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Russians search for lost '30s-era Soviet bomber in Alaska

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Courtesy Andrey Podolskiy / International Search Expedition for Aircraft N-209Pravda, the official Soviet newspaper, proudly ran this photo of the Bolkhovitinov DB-A as it left the ground. COURTESY ANDREY PODOLSKIY / INT

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On Aug. 12, 1937, the world watched as a massive Russian bomber took off from an airdrome near Moscow. Stalin's war ministry abandoned its usual secrecy and invited Western reporters to see the event. Shutters clicked and cameras rolled as great red wings lifted the Bolkhovitinov DB-A into the evening air. Captain Sigizmund Levanevsky banked the plane over a row of trees and set a course for Fairbanks, Alaska.

The plane was never seen again.

This year a Russian team, with assistance from the Russian Geographic Society, came to the North Slope village of Nuiqsut, following up on long-forgotten reports that the plane came down off Alaska's Arctic Ocean coast. While they didn't find the wreckage, they learned some details that may help pinpoint its underwater location.

"We got interesting new information," said Yuri Salnikov, the head of the expedition.

Salnikov is a documentary filmmaker and footage is being shot of the hunt. But, he says, "Our main goal is to locate the plane."

Soviet Lindbergh

Blond, steely-eyed and square-jawed, Sigizmund -- or Sigismund -- Levanevsky was the very image of a larger-than-life, heroic aviation pioneer.

He gained fame in 1933 when he picked up an American pilot, Jimmie Mattern, who had crashed in Chukotka during a much-publicized attempt to fly around the world. He made headlines again when he tried to assist survivors of a shipwreck in the Arctic Ocean. Though his plane crashed and he didn't rescue anyone, he was nonetheless declared a Hero of the Soviet Union.

Other pilots teased him, Salnikov said, suggesting that he hadn't really earned the honor and suggesting that he was "unlucky." As a result, Salnikov thinks, Levanevsky became obsessed with proving himself worthy.

He pushed the limits as a long-distance pilot. On one trip he ferried a plane from Los Angeles to Moscow, a distance of more than 11,000 miles. He spoke English, to the delight of American reporters. The press dubbed him "The Russian Lindbergh."

In the summer of 1937 Soviet aviators made history with back-to-back nonstop flights from Russia over the North Pole to the United States in Tupolev ANT.25s, single-engine planes built along the lines of powered gliders. Levanevsky personally pushed Stalin to let him do it in the bigger, heavier DB-A. He planned to touch down in Fairbanks, then continue to Chicago and New York with a gift of black caviar. (Rumors later arose that the plane also carried gold.) It would pioneer a new route for passenger and cargo flights, he argued. It would usher in a new age of improved international communication and trade.

Stalin may have done some pushing of his own. There are reports that engineers felt the plane had not undergone sufficient testing. But its propaganda value outweighed their concerns. The DB-A could hold 25 holiday travelers or tons of civilian freight. But its real business was bombs. An intercontinental flight by the large warplane might give potential foes -- Germany, for instance -- something to consider.

The DB-A was a unique plane for the time, Salnikov said. It had four 680 horsepower engines, "which made it a big deal." Constructed from aluminum alloy, sleekly designed, with aerodynamic cowls and wheel housings, it included the recent innovation of in-wing gas tanks. It could carry 6,000 gallons of fuel, enough to fly 5,000 miles. The wingspan, 129 feet, was 26 feet more than that of the B-17, an American bomber that borrowed some of the ideas found in the DB-A. (The wingspan of a modern Boeing 737-100 is 93 feet). An American reporter called it "simply stupendous."

Levanevsky had tried the route once before only to be turned back by a cracked oil line. This time the trip began more smoothly. The crew crossed the North Pole without incident less than 20 hours out of Moscow. But 300 miles later they sent out a message that there was trouble with an engine. The plane was facing heavy winds and losing altitude.

A second message indicated an emergency landing was imminent.

Then nothing.

Long search

An unprecedented air search to find Levanevsky followed. Pilots from Alaska and Canada took part. Mattern, the American whom the Russian had rescued in Chukotka, flew up from California to join in. The Soviet Union hired a PBY Catalina seaplane and arranged for the noted Australian explorer Hubert Wilkins to lead the effort.

Wilkins was the aviator who, with Carl Ben Eielson, had flown from Barrow to Norway in 1928, less than a year after Charles Lindbergh's epochal solo flight from New York to Paris, making the first eastward crossing of the Arctic Ocean by air. After freeze-up, he returned with a Lockheed Electra on skis and continued scouring the region in a grid pattern that eventually covered an area the size of Montana.

More than one sighting was reported; all turned out to be false.

But the mystery of the downed plane remained in the memory of northern pilots, slowly taking the contours of legend. Anchorage pilot Ron Sheardown was part of a mission in 1962, when the wreckage was thought to have been found in Canada. It wasn't Levanevsky's wreckage.

In 1990, David Stone, professor emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Geophysical Institute, followed up on previous reports that three Inupiat men with binoculars had watched a plane go down while hunting at Oliktok Point, east of the Colville River. He used sleds to drag magnetometers over the ice, but he couldn't detect any wreckage that might be associated with the plane.

In 1999 an employee of the Department of Interior's Minerals Management Service noted a fuselage-like shape in a sonar image from the sea bed at Camden Bay, west of Kaktovik. Follow-up sonar scans failed to find such an image.

