

# Vostok Station – Point of Impact

## Excerpt

The lead pilot, Squadron Leader Lance Hamilton, called a 60-second "hack" to start the countdown to brake release. The three aircraft squatted at the end of the runway, their jet exhausts shimmering behind them. The pilots sat, hands on throttles, senses taut, anticipation crowding their thoughts. Hamilton rolled the throttles forward, the two big turbofans roaring at 80 percent rpm.

Hamilton spoke into his mask. "Lead, five, four, three, two, one." Simultaneously all three pilots released brakes and lit their afterburners. The "burners" instantly increased thrust from 24,000 to 40,000 pounds and gave the aircrews a "kick" that jammed them back in their seats. Acceleration was quick. The scenery became a blur. Hamilton and his navigator checked instruments for engine power and performance. Rotation speed came fast. He then eased the stick back, lifting the nose smoothly off the runway. With the aircraft free of the ground he used his left hand to raise the gear, keeping his right hand on the control stick to correct pitch angles and keep wings level. It was all automatic, as natural as scratching his nose. Moving his left hand from the gear handle to flap handles, he sucked in the flaps and slats as they accelerated through 290 mph, repositioning the wings from 16 degrees to 26 degrees of sweep. As they approached 400 knots, Hamilton retarded the throttles, cut off the burner and reduced the power setting to continue the climb out.

With the Pig climbing steeply, Lance made radio contact with their departure control, scanning his radar to locate any possible aircraft in front of him. It had been 90 seconds since he had left the runway. In less than 10 minutes he leveled off at

27,000 feet, with his fellow aircraft stacked in neat trail formation, heading south.

Conversation with the traffic controllers on the ground was clipped as they steered the flight quietly through the myriad flight paths of commercial and private planes. The Pig's inertial system's gyros and digital computers hummed in unison, accepting the directions of the computer program. While Lance busied himself with course changes, speed, and other mission variables, the electronic sensors in the avionics systems measured every tiny movement of the aircraft, compensating for each deviation by issuing direct commands to the flight-control surfaces. In fact, the navigation system was so sensitive and accurate that the Pig's parking spot on the ramp had to be surveyed to give the system the exact coordinates of the mission starting point.

Right on schedule, the RAAF B707 of 33 Squadron made radio contact, navigating their intercept at over 480 knots. Hamilton and his escorts adjusted their heading to close at a rate of almost 1500 feet per second. Following the image of the B707 on his radarscope, the lead navigator relayed course corrections to the small formation, adjusting the flight path toward, but slightly offset, from the tanker's. At a 1000 knots closure rate, the distance between them diminished rapidly. When the tanker was exactly 21 miles downrange, Lance, flying lead, directed the B707 to turn onto his heading. He spotted the 707 halfway through its turn 10 miles out. When he rolled out, the bombers were five miles astern, now three abreast in loose visual formation. In minutes, the lead Pig was in position, immediately behind and below the refueling boom, ready for hook-up. The 707 began to offload its JP4 jet fuel. One by one the tanker's boom operator inserted the refueling boom into the small receptacle just behind each F111's cockpit while it flew in very close trail position behind the tanker.

Despite its size, the Pig was a dream to refuel in flight. Its flight controls were specially designed to adapt automatically to almost any altitude and airspeed condition. The feel of the stick was ideal, Hamilton thought, neither sluggish nor jerky. After so many hook-ups and hours of refueling practice, Hamilton had developed a feel for the correct position behind the boom. He was abstractly looking at the director light system on the belly of the tanker's fuselage. The system signaled the receiver pilot with lights to advise him of his relative position in the refueling "envelope." The boomer suddenly broke into his thoughts calling a "Disconnect" over the radio. Hamilton slipped below and away from the tanker.

Hamilton's Pig was loaded to the gills, packing some major surprises for anyone getting in her way.

Meanwhile, far south, the target of interest steamed west unaware of the approaching danger. The *Fuzhou* displaced most of the other ships in the Chinese fleet by over 50 percent. She was built for long endurance and could run fast. Even in the heavy following sea, the Sovremenny class destroyer made a comfortable 25 knots. Her captain and crew were confident in their systems. She was, after all, the 'Carrier Killer'. The *Fuzhou* was a lethal package of air, ASW and surface-to-surface weaponry, the ship's captain, PLAN Commander Li Zhenbang, easily moved with the steady roll of the ship. There was, he believed, no one close enough or daring enough to offer a threat to them. They strolled with complete impunity through the Australian waters.

