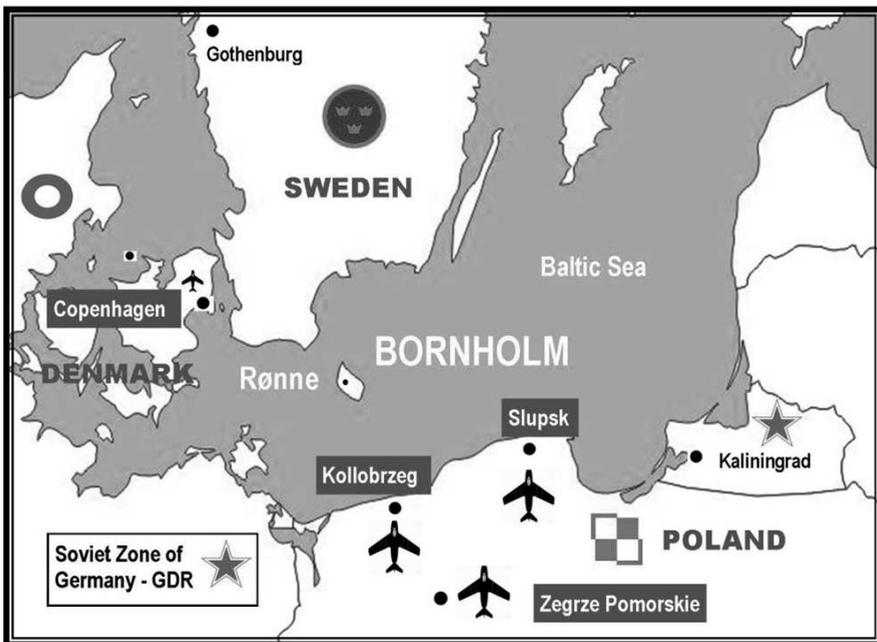


The Secret MiGs of Bornholm

For Pauline and Mickey

DICK VAN DER AART

The Secret MiGs of Bornholm



AIR-INTEL RESEARCH

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Published by
Brave New Books
The Netherlands

for AIR-INTEL RESEARCH
www.air-intel.nl

ISBN 9789402153521

Cover design and maps: Dick van der Aart

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First printed in The Netherlands in 2016

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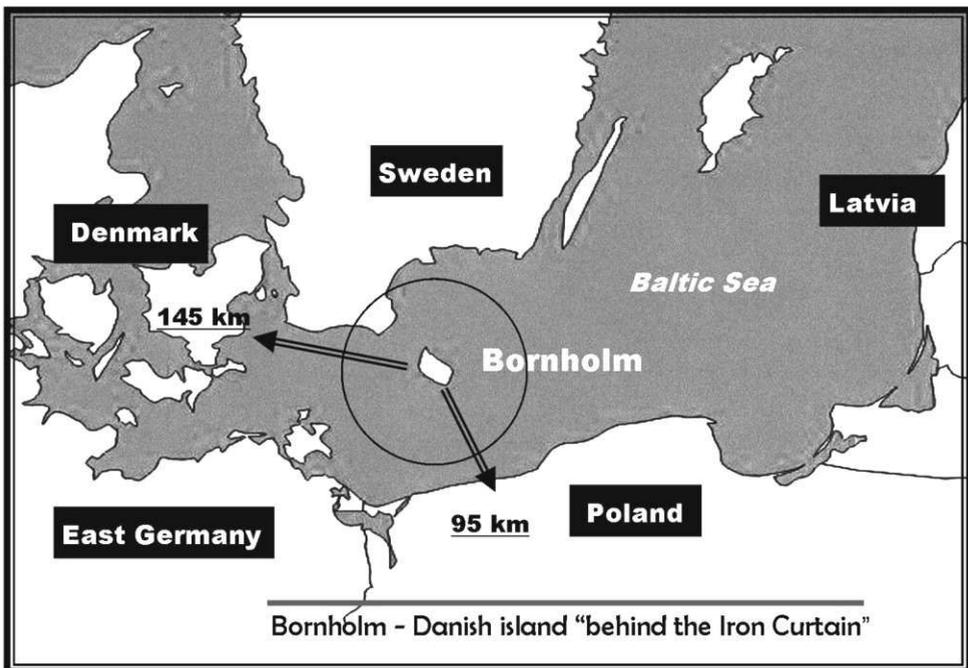
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INTRODUCTION

