

Soviet hunter finds U.S.-made warplane

by Nikolai Bely
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BLAGOVESHCHENSK, USSR — Making his way through the thick taiga forest in the Mutula river valley, Nikolai Ivanov, a professional hunter for Yakutia, one day discovered the debris of a warplane.

Not far away he saw the remains of the airman devoured by beasts of prey. It is safe to assume that at the time of the crash, the pilot parachuted to the ground and lived for some time not far from the crash site.

The hunter had no way of knowing the type of the plane. It turned out to be a U.S.-made R-39 Kingcobra fighter No. 24962.

How could it get there? The Yakut taiga closely guarded the mystery for 45 years. But now when we are learning more facts about the joint Soviet and U.S. war effort during World War II, the answer is on hand.

Few people remember these days that during the war the Soviet Union formed a special air division whose mission was to deliver thousands of warplanes, supplied to us under the Lend-Lease Act, from America to the Soviet-German front. At that time the shortest and safest route was that from Alaska across the Bering Strait, then over Chukotka, Yakutia and Siberia to Russia.

Of course, the route was only relatively safe and short. The planes taking off from Alaska airfields had to fly more than 12,000 kilometers. The route was poorly studied and passed through desolate places without airfields or navigation support. On each run airmen had to fly over the Verkhoyansk and Chera mountains.

To give the planes more range, additional fuel tanks were attached to the wings. However, they made the airmen's job all the more difficult.

Planes usually flew in groups. Often, however, foul weather dispersed them and every pilot had to fly on his own. Not all the planes arrived at their destination. The unit commanders had no illusions as to the fate of their men who crashed in the taiga.

However, the operation was a success. Several thousand warplanes were delivered to the front-line that way and, of course, they contributed to the victory over the common enemy.

The roaring engines of big-bellied Catalinas, elegant Kittyhawks, fast Kingcobras and heavy Thunderbolts disturbed age-long quiet over the Lena River, Kolyma and Indigirka. Thousands got through, but some didn't make it. According to the official data, the losses made up 2 percent of the total number of planes bought.

Dozens of U.S.-made planes and hundreds of Russian men remained forever in Chukotka, Yakutia and the Krasnoyarsk region.

According to archive records, Kingcobra No. 24962 was flown by Russian Air Lt. Vasily Kovalev. The records listed him as missing. Then the Yakut hunter came into that remote corner of the taiga.

Starting from 1935, Kovalev served in the Soviet Air Force. Being deputy squadron commander, 7th Air Regiment, he went to Fairbanks in early March 1943. On the day of departure for the Soviet Union the American technician carefully inspected the plane and wished the airman a happy voyage. A group of planes, Kovalev's Kingcobra among them, climbed into the spring sky over Alaska.

On March 24 bad weather dispersed the group as it was flying from Seimchan to Yakutsk. Kovalev didn't make it and was listed missing. And now 45 years later, we know what

happened to him.

The search for missing planes in Yakutia is acquiring organized forms. Dozens of volunteers are taking part in it in their spare time to try and decipher some of the secrets of the past war.

Not so long ago, the debris of a B-25 medium bomber, No. 232219, were discovered in a sand bank of the Lena River. The plane went down May 7, 1943, and was detected when the level of water in the river dropped significantly. It was learned from the records that the crew of the bomber comprised of Maj. Alexander Boronenko, pilot; Capt. Vasily Shevelev, navigator; Junior Lt. Alexei Shabanov and Sgt. Grigory Naumov, gunners; Capt. Pyotr Kudelin, engineer; and Lt. Vsevolod Ferens, technician.

A coaxial machine gun with a cartridge belt fed in, units of the radio sta-

tion and an ammunition container were lifted from the bottom of the river. A map-case containing well-preserved documents and several photos of the crew were also discovered.

America's Boeing showed an interest in the discoveries made in Yakutia. The company wants to put a World War II warplane in its museum.

Boeing contacted Yakutia via the Soviet-American Friendship Society and inquired if it was possible to find a more or less intact plane. The task proved to be rather difficult.

Some of the planes that crash-landed in taiga failed to stand the wear and tear of time, others — the pilgrimage of people: the duralumin body of the plane that crash-landed near the settlement of Lensk is gone without a trace.

The material was used by local people to make — what do you think? Spoons. After the war they were in

short supply. So, villagers decided that quality duralumin should not be wasted.

The last U.S.-made warplane flew over the vast expanses of Siberia more than 40 years ago. However, last summer a different plane, a modern civilian jet, flew from Moscow to Yakutsk. The pilot was Thomas Watson, 73, a veteran of World War II. During the war he had flown many times over Siberia, delivering warplanes to Russia.

On his latest trip the roar of the jet engines over Siberia sounded like a requiem of the airmen who died performing their duty, both the ones whose names we already know and those who remain unknown to this day.

It is planned to find all U.S.-made planes that crashed in Yakutia and determine the names of the airmen.