman assigned to the Combat Information Center aboard the aircraft carrier *Oriskany* during that action, I was intimately involved with the machinery that brought about the highly successful intercept. While Mr. Tapp should be commended for calling attention to this little-known incident, in the interest of historical accuracy I would like to provide much missing and pertinent information about an event that not only ranks as the U.S. Navy's first multiple-jet combat but, more important, could easily triggered World War III.

The "bleak day in the last winter of the Korean War" in which Mr. Tapp set the engagement was November 18, 1952. That was just eight days after the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower left Harry S Truman a lame duck president. The volatile and unpredictable Josef Stalin was still firmly entrenched as dictator of the Soviet Union. The task force personnel secured from their daily dawn alert, and the battleship *Missouri*, flying the flag of famed World War II Admiral Joseph J. "Jocko" Clark, looked like a grey mountain among the cruisers and destroyers that were screening Task Force 77's main punch--attack carriers *Oriskany*, *Essex*, and *Kearsarge*. This was one of the relatively few instances during the Korean War in which all three of TF-77's flattops were the extensively modified SCB-27A type with enlarged, angled decks² and, it is significant to note, a special magazine reserved exclusively for nuclear weapons.³ The other seven *Essex*-class carriers routinely rotated in and out of the task force up until that time were still of late World War II configuration.

Air Group 102 (an all-Reserve air group) was embarked on *Oriskany* and assigned Combat Air Patrol (CAP) duties as the task force maneuvered 100 miles southwest of the Soviet naval base at Vladivostok. Most of the aircraft from all three carriers were attacking an industrial complex at Hoeryong, not far from the Chinese and Soviet borders.

¹ LT Daniel E. Keough, USNR (Ret), *Military History*, "Perspectives," p.24. ©August 1997. (Permission requested).

² All were SCB-27A conversions with axial decks. CVA SCB-27Cs with angled decks did not participate in the Korean War. [Brown Shoes ed.]

³ At this time *Oriskany* did not have nuclear magazines, although one night after Eisenhower's election a dozen or so "shapes" on large dollies were transferred aboard and were tied to the hangar deck; all were guarded by our Sea Marines. On this same night a twin-engine AJ-2 and three F2H-2s--all painted black and modified to carry the "shapes"--were landed aboard. Several nights later all disappeared. [Brown Shoes ed.]

As the morning hours progressed, several bogies (unidentified aircraft, presumed hostile) were detected by various ships in the task force, as well as by the heavy cruiser *Helena*, which had been detached on a special mission. Most of those contacts disappeared from the radar almost as soon as they appeared. At 1:29 P.M., Z.S. Buseck, a fellow radarman in my watch section, picked up what would prove to be a "hot" contact on the SPS-6B air-search radar. "General quarters" blared out from countless speakers on *Oriskany* and her consorts, with the time-honored tag-on, "This is not a drill!" The approaching contacts, not one of which was flashing the required IFF (identification – friend or foe) electronic code, were estimated to have numbered 16 to 20 aircraft. They were immediately designated "Raid 20."

My general quarters station behind the massive vertical plot (a clear Plexiglas plotting board) afforded direct telephone hookup with the air-search radar operators. As Buseck would report each new range and bearing of the incoming bogies, I would update their position relative to the task force, work out any change in their course and speed, indicate their altitude (from the operator on the SX radar) and also indicate the position of all other aircraft in the area, including our own CAP and anti-submarine patrol. I would then display that information on the vertical plot for use by *Oriskany's* air controller.

Of great assistance that afternoon was the availability of the SX air-search radar. A dual-frequency "three-dimensional" system that, unlike any of the carrier's other detection gear, had the capability of determining a target's altitude. Up to that time, the SX had proved to be a dismal failure aboard *Oriskany*, with about an 80 percent downtime. And strangely, after its fine performance on November 18, it again reverted to its prior state of undependability. It is worth noting, however, that the SX program led directly to the development of the SPS-8, the Navy's truly successful height-finding radar.

Oriskany's CAP that afternoon consisted of two divisions⁴ (eight aircraft) of Squadron VF-781 ("the Pacemakers"). They were flying the relatively new Grumman F9F-5 Panther, which had a more powerful engine than the earlier versions. Even so, the straight-wing Panther was obsolete compared to Russia's sweptwing MiG-15 or the U.S. Air Force's North American F-86 Sabre jet.

As the incoming bogies approached, they split into two groups. One eight-plane group continued toward the American ships, which had shifted into a circular screen formation for maximum anti-aircraft defense.

