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SUBJECT The Soviets And The Downed Korean Jet

RON EISENBERG: We go to the WRC Live Line and a gentleman who called us earlier today.

And I gather you used to work, caller, for the Defense Intelligence Agency?

MAN: Yes, that's correct, Ron.

EISENBERG: You're not longer with them, though.

MAN: No, I'm retired.

EISENBERG: Why did you want to come on with us?

MAN: Well, I'd heard a question, probably during the two o'clock hour, in your discussion. I was on the highway at that time. When we ask the question about would it have been possible, if we had all of this information regarding the conversations between the Russian air defense fighter pilot and his ground controller, and recognized very likely that what they were talking about at the time, since we knew where they were from radar and we knew where the Korean Air Lines plane was from radar, the question was: Well, if we knew all of that, couldn't we have done anything about it?

EISENBERG: What's the answer?

MAN: Well, there are basically three answers. The first answer is it depends on how that information actually got into our hands. There are -- you know, you have to remember that

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these are conversations that anybody could have monitored on any radio anywhere in the world if the radio just happened to be in the right place, particularly since you're dealing with an aircraft -- in this case, the Russian fighter aircraft -- that are fairly high up, and therefore it's pretty easy to intercept what they're saying.

EISENBERG: I would assume we do a lot of that.

MAN: I think all governments do, Ron. I don't think that's any big secret.

EISENBERG: Right.

MAN: It's part of your basic strategic intelligence posture.

And since it was obviously what we call clear text -- in other words, they were speaking in Russian, there was no attempt to disguise what they were saying. They weren't using any codes or anything.

EISENBERG: Why do you think they weren't encoding?

MAN: That's probably standard procedure in a situation like that. They may not have the sophistication in their radio equipment. When time is of the essence, generally you direct fighters into attack simply in the clear because it cuts through a lot of the misunderstanding that can occur otherwise.

EISENBERG: Okay. Now, from the tapes we heard last night and at the U.S. Security Council meeting today, it was pretty clear that fighter was directed in, told to fire, it fired, then went back home.

MAN: Okay. You know, to get directly to the question at hand, which is, you know, was there time to pass a warning?

EISENBERG: Yes.

MAN: It depends on when we became aware that the Soviet aircraft actually had hostile intent. If we just saw them go up, which they do frequently when any aircraft comes near -- I think the President mentioned that there was a KC-135 reconnaissance aircraft of some kind that had been out on patrol earlier in the general vicinity, you know, not really anywhere near the specific point of the incident.

EISENBERG: Right. And the statement from the Soviet Tass news agency was that they sent fighters up to look at that one too.

MAN: I'm sure they did. And, you know, that's just very standard procedure. And it wouldn't matter what kind of an airplane it was. You know, they're so sensitive to that airspace in that particular area, and other areas as well, that that would have been a routine.

So, you know, so it's up there, you know. Now, the question to whether we could have done anything about it hinges on two things. One, at what point would someone really have become aware of the intent of the Soviet fighters? And secondly, what is the means of -- in many cases, because these sorts of things are very routine and are routinely important, you may have -- you know, all this may simply go on a tape recorder somewhere, and then, in reviewing it all after the fact, we might have become very aware of what was taking place.

EISENBERG: What do you think happened?

MAN: I think, from my own personal experience, it's my guess that these broadcasts were monitored live.

EISENBERG: Okay. Now, your guess, for the WRC listeners just joining us, is a pretty sophisticated guess. You used to work for the Defense Intelligence Agency. And I gather you left them rather recently.

MAN: Well, actually, I left them several years ago, but remained active in the intelligence community up until my retirement in 1978.

EISENBERG: Okay. So you've had your finger in the intelligence pot.

MAN: Right. Okay, now...

EISENBERG: Now wait a minute. When you say your best guess that these communications were monitored live, you mean someone was sitting and listening while it happened?

MAN: Yes. And this person would have been a Russian linguist and would have been able to pretty well discern what was happening.