In 2014, a different Russian-led team plans to look for evidence of the crash on Canada's Ellesmere Island, near Greenland, more than a thousand miles away from Alaska.

But Sheardown, for one, thinks Point Oliktok is the more promising site.

After participating in the 1962 search in Canada, Sheardown put thoughts of the Levanevsky flight out of his mind for a while.

"But then, one day, I was sitting at a restaurant in Nome," he recalled. "On the back of the menu was a copy of an old Nome Nugget that talked about the flight. I got interested again."

He helped with the reconnaissance at the Camden Bay site and, when Salnikov announced his intentions, was quick to offer his aircraft and knowledge of the area.

New clues

Like Sheardown, Salnikov thinks Simpson Lagoon, off Oliktok Point, is the likely location of the crash -- largely on the strength of the testimony of the Inupiat hunters. Their account raises the possibility that Levanevsky's plane was seen one last time, in its fatal moment.

Salnikov first learned about the hunters in 1983 while making a documentary about famous Russian fliers. He was digging through archives in USSR's Foreign Ministry when he came across a letter by a missionary, Homer Kellems, who spoke with the men and passed their information to the Soviet embassy in Washington; it apparently took a year to reach Moscow, where it was filed and forgotten.

Later, in 1989, working in American archives, he found a message from a radio operator based in Barrow, Stanley Morgan, who had spoken with one of the men shortly after the crash. They had watched the plane through their binoculars as it came through the clouds and went into the water between two specific barrier islands about five miles from the coast, Salnikov said. Their report, recorded by Morgan shortly after the event, was contemporary with the crash -- not made up afterward -- and remained consistent in retellings. In an Aug. 25, 1938 story, *The New York Times* quoted a member of Kellems' party who had spoken with the men as saying, "Their story appeared airtight in answer to every question."

Sheardown said that the day after the crash, a storekeeper from nearby Beechey Point, Jack Smith, took a skiff to the location where the men said they'd seen the plane go down. "He didn't see wreckage, but he did find an oil sheen," Sheardown said. "In 1937, it's hard to imagine where that could have come from if it wasn't that plane."

Funding for the Russian team to go to Oliktok Point didn't come through until August of this year, Salnikov said. That limited the time they could spend searching the area. The team distributed leaflets describing the plane and identifying two of the Inupiat hunters who had seen it come down, Foster Panigeo and Roger Kasak. They spoke with residents familiar with the area who assured them that the islands were plainly visible from shore in good weather and that observers with binoculars would have no problem seeing a big plane.

They met elder Jane Brower of Nuiqsut, who was 7 years old at the time. She recounted how people -- few of whom had yet seen any airplane -- talked about the bomber, the roar of its engines over the still Arctic air and the place where the hunters had spotted it. (It should be noted that residents of the Camden Bay area, more than 100 miles to the east, also told investigators in 1999 that they remembered hearing the plane.)

And the team learned that a few years ago whalers in the vicinity of the reported crash hit something lurking just under the water, something big and hard that ripped a hole in the fiberglass hull of their boat.

The water in that area ranges from 18 to 30 feet deep, Sheardown said. Other submerged plane wrecks in the region periodically appear when water levels drop and appear to be in good shape after decades in the ocean.

The location near the mouth of the Colville River augers well for the preservation of the aluminum plane, if it's there, even after 75 years, said former state archeologist Dave McMahan. "Especially with the mix of fresh and salt water." However, he added, there's the possibility that ice will have scoured the bottom of the shallows in the interim.

For now, the arrival of winter in northern Alaska has put an end to field work. Salnikov will attempt to return next year to continue the search in the spring. "It depends on funding," he said.

"We hope to do more bottom work," said Sheardown. "Of course that means we need the right permits."

Vision achieved

Though Levanevsky never reached his goal, the efforts to find him contributed significantly to northern aviation. In this he occupies a position in Arctic exploration not unlike Sir John Franklin, who attempted to sail through the Northwest Passage in 1845. Franklin, his ships and his crew, vanished. But the intense multi-national search for him led to detailed mapping of the Arctic coast and a better understanding of weather and ice conditions in the far north.

Likewise, the careful and coordinated hunt for Levanevsky's plane proved that "the equipment and support systems for safe (arctic) flight were available," in the words of Time-Life Books "The Epic of Flight" series.

Hubert Wilkins, the pioneer aviator who led the 1937 search for Levanevsky, noted how dramatically flying in the far north had changed in the nine years since he'd made the first flight from Alaska to Europe with Eielson. That trip had been a leap into the unknown; the pilots often did not know where they were, flying into surprise storms that grounded and wrecked planes.

In the 1937 search, he said, "I had flown thousands of miles -- not in a rickety crate but in sturdy, powerful planes. We had not had one crash, but had flown for months in perfect safety." Radio kept pilots in touch with the world at all times. Weather reports from across the region were available hourly. "Science enabled us to save many precious hours and avoid needless risks."

Today, uncounted passengers and tons of cargo fly across the North Pole each year. Levanevsky's vision of commerce and communication flying over the Arctic Ocean has come to pass, as he seemed confident it would.

Salnikov recounted an interview that Levanevsky gave just before his final flight. "The reporter said, 'You've failed before. What makes you think you'll succeed this time?'

"Levanevsky replied that whether he made it or not was not important. He said, 'I believe that people will fly this route -- with or without us.' "

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