
Korean Airlines Flight 007

On September 1, 1983, Korean Airlines Flight 007 was shot down by a Soviet Su-15 interceptor jet. The Boeing 747 was carrying 269 passengers and had veered into Soviet airspace while flying between Anchorage and Seoul. The plane was 320 kilometers (200 mi) off its planned course when it was destroyed, and its reason for straying is one of the most hotly debated in aviation history.

The immediate reaction from the USSR was to deny knowledge of the plane. When they eventually admitted shooting it down, they claimed the plane was on a US spying mission. A report released in the 1990s confirmed the Soviets had no evidence for that theory.

The actions of the US government suggested they may have had something to hide, however. They killed an investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and requested the International Civil Aviation Organization investigate the crash instead. The NTSB had powers to subpoena documents and witnesses that the ICAO could only ask for nicely. Some believe that American intelligence agencies had monitored the flight of KAL 007 on radar and failed to take any action to alert anyone.

The ICAO concluded that error by the flight crew was the cause for the flight straying. Many people think this is unlikely, as the flight crew had multiple pieces of navigation equipment that would have alerted them to the issue. The plane was carrying a US congressman, Larry P. McDonald, who was a vocal anti-communist. It's been suggested that McDonald was a target and the USSR electronically lured the plane off course. Another theory suggests that the plane was flown off course to probe Soviet air defenses for US intelligence services.

It's even been suggested that the US arranged for the plane to be shot down on purpose, in order to create stronger anti-Soviet sentiment around the globe. The Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, called it a "sophisticated provocation masterminded by the U.S. special services."

No full bodies were ever found, though the Soviets were able to recover some footwear and a few small pieces of human remains. They also found the cockpit voice recorder and released a transcript. It was 10 years before Russia released the actual recordings.