

The KC Chronicles

Journey to the Russian Far East

Day 1: The Taking of Flight 201

Date: Saturday, June 1, 1996

9:30 am. It started out innocently enough. After checking in my grossly overweight baggage at SeaTac (note to Willie: don't let them talk you into being a mule and carrying everything but the kitchen sink translated into Russian, it is a major league pain. My advice, only the essentials son!) and a tearful good-bye to my beautiful bride Jody, I dutifully hopped aboard my Alaska Flight 97 to Anchorage. Funny thing, but after being gone for 13 years or so, upon arrival, it still looked and felt the same. The murky coastline, breathtaking glacial mountains, reindeer sausages and far from home.

1:30 pm. Waiting for my transfer flight in the lobby with the same stuffed polar bear and looking for my client contact, I couldn't help but notice four businessmen, sharply dressed in their power suits, all trying to figure out how to get the payphones to work. Looking closer I noticed that they were all speaking Russian and having a hell of a time. I couldn't help but chuckle. Little did I know that my time would come. "Now boarding Alaska Flight 201 to Magadan, Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, blah, blah, blah. . .", was announced and after stowing my millions of pounds of carry on luggage, I settled down for what was to become an interesting voyage. The overbooked flight was finally ready for take off, except for one minor detail, we didn't take off. We all sat there, waiting.

3:00 pm. This flight was scheduled to depart Anchorage International at 2:00 pm and we were still hugging the apron. Finally the Captain announced that a 100 mph headwind had developed. This meant that with the current weight of the plane and the maximum fuel capacity, we would not make it all the way to Magadan without a stop for refueling. Negotiations with the Russian government were just completed for us to stop in the city of Anadyr, about half of the way. Too bad, because if they were looking for volunteers to get off the plane I'm sure me and my million pounds of baggage would have lightened the load enough to give them sufficient fuel for a lunar landing and back.

5:15 pm. The Captain just made the announcement that eventhough the go ahead was given earlier we would not be permitted to land and were turning around and headed back to Anchorage. Minutes after the plane made its' sweeping 180 degree turn he came on the speakers again, this time saying that were given permission to land. Apparently, the self serve island was open, so again, another sweeping 180 degree turn and a rousing chorus of *Anadyr Here We Come*. After a safe landing on the bumpy runway, and taxiing down the facility strewn with broken down snow covered machinery, I finally realized that this was were all planes came to die, kind of like an elephant graveyard for aircraft.

The plane came to a complete stop and was immediately met by jeeps carrying some kind of Russian military, great!

6:00 pm. Still no sign of anything resembling a fueling truck and the natives on board were getting a little restless. As luck would have it, my seat was surrounded by a sweet elderly lady from Phoenix in front of me, commercial fishermen to the left of me, a contingency from the great state of Texas to the right of me and a crying little Russian child behind me. Every representative of the human spectrum was present and by the time this ordeal would be over I will have learned how to tie my own fishing lures, crochet some decorative doilies, insult Bobby Allison with a Houston twang and scream like a Russian baby.

7:00 pm The fueling truck just pulled away and everyone had the sense that we were finally getting off the ground. A Russian Colonel had come through the cabin. It looked like some kind of military inspection, and boy the rumors started circulating throughout our little community. One of the better ones was that the Captain of our plane had given a lower ranking officer his flight cap as a gift and a higher up took this as an insult and would not permit us to leave. We were told that the crew was given permission by the military to serve the passengers juice and water only and we were not permitted to deplane. A military truck had pulled out in front of the plane to prevent our departure while the annoyed Russian Officers left in a huff.

7:15 pm Well, well, remember the four power suit guys at the Anchorage Airport?. Low and behold, they happened to be high ranking Russian Aviation Control officials and they became involved in the negotiations. They couldn't even get a payphone to work, but now I had the utmost confidence in them.

7:30 pm Negotiations have broken off and we had no clue when we would be given permission to leave. Now I may be a little dense, but this seemed like a hostage situation to me. In what they tell me has routinely been a 40 minute refueling exercise in the past was fast approaching 2 1/2 hours and everyone, including the good natured Americans had the makings of a first class mob. The good old boys next to me started demanding some beer and wanted to take those "little green men" out back and beat the tar out of them. The elderly lady wanted to take up a collection to pay our way out and all of the war stories of Kuwait and the Marines started surfacing. "We were an American flagship dammit, this couldn't be happening to us !"

8:00 pm The Captain finally came back to inform us of our situation and to answer our questions. The first and foremost question being when do we leave? His reply was, he had no idea. He began to explain that he landed the plane exactly as directed and parked it for refueling per their towers instructions. A military exercise was being held on a far runway, but in using the near runway, we had infringed on the military portion. The plane was partially sitting on a restricted runway. Just then, the truck blocking us drove away, but was quickly replaced by another one. They actually changed shifts on us. The Captain proceeded to tell us that our Government and Alaskan Airlines officials have been notified as well as the City of Magadan. He stressed that we

were in no immanent danger and that negotiations were now between the Russian Military and the Russian Civilian Airfield officials who share the facility. We were completely out of it. We were all just to sit back and await the outcome of their show of force. This information did very little to calm us down. Even me, passenger 44, seat 10C was fuming with increasing anger. Say, wasn't that Bernard Shaw of CNN out there?

9:00 pm Just when we were reaching our boiling point a Russian passenger plane was landing on the adjacent runway and after seeing our predicament with the military, immediately took off again without stopping. An instantaneous roar of cheers and laughter broke out and although we didn't know it at the time, it was the exact circumstance we needed to break our growing anxiety and tension. It kind of brought us all back together and lifted our spirits. We were now all ready to suck it up and wait till hell froze over if we had to.

9:45 pm The Captain had just announced to the flight attendants to prepare for departure. Being an airline travel veteran I know the time between that announcement and the actual take off time is usually in the neighborhood of 10 to 15 minutes but he already had that sucker moving while the words were barely out of his mouth, as if he thought they would change their minds about our emancipation.

10:00 pm I doubt we will ever know the real reasons why Alaska Airlines Flight 201 was detained for over 3 hours on that dilapidated airfield in the Russian Far East. Political pawns?, perhaps. The flexing of military muscle?, maybe. Global game of Chicken?, probably. In the days to follow, when all of the differing versions have made their rounds, this event would slide quietly into our collective distant memories, only to be revived at cocktail parties and family reunions. Nevertheless, one distinct moment would be etched in my mind forever, that final big cheer from us, the family of passengers when we were finally on our way. But I don't know why I was cheering, . . . it's not as if I were going home!

Keith Canedo is Chief of Design for McGowan Broz Engineers, Inc., a multi-discipline consulting firm in Bellevue, Washington.