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BRITISH MILITARY GOVERNMENT,

BERLIN

22 April, 1966.

Despatch No. 6

Sir,

I have the honour to report that at 3.30 p.m. on Wednesday, the 6th of April a two-seater YAK 28 ("Firebar") all-weather jet fighter aircraft of the Soviet Forces in Germany was on a flight across Berlin at 4,000 metres when it got into difficulties and crashed into the British Sector of Berlin. The purpose of this despatch is to describe the sequel and the initial repercussions of this unexpected event.

2. The aircraft fortunately crashed onto water, at a point about 200 yards from the eastern shore of the Stoossensee, an inlet of the Havel River just south of the Heerstrasse. There was thus no damage done to persons or property in West Berlin. Both the Soviet airmen remained in their aircraft and were killed on impact, but this was not immediately apparent as only the tip of the tail remained above water, the bulk of the aircraft being embedded in the deep mud of the Havel bottom at this point (the depth of water is only 2-3 metres).

3. The news quickly reached these Headquarters, but first reports of the type and even the nationality of the aircraft were conflicting. Meanwhile the West Berlin Fire Brigade and Police were quickly on the scene, as well as the Red Cross and other organisations, and also large numbers of the public. The Military Police and representatives of these Headquarters and Royal Air Force Gatow took charge of operations and cordoned off the shore area. Aqua-lung divers began probing the wreckage, and it was rapidly apparent to RAF Officers (largely owing to the quick reaction of Squadron Leader Taylor of BR1XMS) that this was a modern Soviet military aircraft of great intelligence interest.

/Meanwhile

His Excellency,
Sir Frank Roberts, G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O.,
etc., etc., etc.,
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Meanwhile military, police, and customs units began a search for the pilots throughout likely areas of West Berlin, in case they had succeeded in parachuting.

4. The Soviet reaction although not particularly quick (it was over two hours before the first Russians arrived on the scene) certainly left no doubt of the interest which the Soviet military authorities took in the crash. A party of officers arrived accompanied by a bus with about twenty Soviet soldiers from the Tiergarten War Memorial Guard, some of them with small arms. More officers kept arriving. Their object was to mount guard on the aircraft themselves and to try to conduct, or anyhow to supervise, the salvage operations: a Soviet Colonel came to British Headquarters and made a formal demand to this effect to the Acting British Commandant, Mr. Hayman, who was by then holding a meeting with the U.S. and French Commandants. After consulting the latter, Mr. Hayman told the Soviet Colonel firmly that the War Memorial Guard must at once return to the Tiergarten; that the British authorities would be entirely responsible for the salvage of an aircraft that had crashed in our Sector; and that when salvage had been completed and the aircraft investigated, we should be able to inform the Soviet authorities about its return. The bus-load of soldiers was duly withdrawn without their having dismantled, but the Soviet officers stayed to observe developments and remained in varying numbers, in a closely cordoned area at a distance of about three hundred yards from the Stoessensee, throughout the salvage operations.

5. As was at once foreseen, Soviet tactics on the day following the crash were to put pressure on us by a mixture of threat and bluster with the aim of obtaining immediate Soviet access to the wreckage and the salvage operations, no doubt so as to make it more difficult for vital equipment to be removed or properly examined and thus to limit the intelligence dividend. Nevertheless, Soviet efforts were neither particularly well co-ordinated nor

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carried very far: the event seemed to have caught them unprepared. They made no attempt, as we at first feared, at physical harassment or pressure on Berlin. They made great play at first with our alleged delay in recovering and handing over the bodies of the two "hero-pilots", Captain Boris Kapustin and First Lieutenant Yuri Yanov, who according to a TASS Agency release of the 7th of April had deliberately remained in their machine and sacrificed their lives in order to avoid coming down on a populated area. TASS claimed that their decision to do so had been monitored by ground control from their conversation in the aircraft. The effect of this story (which we believe was mostly invention) was spoilt locally by the appearance of a different and much more highly embroidered version in "Neues Deutschland"; this purported to give a minute description of what passed through the pilot's minds after their radio had gone dead and they lost touch with the ground! More seriously, on the morning of the 7th of April the Chief of BRIXMIS was summoned to the Soviet Headquarters at Zossen-Tunsdorf to receive a stiff formal protest from the Deputy Commander in Chief, General Belik. This ended with a categorical demand that Soviet personnel should be permitted to salvage the aircraft, failing which the Russians would be forced to take "appropriate measures". Immediately afterwards, however, Brigadier Wilson was given a considerably milder message to the Commander in Chief, R.A.F. (Germany) from the Soviet Commander in Chief himself (General Koshevoi was telephoning from Moscow where he was no doubt attending the Party Congress). Parallel requests were made by the Head of the Soviet Liaison Mission (SOXMIS), who spent the whole morning at Joint Headquarters in Rheindahlen.

