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- Honorable Mayor Joseph Peel, Elizabeth City, NC

PROJECT ZEBRA

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ROOSEVELT AND STALIN'S TOP-SECRET MISSION
TO TRAIN 300 SOVIET AIRMEN IN AMERICA

M.G. CRISCI

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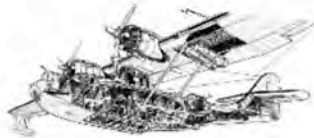
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*Roosevelt and Stalin's Top-Secret Mission to
Train 300 Soviet Airman in America*

M.G. CRISCI

In collaboration with Gregory Gagarin

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Preface

About seven years ago, I was invited to the Russian Cultural Center in Washington, D.C., to discuss how and why I, an American with no Russian ancestry, came to write a book about the life and times of the world's first female fighter pilot: a Russian teenager named Lilia Litvyak (1921-1943).

At the end of my talk, a tall, distinguished gentleman approached. He introduced himself as Gregory Gagarin and complimented me on my accomplishment, the accuracy of details in *Call Sign, White Lily*, and my ability to collaborate with a broad cross section of Russians and Ukrainians many thousands of miles away. Then: "Would you be interested in another collaboration?"

"About what?" I asked.

"The story of a top-secret World War II mission that's never been told," he said.

Though it sounded intriguing, I declined, citing other projects. Sometime later, I was to speak in Moscow, Russia, about *Call Sign*. Somehow, Gregory heard about my impending trip. He called to ask if I would have dinner

with a few of his Russian friends in Moscow. I figured, why not? I met two sisters by the names of Emilia and Yelena Chibisov. They explained their father was a decorated Russian Major General named Maxim Chibisov and that he and “Grigory” had worked together closely during World War II in “North Carolina, America.”

Emilia urged me, “Talk to Grigory; he has many of the details.”

Upon my return, I visited Grigory’s home. He took me on a tour of his extensive collection of historical memorabilia and rather humbly told me that his grandfather was a member of the Imperial Russian Aristocracy. That house tour was my first exposure to the words Project Zebra. Four years and hundreds of interviews, documents, and discoveries later, Grigory and I are proud to introduce you to top-secret Project Zebra:

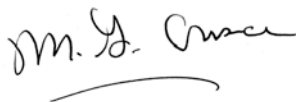
“Roosevelt and Stalin’s Top-Secret Mission to Train 300 Soviet Airmen in America.”

Project Zebra is the only documented instance in history where Soviet flying aces and their crews were trained in America by American Naval officers to fly a huge, American-made amphibious seaplane called the PBN-Nomad. Amazingly, we produced 184 of these state-

of-the-art planes in Philadelphia and trained 300+ Soviet airmen in the patriotic town of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, without any media leaks. These heavily armed Nomads went on to seek and destroy numerous Nazi U-boats and Japanese submarines in the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters without losing a single plane.

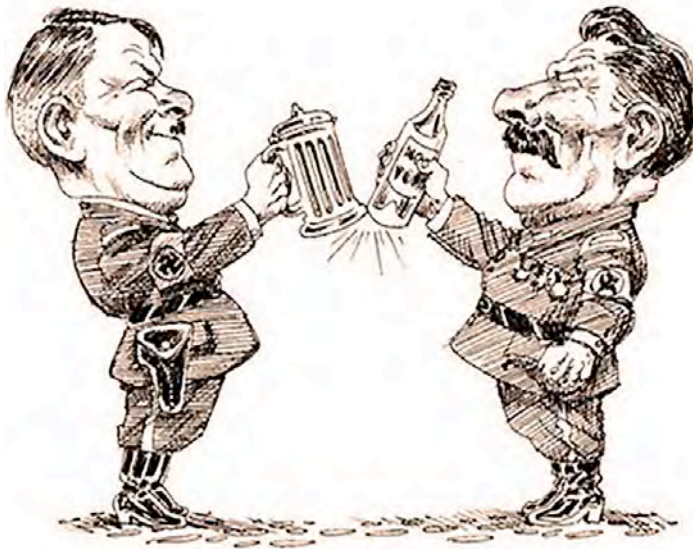
Top-secret Project Zebra was also a historic human event. The Soviet and American teams shared experiences that created bonds of trust and mutual respect, despite their language barriers and cultural differences — something that might serve us well to model during these uncertain Russian-American moments. Project Zebra was declassified on December 31, 2012, and remains one of WWII's last never-been-told stories. Until now!

