

Dag Hammarskjöld's Death Date

By Albert Pelsser

Further to the story on the *Election of Dag Hammarskjöld as UN Secretary-General* (See UNPI Journal VI. 48 #4, August 2024, Pages 13-14), the two mini-sheets issued on December 26, 1980 by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Scott 2007a and 2008) for the 75th anniversary of his birth can be added to the sampling of issues related to Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961) as Secretary-General of the UN. The official date of the death reported in all reference material is September 18, 1961; however, the two souvenir sheets (Figures 1 and 2) bear an erroneous date of September 17.

Dag Hammarskjöld is the only Secretary-General of the United Nations to have died in office. During the two terms as Secretary-General, he carried out many responsibilities for the United Nations in the course of his efforts to prevent war and serve the other aims of the UN Charter. He travelled to many countries in the world, either on specific assignments or to further his acquaintance with officials of member governments and knowledge of the problems of various areas of the world.

In 1960, when President Joseph Kasavubu and Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of the Congo sent a cable on July 12 asking "urgent dispatch" of UN military assistance to the former Belgian Congo, the Secretary-General addressed the Security Council at a night meeting on July 13 and asked the Council to act with utmost speed on the request. Pursuant to Security Council resolutions, the United Nations Force in the Congo was established and the Secretary-General himself made four trips to the Congo in connection with the United Nations operations there. The first two trips to the Congo were made in July and August 1960. Then, in January 1961, the Secretary-General stopped in the Congo while en route to the Union of South Africa on a third mission in connection with the racial problems of that country.

The fourth trip to the Congo began September 12, 1961. In the afternoon of September 17, 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld boarded a four-engine Douglas DC-6B passenger plane SE-BDY *Albertina* (belonging to the Swedish Transair Company) taking off from Ndjili, the airport in Leopoldville (the capital of the Congo, now Kinshasa) at 17:51 GMT; the aircraft was bound to Ndola, in



Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) with Hammarskjöld to meet Mr. Tshombé, the provincial president of Katanga and seek an end to the fighting in the secessionist mineral-rich province of Katanga. The plane was under orders to fly after dark because of the risk of being shot down by a Katangan jet fighter.

The DC-6 plane turned over high ground while making its final approach, but terminated with a fatal accident several miles to the west of the airfield of Ndola. Dag Hammarskjöld was killed, along with seven other UN staff members and the Swedish crew of four. The time of the crash, established by the broken watches of the passengers, was around 00:15 local time on 18 September 1961 (i.e., 22:15 GMT on 17 September 1961). The UN investigation commission reached no firm conclusion as to the cause of the crash.

References:

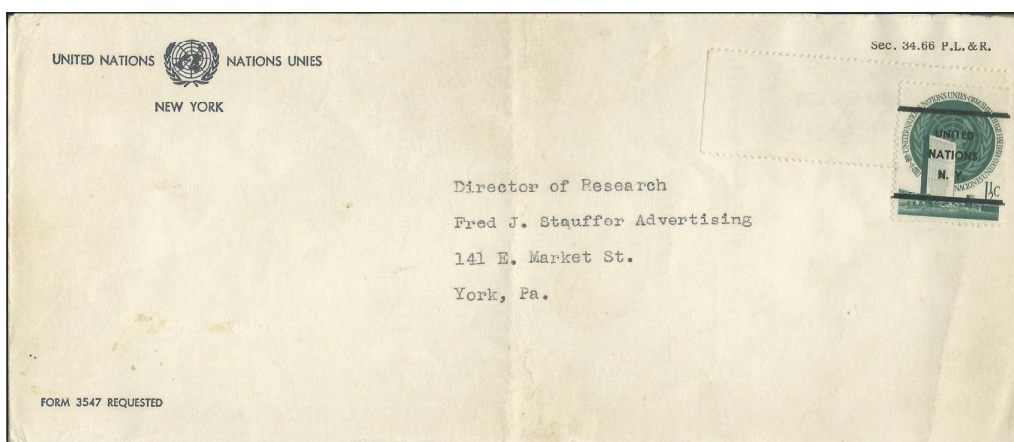
1. https://applications.icao.int/postalhistory/tcc_dag_hamarskjold.pdf
2. https://applications.icao.int/postalhistory/democratic_peoples_republic_of_korea_75th_birth_anniversary_of_dag_hamarskjold.htm
3. <https://www.baaa-acro.com/sites/default/files/import/uploads/2017/11/SE-BDY.pdf> ICAO Circular 69-AN/61 ICAO Circular 69-AN/61 <https://www.un.org/depts/dhl/dag/bio.htm>

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