

## RB-47E USSR Overflights by the 91<sup>st</sup> SRW

During the early and mid 1950s, the U.S. grew increasingly apprehensive concerning the Soviet Union's development of advanced weapons including aircraft, air defense radar & missile systems, and atomic bombs. The Berlin Airlift and Korean War increased the level of mistrust on both sides; however, the closed Soviet society made gathering intelligence about the development of new weapons very difficult and greatly concerned the US and its allies.

In an effort to obtain information about weapons development and deployment, the USAF conducted regular routine reconnaissance missions near the Soviet land borders or just outside the 12-mile limit defining international waters. In most cases, the planes were forbidden to fly into Soviet airspace, but in a few cases the need for information outweighed the risk of overflight and a plane was sent into the Soviet Union.

One such flight occurred on 8 May 1954. The US Air Force had strong suspicions that the Soviets were getting ready to deploy a follow-on to the MiG-15 and needed to find out for sure. Additionally, the USAF's Strategic Air Command needed to know how many Soviet long-range bombers were stationed at the northern bases on and near the Kola Peninsula. As a result, a flight of three RB-47E reconnaissance planes took off from RAF Fairford in England. Two of the Stratojets flew as airborne spares and turned back before the overflight began; however, one plane penetrated Soviet airspace near Murmansk. The plane flew over numerous Soviet airfields and naval facilities conducting photographic reconnaissance and making radarscope images of the various facilities. The RB-47E continued to Arkhangelsk before turning west and heading back to England.

The USAF plane was intercepted by MiG fighters after being over Soviet territory for about 50 miles. Initially, MiG-15s were spotted, but a short time later a flight of MiG-17s appeared. The operational deployment of the MiG-17 was a significant surprise to the three men in the RB-47 and they knew they were in trouble since the new fighter was capable of reaching the RB-47 and attacking.



When the MiG-17s climbed to approximately the same altitude as the reconnaissance plane (38,000 feet) they opened fire\*. The Soviet fighters each made single shooting passes at the USAF plane. The RB-47 was equipped with a tail gun controlled by the copilot and returned fire but did not hit any Soviet plane. One MiG was able to hit the Stratojet with several rounds and caused moderate damage to the wing and fuselage. Before the MiGs were able to shoot down the USAF plane, it crossed the border into Finland and the MiGs broke off the attack. However, during the attack the RB-47's fuel tanks were hit and the plane nearly ran out of fuel before it was met by a Boeing KC-97 tanker for in-flight refueling. The RB-47E landed safely in England a short time later.

When the reconnaissance data from the RB-47 was analyzed, it was determined that the Soviets did not have any long-range bombers stationed at its northern bases. The confirmation of the operational deployment of the MiG-17 was another significant outcome of the flight. The great need for reliable information on Soviet weapons development and deployment combined with the great risk of overflights of Soviet territory prompted President Eisenhower to propose the "Open Skies" treaty in mid-1955. President Eisenhower was concerned the overflights by military aircraft would be considered an act of war by the USSR and only approved a few flights. In 1956, after the Soviets rejected the "Open Skies" treaty proposal, the US Central Intelligence Agency created a secret reconnaissance program using the Lockheed U-2. The CIA conducted overflights of the Soviet Union into the early 1960's when the U-2 flown by Francis Gary Powers was shot down in May 1960.

- - Because the RB-47E was over Soviet territory, it was a spy flight and a legitimate military target. If the Soviets had shot the plane down, it would have created an international incident to the detriment of the United States. This was the situation when the CIA U-2 was shot down over Sverdlovsk on 1 May 1960.

**Photo/Information courtesy of the US Air Force Museum**

Now for the rest of the story - That RB-47E was from the 91<sup>st</sup> Strategic Reconnaissance Wing. The aircrew was:

A/C Hal Austin            C/P Carl Holt            Nav. Vance Heavilin (D)

The crew chief - Phil Van Deusen