

The Cold-War Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, a deep freeze had settled in on relations between former Allies, the Soviet Union and the United States. The globe was carved into competing spheres of American and Soviet influence, and a number of proxy battles between the “super powers” took place. Many are well known, including the Berlin Airlift, Korean Conflict, Vietnam War, Cuban Missile Crisis, Afghanistan, and even the space race. Less known are the nearly constant battles along the fringes of freedom. These constant cat and mouse encounters were played out primarily between the US Navy’s Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force (MPRF) and Soviet and Red Chinese fighter planes, and were vital to containing the expansion of the Sino/Soviet blocs.

One of the primary missions of the MPRF was to preserve freedom of movement in the air and sea over internationally recognized boundaries. It was not a glamorous task, but it was one of the Cold Wars’ most dangerous. The missions sometimes meant flying close to areas whose boundaries were often in dispute. It also meant performing electronic and other reconnaissance to monitor Communist military assets and gauge their intentions in order to ensure appropriate US preparation to deter any attempts of Communist aggression. In one of history’s biggest mismatches, the large, slow patrol aircraft were often intercepted by swift and deadly fighter jets. Hostilities could escalate quickly and with little or no warning to the MPRF crews.

Not counting the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, from 1945 to 1969, there were at least twenty separate incidents involving MPRF and Communist-bloc aircraft. A number of their confrontations were deadly. The United States lost at least eight Navy aircraft, one Coast Guard aircraft, and eighty-one Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard aviators and crew. A recounting of some of these incidents follows.

On 8 April, 1950, an unarmed PB4Y-2 from VP-26 was attacked by a Soviet aircraft over the Baltic Sea off the coast of Latvia. Ten crew members are presumed to have perished, although there were unconfirmed reports that at least some of the crew had been captured and detained by the Russians.

On 6 November, 1951 a VP-6 P2V Neptune was lost to hostile fire. The Neptune was operating in international waters in the Sea of Japan off Russia’s eastern coast when it reported that it was being fired on by Soviet aircraft. The Neptune and its ten-man crew disappeared off Vladivostok, thirty-two miles outside Soviet-claimed waters.

MPRF aircraft were attacked by hostile aircraft over international waters at least four more times in 1952, six times in 1953, once in 1954, and three times between 1955 and 1956.

In "A History of U.S. Navy Fleet Air Reconnaissance," originally printed in *The Hook* in spring 1987, the following account of an attack in 1959 is presented by Captain (Ret) Don C. East, USN.

“On 16 June, a VQ-1 P4M-1Q was on a routine reconnaissance mission over the Sea of Japan off the North Korean coast. While the Mercator was at 7,000 ft off Wonsan, North Korea, two MiGs attacked with cannon fire. A few moments later, the tail gunner, twenty year old Petty Officer Second Class Eugene Corder, collapsed with more than forty shrapnel wounds. Now totally unarmed, the Mercator continued to be attacked by the MiGs as LCDR Donald Mayer dove for the deck in an attempt to escape. By the time Mayer reached 50 ft altitude above the Sea of Japan, the P4M’s two starboard engines and rudder had been shot away. On the way down the copilot, LCDR Vince Anania, could see the red stars painted on the fuselages of the North Korean fighters as they made *six more passes* at the crippled P4M. The Mercator was barely able to limp back to Japan and make an emergency landing at Miho Air Base.”

The most significant loss was suffered by VQ-1 on 15 April, 1969 over the Sea of Japan. On that day, a VQ-1 EC-121M and thirty one crew members were lost to hostile fire from North Korean MiG fighters. On 14 April, Deep Sea one-two-nine took off from Atsugi on a routine electronic reconnaissance mission off the North Korean coast. They were to fly elliptical orbits over international waters, as had been done on hundreds of previous missions.

At 1350, about seven hours after takeoff, US Air Force personnel monitoring the flight detected on radar a pair of North Korean MiGs rapidly approaching the VQ-1 aircraft. A message was sent to LCDR James Howard Overstreet, the mission commander, ordering him to abort his mission. The unarmed EC-121M began turning back, but it was attacked by the MiGs and went down in flames southeast of Chongjin, North Korea.

Only two bodies were recovered, those of LTJG Joseph R. Ribar and AT1 Richard E. Sweeney. The other crewmembers who lost their lives on Deep Sea one-two nine that day were: LCDR J.H Overstreet; LT’s John Dzema, Dennis B. Gleason, Peter P. Perrottet, John H. Singer and Robert F. Taylor; LTJG’s Robert J. Sykora and Norman E. Wilkerson; CPO’s Laverne A. Greiner, Marshall H. McNamara and Richard E. Smith; PO1’s Steven C. Chartier, Bernie J. Colgin, Bailard F. Connors Jr., James L. Roach and John H. Potts; PO2’s Louis F. Balderman, Dennis J. Horrigan, Richard H. Kincaid, Frederick A. Randall and Stephen J. Tesmer; PO3’s Gene K. Graham, David M. Willis, Gary R. Ducharme, John A. Miller Jr. and Philip D. Sundby; AN Richard T. Prindle and SSGT Hugh M. Lynch.

The Cold-War MPRF warriors were some of the least-publicized heroes of the era due to the nature of their secret missions. Those who lost their lives did so on freedom’s front line. Their sacrifices helped ensure that America and her allies would prevail by the end of the Cold War. In honor of their honor and for the Centennial of Naval Aviation, there will be recognition of past MPRF warrior’s contribution to Naval Aviation’s illustrious history at the 2011 MPRF Reunion and Symposium, as well as a number of events dedicated to special heritage celebrations. Please join us the first week in April onboard NAS Jacksonville, FL.

* For more pictures cold war era MPRF aircraft, discussions, and information on the 2011 MPRF Centennial Celebration, Reunion, and Symposium and a link to a list of Cold War incidents involving US aircraft, visit our Facebook page at [facebook.com/mprfheritage](https://www.facebook.com/mprfheritage).