The personal stories that comprise the body of this book happened. The vintage photographs and rare military documents are real, as are the stories that have been passed on by word of mouth.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M.G. Crisci". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a simple horizontal line.

Chapter 1

Directive 21



Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin celebrate an improbable deal

During World War I, America rallied around President Woodrow Wilson's crusade to "make the world safe for

democracy.” But time dimmed intent. By the 1930s, critics were convinced US involvement in that war was driven primarily by profit-hungry bankers, war material producers, and arms traders. These widely-held beliefs eventually led the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to create an isolationist movement via the issuance of a series of Neutrality Acts¹ which, by law, forced America to remain neutral with countries at war. During this same period, Germany and the Soviet Union’s aggressive appetites to dominate and control the world grew at an alarming rate.

Differing Dictatorships

Nazism fixated on the racial superiority of the Aryan race, built on a foundation of pseudoscience and biological determinism that placed Jews, blacks, and other minorities in very low regard. Nazism divided human society along strict religious, ethnic, and racial lines.

¹ Neutrality Acts of 1935, 37, and 39. Office of the US Historian.

By contrast, Communism focused on an economic hierarchy known simply as the “haves” and “have-nots.” Communism sought to empower the latter (i.e., the have-nots) to revolt against the former.

Despite seeming differences, both Nazism and Communism created and enforced a regimented set of rules for “acceptable” political behavior — painting a very bleak “black-and-white” world with little wiggle room for any divergent political thought.

Nonaggression Pact

On August 23, 1939 — shortly before World War II (1939-45) broke out in Europe — avowed enemies Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union surprised the world by signing the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, despite their seemingly different totalitarian world views.

Under the terms of the Nonaggression Pact, Germany and the USSR agreed to take no military action against each other for the next ten years. Stalin viewed the pact as a means of keeping his nation on peaceful terms with Germany while giving him time to build up the Soviet military. Hitler used the pact to make sure Germany could invade Poland unopposed, to expand his geographic base

westward and eventually rule the world as the dominant superpower.

Hitler was smart enough — and demonic enough — to realize he couldn't achieve his endgame without the support of what he called the three major Axis Powers — Japan, Italy, and Russia. From various conferences, Hitler knew Japan and Italy, for a variety of reasons, were “all in.”

But he was less certain of Stalin's intentions. He knew Stalin believed the success and expansion of America's capitalistic way of life could undermine his brand of communism, but he also knew Stalin had his own interest in world domination.

On September 27, 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Axis Pact, which divided the world into spheres of influence and was implicitly directed at the United States. Interestingly, the pact contained a clear provision (Article 5) that the agreement did not include or discuss relations with the Soviet Union.

Hitler-Stalin Rift

During October and November 1940, Germany and the USSR Soviet Axis held unilateral talks concerning the Soviet Union's inclusion as the fourth Axis Power.

After the talks, each side provided the other with conflicting written proposed agreements. For example, Hitler encouraged Soviet presence in Iran while removing its influence in the Balkans, and giving Germany full rights to Finland's immense natural resources.

The two parties argued for several weeks. Finally, an impatient Hitler remarked to his top military chiefs that Stalin "demands more and more," "he's a cold-blooded blackmailer," and that "Stalin must be brought to his knees as soon as possible." Hitler decided to leave negotiations unresolved by not responding during the winter and spring of 1941.