Now, this still doesn't mean we could have done anything about it.

EISENBERG: Why?

MAN: Perhaps the time element just wasn't there. Very frankly -- and one of the things I probably should have found out before I offered to speak on the subject -- is I have no idea over what period of time these conversations took place that in-

licated that these Soviet fighters really had hostile intent.

EISENBERG: Well, from the...

MAN: It could have been that the whole thing transpired, let's say, over a 10-to-15-minute period.

EISENBERG: Well, that's about right, in terms of what we...

MAN: ...no way, even if someone had had the authority to do it, there would have been no way that the reaction could have been that quick.

EISENBERG: Okay. Don't go anywhere. I want to come back and ask you who these Russian linguists are who are listening, and whether, from your knowledge, these kinds of things happen more often than we have been told, commercial jets and the potential danger.

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EISENBERG: We have on the line a gentleman who called us earlier today. He used to work for DIA, Defense Intelligence. He's been in the intelligence business up until 1978, you said.

I want to move along, but let me ask you this. In terms of what you know, there's no way, in your view, that the U.S. could have warned somebody and didn't.

MAN: I just think that the time factor was too close, Ron. And then you've got what we call the Coventry syndrome, also, that you have to work with.

EISENBERG: What is that?

MAN: This is the well-known anecdote about World War II intelligence operations where we had obtained a copy of the Engigma cipher device that the Nazis were using, and Churchill was informed in advance about the Nazi raid on Coventry and had the very, very difficult decision of compromising the intelligence by, you know, doing something that might tip the hand to the Nazis that we knew about the raid in advance or going ahead and letting the raid take place, with the subsequent very tragic loss of life there in Coventry.

EISENBERG: Yeah, but what you're saying by that is we may have known, may have been able to stop it, but didn't?

MAN: I would say even if we had been, there would have been that further obstacle to a quick reaction.

EISENBERG: What level are the -- you said it would have been a Soviet analyst sitting and listening to those...

MAN: A very low level.

EISENBERG: Of technicians.

MAN: Yeah. This would probably have been at a very low-level position. There would have been many layers of -- you know, in spite of whether the person actually listening to the conversations was fully aware of what was taking place, there would have been many layers of -- in fact, it probably would have had to go to the President to get released. And that, obviously, would be an impossibility.

EISENBERG: But it would have taken a while, I suspect.

How often do these kinds of incidents happen that don't end as tragically?

MAN: Well, I think they happen probably much more frequently than even I was aware of. And I think, you know, of interest to that, I was talking to your producer before I came on and I had heard a commentary earlier about the so-called conspiracy theory. And I think the thing that really puts the end to that is that there was no way we could have guaranteed it. Because I have a feeling it's very -- I would say it's relatively unusual that this would have happened. You know, there's no way you could have guaranteed in advance that this would happen.

EISENBERG: Okay. I've got to run. Thanks.

MAN: One additional thing I might want to pass on. It's another theory. I have no basis for this whatsoever. It is probably the thing that novels are better made out of than news commentaries.

But take an example that perhaps a major power on some occasions in the past might have actually used another country's civilian airliners for some sort of surveillance or intelligence mission. Let's say a third major power had been aware of this for some time and was getting more and more irked by the practice, and decided one day, "This is a good time to send a message that we don't want this to continue."

EISENBERG: Now, what do you mean? Is there any way --no one has said to us that there's anything useful you could get from a commercial 747 flying at night at 35,000 feet in terms of intelligence advantage.

MAN: Well, I can't comment on that, Ron.

EISENBERG: Do you think there could be a use?

MAN: I won't comment on that.

EISENBERG: Well, how could you lead us all the way to the edge of the cliff and then stop?

MAN: Well, I said this is a -- you know, this is a conjecture that novels are better made of than news commentaries.

EISENBERG: All right. Well, we're going to leave it at that. And maybe you'll go write the novel and we'll find out.