

THE STOLEN RUSSIAN MIG-25 "FOXBAT" AND VIKTOR BELENKO'S DEFECTION IN 1976

420



In 1976 the Cold War was still an ongoing reality for the entire world. Defections from the Soviet bloc to the Western world weren't too uncommon throughout these decades, although oftentimes these defectors were athletes, artists or scholars. It was quite rare for a serving member of the military to defect, let alone if they weren't stationed at a border such as the Berlin Wall.



November 10, 2020

Yet on the 6th of September 1976 one of the 'national prides' of the Soviet Union, a fighter-pilot, did the unthinkable. During a training mission near the Siberian airbase Chuguyevka, near Vladivostok, USSR pilot Viktor Belenko, flying his Mikoyan-Gurevich MIG-25, nicknamed "Foxbat", suddenly dove below radar detection elevation, turned off his radio and sped towards Japan as fast as he could.



Viktor Belenko

In Japan, the aircraft popped up on radar screens after not too long. But due to its speed, before any action could be taken against this potentially hostile intruder, Belenko had already reached the airfield of Hakodate. Rapidly approaching the airport his MiG-25 only had 30 seconds of fuel remaining, and as such Belenko again dove full-speed towards the airfield.

During his descent, he narrowly escaped a collision with a Japanese passenger plane, reached the landing strip at a speed that was way too high, knocked over two large antennas on the airfield and with squeaking brakes finally managed to come to a standstill after 250 meters. *Viktor Belenko had officially defected to the West.*



Belenko's MiG-25

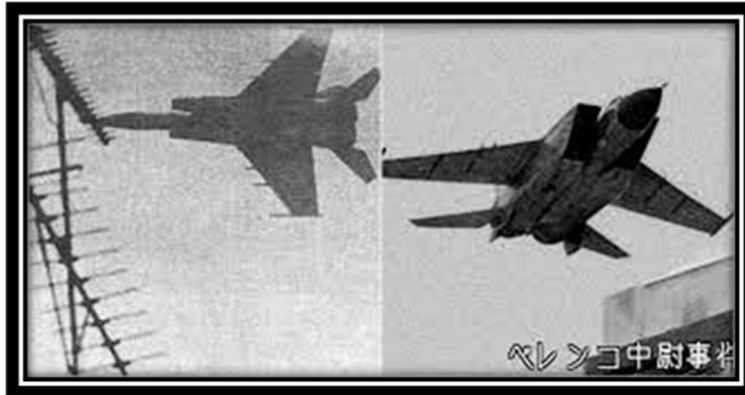
DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS

Following Belenko's defection, the United States was on the case in no-time. Because, well, obviously Belenko was interesting because he could elaborate a lot about Soviet tactics, but the *plane he flew in was at the time a mystery to the United States.* The MiG-25 had been operating for six years and the wildest stories circulated about its abilities. *Nobody in the West had seen the aircraft up close yet, and now one of them simply landed on an airbase of an allied country. It was a chance the US wasn't willing to pass up.*



The MiG-25 covered under drapes has now shifted to the vicinity of the terminal building.

But the Japanese were in a bit of a pickle. To begin with they didn't know what to do with Belenko when he crash-landed on the airfield. *They arrested him, charged him with several crimes including the invasion of Japanese airspace, destroying the antennas on the airfield and carrying an illegal firearm.* But Belenko's charges were the least of their worries. The Soviet Union only realized Belenko had defected when he didn't return after the training mission due to his low-level flight. As a rescue mission was set up for the presumed crash site, border guards informed the air force that a plane had crossed the border towards Japan.



Actual pictures of the hijacked plane searching for the Airport in Japan to land

And Japan now became the playball between the two international heavyweights – the Soviet Union and United States. The US was pressuring Japan to hand Belenko and the aircraft over to them. At the same time, the Soviets demanded the repatriation of Belenko and the plane before the US would turn it inside out and subject it to detailed inspection. Japan had to choose between remaining friends with the US or risk disturbing their gigantic threatening neighbor, the Soviet Union.

Initially, Japan allowed the US just to inspect the aircraft and run some radar tests with it. But because they realized their national defense benefited from the military knowledge, within too *long they allowed the US to extract as much information from the MiG-25 as possible.* The aircraft was moved to a nearby airbase where it was subject to a rigorous inspection and taken apart *completely. It provided a wealth of information about the latest technological situation of the USSR and its military capabilities.*

The information about the aircraft the U.S. published was that it was a ‘thing from the past’ designed with ‘crude technology’. And that wasn’t too wrong, although a bit exaggerated. The US had indeed overestimated the capabilities of the MiG-25 by a longshot, with US Defense Secretary Schlesinger once stating that the “MiG -25 is the only aircraft scaring all the world.” This conviction stemmed from the Soviets flying MiG-25s over Israel without being intercepted during the Yom Kippur war.



