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THE CENTRAL
INTELLIGENCE
AGENCY AND
OVERHEAD 
RECONNAISSANCE

The U-2 and OXCART
Programs, 1954 - 1974

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Koon, call the commander of Kirtland AFB near Albuquerque. General Koon told the base commander about the sealed orders and explained that an unusual aircraft would make a deadstick landing at Kirtland within the next half hour. The general then instructed the base commander to have air police keep everyone away from the craft and get it inside a hanger as quickly as possible.

After a half hour passed, the base commander called the Pentagon to ask where the crippled aircraft was. As he was speaking, the officer saw the U-2 touch down on the runway and remarked, "It's not a plane, it's a glider!" Even more surprised were the air police who surrounded the craft when it came to a halt. As the pilot climbed from the cockpit in his "space" suit, one air policeman remarked that the pilot looked like a man from Mars. The pilot, Jacob Kratt, later reported to Cunningham that, from the beginning of the first flameout until the landing at Albuquerque, the U-2 had covered over 900 miles, including more than 300 by gliding.⁵⁸

Aside from this extraordinary gliding ability, however, the U-2 was a very difficult aircraft to fly. Its very light weight, which enabled it to achieve extreme altitude, also made it very fragile. The aircraft was also very sleek, and it sliced through the air with little drag. This feature was dangerous, however, because the U-2 was not built to withstand the G-forces of high speed. Pilots had to be extremely careful to keep the craft in a slightly nose-up attitude when flying at operational altitude. If the nose dropped only a degree or two into the nose-down position, the plane would gain speed at a dramatic rate, exceeding the placarded speed limit in less than a minute, at which point the aircraft would begin to come apart. Pilots, therefore, had to pay close attention to the aircraft's speed indicator because at 65,000 feet there was no physical sensation of speed, without objects close at hand for the eye to use as a reference.⁵⁹

THREE FATAL CRASHES IN 1956

The first fatality directly connected with flying the U-2 occurred on 15 May 1956, when test pilot Wilburn S. Rose, flying article 345A, had trouble dropping his pogos, the outrigger wheels that keep the

⁵⁸ Bissell interview (S); Cunningham interview (TS Codeword); Brig. Gen. Leo A. Geary, interview by Gregory W. Pedlow, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 12 October 1988 (S).

⁵⁹ James Cherbonneau, Carmine Vito, and Hervey Stockman (former U-2 pilots), interview by Donald E. Welzenbach, Washington, DC, May 1986 (S).

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wings parallel to the ground during takeoff. Once airborne, Rose made a low-level pass over the airstrip and shook loose the lefthand pogo. When he attempted to make a righthand turn to come back over the runway to shake loose the remaining pogo, Rose stalled the U-2 and it plunged to earth, disintegrating over a wide area. Three months later, on 31 August 1956, a second fatal crash occurred during a night-flying exercise. Frank G. Grace stalled article 354 at an altitude of about 50 feet when he tried to climb too steeply at takeoff. The craft fell, cartwheeled on its left wing, and struck a power pole near the runway. More experienced U-2 pilots always cut back abruptly on the throttle as soon as the pogo sticks fell away in order to avoid such stalls.

Before the year was out, two more U-2s were destroyed in crashes, one of them fatal. On 17 September 1956, article 346 lost part of its right wing while on its takeoff ascent from Lindsey Air Force Base in Wiesbaden, Germany. The aircraft disintegrated in mid-air, killing pilot Howard Carey. The loss of article 357 on 19 December 1956 resulted from pilot hypoxia. A small leak prematurely depleted the oxygen supply and impaired Robert J. Ericson's judgment as he flew over Arizona. Because of his inability to act quickly and keep track of his aircraft's speed, the U-2 exceeded the placarded speed of 190 knots and literally disintegrated when it reached 270 knots. Ericson managed to jettison the canopy and was sucked out of the aircraft at 28,000 feet. His chute opened automatically at 15,000 feet, and he landed without injury. The aircraft was a total loss.⁶⁰

COORDINATION OF COLLECTION REQUIREMENTS

From the very beginning of the U-2 program, it was apparent that some sort of an interagency task force or office would be needed to develop and coordinate collection requirements for the covert overhead reconnaissance effort. In a three-page memorandum to DCI Dulles on 5 November 1954 setting forth the ideas of the Technological Capabilities Panel's Project 3 on this subject, Edwin Land wrote:

It is recommended that... a permanent task force, including Air Force supporting elements, be set up under suitable cover to provide guidance on procurement, to consolidate requirements

⁶⁰ U-2 Accident Reports, folders 4, 10, and 14, OSA records, job 67-B-415, box 1 (S).

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