

U.S. Plane Saved Virginian's

By Joseph D. Whitaker
Washington Post Staff Writer

While the Soviet Union reportedly was readying 50,000 troops for possible deployment to the Middle East last week, a huge, U.S. Air Force hospital jet—marked only by its serial number and a tiny replica of the U.S. flag—landed secretly in the middle of the night at a Russian airport in Siberia on a mission of mercy.

Shortly after daybreak on Oct. 23 (Oct. 24, Soviet time), the four-engine C-141 jet transport then took off for the U.S. Air Force hospital in Yokote, Japan, the nearest U.S. medical facility carrying James F. Torrence,

an American citizen from Fairfax County who had become violently ill while in the Siberian city of Irkutsk, 3,000 miles east of Moscow.

The flight took Torrence to medical treatment that, according to doctors, saved his life.

U.S. State Department officials are regarding the mercy flight as an unprecedented example of "complete Soviet-American cooperation" to save a life.

"It's significant that this kind of medical evacuation could occur when there was a possibility of conflict between two superpowers," a spokesman for the U.S. State Department's Office of Soviet Union Affairs said yesterday. "Such a mission could not have been carried out a few years ago."

Officials also find highly unusual the fact that the Soviet government did not require that a Russian flight crew board the plane before it entered the country and remain aboard throughout the 6,000-mile flight across the Soviet Union.

"It was a case where humanitarian concerns overrode everything else," a State Department spokesman said. "Two countries were simply working together to save one man's life—and they did."

Torrence, a hiking and mountain climbing expert

for the National Forest Service, had gone with 29 other Americans to Siberia on Sept. 11 to begin an exhibition of American outdoor recreation as part of the U.S.-Soviet cultural exchange program.

He became seriously ill on the last day of a two-day hiking trip near Irkutsk on Oct. 15.

Torrence's wife, Rosemarie, said yesterday she received a telephone call from a United States Information Agency official on Oct. 18, stating that her husband was suffering internal bleeding and recommending that she not come to Siberia.

"Our telephone connection was very poor," she said. "I could hear him, but he couldn't hear me. There I was standing in my kitchen screaming into the phone, 'What is wrong with my husband? What is causing the bleeding?'"

"I didn't get a complete explanation of what had happened until a few days ago," she said. Mrs. Torrence said she was shaken by the details of her husband's illness, gastrointestinal bleeding caused by repeated vomiting, but she remained emotionally calm in an effort not to excite the couple's three children.

See FLIGHT, C2, Col. 4

FLIGHT, From C1

"I told the kids Daddy was very, very sick and that the American doctors were taking good care of him," she added. "But I was in a constant state of anxiety, not knowing when I'd hear the next word about him."

Torrence, 41, subsequently was operated on by Soviet surgeons in Irkutsk. Soviet doctors and an American doctor with the exhibition group felt he was not responding adequately to the surgery and could die.

Negotiations between Soviet officials in Washington and in Russia and American officials here and in Russia (the mayor of Irkutsk allowed his "hotline" to Moscow to be used) resulted in the agreement for the flight.

At the same time that officials in Moscow were clearing the way for the mercy flight that eventually span-

ned about 9,000 miles, the Soviet Union, it was later reported, also was preparing seven airborne divisions (about 50,000 men) for possible deployment to the Middle East.

But the U.S. Air Force hospital jet—manned by a crew of six Americans all dressed in civilian clothes—took off anyway, from the Rhine-Mainz Air Base, near Frankfurt, Germany, last Tuesday, according to an Air Force spokesman.

The plane then flew five hours to Moscow where it refueled, took on an English-speaking navigator from a Soviet airline and flew for another five hours to Irkutsk, arriving there in the early morning hours of last Wednesday.

After the plane was refueled a second time, it took on its single patient, Torrence, who immediately began receiving treatment

from American doctors aboard the jet.

The flying hospital then took off from Irkutsk, and landed a short time later to discharge its Russian crew member in the city of Khabarovsk, before continuing on to the Air Force hospital in Japan.

The day after Torrence was flown out of Irkutsk, U.S. military forces were put on alert in response to the reported wide-spread movement of Russian troops. The alert was lifted Friday.

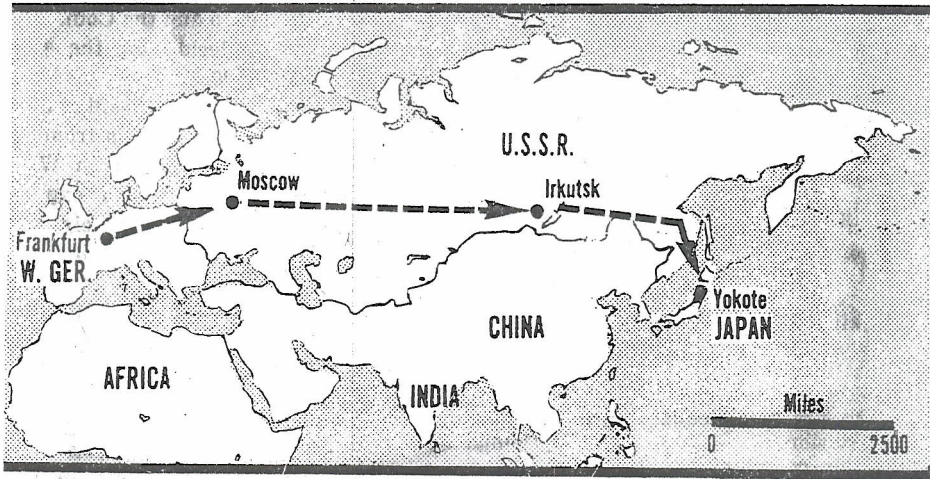
Edward B. Garvey, a Falls Church member of Torrence's exhibition group, said that Torrence received massive amounts of blood in transfusions from Russian donors. "The blood transfusions kept Torrence alive," Garvey said. "But when he saw the American plane and the American doctors, he got a tremendous psychological lift."

Torrence is expected to return to his home in the Mount Vernon area of Fairfax County by the end of the week.



JAMES F. TORRENCE
... cooperation saved life

Life in Russia During Alert



By Joseph Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Dotted line notes route of U.S. jet that flew Fairfax man from Russia to Japan.