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Operation Overflight

U-2 Pilot Takes Along Poison After Delays and Change of Planes

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(Third in a Series)
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The main reason we had never tried to fly all the way across the Soviet Union was not fuel but logistics.

Previously all the overflights had returned to their originating base. Taking off from one base and landing at another required two ground crews, doubling personnel, preparation and risk of exposure.

But it was considered worth the gamble. The planned route would take us deeper into Russia than we had ever gone, while traversing important targets never before photographed.

Our commanding officer was Air Force Col. William M. Shelton. Shelton handled the briefings for the flight, conducted at Incirlik Air Force Base in southern Turkey prior to our leaving for Pakistan.

Taking off from Peshawar, Pakistan, I was to overfly Afghanistan and cross the Hindu Kush range, an extension of the Himalayas.

Once in the Soviet Union, my route would take me over or near Stalinabad, the Aral Sea; the Tyuratam Cosmodrome (Russia's Cape Canaveral), Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk, Kirov, Archangel, and, on the Kola Peninsula, Kandalaksha and Murmansk, from which I was to fly north to the Barents Sea and along the northern coast of Norway to Bodo. This way I would avoid overflying Finland and Sweden.

The flight would take nine hours, cover approximately 3,800 miles, 2,900 within the Soviet Union itself. With an early-morning takeoff, and considering the time changes, I would be in Bodo about nightfall.

I was thinking about this as early on the morning of Wednesday, April 27, I packed a bag for the trip. Should I stay in Bodo a day or two, I'd need a shaving kit, civilian clothes, ID and money. Checking my wallet, I found I had some German marks, Turkish pounds,

and about \$100 in U.S. currency. I tossed the wallet into the traveling bag along with the other items.

With a refueling stop at Bahrain, the trip to Pakistan would take about seven hours.

Accommodations at Peshawar were primitive. Our hangar was set off from the rest of the base; we slept there on folding cots and cooked our own food from rations.

There was one departure from routine. Rather than bringing the U-2 over and leaving it at Peshawar until the flight took place, we were trying something new. Chiefly for security, to reduce plane exposure, we are ferrying it to Peshawar the night prior to flight. Then, should the flight not take place as scheduled, for weather or some other reason,

we would ferry it back to Incirlik.

It was the best plane we had, which was comforting. Aside from the long layoff, and the fact that this flight would be going all the way across Russia, there was nothing else to distinguish this overflight from its predecessors.

Yet because this was to be the first flight all the way across Russia, I felt an additional touch of excitement and some apprehension. However, my complete trust in the aircraft helped.

Two Delays

The schedule called for a 6 A.M. takeoff. Wednesday afternoon I went to bed about four o'clock. At 2 A.M. I was awakened by someone from message center. I had washed and was dressing when I received another message; due to bad weather, the flight had been postponed.

Friday afternoon, shortly before I was to go to bed, word

came that there would be no flight on Saturday. A night of poker and a day of reading and

loafing relieved some of the tension built up by the two false starts. But not all. For I also discovered that I wouldn't be flying the plane I'd hoped.

The departure from routine had turned out to be less than a good idea. Periodically, after a certain number of hours' flight time, an aircraft has to be grounded for maintenance check. Flying back and forth from Turkey to Pakistan, time on the plane I'd counted on flying had run out.

A 'Dog'

As a substitute, on Saturday night U-2 number 360 was flown over. It was a "dog," never having flown exactly right. Something was always going wrong. No sooner was one malfunction corrected than another appeared. Its current idiosyncrasy was one of the fuel tanks, which wouldn't feed all its fuel. But not all the time,

just occasionally. So the pilot was kept guessing.

Saturday afternoon I again went to bed early, to be awakened at 3 A.M. With my backup pilot, I had a good substantial breakfast — two or three eggs, bacon, toast. It was to be the last food I'd have until reaching Norway, some 13 hours later.

As I was suiting up, I remembered that traveling bag, with wallet and clothing, and asked that it be put in the cockpit.

"Do you want the silver dollar?" Shelton asked.

Before this I hadn't wanted the disguised poison pendant. But this flight was different. And I had less than complete confidence in the plane.

For A Weapon

"If something happened," I had previously asked the intelligence officer, "could I use the needle as a weapon?"

He couldn't see why not. One jab, and death would be almost instantaneous. As a weapon, it would be quite effective.

"O.K.," I replied. Shelton tossed it to me, and I slipped it into the pocket of my outer flight suit.

Though with more than sufficient time to think about it since, I'm still not sure why this time I chose to take it.

About 5:20 A.M. I climbed into the plane, the personal equipment sergeant strapping me in. Takeoff was scheduled for 6 A.M. I completed by pre-flight check and waited.

Finally Col. Shelton came out to explain the delay. They were awaiting approval from the White House.

This was the first time this had happened. When Presidential approval was necessary, it usually came through well in advance of the flight.

Fateful Date

At this point I was sure the flight would be canceled, and was looking forward to getting out of the sweat-drenched flight suit, when at 6:20 A.M., the signal came: cleared for takeoff.

At altitude, the temperature outside the aircraft dropped to 60 degrees below zero. Some of the chill began to penetrate. Although the suit would remain damp and uncomfortable throughout the flight, at least I was no longer sweltering.

Switching on the autopilot, I completed my flight log. I had already filled in the Aircraft Number, 360, and the Serial Number, 415A. Now I added takeoff time, 0126 Greenwich Mean Time, 6:26 A.M. local time, with the notation "delayed one-half hour." I also filled in the date: "1 May 1960."

NEXT: Time and a Soviet rocket catch up with Operation Overflight.