By Bill Gertz

In China, the reckless F-8 pilot has become a national hero.

The Last Flight of Wang Wei

When the alarm sounded, Lt. Cmdr. Wang Wei was at Lingshui air base, located on Hainan Island in the South China Sea. It was 8:45 a.m., local time, April 1. The Chinese fighter pilot and his wingman, Zhao Yu, took off from the People’s Liberation Army base in F-8 interceptors—Chinese versions of the old MiG-21 fighter. The Chinese jets carried Israeli Python air-to-air missiles.

This would prove to be the last flight of Wang Wei—and the first step in the creation of a mythic figure.

Within 15 minutes of takeoff, the Chinese warplanes had intercepted a US Navy EP-3E Aries II surveillance aircraft flying some 80 miles off China’s coast. The lumbering American turboprop had been spotted by Chinese regional air defense radars set up on Hainan. Technicians there had flashed the information about its location to Lingshui.

As the world would soon learn, Wang’s fighter and the American EP-3 then suffered a catastrophic midair collision, one that sent the Navy aircraft to an emergency landing on Hainan and the Chinese pilot to his death in the South China Sea. With his fighter breaking apart around him, Wang ejected over the ocean, but his body never was found.

Wang’s death is now being exploited by the Communist government in Beijing, which has launched a propaganda offensive to deify the dead fighter pilot and harangue the United States, all under the rubric of battling “hegemonism”—Beijing’s word to describe US power and influence in the Pacific.

The Good Old Days

The theme is echoed throughout the main organs of Chinese government–run media. The campaign is reminiscent of the days of Mao’s Red Guards and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the period in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Communist fervor tore apart Chinese society, wrecked its economy, and set back the nation’s development by decades.

In a commentary typical of the Wang campaign, Liberation Army Daily, the PLA’s official newspaper, had this to say: “The struggle against hegemonism and power politics will be a prolonged and complicated struggle. It requires powerful political and national defense strength and national unity to safeguard state sovereignty and national dignity.”

The new propaganda offensive features the most incendiary anti-US rhetoric since NATO’s accidental bombing in 1999 of the Chinese...
Embassy in Yugoslavia, an event that galvanized Chinese government efforts to fan nationalist sentiment among a restive population anxious to see political reform along with its new economic reforms of the past decade.

As for Wang, Chinese President Jiang Zemin conferred upon him a special honor—the title “Guardian of the Seawaters and Airspace.” US defense officials said this new title comes as close as the officially atheistic Communist government can come to attributing a god-like status to a human being.

In fact, Wang has been compared to an “immortal” Chinese revolutionary figure from around the year 200. That’s not all. He also was declared a “revolutionary martyr.” The Chinese government’s propaganda campaign has praised Wang in terms that are highly similar to those used in an earlier effort to deify Communist hero Lei Feng, a PLA soldier who died in 1962 after a telephone pole fell on his head. His devotion to the Communist Party, even reported that Wang asked his wife, pregnant with their first child, to have an abortion so that the pregnancy and responsibilities of fatherhood would not interfere with the great man’s flying career. “I want to make the most of my youth and fly eight or 10 models,” Wang reportedly told his wife, who “tearfully agreed” to the abortion.

Wang’s hero status was heralded in the People’s Daily in an April 24 editorial. The editorial said the pronouncement was a sign of the Chinese military’s determination to protect national security and “rejuvenate” the Chinese nation. Those stories of Wang’s demise that were published only in China also stated that Wang was eaten by sharks in the South China Sea. US defense officials said the death by shark appeared to be part of the propaganda campaign to give Wang a more heroic death so as to further enhance his standing among the Chinese people.

Earlier Encounter

Wang, thought to be 33 years old, was a squadron leader in the 8th PLA Naval Air Force Wing’s 22nd Regiment, based at Lingshui. Most official Chinese reports refer only to “a certain unit,” highlighting the PLA’s extreme reluctance to disclose any military information to the public. Hainan is a major PLA military base.

Wang was no stranger to intercepts. During a Jan. 24 aerial encounter, which was videotaped and later made public in Washington, he flew dangerously close to another EP-3E. The F-8 was shown flying to within 20 feet and slowing its speed to the point where it was having difficulty flying with the EP-3E. The Chinese themselves confirmed US suspicions that Wang was the pilot in the Jan. 24 incident. The military said that Wang and another pilot were sent to intercept an American reconnaissance aircraft near southern China.

On April 1, Navy Lt. Shane Osborn had his aircraft on autopilot, flying level at around 180 knots airspeed while his 23 crew members carried out their duties, most of them conducting electronic vacuum cleaning of all communications along China’s coast.

“We were obviously being intercepted,” said Osborn, “and the [Chinese] aircraft was approaching much closer than normal, about three to five feet off our wing. So, I was just guarding the autopilot, listening to the reports from the back end and from my other pilot, Lt. [Patrick] Honeck, who was in the window watching the aircraft approach.”