London Evening Standard explains the growing Hitler-Stalin rift

Instead, several directives (i.e., top-secret instructions and military plans) were issued directly by Hitler during that period. They covered a wide range of subjects, from detailed direction of World War II military units to the

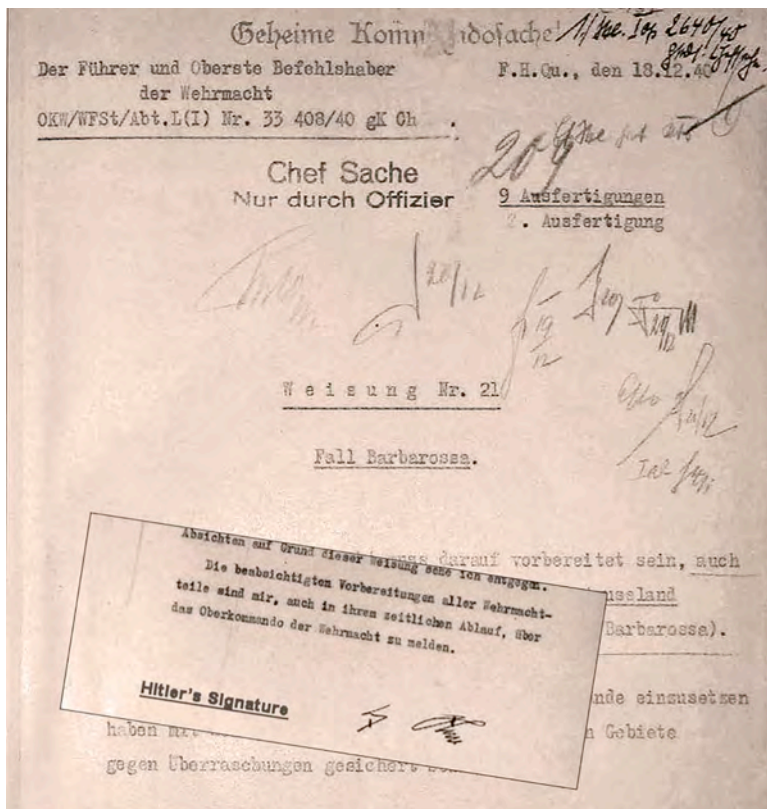
governance of occupied territories and their populations. Under the Nazi system, these directives were binding and followed to the letter, unless superseded by another law.

On the other side of the border, Stalin anticipated an eventual war with Germany, but he badly miscalculated the “when.” Speaking to his generals in December 1940, Stalin noted Hitler's references to an inevitable Soviet attack in *Mein Kampf*. Publicly, Stalin urged his commanders to always be ready to repulse a German attack. Privately, he told his tiny inner circle that the Soviet Army would require time to approach equaling the Nazi war machine. “Comrade Commanders, we must do everything in our power to delay the Nazi war for another two years.” He also communicated to FDR through his highest-ranking government officials, Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and Ambassador Maxim Litvinov, that the Nazi-Soviet alliance was tactical, the Russians never trusted Hitler, and they were certain he would eventually attempt to invade Russia.

Directive No. 21

During the month of Stalin's reassuring assessment, Hitler asked his commanders to accelerate military plans

for a massive invasion of Russia. On December 18, 1940, Hitler signed Weisung Nr. 21 (Directive No. 21), code name Operation Barbarossa. The date for the invasion was set for May 15, 1941.



Directive No.21, signed by Adolf Hitler

Directive No. 21 Highlights²

Decades later, the US Department of the Army translated Hitler's bloodcurdling directive into English. To everyone's surprise, the directive was short and succinct, written in easy-to-understand language by Hitler himself, and formatted much like the fact-based executive summary of a corporate business plan. Since most Americans have never seen or heard of the Directive, here are a few brief sections to give a greater understanding of Hitler as Commander-in-Chief.

“The German Wehrmacht must be prepared to decisively crush Soviet Russia during Operation Barbarossa [. . .]

I. Operations

² Use of a parenthesis means additional content deleted. See References.

For this purpose, the Army will employ all available units to dominate ground operations [. . .]

The Luftwaffe will release such strong forces to support dominated areas and to adequately protect against all enemy air attacks [. . .]

I shall order the concentration against Soviet Russia possibly eight weeks before the intended beginning of operations. Preparations are to be started now – if this has not yet been done – and completed by May 15, 1941 [. . .]

