

PRESS RELEASE



COMMUNIQUE

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

CANADA

MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES EXTÉRIEURES

DO NOT PUBLISH BEFORE 15.00

MAY 24, 1968

The Department of External Affairs today made the following announcement:

On May 11, 1968 at 6:30 a.m. on a train between Khabarovsk and Nakhodka in eastern Siberia, Soviet officials and others purporting to be civilians forcibly entered the compartment occupied by the Assistant Canadian Forces Attaché (Air) in Moscow, Lt.-Col. J.V. Watson, and his wife. Shortly afterward, a Major of the Militia (Police) in uniform joined the intruders, who used physical violence against both Col. Watson and his wife while conducting a search of their compartment. The claim was made without any foundation in fact that the Attaché had photographed a military air field which the train had allegedly passed shortly before the forced entry. Two cameras in the compartment containing unexposed film were seized as well as the Attaché's notebook containing travel notes related to the journey. Acting in accordance with standing instructions intended to prevent subsequent tampering with blank film, the Attaché sought to spoil both films by exposure to light but was successful with only one. The cameras were later returned but not the films or notebook.

During a period of over one hour in which a search and questioning of the Attaché took place, the senior Canadian Forces Attaché in Moscow, Capt. McDowall, and his wife, who occupied another compartment in the same car, were denied access to Col. Watson's compartment. Capt. McDowall's compartment was also entered without his permission and subjected to a search.

In view of the impossibility of ruling out further indignities, the Canadian party, after reaching its destination in Tokyo, abandoned plans for returning by the

same route and returned to Moscow direct by air. Lt.-Col. and Mrs. Watson were treated by the Soviet ship's doctor en route to Japan and by a doctor in Tokyo for injuries sustained during the train incident.

The Canadian Ambassador to the Soviet Union lodged a strong protest with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow against this unwarranted violation of Watson's diplomatic status and elementary rules of courtesy. The Ministry refused to accept the protest, declared Lt.-Col. Watson persona non grata and demanded his recall. The Ministry repeated the claim that the Attaché took photos of a military airfield and alleged that he did not identify himself to the Soviet officials and that his notebook constituted "evidence" of intent to carry out illegal activities.

These charges are untrue. As noted above, the films in both cameras seized were blank and unexposed at the time of seizure. As regards identity, the Attaché repeatedly proclaimed his identity and status to the intruders and produced documents of identity. In any event, since the Soviet authorities had authorized the journey and the compartment was in a car reserved for use by foreign travellers, train officials could have been in no doubt of the status and identity of the Watsons and the McDowalls. As regards travel notes, their possession is not "evidence" of illegal activities. The right and power of Soviet authorities to deny facilities for access to or observation of whatever they desire to protect is not questioned. Equally the Soviet authorities cannot question the use by travellers of normal facilities for observation from a Soviet train, travel on which has been authorized by the Soviet authorities themselves.

In view of all the circumstances it can only be concluded that the Soviet individuals concerned were attempting to frame an incident against the Attaché. In this connection, it may be relevant that in complaining about the events of May 11, Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated an earlier unfounded charge, vigorously denied at the time, that the Attaché had photographed a military installation in Leningrad on April 8, 1968.

The Soviet Ambassador in Ottawa was called in and formally notified that the Government of Canada strongly protests against the actions directed against the Canadian attachés and their wives which were completely unjustified and in violation of their diplomatic status.

The Ambassador was also informed that Lt.-Col. V.S. Didenko, an assistant Soviet military attaché, should be withdrawn from Canada without delay.