The Secret of Bornholm

In the early morning of Thursday 5 March 1953 a silver-metallic jet roared with great speed over the island of Bornholm, a tiny piece of Danish territory in the Baltic Sea. The swept-wing jet fighter streaked low over the red roofs of Rønne, lowered its undercarriage and, against all odds, made a perfect landing on the dangerously short grass airstrip just south of the city. Out of the cockpit climbed a young Polish Air Force pilot, shaken but unharmed, and not realizing he had just earned a prominent place in the history books. For the first time an operational and fully-armed Soviet-built MiG-15bis, an improved version of the most advanced Russian jet fighter, had landed intact on Western soil. ‘A sensational catch’ cheered British and US intelligence services.



For years they had tried in vain to lay their hands on a flying example of the feared fighting machine. On the very day of the defection the UK and US intelligence agencies arrived unsolicited in Copenhagen with their own experts, more than eager to have a look at the Russian aircraft. Denmark, afraid of political repercussions, actually wanted nothing more than to hand the communist aircraft back to Poland as soon as possible. But unprecedented pressure from several NATO allies (even the option of ‘stealing’ the MiG from Bornholm was considered) forced Denmark to postpone the return of the MiG fighter. The governments of the United States and Great-Britain, prodded by the leaders of their respective Air Forces, the USAF and the RAF, insisted upon a thorough technical examination of the MiG-15 by their own aeronautical experts. Danish technicians were simply regarded as not qualified enough.

Denmark, at the time a somewhat reluctant NATO member, gave in to the international pressure, albeit with a demand for total secrecy. No one was to know that foreign experts were allowed to inspect, analyze and test every single part of the Soviet MiG and to interrogate the Polish pilot. It had to be a covert operation to deceive the Communist leaders in Warsaw and Moscow and to satisfy the curiosity of the West.

And with this political decision the ‘Secret of Bornholm’ was born. A promise of secrecy that had to be repeated by NATO commanders again and again. Because, much to the surprise and joy of the Western military intelligence services, another two Polish Air Force pilots escaped with their modernized Polish-built versions of the MiG-15bis to the island of Bornholm. These defections seemed to confirm NATO’s reasoning at the time that the pretty holiday island of Bornholm, only about 95 km (60 miles) from the Polish coast, was the ideal location for freedom-seeking communist pilots. Denmark had a totally different view on this matter. Copenhagen clearly regarded the whole situation as most inconvenient.

OCCUPIED BY THE RUSSIANS

Denmark was fully aware of the sensitive geographical location of Bornholm and the associated political implications in the Cold War. At the end of World War II the island was occupied by Russian troops on 9 May 1945 after a heavy bombardment to force the surrender of the German garrison. Although the Russians apparently behaved well, their seizure of Bornholm was not seen as a liberation. In March 1946 the Soviet government declared that it was prepared to evacuate Bornholm, if Denmark was able to take over the island and establish its administration without any participation of foreign troops. Moscow made it clear

that the stationing of foreign troops on Bornholm would be considered a declaration of war against the Soviet Union.

The Danish government informed Moscow that it was fully able to take over Bornholm with its own troops and establish its own form of government on the island. Although there never was a signed treaty between the Soviet Union and Denmark concerning the evacuation of Bornholm by the Soviet forces, the Russians ended the occupation peacefully on 5 April 1946.¹ Since then Moscow kept a close watch on the small island in the Baltic. The policy of no foreign troops remained in force after NATO was formed in 1949, with Denmark as one of the founding members. The first American naval visit to Bornholm with two destroyers in 1951 was uneventful, but when NATO in 1952 held the gigantic multi-national military exercise MAINBRACE, involving allied naval and air units in the Baltic, the Soviets charged that the participation of allied forces on or around Bornholm was a violation of the conditions upon which the island was evacuated. Even the emergency landing of an American military helicopter on Bornholm resulted in a Soviet diplomatic protest.