The mass of the Russian Army in Western Russia is to be destroyed in daring operations, by driving forward deep armoured wedges, and the retreat of units capable of combat into the vastness of Russian territory is to be prevented. [. . .]

In quick pursuit, a line is then to be reached from which the Russian Air Force will no longer be able to attack the territory

of the German Reich across the Volga-Arkangel line, and the Russian Baltic Sea Fleet will quickly lose its bases and no longer be able to fight [. . .]

II. Allies

Romania will support the attack of the German southern wing; pin the enemy down where German forces are not committed; and render auxiliary service in the rear area.

Finland will cover the concentration of the German North Group withdrawn from Norway [. . .]

Swedish railroads and highways will be available for the rapid advancement of the German North Group [. . .]

III. Resources

The number of officers to be assigned to the Operation shall be kept as small as possible; and only to the extent required for the activity of each individual [. . .]”

With Directive 21 firmly in place, the German High Command made preparations to execute what would be Hitler's bloodiest invasion.

Chapter 2

Bloody Barbarossa



Operation Barbarossa was, and remains, the largest military invasion in history

For reasons outside the scope of this book, Hitler held a long-standing ambition to permanently eliminate “Peasant Communism,” as he privately referred to the Russian philosophy and its citizens. He wanted to annihilate the Soviet Union as a military, political, and economic

power, and permanently occupy the northern cities of Archangel and Astrakhan that were rich in both oil and rare metals. In Hitler's grand scheme, the occupation of those industrial centers meant millions of Soviets would work for the Third Reich as slave laborers.

Barbarossa Begins

At about 3 A.M. on June 22, 1941, about 135 days before the Pearl Harbor attack, Hitler launched the largest and most destructive military invasion in the history of the world. Nazi Germany and its Axis powers directed 5.5 million soldiers, 3,712 tanks, 193 battleships, 47,260 howitzers and mortars, and 4,950 of the Nazi's elite Luftwaffe (air force) to invade the Soviet Union.³

³ Estimates range from 28 million to 40 million Russian soldiers and citizens died during WWII, a number greater than all the casualties of all the enemy Axis powers and all our Allies combined.

Initially, three army groups — including more than three million German soldiers, supported by 650,000 troops from Germany's allies (Finland and Romania), and later augmented by units from Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, and Hungary — attacked the Soviet Union across a broad front. Their invasion stretched from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, and was supported by a massive number of tanks on the ground and tens of thousands of bombs, compliments of the Luftwaffe.

It is estimated that during the first few weeks of the invasion, 660,000 Soviet soldiers and citizens died and 60 percent of the Soviet Air Force was destroyed (4,017 of 7,700 aircraft), while German losses amounted to less than 150 aircraft. With much of the existing Soviet air force destroyed, Soviet ground forces were initially overwhelmed. German units encircled millions of Soviet soldiers, who were cut off from supplies and reinforcements.



Einsatzgruppen⁴ security police hang Soviets for sport during Operation Barbarossa

Despite catastrophic losses during the first six weeks of Hitler's invasion, the Soviet Union failed to collapse as anticipated by Nazi leadership and German military

⁴ Pronounced ein-za-potten. Responsible for 1.4 million deaths. See References.

commanders, and they moved many of their industries, especially war plants, east of the Urals. By the fall of 1941, Soviet resistance had stiffened as every citizen in every town went to war in one manner or another, forcing the Germans to rethink their timetable to domination. In fact, in early December the Soviet Union launched a bloody counterattack against the center of the German front, driving them back from Moscow. But Soviet offensive gains were short-lived due to a chronic lack of tanks and aircraft.

It was now clear to President Roosevelt, who only twelve months earlier had declared the Soviet Union a “dictatorship as absolute as any other dictatorship in the world,” that Nazi Germany, not the Soviet Union, posed the greatest threat to the world order.

Lend-Lease Arrives

On November 1, 1941, at Roosevelt's insistence, Congress extended \$1 billion (present value: \$17 billion) in interest-free military aid to the Soviets under The Act to Promote the Defense of the United States, more commonly known as Lend-Lease.⁵

Initially, aid was in the form of military equipment, ammunition, consumer goods, and materials for weapons production. While such aid was useful, the Soviets continued to lose ground without major air support. By the spring of 1942, the Nazi offensive to capture the rich fields of oil and rare metals in the northern Caucasus was in full swing.