Each of VF-781's divisions was composed of two two-plane sections. One consisted of division leader Lieutenant C.R. Elwood and his wingman, Lt. j.g. J.D. Middleton. The other section was led by Lieutenant E.R. Williams, who was supported by Lt. j.g. D.M. Rowlands. Ordered not to engage unless attacked, the Panthers were headed straight toward the bogies when the fuel pump on Elwood's Panther cut out, forcing the division to descent to 13,000 feet. On orders from the *Oriskany's* air controller, Elwood detached Williams' section, which climbed to gain strategic altitude.

At 26,000 feet, four of the MiGs initiated a flat side-firing attack on Williams and Rowlands. Middleton was soon vectored up to aid his two squadron mates, making the odds three F9F-5s against at least seven and possibly eight MiG-15s. The eight-minute dogfight that followed has been officially described as an "uncoordinated melee," but the result was decidedly an American victory. The Navy's records credit Williams and Middleton with the destruction of one plane each, and Rowlands with one damaged. However, a later analysis based on radar plots and pilot interviews suggests at least five MiGs were either shot down or damaged so severely that they would have crashed into

⁴ Only one VF-781 division of four aircraft was airborne and involved.

the sea on their 55-mile flight home. Except for one of the screening destroyers briefly firing at Williams' plane, the Pacemakers return to *Oriskany* was uneventful.

There is no doubt that the MiGs were Soviet. In addition to the fact that the initial radar contacts indicated that they were coming from the direction of Vladivostok, numerous radio intercepts revealed that the pilots were communicating with each other in Russian. What has not been determined is their motive. Was the attack the work of a bunch of hotheaded Russkies anxious to get into the Korean War, or were they acting on direct orders from the Kremlin? Now that the Iron Curtain has been raised, perhaps someday that question will be answered.

I totally disagree with Mr. Tapp's inference that the task force deliberately avoided picking up one of the downed Soviet pilots. In Clark's biography, *Carrier Admiral*, the author, noted naval historian Clark G. Reynolds, quoted Clark as saying: "One Russian pilot parachuted into the sea. I asked why our ships had not picked him up, dead or alive, the Russian pilot in our possession would be proof that the USSR was actually in the war. Hickey (Rear Admiral R.F. Hickey, flying his flag from *Oriskany*) told me faulty plotting in the ships nearest the pilot made it impracticable to find him. He undoubtedly froze to death in those cold waters.

Several years later, as a commissioned officer, I had the privilege to meet Admiral Clark, and he confirmed his extreme disappointment at hearing the news that the destroyer assigned the task of fetching the Soviet pilot had plotted an incorrect course on the maneuvering board and went off in the wrong direction. He never identified that particular "tin can."

Another part of Mr. Tapp's article that disturbed me was the conversation, supposedly in clear language, between an admiral whom he does not identify and the pilots from *Oriskany* whom he also fails to identify, on the inferior performance of their F9F-5s in comparison to the MiG-15s. Knowing TF-77 and the Navy's heavy emphasis on communications security, it seems incredible that an admiral would ask such sensitive questions over an open radio circuit. The standard procedure would have called for the pilots to have been flown by helicopter to Admiral Clark on *Missouri*.

As a postscript, I would like to report that Williams and Middleton were both given the Silver Star, while Rowlands received the Distinguished Flying Cross. On December 3, 1952, all three pilots were flown to the headquarters of General James Van Fleet in Seoul to meet President-elect Eisenhower. It is reported that the pilots were highly impressed by his knowledge of aerial warfare.

Postscript by Dale Tapp:

I did not make any notes about the incident until several years later, when I realized it was not mentioned in the standard histories of the Korean War. One destroyer (not *Hopewell*, which was not in the van) did fire a few rounds at a returning friendly aircraft before being ordered to cease fire. When a van destroyer observed a parachute descending several miles ahead and asked whether to attempt a rescue, the reply was a firm "negative" (both transmissions in plain language over the screen common radio circuit). If, as Lieutenant Keough asserts, after TF-77 had turned back south, someone had second thoughts and ordered a destroyer to go back and recover the pilot, any such message was not directed to *Hopewell*. Lieutenant Keough also contends that since a plain-language conversation (about MiG-15 capabilities) over the Combat Information radio circuit would have been non-regulation, it could not have happened. But it absolutely did happen--and so have plenty of other things where standard operating procedures got bent like a pretzel.

In conclusion, I am pleased that my article elicited a response by someone familiar with the Vladivostok incident. -☆☆☆-