

How SAS assisted in space détente

By Barry Davidoff

An interesting sidelight to the Soyuz 11 tragedy is how SAS Airlines assisted in space détente. On the day of the tragedy, June 30, astronaut Thomas Stafford and his family were on a good will tour of Europe. Stafford had orbited the Moon aboard Apollo 10 in May 1969. He previously had flown on two important rendezvous missions, Gemini 6 in December 1965 and Gemini 9 in June 1966.

Stafford was traveling to Belgrade, Yugoslavia to address the International Aeronautical Conference when he heard about the deaths of the cosmonauts. Once in Belgrade, Stafford accompanied by the American Ambassador Malcolm Toon, made a visit to the Soviet embassy to express their condolences. Stafford met with several Russian space officials at the opening night banquet.

Returning to his room after 11 P.M., the American Ambassador informed Stafford that he would be representing President Nixon and the United States at the funeral for the three cosmonauts the very next day in Moscow. It would be one of the very few times that an American astronaut was allowed to visit Russia.

The problem was how to fly from Belgrade to Moscow immediately. There was insufficient time for any commercial flights, and it was impossible for the Soviets to grant clearance for an United States Air Force T-39 executive jet to land in Moscow on such short notice. It required an incredible interplay of logistics.

Now, this where SAS played a valuable role in space détente. At the time, SAS was one of the few Western airlines that had regular flights to Moscow with crews that were trained in the special procedures required to fly in Russian air space. SAS was able to arrange on short notice for clearances for a special charter flight to carry Stafford to Moscow.

Almost as soon as Stafford heard that he was going to Moscow, a USAF T-39 took off from Weisbaden, West Germany to pick up Stafford in Belgrade. Once aboard, he was flown to Copenhagen airport where a special SAS charter awaited. Stafford recalled the flight and stated,

When we arrived in Copenhagen, the sun was already up, even though it was very early in the morning. The SAS plane had a pilot, a co-pilot and two stewardesses,

and me, not one other passenger. I had the flight attendants spread out some blankets and pillows on the floor, so I could sleep on the flight to Moscow

Although Stafford was privileged to obtain such special treatment from SAS as the only passenger, he arrived in Moscow on the morning of the funeral feeling very tired. At the Moscow Airport Stafford was met by American embassy staff and cosmonaut Georgi Bergovoi, who had flown the Soyuz 3 mission in October 1968. Stafford and Bergovoi went immediately to the Red Army Officers' Club, where the urns containing the cremated remains of the Soyuz 11 crew were lying in state.

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Stafford attended the state funeral as the senior American representative conveying the condolences of NASA and his fellow astronauts. Stafford was one of the pall bearers as the funeral proceeded to Red Square where the remains of the crew were interred in the Kremlin wall. The funeral was presided over by Party Secretary Leonoid Breshnev and Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin.

In the course of his only day in Moscow Stafford met with several of the cosmonauts and officials of the Soviet space program. Stafford also met Alexei Leonov, though at the time Stafford didn't know that Leonov had been scheduled originally to command the Soyuz 11 flight. This meeting led to a long friendship highlighted when they shook hands in space during the Apollo Soyuz Test Project in 1975.

Allowing Stafford to attend the Soyuz 11 was an important part of the opening of the Russian space program. Less than a year later, President Nixon visited Moscow to sign an agreement for cooperation in space for peaceful purposes and flying the Apollo Soyuz Test Project mission. SAS Airlines had a special role in the opening phase of space détente in conveying Thomas Stafford to Moscow on a charter flight for the funeral of the tragic crew of Soyuz 11.

Thomas Stafford describes his special flight aboard SAS and his other experiences as an astronaut in his marvelous book, *We Have Capture*. (Washington: Smithsonian Press 2002.)