In a letter to Roosevelt, Stalin summarized his greatest need. "We are in desperate need of supplies of modern fighter aircraft (for example, the Airacobra). The Germans have a large reserve of aircraft. In the south, the Germans

⁵ Lend-Lease aid was either free or driven by heavily-discounted loans that were often traded for US Army and Naval bases in Allied territory.

have at least twice the superiority in the air, which makes it impossible for us to provide cover for our troops.”⁶

During the next two years, the US built and supplied about 22,000⁷ Soviet fighter planes, while the Soviet aviation industry gradually increased its own production of fighters, bombers, and attack aircraft. Slowly, the momentum of the war was starting to shift.⁸

While the Soviets willingly accepted American military aid, Stalin and his officials publicly described this aid as a “minor factor” in winning the war. Years later, after Stalin’s death, Anastas Mikoyan, the USSR’s Commissar for Foreign Trade, responsible for accepting supplies from the Allies during the war, spoke candidly. “Without Lend-

⁶ From Russian historical archives. See References in rear.

⁷ Estimates vary. Some are higher.

⁸ By war’s end, the P-39 had scored the highest number of individual kills attributed to any US fighter plane in the Eastern European Theatre.

Lease, we would have continued fighting for another 12-18 months, and lost many more lives.”⁹



American-made Soviet P-39 (Airacobra) jet fighters get final checks at Bell Aircraft in Wheatfield, NY

Interrupted Cargo

⁹ G. Kumanev, *The People's Commissar's of Stalin Speak*.

Despite the accelerated flow of aid, the Soviets struggled with actual delivery in the North Atlantic corridor. The heavy presence of German submarines, based primarily in Norway, disrupted everything from cargo ships to battleships. At the time, it was estimated that less than 60 percent of Lend-Lease supplies were reaching their intended destination.

Consequently, Stalin was quite intrigued by the giant US seaplane called the PBY (more commonly known as the Catalina). With modifications, he believed the plane had the multitask potential to hunt submarines, shoot down enemy aircraft, escort convoys, land troops, and rescue crews from disabled ships. To his credit, Stalin realized the Soviets lacked the engineering experience to design and maintain such a complicated aircraft. Also, only one Soviet manufacturing plant located in Beriev, Eastern Ukraine, had the infrastructure to produce a PBY-like plane. Unfortunately, that city was in German hands. And so, Project Zebra was born.

Chapter 3

Capitalist and Communist



Unlikely bedfellows developed a warm relationship
at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran

When Stalin and Roosevelt met for the first time in Tehran, Iran, in 1943, the Soviet Union was struggling with the loss of Lend-Lease war materiel in the North Atlantic.

It was estimated that the German submarines, housed and maintained in Norway, destroyed 60 percent of the desperately needed Allied cargo. Another important meeting theme was agreement that the Soviets would later join the Allies and take the lead against the Japanese naval fleet in the Pacific Theater.

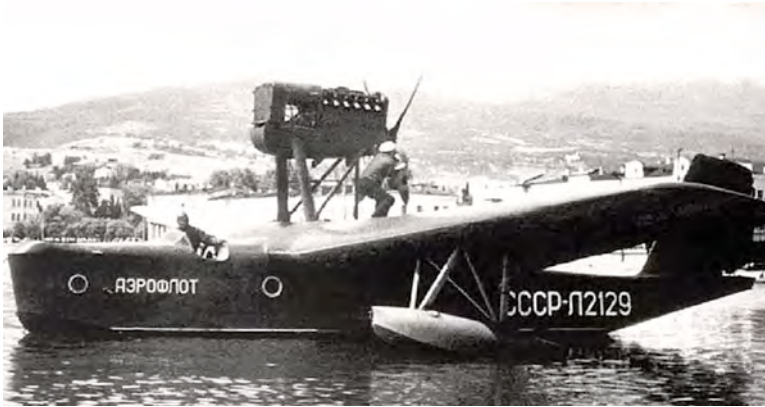
Mutual Interests

Stalin, Roosevelt, and ultimately Churchill realized the Soviet Navy required a substantial upgrade to achieve their primary strategic interest — the destruction of Hitler and his Nazi war machine. Privately, Stalin joked that his Naval Air Fleet might not be quite “up to the tasks at hand.” During these discussions, Roosevelt saw a human side of Stalin few ever saw, and pledged to provide whatever was