6. Meanwhile the welcome and extremely prompt arrival of a team of Naval divers and R.A.F. technical experts from the United Kingdom, who after being roused from their beds in England in the very early hours of the morning reached the crash site at noon on the 7th of April, allowed salvaging to start in earnest. During

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the afternoon the main part of the fuselage was sufficiently raised onto the Royal Engineers' raft to confirm that both pilots were indeed dead in the cockpit. First priority for the rest of the day went to the work of extricating the bodies, which owing to the tangled condition of the wreckage took about seven hours and was in part extremely dangerous because one of the ejector seats was still "live". Great praise must go to the team, and particularly to the R.A.F. mechanics from Gatow, who accomplished this task without mishap. They were frequently hampered by a searchlight which the Soviet observers had by now established on the bank. It was after midnight before the bodies were ready to be handed over to Soviet representatives with suitable military honours. At this point there was a new difficulty: the reasonably co-operative Soviet Air Force General, Eulanov, who had been the senior officer present, was replaced by the Deputy Chief of Staff from Bessen, Lazutin, a much tougher customer who insisted that according to alleged Soviet custom the Soviet bearer party must be allowed to receive the bodies and pay homage to them on the spot where the pilots died, i.e. on the salvage raft. This was obviously a fresh Russian device to try and get on the raft, as was an earlier plea to send a doctor to the raft. Thanks to patient but firm negotiation by the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Taylor, and the Deputy Chief of BRIXMIS, Group Captain Colahan, this ploy was eventually dropped and after the Tiergarten War Memorial guard had again been summoned (this time by agreement) with a small military band, the bodies were formally handed over on the bank at about 2.30 a.m. on the 8th of April (Good Friday). Great credit is due to Brigadier Taylor, Group Captain Colahan, and all others concerned for bringing this operation to a successful conclusion, and for carrying it out in a way which visibly impressed the Russians (as also witness the fact that General Belik congratulated Brigadier Wilson next day on the bearing of our soldiers).

7. Our other concern during the 7th of April had been to decide

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how long it would take to salvage the aircraft and how long we could reasonably keep the wreckage for intelligence examination before handing it back to the Russians. Our experts estimated that they could if necessary complete the essential examination of the airframe within twentyfour hours, i.e. by the end of Friday, the 8th of April, although the engines were unlikely to be recovered by then or perhaps until much later. The French Commandant, apparently on his own initiative and perhaps mindful of General de Gaulle's forthcoming visit to Moscow, pressed for a very early hand-over, but declared himself satisfied provided the Russians could be given at least an early estimate of the hand-over date. My United States colleague was at first without instructions but early on the 8th he learned that a party of experts was arriving from the United States that day and would want to work on the wreckage for two or three days. Even allowing for the extra few hours' flying time the Americans had been a good deal slower off the mark than the Royal Navy and the R.A.F. This obliged us to change our original plan of offering the wreckage to the Russians at dusk on Friday the 8th of April; we agreed with our Allies to name a hand-over time twentyfour hours later i.e. 6.00 p.m. on Saturday the 9th (the American experts, having once seen the wreckage and the work already done by the R.A.F., agreed that this would be enough for them). All the immediately recoverable wreckage was in fact on the raft by the early afternoon of the 8th, and all essential examination by the British and United States experts (the French were showing at this time no interest) was complete by mid-day on the 9th. Small pieces of wreckage continued to come up after these times, but there was still no sign of the two engines: these were almost certainly deep in the mud and would require a major dredging operations.

8. The next step was discussion with the Russians of the hand-over time and procedure. The Soviet authorities were by now showing themselves in a more reasonable frame of mind. Admittedly, the Chief of BRIZNIS was again summoned by General Belik to Gossen on

