INSIDE A FORGOTTEN COLD WAR PROTOCOL: MY FLIGHT ABOARD A SOVIET IL-12

by Tom Shepherd, Harlingen 54-16

I was the only non-pilot American crewmember on a Soviet flight as part of a Cold War mutual observation protocol. But to understand how I ended up in that seat on an Ilyushin IL-12, you need to know where my Air Force career began.

I was in the Navigator Observer class 54-16 and then in 55 AN graduating in January 1955. My assignment after Navigator/Observer school was to Germany. In those days, officers were assigned to the overseas commands, and then upon arrival assigned to a specific unit. From my class, several of the assignments to Europe (including mine) were to the 7167th ATS (Air Transport Squadron), "SAMS" (Special Air Missions) at Rhein Main Air Base, Frankfurt, Germany. When we received our assignments, we had no idea what the squadron was or what their role was. The squadron had several C-47s and a couple of C-54s. The 7167th was scheduled to receive several more C/VC-54s that required navigators, and I was one of them. However, the C/VC-54 was not the only aircraft for which I served as navigator; I flew on many C/VC-47s, an EVAC C-131 modified to carry an iron lung, and to my surprise, a Soviet Ilyushin IL-12 transport plane.

My time at the 7167th started routinely. I was required to fly several orientation flights to learn about the aircraft and operations. I had a standardization flight (a check flight), and then I was a regular navigator. I went on scheduled courier flights throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, and the West Asia region. I had missions as far east as India and Pakistan. I also went on emergency Air Evacuation flights. Most of my work involved courier and evacuation flights across Europe. One of the squadron's lesser-known responsibilities would eventually send me on one of the most interesting missions of my career.

Few people today know that during the Cold War, diplomatic flights couldn't enter opposing airspace without military escort personnel from the other side. One of the SAMS' responsibilities was to provide a western air crew member to perform US military escort duty on Soviet aircraft. This little-known Cold War protocol required a western aircrew member to be aboard Soviet diplomatic aircraft flying through Allied airspace. Conversely, when Allied diplomatic missions had to traverse Warsaw Pact airspace, a Soviet aircrew member had to be present on our aircraft, too. Our squadron was the only one tasked with fulfilling this requirement by providing aircraft for diplomatic missions into Warsaw Pact territory, and by providing escort personnel for Soviet flights into Allied airspace. The escort chosen was always a squadron pilot, except for that one time, as far as I am aware.

On 18 October 1955, there was a problem. No squadron pilot was available. This could have been because of the ops tempo and other mission requirements at that time during the Cold War. Ultimately, I was chosen to be the escort, even though I was a navigator. I would go to Berlin on our afternoon courier flight to fly as the US military escort crewmember on a Soviet Air Force IL-12 from East Germany to Geneva, Switzerland, and return. After arriving at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, I received a briefing from a USAF Intelligence officer, who told me that I needed to remember anything I could about the aircraft, the crew, and Soviet operations.

The next morning, I was taken to the Berlin Air Traffic Control Center and met a Soviet AF major and his driver. I filed our clearance from Berlin to Geneva and we then drove to Schonefeld airfield in East Germany. It turned out the IL-12 coming in from Moscow was late. The Soviet military personnel made me wait in the car because they didn't want me in the terminal for some reason. Some 30-40 minutes later the IL-12 arrived. I then met the Soviet air crew and we boarded their aircraft for the flight to Geneva. The crew consisted of the pilot, copilot, navigator, and an enlisted man who was the crew chief. Another officer who I assumed was a Soviet Intelligence officer came as well. As soon as we were airborne, he sat in the copilot's seat and listened carefully whenever I spoke to traffic control. The pilot and navigator spoke some English. However, I had a phrase sheet with many of the items I needed to communicate to the crew written in English and Russian side by side.

After we were airborne, I contacted Berlin Center and informed them that we were on our way from Schonefeld and requested clearance from our current position to the Berlin Center area. After entering Berlin Control we were cleared to exit Berlin via the Southern corridor to Frankfurt Center, and eventually Munich Center and Geneva. I sat in the Soviet radio operator's seat directly behind the pilot, and when he saw Geneva Cointrin Airport, he asked if it was Geneva and started into a descent for landing, even though he didn't have clearance yet. I immediately informed the control tower that the pilot had the field in sight, and was starting the landing pattern. They informed me that we were cleared to land.

After landing, I informed the airport authorities that we were spending the night in Geneva and departing the next day back to Schonefeld, East Germany. The Soviets' purpose was to bring some supplies to Geneva, as there was a meeting planned between them and our diplomatic team. The Soviets had a staff car that took their crew to their embassy, and I went to a hotel.

I returned to the airport the next morning, where I met the Soviet Aircrew at the airport. The pilot and I went to Operations and received the weather briefing and then filed our clearance to return to Berlin Control.

I signed the form as the person in control of the aircraft. We had a routine return to Schonefeld, although the Soviets did not like to fly in clouds. So, the pilot asked me twice to request a change in altitude, which I did. The Soviet crew navigator used radio beacon navigation as well as map reading. In the Berlin Corridors they were trying to get a map reading fix via the copilot's window. I called Berlin Center and requested a position and they immediately responded with a distance from Berlin and our distance off the corridor center line. We returned to Schonefeld, I was driven back to the Berlin Safety Center, and I returned to my unit at Rhein Main via our afternoon courier.

My squadron had missions throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, and West Asia as far east as India and Pakistan. I flew on flights to most of those locations. I flew more than 2,000 hours in my four years with the squadron, but no mission stood out like the day I sat behind the pilot of a Soviet IL-12, guiding it safely through Allied airspace. It remains a small but significant footnote in Cold War history, and in my own life.

- Tom Shepherd