

Visit to a Soviet Ship in 1967

by

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Each year on March 13th, I remember that it's the anniversary of one of my most incredible experiences in my life, for on that date in 1967, I went aboard a Soviet ship. About 2 AM on that morning, my friends Buck Buchanan, Al Patrick, and I closed down Akai's bar in Chitose, Japan. When you are about 21, the idea of going to sleep at bar closing time is about as foreign as the country we were in (although we were the foreigners!). Buck and Al and I were all stationed in Chitose while serving in the U.S. Army. Buck had a 1958 Ford, so we three Americans, Akai, and Yuki, one of the Japanese bar hostesses, all clamored in, and went for a short drive to Tomakomai, a seaport town in Japan's Northern island of Hokkaido. Tomakomai wasn't the destination that night - we didn't have one; we could have ended up anywhere, but this is where my story begins.

Maybe it was the Sapporo beer, or maybe it was just plain crazy, or maybe it was just curiosity that I told Buck to stop when I saw this cargo ship with a hammer and sickle painted on its smokestack. To this day I don't know what made me tell him to stop. The night watchman on duty must have wondered what was going on, perhaps he felt a little fear himself, when this American car stops about 100 feet abeam his ship and four guys and a girl hop out. At least that's how I remember it, but Buck thinks he remained in the car, probably just as nervous as the Russian sailor. I first said "Hello" in English, and there was only a quizzical expression on the sailor's face; then I said it in Japanese, with the same results. Previously, I had been stationed in Sinop, Turkey, so I thought, "Perhaps he is from that area of Russia that is near the Black Sea" and I said, "Marahaba", which is Turkish for "hello". He smiled and waved at us to come on board.

That one word was about the only one common between him and me. All the rest of our communication was done with hands, eyes, and smiles. Maybe he told me his name but I don't know if he did or not. Even so, I would not remember it. I do remember holding my arms and rocking them like you would rock a baby, and gesturing with my hands heights of children. I found out that he had three small children. He was wearing a fur coat that went down to his shoes. Yuki wanted to try it on, so he took it off and Yuki wore it for a couple of minutes. Either Buck or Al had a package of Winston cigarettes, which they gave to the sailor. I dug through my pockets and found some American coins and a key chain pocketknife, and shortly afterwards tried on the coat. It was made to keep people warm, and that it did. I can't remember ever wearing a coat where I felt such warmth; his brown eyes reflected the same level of warmth of the soul, with a look that said, "These Americans are human beings, just like me. It is too bad that our countries don't see eye-to-eye, because under different circumstances these people could be my friends." I have the same sentiments.

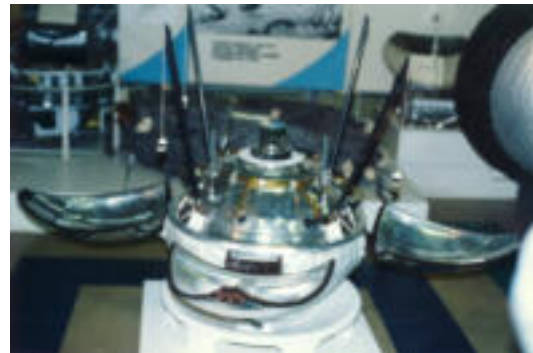
While I still had his coat on, he indicated for us to wait a minute, and instantly disappeared through a hatch. Suddenly, it hit me, and I felt fear: "What am I doing here? I am an American soldier standing on the deck of a Russian ship in the middle of the night in Japan and nobody but the four people with me know where I am. What happens if he comes out with other sailors holding guns?" This was in the middle of the Cold War, and technically, when we boarded that ship we were on Soviet territory. I mentioned the

incident to a Navy investigator when I was being interviewed for a security clearance for the Naval Reserves about 25 years later. I did obtain the clearance.

But I needed not to have worried, because the sailor came out by himself just a minute or two later. I don't know what gifts he gave the others, but he gave me a couple of coins, a packet of Russian cigarettes, and a small lapel pin that had Russian writing on it and the image of a satellite. I guess I had a look on my face like, "What is it?" and he said, "Sputnik", which I instantly recognized as "Sputnik". Years later, I met a person who had been a Russian interpreter and when he saw it, he told me that the pin said, "Luna 9". The Luna 9 spacecraft had made the first soft landing on the moon on February 3, 1966 and had transmitted television images back to Earth. This was a proud accomplishment for the Soviet space program. I still have the pin, the coins, and two dried up cigarettes left from the package. I thought I had the package but have no idea where it decided to hide. We shook hands and said goodbye a few minutes later. If the man were still alive now, he would probably be in his late 60s or early 70s; now that the Cold War has ended, I would like to have our paths cross again and find out about his life, and if he still remembers our meeting. I'm sure he does.



Upper: Luna 9 lapel pin
Right: Backup Luna 9 spacecraft



In 1992, when I went to Russia with some other people to see the launch of Soyuz TM-15, I was kind of hoping I would have run into him then. That didn't happen, but during the trip we were privileged to go to the Korolev Spacecraft Museum in Moscow and saw the back-up Luna 9 spacecraft, which I thought was kind of special.