

# Tense time on Nixon plane

By Larry D. Hatfield

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A "provisional alert" that President Nixon's plane might be under air attack caused Navy jets in the Eastern Mediterranean to scramble yesterday, a high-ranking military source told The Examiner.

The coded alert, which the source said was flashed from Air Force One to U.S. military elements "within striking distance," was cancelled within minutes after it was determined that four Syrian MIG jet fighters intercepting the President's plane were not hostile.

The tense incident also apparently was prompting a top-level review of Presidential air security procedures in Washington, D.C., the source said.

Air Force One's pilot, Col.

Ralph D. Abertazzie, apparently was not informed that the Syrian jets would escort Nixon's plane into Damascus, the third stop on his five-nation Middle East tour.

The breakdown in communications prompted Abertazzie to shake up Nixon and other high-ranking officials during a violent series of evasive maneuvers.

When the four Soviet-built MIGs appeared off the wingtips of the plane as it crossed the border into Syria, Abertazzie dived into a sharp right bank, crossing above and below the paths of the fighters for seven minutes before he confirmed they were an honorary escort.

U.S. officials on the ground said they had been told in advance about the escort and did not know why the pilot was not informed.

It was during the diving evasive maneuvers, the mil-

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itary source told the Examiner, that word of a possible attack was flashed to the National Military Command System from Air Force One.

This alerted carriers and other Navy ships stationed at 250-mile intervals along the oceanic route of the President and also Air Force and Navy planes that were already aloft in the area.

The dramatic encounter occurred shortly before 7 a.m. PDT.

The Pentagon insisted there was no "alert" and its public affairs duty officer, Maj. Duane Austin, referred queries to the White House. Austin said he checked the National Communications Center, the information link between elements of the worldwide American military network, and "there was no record of an alert."

The North American Defense Command in Colorado Springs and the Strategic Air Command in Omaha, both linked to the President's plane by one of two communications systems, also said they had not gone on alert.

"It was not a full alert so they wouldn't be involved although they would know about it," said the military source. "It amounted to a provisional measure which was, in effect, a scramble warning to planes on carriers and probably in Turkey."

Pentagon officials have traditionally been reluctant to discuss security precautions for a President's plane. Privately, they had expressed concern about Nixon's trip over the Middle

East, saying their primary concern was that Air Force One might trigger Russian-built SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles.

The SAMs target on the heat of jet engines and intelligence sources believe that at least one Palestinian guerrilla group has some.

The protective system for the President's planes, which posts carriers and shadow planes along the route, is designed primarily to prevent crashes and deal with engine trouble, the Pentagon said.

American fighter planes sometimes fly protective cover for Air Force One in the United States but, officials said, they do not fly over foreign nations.

It is customary, according to diplomatic observers, for host countries to provide fighter escorts while dignitaries are in their air space. Such escorts have been given to Nixon in his past trips abroad but the Air Force One pilot has always been told before.

No one on the President's plane was injured during the evasive maneuvers taken yesterday. It did shake them up, however.

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