/the 8th

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of the wreckage from the British raft to a Soviet vessel just inside our Sector at the point on the Havel opposite Peacock Island where the British Sector and the Soviet Zone have a common water boundary. At the same time the Russians were warned that, unless they accepted this or our original offer by noon the next day, we should be obliged because of the inconvenience caused to the West Berliners and ourselves to remove the wreckage to a place of safe keeping under our control. Next day, the 12th of April, Chief of BRIMIS was once again summoned to Coesen where the Soviet Chief of Staff, General Turanteyev accepted the plan for a transfer on the border, although he insisted that it should be exactly on the border rather than on our side of it. We had made this latter condition in order to remove any risk that the Russians might manoeuvre our barge over to their side and then detain it unless we agreed to sign some unacceptable form of receipt or understanding. But General Turanteyev had explicitly agreed to a generalised form of receipt, and it seemed unlikely now that the Russians were out to make any incident of this kind. The hand-over plan was accordingly set in motion. By 4.00 p.m. on the 13th of April, just a week after the crash, the two rafts were at the border and the hand-over was begun. It took a full six hours, partly owing to the Russians' insistence on examining every piece of the wreck, but also because some of the expected difficulties over documentation did in fact arise. The main trouble was that the Soviet representatives wanted an "Akt" or agreed minute signed listing not only the major elements of the aircraft returned but also those still missing and containing an undertaking that these would be handed back within a time limit. After some hard argument on the raft between General Dulovan and Group Captain Colahan I authorised the signature of a document eliminating the unacceptable features: only the elements of the aircraft handed over were listed, and it was noted that we would in due course (without time limit) handover further parts of the

aircraft

see comment I think, 1st day (W)

see first demand of this order from Mr. Haggan on 21 April (W)

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aircraft recovered, this being in accord with assurances already given by the Commanders-in-Chief. Shortly after 10 p.m. on the 13th the two rafts parted and the first half of the episode was over.

11. The dredging operation to recover the engines has since been in progress: the results will be reported in due course. This is not the place for any discussion of the intelligence dividend provided by our examination of the aircraft and anyway it is much too early to assess this. But it is quite clear that it will prove of the greatest importance. It remains to say something about the impact of the event upon the Berlin authorities and public opinion.

12. The Governing Mayor was away from Berlin, and Herr Albertz seemed well content to be kept generally informed and otherwise to leave the British to handle the matter. This was fortunate: we should undoubtedly have had more trouble from the Russians if it had appeared that the Germans were taking any kind of official share, or even too much official interest, in the salvage and examination of the wreckage. Indeed, the relaxation of the Soviet attitude noticeable after the first fortyeight hours may in part have been due to our efforts to get all Germans as far as possible away from the salvage operations and demonstrate that they were a British affair. This is in no way to belittle the help offered by the Fire and Ambulance services and particularly by the West Berlin Police; the latter co-operated admirably in controlling the area round the crash on both water and land, providing at times upwards of one hundred policemen during the busy Easter weekend. The attitude of the Berliners themselves was commendably sensible and restrained - although of course Stoenensee must have been visited by literally thousands of Easter holidaymakers.

13. To the nowadays underworked and overstrung Berlin press corps the crash was of course a godsend. It filled the front pages throughout the Easter holiday and for most of the following

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shown who were the masters in West Berlin. We feared that, once the main wreckage had been handed over, and we settled down to the longer-term operation of recovering the engines, the press might mount a campaign against the continuing presence of the Soviet observers at the Stoessensee, who had now provided themselves with a motor caravan. In fact, interest in the whole affair quickly evaporated, but we took the precaution of insisting on the Soviet authorities at Potsdam having the caravan removed and of limiting Soviet activities to using one vehicle and about four military personnel which could reasonably be described as a normal patrol. The Russians complied, with not too ill grace, and our action was again noted by the press with approval.

14. The whole affair was primarily a practical operation and I do not think there is any political moral to be drawn except that, as might be expected, the Soviet Government have not so far been prepared to risk a Berlin crisis for the sake of any attempt to deny us the intelligence exploitation of the crash. It was all the same a remarkably complicated operation in which we were given at all times the fullest support by the Embassy and by the Commanders-in-Chief. A surprisingly large proportion of the British garrison were in one way or another engaged in the business to the detriment of their Easter holidays; apart from the R.A.F., the Royal Engineers and the Royal Military Police, the Infantry Battalions were required to mount extensive security precautions, the British Military Hospital played its part, and so on. They all did an extremely good job; and I should like to pay particular tribute here to Mr. Hayman, who was Acting Commandant over the Easter period, to Brigadier Taylor, and to the Officer Commanding R.A.F. Gatow, Group Captain Oxspring, for the admirable way in which they directed operations in their particular spheres, and also to Brigadier Wilson and the staff of BRIMIS for the way in which they carried out the liaison

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work with the Soviet authorities.

15. I am sending copies of this despatch to the Foreign Office, to H.M. Ambassadors in Washington, Paris and Moscow, to the United Kingdom Permanent Representative to NATO, to the Commanders-in-Chief Committee (Germany), and to General Harris at Live Oak.

I have the honour to be,
with the highest respect,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant

(E.J.B. NELSON)

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