needed to end “this thing.”¹⁰ FDR even called Stalin “Uncle Joe” when speaking to Churchill.

Stalin candidly explained that his Naval Air Fleet consisted almost exclusively of small, two-person seaplanes called the Beriev MBR-2. Each was powered by a single engine, had a top speed of 130 miles per hour, and could remain airborne for no more than four hours. Its only armaments were two manually-loaded machine guns with no sights.

¹⁰ My Dear Mr. Stalin: The Complete Correspondence of FDR and Joseph V. Stalin by Susan Butler.



Soviet MBR-2 co-pilot and gunner
direct single-engine seaplane to landing dock

Stalin, described by a ranking American official as “a football coach’s dream of a tackle with huge hands as hard as his mind,” was an underappreciated military tactician. Stalin knew what he needed: 150+ of the massive PBY’s modified to Soviet war-time specifications. The Department of the Navy named this Soviet version of the PBY the PBN-1 Nomad.

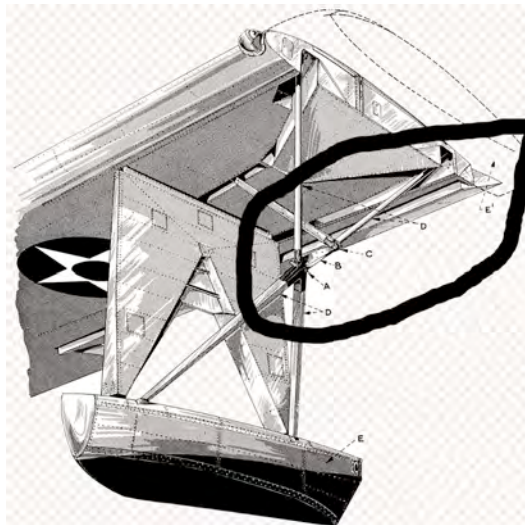
To receive the badly-needed Nomads as quickly as possible, Stalin temporarily agreed to forgo supplies of tanks, artillery, and ammunition. He also put his most trusted ally, Foreign Minister Vladislav Molotov, in charge of working with America to develop a complicated, high-

risk plan to modify, produce, and deliver the Nomads, as well as train the crews. Committed to supporting Stalin, Roosevelt appointed a member of his military inner circle: Vice Admiral Patrick Bellinger, a distinguished Naval Air Force commander and a veteran of Pearl Harbor.

To those Americans and Soviets in charge, along with a small inner circle, the top-secret plan came to be known as Project Zebra. As of this writing, there are no known documentations detailing why the mission was so named. Military lore hypothesizes that the wild animal with multiple stripes was a metaphor for a freewheeling mission among multiple allies.

retractable landing gear that enabled the plane to take off and land on both water and land.

During water landings, the ends of the wings, with hollow pontoons attached, folded into a vertical position with the flick of a switch, turning the plane into a trimaran that was remarkably stable even in the choppy waters of the North Atlantic.