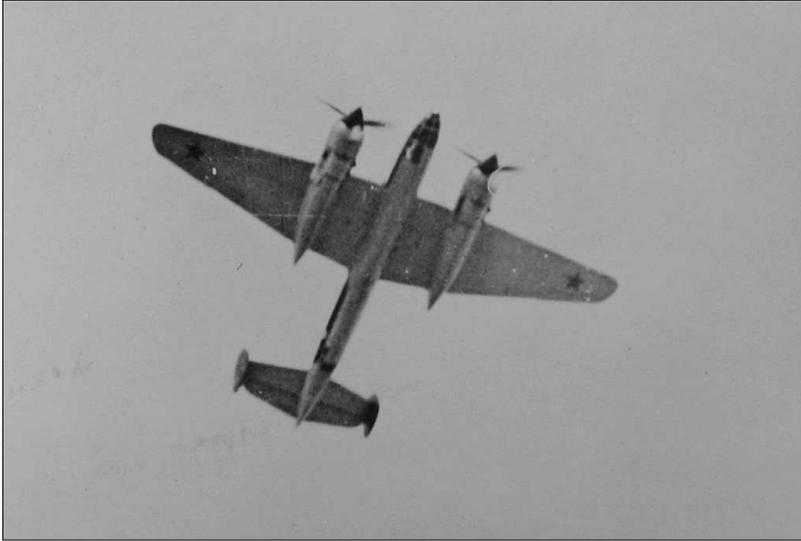
RUSSIANS FLEW LOW OVER BORNHOLM

In the morning of 9 September 1948, less than two years after the Russian evacuation, a large formation of Soviet aircraft appeared over Bornholm. At 11.00 hours 35 Russian fighters and seven twin-engined Tupolev Tu-2 BAT bombers roared over the Danish island. The planes came from the south and flew at an altitude of 180 m (600 feet) over Rønne, the largest city on the island. Rønne airport tried to contact the low-flying Russian aircraft by radio, but the Russian-speaking operators got no answer.² The massive aerial action, which was seen by NATO members as a carefully-planned demonstration of Soviet military power, caused considerable excitement among the island population. Copenhagen kept the incident secret, but on 24 September 1948 the Royal Danish Navy disclosed that 50 Russian planes had violated Danish territory in flights around Bornholm two weeks earlier.³ From Moscow the Russian news agency TASS bluntly reported that the Soviet aircraft were training in the southern Baltic Sea, but that they had not violated Danish airspace.

¹ Memorandum for Standing Group North Atlantic Military Committee, COSMIC TOP SECRET (declassified), 10 September 1952

² *Washington Post*, Soviet Shows Air Might over Europe, 10 September 1948.

³ CAB 163/18, The National Archives, Kew, UK.



During the Cold War the Soviet Air Force more than once violated the Danish airspace over Bornholm with flights of Tupolev Tu-2 bombers and other military aircraft. NARA

CLANDESTINE CIA REDSOX FLIGHTS

A small group of intelligence and government officials in Denmark knew there was another reason why Moscow kept a close watch on Bornholm. In the fifties the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) regarded Bornholm as a suitable springboard for clandestine flights to Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. With the full cooperation of the Danish defence intelligence the small airport at Rønne was used by *sanitized* American military aircraft of the CIA's Frankfurt Air Section for infiltration and exfiltration missions over these occupied Baltic states. From 1950 to about 1956 the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), the *dark* part of the CIA that ran the clandestine psywar and agent operations over Eastern Europe and Russia, had a Top Secret program called REDSOX.

Under a plethora of separate codenames, top secret OPC missions were flown to communist countries to disperse millions of leaflets to stir up resistance or drop agents to gather intelligence and organize stay-behind teams for sabotage. Most of these missions ended in failure. Almost all airdropped agents were captured by Soviet counter-intelligence teams and killed. The ones that survived, told in harsh interrogations what they knew about the American covert activities. It

can therefore be assumed that Moscow was aware of the role of Bornholm with regard to the Danish and US intelligence cooperation.