Two hours after refueling, the flight of Pigs descended to sea level well outside the range of the *Fuzhou's* radar capabilities. Flying at over Mach 1 and on the deck, the big jets ploughed the ocean with their exhausts, even lower than the T120s had previously. It was a rough ride. Hamilton's lead jet buffeted heavily. Normally a weapon release would

have occurred earlier and would normally require a pop up, exposing them to radar. Today, they would stay on the deck.

Just three miles out, the *Fuzhou* ops room acquired the flight. By then the F-111s had split, converging on the target from different directions. A collision was a real possibility, but the gain of splitting the ship's defenses in all directions was worth it. On board the *Fuzhou*, the missile director frantically punched his keyboard, loading SA-N-7 Gadfly missiles into their launches calling *multiple incoming at plus mach one*. Hamilton and the rest of the flight saw and heard the Sovremenny radar lock onto them.

The anti-air missiles were not the only threat; the *Fuzhou's* four six-barrel 30 mm AK-630 air defense guns could spit out a curtain of lead at the rate of three thousand rounds per minute to a range of two miles. A shower of cold lead you only took once.

Captain Li Zhenbang had no previous combat experience. Neither was he stupid. But for the first time in his life he froze. What were they, missiles? The time was the hard part. At the point of detection, the incoming flight was moving at more than 1000 feet per second. In the time it took the missile director to utter the warning and the ship's Captain to comprehend it, the air exploded, the deck of the destroyer shook violently, glass cracked, everything reverberated from the supersonic shockwaves, one after the other. The missile officer panicked, pushing the launch button, sending four Gadflies into the sky in pursuit of the aircraft.

On the bridge and around the rest of the ship they realized quickly that they had suffered no damage. There had been no attack. If there had been one, they would have been dead. Several of the crew had seen the sinister black shapes seemingly leap from the ocean without any sound, leaving an explosion of noise and shock waves in their wake.

The flight profile was the problem the ship's Captain thought. If they were firing missiles the

attacking jets would never have passed over the ship. Indeed, they would have never come that close. Captain Li Zhenbang realized what was happening and swore loudly. "Shut the system down," he screamed into the ship's communication system. It was already too late.

Hamilton now had a real problem. He had the Gadfly locked on to him and coming in fast. The warbling of the threat receiver was annoying the shit out of him. The Gadfly missile profile would have been to climb, look down and then plunge towards the target - him. How low can you go, he thought? Running parallel to the big rolling swell of the Antarctic Ocean, Hamilton dialled 20 feet into the system. The aircraft sank so low it flew between the swells; he could look up at them on either side, the canopy heavily smeared in salty spray.

The missile could not see through the waves and lost the lock-on to the fleeing jet plunging into the heavy swells. Within seconds the missile warning stopped and Lance's heart started again, but only for a few moments of respite.

"We're being painted by radar." Lance's navigator Jake, worked his box of tricks. There was no sign of his wingman. "Looks like an SU27."

"Let him keep looking. We are turning around. The rules of engagement were quite clear. Only fire if fired upon. We have been fired upon and by the looks of it Stuart and Hat Trick are gone."

The *Fuzhou* was following the heavy Southern Ocean swell. At 60 miles out Hamilton approached from an angle to the stern, settling the big jet in between the moving mountains of water to keep her below the *Fuzhou's* radar. He closed the gap to 50 miles and popped the aircraft up. The threat receiver blared immediately as the *Fuzhou's* radar picked them up. He waited until the F111's own radar registered the target and fed the information to the Harpoons. The AGM-84D Harpoon Block 1D was an all weather, over-the-horizon, anti-ship missile system. The Harpoon's active radar guidance, integrated Global Positioning System/inertial navigation system, warhead design, and low-level, sea-skimming cruise trajectory and re-attack capability, made it

an extremely unpleasant visitor, even on the best of days.

With the target information fed through to both missiles, they automatically released. Lance then stood the aircraft on its wing and dropped back into hiding among the heavy swells.