State-of-the-art Nomad hydraulics schematic

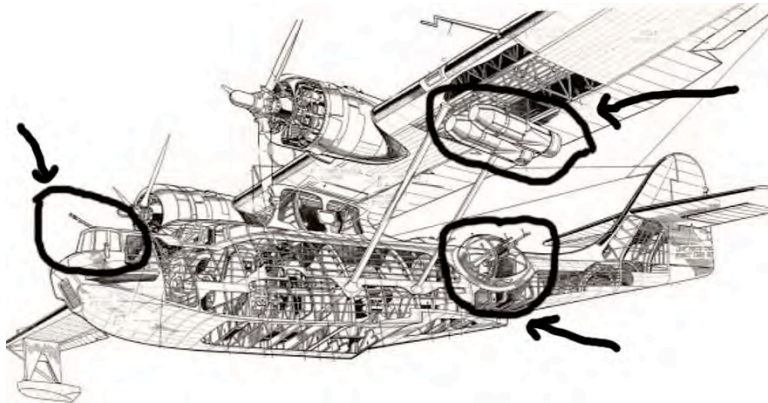
During takeoff, the Nomad glided delicately along the water and extended its wing flaps as it separated from the water. When the Nomad landed on a runway, the wings

were simply lowered into a horizontal position and locked in place.

Ordnance Capacity

The Nomad contained an engine that was 50 percent more powerful than its predecessors, so it could carry a bomb load that was the equivalent to America's land-based, workhorse B-17 bombers, as well heavy-duty front and rear machine gun turrets with new, continuous-feed mechanisms.

Other design improvements included 50 percent larger fuel tanks so the plane could remain airborne at relatively low altitudes for 18-20 hours without refueling; an upgraded electrical system; multiple auxiliary emergency power back-up units; the latest radar technology; and a state-of-the-art bombsight called Norden. It required a crew of seven (two pilots, two gunners, a bombardier, a radio operator, and a flight engineer) in combat and had sleeping accommodations for three crew members during noncombat periods.



Nomad drawing shows increased ordnance capacity

Nomad Production

The consensus of the US military was that our allies would have little postwar interest in the limited-edition, highly customized model Nomad. There were also concerns that interrupting the production of P-39 planes, at both the Consolidated plant in San Diego and the Bell plant in Buffalo, could create significant downtime and inefficiencies.

Consequently, the Department of the Navy decided the only practical solution was to build the Nomads at the Navy-owned Naval Aircraft Factory (NAF) in the Philadelphia shipyards. They rationalized this production plan would ensure replacement part availability; obtain cost

data for the Department's guidance in its dealings with private manufacturers; allow control of additional design modifications, if any; and deliver sufficient quantities of this battle-ready craft in order to have immediate military impact.

Within a matter of months, production lines were up and running. The planes were produced and delivered in three consecutive phases, so they could be put to use as fast as America could produce them. To fulfill the complicated production requirements, the NAF worked three shifts a day, seven days a week. The Factory even had a staff devoted to incorporating the required safety warnings and markings in Russian on the equipment, as well as giant red stars on the fuselage and tail.

During the height of production activity, an estimated 2,000 employees worked on these planes. They knew what they were doing was highly unusual, yet no one leaked a word about the mission to the press.



Soviet-bound Nomads produced in downtown Philadelphia

Practical Issues

As the planes were readied to come off the production lines, Soviet and American teams turned their focus on four remaining issues:

1. The Nomad training manuals were all written in English.
2. Where would Soviet pilots be trained to fly this massive plane?
3. How would the planes reach the Soviet Union? Stalin insisted no American could fly into Soviet airspace, and Roosevelt would not allow the Soviets to fly over American airspace

4. Who would be responsible for documenting performance; needed modifications if any; parts replacement; and general maintenance?

President Roosevelt selected the small town of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, as the “where.” He had visited a few years earlier and was impressed by the warmth and patriotism of its citizens. Most importantly, he approved \$2 million (present value: \$35 million) to dramatically expand Coast Guard runways for future military use.



President Roosevelt visits Elizabeth City

Once Lend-Lease was in full gear, Roosevelt insisted that Project Zebra be given priority for the Russians because they were desperately in need of air support. But staying the course was not easy, given the constant barrage of warnings from his vice-president, Harry Truman; his main political adversary, Thomas Dewey; and numerous senior Pentagon officials. Even his hand-picked Ambassador to Russia, Averell Harriman, balked privately. They all feared what would happen after the war to the new technology and secret military equipment provided to the Soviets.

Roosevelt ignored them all. His priority was to rid the world of Hitler. He also felt, from his prior summits, that he could work with Stalin in the post-war world. So Project Zebra became one of Roosevelt's pet projects.