Hundreds of documents about the REDSOX operations have now been declassified by the CIA and several mission reports mention Bornholm. One describes in rich detail the involvement of the Danish island. On the night of 10-11 September 1955 a modified de Havilland Canada L-20 Beaver (with detachable USAF insignia and loose plates with serial number 16266) took-off from Rønne airport for an exfiltration mission. The single-engined 'clean' American Beaver was flown by two experienced CIA-trained agent-aviators. The intension of the hazardous operation was to land on a designated spot in Latvia and to pick-up two agents who wanted to get out. The OPC had contacted Danish military intelligence to get permission to operate from Bornholm. A **SECRET / EYES ONLY** memorandum states that the negotiations with Danish military intelligence to get their support for the mission were successful: 'Full cooperation and assistance was obtained from the Danish Intelligence Service (DIS) for the use of Bornholm Island for mounting the operation.'⁴

SECRET MISSION FROM BORNHOLM TO LATVIA

The Danes provided parking and refuelling facilities at Rønne for the L-20 Beaver, the services of the airport manager (to reopen the airfield after sundown) and of two DIS intelligence officers and three radio transmitters. A safehouse for the equipment and two DIS communications men was found at the attic of the naval commandant's home on Bornholm. The cover story for the presence of the Beaver on the island was that it was to engage in extended local flights investigating magnetic anomalies in the area. This deception was arranged to avoid a possible air-raid alert by Danish air defence radar [caused by the low-flying 'unknown' American L-20]. A Danish Air Sea Rescue Service PBY-5A Catalina was kept on stand-by at the Bornholm naval base for a possible rescue operation.⁵

The Beaver, now devoid of Air Force insignia and serial numbers, took off from Rønne at 21.37 hours and returned to Bornholm according to plan at 05.19 hours the next morning, but without the Latvian agents. Although the aircraft had successfully penetrated the target area, the crew failed to locate the true landing zone near the coast. The CIA wanted to rerun the Latvian exfiltration mission later

⁴ AECOB Exfiltration Operation 10/11 September 1955, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, 7 October 1955, CIA CREST.

⁵ AECOB Exfiltration Operation 10/11 September 1955, Memorandum for the record, 3 October 1955, CIA CREST.

in the year, but this time the Denmark's Defence Intelligence Service was not prepared to authorize the use of Bornholm.

Throughout the Cold War the position of Bornholm as 'the island behind the Iron Curtain' remained delicate. A situation of which successive governments in Denmark were well aware. No foreign troops on Bornholm, never, not even an American military brass band. Let alone a small American listening station! It was the defection of modern Soviet MiG-15bis jet fighters to Bornholm which forced the authorities in Copenhagen to a political *flexible response* towards its powerful eastern neighbours and allies in the West.



The MiG-15bis of the Polish Air Force, shortly after the landing on Bornholm. A historical event in the Cold War that gave the West for the first time access to the secrets of the most advanced Russian jet fighter. The MiG-15, which was allocated the NATO reporting name FAGOT, was the main enemy in the air during the Korean War and since 1952, both in Asia and Europe, responsible for many attacks on British, American and French civil and military aircraft. COLLECTION AUTHOR

CHAPTER ONE

First Polish MiG-15 flight to Bornholm

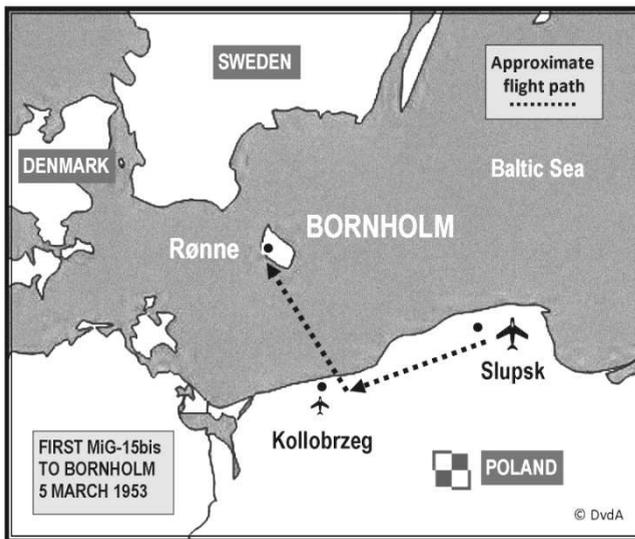
British air attaché took the first photos