Osborn went on, “The aircraft made two close approaches, [with the pilot] making gestures. And then, on the third one, his closure rate was too high, and he impacted the No. 1 propeller, which caused a violent shaking in the aircraft. And then, his nose impacted our nose, and our nosecone flew off, and the airplane immediately snap-rolled to about 130 degrees in low bank and became uncontrollable.”

Asked if he had had “eyeball-to-eyeball” contact with Wang, Osborn told CNN: “I did on the second time he joined up on us. He came out a little bit front and was making gestures, and we could all see him.”

What kind of gestures? “I don’t care to comment on that,” Osborn said.

Osborn later recalled, “He had his oxygen mask off and was waving us away and mumbling some words.” Osborn could not tell what Wang was saying.

Another EP-3E crew member, Lt. John Comerford, was the one who got the best look at Wang’s deadly flying. “I was actually out of my seat and kind of down on my haunches, looking out of the port side, left side, over-wing exit window at the fighter as it approached,” Comerford told
CNN. “I was taking notes on a clipboard about the condition of the flight and things like that and was watching the approaches that he was making to our plane.” Comerford was thrown backward by the collision and pinned to the ground as the aircraft rolled over.

China told a very different story. Zhao Yu, who piloted the F-8 next to Wang gave this account in Liberation Army Daily:

“I saw the head and left wing of the US plane bump into Wang Wei’s plane. At the same time, the outside propeller of the US plane’s left wing smashed the vertical tail wing of the plane piloted by Wang Wei into pieces. I reminded Wang Wei, ‘Your plane’s vertical tail has been struck off. Pay attention to remain in condition, pay attention to remain in condition.’ Wang Wei replied, ‘Roger.’ About 30 seconds later, I found Wang Wei’s plane was rolling to the right side and plunging. The plane was out of control. Wang Wei requested to parachute. I replied: ‘Permission granted.’ Afterward, I lost contact with Wang Wei.”

“Wild and Arrogant”

The Chinese government insisted that the EP-3E, to shake the intercepting aircraft, slowed down to make it difficult for the jets to fly alongside. Beijing also claimed the surveillance aircraft would make sudden movements. “The wild and arrogant planes also often jumped up and down and suddenly turned steep left and right to provoke the pilots of our side again and again with extremely dangerous actions,” the military newspaper stated.

Osborn rejected China’s claim that the EP-3E suddenly turned and rammed Wang’s jet. “It’s not very common for a big, slow-moving aircraft to ram into a high performance jet fighter,” he said. “And we definitely made a sharp left turn. That was called uncontrolled flight—inverted in a dive after he impacted my propeller and my nose.”

According to Osborn and other Pentagon officials, Wang was preparing to “thump” the EP-3E by flying in front of the slower aircraft and hitting his jet’s afterburners. The maneuver is an unfriendly gesture designed to disrupt the flight of the target aircraft. But he didn’t get the opportunity to do any thumping because the airplanes collided. Osborn’s initial reaction to the collision was matter-of-fact. “The first thing I thought was, ‘This guy just killed us,’” he recounted later, noting that he remembered looking up and “seeing water” close up—an unhappy sight for any pilot.

In an interview, Osborn spoke of the ordeal and the encounter with Wang. “He was joining up on us and had too high of a closing rate, and instead of going low, he went up,” Osborn said. “He could have shot underneath us and never hit anything.”

Zhao Yu said he flew to within about 9,000 feet of the sea and spotted the wreckage of Wang’s airplane, along with a flight seat stabilizing parachute and a rescue parachute “floating in the air.” At about 9:30, Zhao landed at Lingshui and 10 minutes later, the damaged EP-3 arrived.

The Chinese government’s search effort was massive, according to both US and Chinese accounts. The operation lasted about 10 days and covered more than 52,000 square miles of water. Some 110 aircraft, more than 100 warships and at least 1,000 other ships, including salvage vessels, fishing boats, and civilian boats took part, along with more than 55,000 people.

Jiang’s Broken Heart

Jiang was among the first of Beijing’s leaders to praise Wang Wei. “For a dozen days, the people of all nationalities throughout the country have all worried about comrade Wang Wei,” Jiang said. “This fully illustrates that the Chinese nation has a strong cohesion.”

The crew’s release followed delivery of a letter from US Ambassador to China Joseph W. Preufer to Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxun expressing “sincere regret” for the loss of Wang and a “very sorry” that the crippled EP-3E had entered Chinese airspace without verbal clearance.

China’s embassy in Washington had quietly put out word through a sympathetic American academic that if China would be allowed to misinterpret the US statement as a blanket apology for the entire affair, the crew would be released. The crew was released April 11. However, Secretary of State Colin Powell made clear the apology was carefully worded to state that the United States was not at fault for the collision. To Americans, the fault lay entirely with China—specifically, Wang Wei.