Upon inspection, it became clear the aircraft indeed was easy to repair and could suffer intense heat and damage due to its steel airframe. *Its radar had two wavebands, which meant it could not be jammed, something the US was eager to copy.* Nevertheless, its radar technology was considered outdated.

Belenko himself revealed a significant amount of information as well.

For example, he explained that the Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird, a long-range high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft caused enormous frustration within the USSR air force. It was assumed the MiG-25 was the only soviet aircraft that could intercept the blackbird. The Blackbird would fly at an incredible speed and high altitude on reconnaissance missions, and although the Soviet air force apparently tried to shoot one Blackbird down by using multiple MiG-25s, the plane simply was too fast for both the MiG-25s and its missiles. The missiles were unable to reach an altitude higher than 27 kilometers and even if the Blackbird flew at the right height it would still outpace them. He also revealed information about the latest design, the MiG-25MP, supposed to be another fear-inducing secret weapon.

Belenko's defection sent a shockwave through Soviet military command because their 'secret weapon' they knew the US feared was now in the hands of their adversary.

They realized it would not take long for the US to develop weaponry and aircraft designed to counter the MiG-25.



Belenko's military ID is now on show at the CIA Museum in Washington DC

It led to the rapid development of another plane, the MiG-25PD the so-called Foxbat-E. Its first model came into action in 1979, just a bit over two years after Belenko's defection.



The threat of the MiG-25 prevented the SR-71 Blackbird from flying over Soviet territory

So what were Belenko's motives to defect from the Soviet Union? In interviews, he said he was tired and fed up with the lies the government told its people.

Supposedly the Soviet Union was a paradise on earth, but in reality, most citizens lived in poverty and the economy was in ruins. Nevertheless, the ruling Communist Party kept up the propaganda machine stating the Soviet Union was the greatest country on earth.

When the US was done inspecting the MiG-25, they packed it up in 30 crates and told the Soviets they were free to pick it up. The Soviet delegation initially wanted to arrive with an Antonov AN-22, a heavy military transport aircraft, and inspect all the pieces of the MiG-25 before they left.

The Japanese refused that, and the crates were moved to the harbor, loaded on the Taigonos cargo boat and shipped off to Vladivostok on the 15th of November 1976, just 2 months after Belenko had defected. Upon return the Soviets quickly realized just how much information the US had extracted from the aircraft.

The engines were obviously run, they measured the aircraft's infrared signature and apparently made a "detailed analysis of the systems and avionics, including the radar and structural materials." Because the hardware was foreign to them some parts were damaged, giving away the inspection it had undergone.

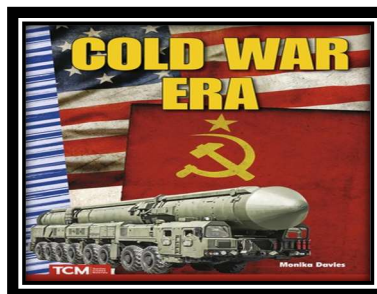
COMPENSATION

The upside of the entire defection was that the Soviet Union was now finally able to export their not-so-secret aircraft to other countries. In the following years they shipped it to Algeria, Bulgaria, India, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Even to this day the Algerian, Syrian and Libyan air force operates MiGs.

Following this very interesting defection, there was some financial and judicial aftermath. To begin with, Japan demanded 40.000 dollars from the Soviet Union for damage to their airfield and the labor costs of packing the MiG-25 parts in 30 crates. In return, the Soviets sent a counter-claim of 10 million dollars. It turned out the US secretly kept 20 parts of the aircraft, and because according to the Soviets Japan was responsible for the plane, they had to reimburse them. As far as I could find I don't think either country has paid the claim so far.

As for Belenko, 4 years after his defection in 1980 he became a naturalized US citizen. He wrote an autobiography titled MiG Pilot: The Final Escape of Lieutenant Belenko. He married a North Dakota music teacher and had two sons, although, curiously enough, he was married in the Soviet Union during his defection and never divorced his Russian wife. He has a son from this marriage too, presumably still living in Russia.

And that's the story of the defection of Viktor Belenko and its aftermath: one of the Soviet Union's best kept secret aircraft literally handed to its adversaries on a silver platter.



DISCLAIMER

PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE AUTHENTIC WEBSITES I CANNOT ENSURE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.