The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Cannonballs and Missile Tests

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November 21, 2011



The year was 1983. Korean Airlines Flight 007 was a Boeing 747 taking 269 people from Los Angeles to Seoul via Anchorage. After leaving Alaska, the plane veered off course, flew steadily to the north of its planned flight path, and eventually passed into prohibited Soviet airspace over Kamchatka. A missile test was planned that day, and the plane's appearance was interpreted as an act of war. Crossing the peninsula, KAL 007 continued into neutral airspace with four Soviet fighter jets in pursuit.

Records released after the fall of the Soviet Union include a recording of two Soviet Air Force commanders arguing about whether to order their pilots to fire on KAL 007. One pushed for holding off until they could determine the plane's intent. "Maybe it's a civilian craft, or God knows what," he said.

"What civilian?" the other said. "It flew over Kamchatka! It came from the ocean without identification. I am giving the order to attack if it crosses the border." So it was. When the plane re-entered Soviet airspace over Sakhalin, it was shot down, and, after a horrifying 12-minute fall, crashed into the ocean. There were no survivors.

"It flew over Kamchatka!" That one sentence gets me. It lifts from the transcript and expands until its few words capture everything about this place: over Kamchatka, which is exceptional, protected, once forbidden and still restricted, once closed by the Soviet state and now gradually opening in the Russian Federation, where once nuclear submarines floated in Avacha Bay waiting for the Cold War to heat up and these days they just float, waiting. In 1983, hearing the name "Kamchatka" was reason to shoot down a 747. What, if anything, does that name incite now?

Twenty-five years ago, foreigners were not allowed to set foot here or even fly overhead. Now, they may happily set their luggage down in a central hotel, charter a private helicopter, and take off to catch salmon in some pristine Kamchatkan river. The Soviet Union's collapse opened Kamchatka — that is, the peninsula shifted from a prohibited zone to an area with relatively free passage — but did not strip the word "Kamchatka" of its military meaning. Nothing could do that.

By its very nature, the peninsula is a fortress. The slice of land is patrolled by bears, ringed by volcanoes and set into the freezing Pacific. Petropavlovsk's center is studded with cannons used to defend the city during the Crimean War in 1854. Still facing the coast, the cannons look like warnings. Across the bay, Vilyuchinsk, one of Kamchatka's closed military cities, offers a more contemporary rebuff: Submarines and navy ships swim nearby.

It seems that every local's personal history traces back to the country's security forces somehow. This person is an Army major, and that person is a Navy cook; this one is training to be a submarine engineer, and that one is a building inspector in Vilyuchinsk. Everyone's parents came to Kamchatka for military postings, and this one's father, or husband, or brother, is a member of the FSB. You can't separate the military from the civilian here. The place was born for defense.

The "Kamchatka" called out by that Soviet general on Sept. 1, 1983, could have been the Kamchatka of 1854 or the Kamchatka of today. The word, the shout, sounds on. This is Kamchatka, locals say, and the name still sounds like a call to war: This is Kamchatka, this place is exceptional. This is ours, and we won't let it go without a fight.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/21/cannonballs-and-missile-tests-a34711