Thursday, 5 March 1953 is a memorable day in international history. Not because a Polish Air Force pilot had chosen just that day to escape with a brand new Soviet MiG-15 jet fighter to Bornholm, but more because it is the day the Soviet dictator Marshal Josef Stalin died. Yet, the 22-year-old 2nd Lt. Edward Franciszek Jarecki was given a prominent place on the front pages of almost all international newspapers and with good reason. His defection to the small Danish island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea was - especially in military circles - nothing less than a sensation. With his daring action Jarecki gave Western military intelligence organizations the first chance to inspect an undamaged, fully operational MiG-15bis, the most advanced jet fighter of the Soviet Union.⁶

Lieutenant Jarecki was on that memorable Thursday formation leader of a flight of four Polish MiG-15s. His *callsign* for the training mission was '731'. Early in the morning the quartet had taken off from the airbase at Slupsk on the Baltic coast for a training flight towards the East German border. On Jarecki's flight maps the Danish island in the Baltic was not marked. But the Polish jet pilot knew it existed. He had seen Bornholm during earlier flights at high altitude over the Baltic Sea and knew it was located about 90 km northwest of Kolobrzeg, a city on the Polish coast. Near the airbase at this location Jarecki broke out the MiG formation at an altitude of 6,000 meters and put his swept-wing fighter into a steep dive to an altitude just above sea level. He dropped his two wing tanks and flew with maximum speed at a height of less than 300 meters in the direction of

⁶ MiG-15bis - *bis*: an updated variant of the basic MiG-15 with a new jet engine and other improvements.

Bornholm. His last words on the radio to the other pilots in his group were rather ironic: "Yes, I am going to escape to the other side to pick up medicine for father Stalin." The day before his escape Jarecki had heard that Stalin was ill. His wingman had seen Jarecki leaving the formation and reported the unusual manoeuvre by radio to the regimental radar station at the airbase at Slupsk which had their flight under control. Jarecki: "I heard them calling on the radio, '731



escaped, 731 escaped!' And I could hear the Russian colonel on the base yelling at me: 'Come back, come back!' The Polish Air Force fighter operations center immediately gave the order for operation *Krest*: intercept Jarecki's MiG-15 and try to stop his escape. If necessary, shoot him down!⁷ That attempt was doomed to fail because Jarecki

already had a big lead and at full speed needed only about eight minutes to get to Bornholm. The Russian MiG-15 interceptors had taken off from Stettin airbase in northwest Poland, near the border with East Germany, and had no chance of reaching the escaping MiG in time. Also, the pursuing MiGs had no radar and at low-altitude over the Baltic waters Jarecki was hard to find. Apparently, the Soviet fighter controllers did not allow the pursuers to violate Danish airspace. They would otherwise have had little trouble to attack the fleeing MiG-15 when the jet had to slow down for landing on Bornholm, or destroy the fighter on the ground.

POLISH PILOT LOOKING FOR BIG AIRBASE

Incidentally, that landing did not go completely as planned. The Soviet military staff which had overall command of the Polish Air Force, the *Polskie Lotnictwo Wosjkowe* (PLW), apparently had given their Polish comrades quite a lot of

⁷ A Cold War Defection, Ole Nikolajsen at www.acig.org.

misinformation about the strength and the presumed warlike intentions of the US Air Force in Europe. At the intelligence briefings about the Western opponent Jarecki was told that the Americans had built a large airbase on Bornholm. Circling around the island, Jarecki searched in vain for the runway of that imaginary airbase. His MiG was first spotted above the town of Nexø on the east coast of Bornholm. According to eyewitnesses Jarecki crossed the island to the coastal town of Hasle, where he circled a few times before flying low over the rooftops of Rønne to the small airfield near the city. The short grass strip of the civilian airport at Rønne was the only landing site that he had spotted from the air. It was used mainly by the Scandinavian airline SAS for a regular service with a Douglas DC-3 to Copenhagen.

As the sturdy landing gear of the MiG-15 jet was designed for operations from grass fields, the absence of a solid concrete runway was not the problem.



The undamaged Polish MiG-15bis '346' on the grass strip at Rønne shortly after the daring high-speed landing. Far on the right in the photo above is the Polish pilot, lieutenant Franciszek Jarecki, still in his black flight suit. via HERKENNING/RNAF