



UPDATED. More Details On Interception Of Ukrainian Helicopters Near Mariupol Revealed

Description

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"Belmak" (L), "Odessit" (R)

On March 31, forces of the Donetsk People's Republic reported that they had shot down two Ukrainian Mi-8 helicopters that tried to evacuate members of the Azov Battalion from the Azovstal plant in Mariupol.

According to initial reports, the first helicopter was shot down near Rybatskoye settlement. Most of the crew and passengers were found dead. The helicopter was tentatively identified as Mi-8MSB, tail number 864, of the Poltava 18th Aviation Brigade. The second helicopter reportedly went up in smoke but continued on its way and allegedly crashed in the sea area. Later, the Russian Defense Ministry released a statement supporting this version. According to it, at least one helicopter was shot down with the captured 'Stinger' MANPAD.

DPR troops captured three survivors from the crew and passengers of the helicopters in question. Two of them were already questioned in videos that appeared online. These are:

- Senior Lieutenant of the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine with the call sign "Belmak". He repeatedly participated in Kyiv's military operation in the Donbass in previous years as well as served as an airborne instructor. During the March 31 incident, he operated the machine gun installed on the helicopter and was tasked with providing fire cover.

- A member of the Azov Battalion, Dmitry Lobinsky with the call sign “Odessit”. He received injuries during clashes in Mariupol and was among the members of the battalion that helicopters tried to evacuate.

Both of them claim that the helicopters in question were tasked with the evacuation of members, including injured ones, of Kyiv’s forces. At around 5 AM local time, their helicopter took off from the port area of Mariupol as a part of the group of helicopters involved in the operation. Then, “Belmak” said, the helicopter was shot down near the settlement of Chervone (two MANPAD missiles were launched at it). Claims of the captured fighters indicate that every helicopter had about 14-15 persons on board, including crew.

“Odessit” claims that he saw 4 helicopters involved, while “Belmak” said that there were 5 helicopters (4 Mi-8 and one Mi-24). “Belmak” added that the group of the helicopters moved to Mariupol from Dnipro Airport. The helicopters also delivered supplies, likely weapons and ammunition, to the garrison of Kyiv’s forces surrounded in Mariupol.

Claims of “Belmak” also indicate that this was not the first attempt to use helicopters to deliver supplies to Kyiv’s forces in Mariupol and evacuate personnel from the area.

If the claims of the captured members of Kyiv’s forces are true, it remains unclear what happened with the rest of helicopters. Also, the question appears about the state of the air defense of forces involved in the operation to take control of Mariupol if such a large group of helicopters was really able to penetrate the frontline.

Answering our readers’ questions, why SF cannot confirm the destroying of even the second helicopter and why we claim that there were exactly four helicopters and perhaps the fifth was a Mi-24 attack helicopter covering at least a part of the air group’s route.

The claim of a second helicopter being shot down over the sea is the very similar to the report by the Russian Ministry of Defence on 28 March. No objective control data or another evidences were provided.

Two seriously wounded but surviving AFU servicemen from the downed helicopter give identical statements which agree in details. It is hard to imagine that they had time to negotiate while the helicopter was falling down.

A separate question is raised by the report that the helicopter was shot down by a trophy Stinger man-portable air defence system. Why did the units blocking Mariupol not have standard Russian man-portable air defence systems? Why is the space above Mariupol not controlled by Russian air defence systems such as Buk or Pantsir? Obviously, we are not talking about the S-300/400, which are designed to operate against targets at other altitudes.

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