

Recollections of a Bear Intercept on December 19th, 1977

by CDR Dean Steele USN (ret.) – December 8th, 2010



LT D. Steele

I just read the report from Pavel Burmistrov ("A Photo for Fidel Castro"). I'll give you some of my impressions about the report from our standpoint, together with more info on our launch and intercept. It is very interesting how perceptions can be radically different from the two sides

In December 1977 I was a lieutenant assigned to Fighter Squadron VF-31 flying the F-4 Phantom from the USS Saratoga (CV-60). We were just completing a six month Mediterranean deployment and were excited to be returning home before Christmas. As I recall, this deployment was being completed right on schedule without the undesired extension that occasionally happened.

The two F-4 squadrons onboard, VF-31 and VF-103, were primarily tasked with air to air missions including air defense of the task force. We were provided initial guidance information from ship radar controllers as well as the E-2C Hawkeye airborne platforms of Airborne Early Warning Squadron VAW-123. The Radar Intercept Officers (RIOs) in the back seat then acquired the incoming aircraft on radar and directed us to intercept, or in a hostile environment, gave us the missile firing parameters.

When there was a possibility that a Soviet aircraft would pay us a visit, we would be upgraded to a 5 minute alert status, which required us to be in the aircraft, on the catapult, and ready to go. When the launch command came we could then start the engines, complete final checks, and be ready to launch as soon as the ship had turned into the wind. Standing alert was boring (and sometimes cold and uncomfortable), but the possibility to launch and intercept an "enemy" aircraft that in wartime was capable of sinking our ship was exciting. We also enjoyed chatting with the squadron personnel and catapult crew who were also standing by for launch.

It was always expected that any potential Soviet attacker would be escorted when it reached possible ordnance release distance from the ship. This meant we needed to turn immediately and race out to intercept. After intercept we would escort the Soviet aircraft, take pictures for the intelligence folks and often attempt to get in any photo they took of the ship to show they had not arrived without being intercepted.

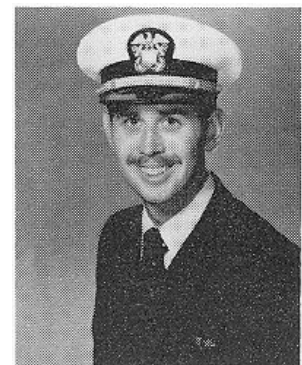
In this case as I recall, we intercepted at good range, flew formation on the tail (as usual), and waved to the Bear crew looking out of the observation windows, so we could communicate with them. We also compared the relative sizes of our government issued cameras with the friendly Soviet Bear crew in the tail. All in fun. The chance to see and, at least with hand signals, communicate with the Soviet crew was fun. No pilots I knew on our side had any real

animosity toward the Bear crews. Yes, they were the potential enemy and all, but we realized we were just the "soldiers" on each side. Of course, in an actual combat situation we would have done anything possible to down the plane prior to missile launch.

As the Bear descended to fly past the ship it flew through a rather thick overcast. I flew as close to the tail as possible to preclude losing visual contact, and was about to drop back to a safer radar trail when we broke out underneath the overcast.

Going past the ship I'm sure we did try to get between the Soviet airplane and the USS Saratoga, and might have flown a bit too close in order to "look good" while going by the ship, as well as an attempt to insert my plane into the photography, if possible. That would prove to Soviet Intel folks that we had escorted their planes. As for myself, my "maneuvering dangerously" at the time struck me that the Bear pilot was being extremely smooth, thus allowing me to more safely tuck in closer. The reason for getting close was to better see the crew. Due to the size of the Bear we could not get too close to the cockpit (I tried once but it was a bit scary). I didn't consider it dangerous but maybe I was a bit cocky. We fighter drivers often prided ourselves in the ability to fly close, and in so doing I might have exceeded the parameters the Bear crew was used to seeing.

I do remember my back seater, Lt. jg. E. Holland, carrying a Playboy centerfold and pointing toward Cuba when showing it. It was also interesting to see the faces of the crew and have some interaction. That was the reason for the Playboy centerfold. I never considered the Playboy centerfold "extravagant", but maybe his feelings could have better been translated as "in poor taste", which I guess was true. Ha!



LTJG E. Holland



I can't remember the details of the refueling but we often did that, and the speeds the Bear flew made it pretty simple to refuel while flying a loose formation. The refueling aircraft simply took over the escort while we "plugged". After refueling was complete we would monitor the refueling drogue retraction and give the pilot a thumbs up, indicating that his plane looked good and the drogue had stowed correctly. We then signaled that we would resume flying lead and the tanker would depart.

After the Bears departed we were told to divert to NAS Bermuda since the ship was busy off loading ammunition. This process required the carrier to steer alongside the ammo ship while ordnance was passed via helicopter and cable. This allowed the carrier to get rid of its ammunition before entering port and for it to then be readily available to pass to another ship

or be taken back to a port where it could be appropriately stored. I distinctly remember us (naively) hoping we would receive orders to fly directly home to NAS Oceana, VA, where our wives awaited, but sadly that did not happen. A few hours later we flew back and landed on the big gray boat instead.

Pavel Burmistrov in his report indicated a belief that carriers would often sail away from the task force to avoid being detected by incoming Soviet aircraft. I was not privy to those decisions about the larger tactical picture but seriously doubt that. I never heard of a carrier departing the rest of the battle group to hide. I strongly suspect we maintained a defensive posture a lot like we would during an actual Soviet attack in a combat situation. If weather presented itself, a carrier might have occasionally ducked into a rain shower to avoid visual detection, but I believe the major effort was to exercise all defensive measures of the task force as an exercise. Remember, a carrier skipper also had to think about landing airborne planes before their fuel ran out. For this reason, and the safety of the deck crew, I doubt they would drive the ship into any serious weather.