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LEE HARVEY OSWALD AND THE BLACK LADY OF ESPIONAGE

by

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Was Lee Harvey Oswald having an affair with the black lady of espionage? After nearly two decades of controversy regarding the motives and background of President Kennedy's alleged assassin, a striking pattern in Oswald's life remains a mystery. Whether this pattern is the result of coincidence or conspiracy is a question that may be debated perpetually. But the pattern is there.

The Russians called it "the black lady of espionage" - the CIA's ultra-secret U-2 spy plane. It was developed in the early 1950's by the CIA, working closely with the Air Force and Lockheed Aircraft, which built twenty-two of the planes. The U-2 became operational in 1956. It was a pet project of then CIA Director Allen Dulles, who later became one of the seven members of the Warren Commission.

The U-2 was considered to be the most spectacular technical achievement in the history of American intelligence. It represented advances in aircraft design and camera and film technique that were years ahead of anything possessed by the Russians. At a time when the known world altitude record was 66,000 feet, the U-2 soared at more than 80,000 feet. Its high-speed cameras could ferret out airfields, missile sites and tests, submarines, and atomic production and testing facilities. Its photographs provided ninety percent of America's hard data on Soviet military activities. Best of all, the Russians could not even find it much less shoot it down (not until 1960 when Francis Gary Powers' U-2 was downed).

Lee Harvey Oswald's first contact with the U-2 came at Atsugi Air Force base in Japan where he was stationed in 1957 as a Marine radar operator. Atsugi was the U-2's Asian home base. Oswald worked

in the very radar tower that monitored the spy plane's flights over Russia and China. His job was to scout for foreign aircraft.

Oswald's fellow marines recall that he showed an extraordinary interest in the flight paths of the conspicuously high-flying blip (the U-2) as it moved across the radar screen. He discussed the spy plane with his commanding officer. He saw the plane being taxied out of its hanger for take-off and watched as the sleek, black science-fiction-like craft zoomed skyward at blinding speed. Oswald was also seen strolling around Atsugi taking pictures.

The U-2 was housed in a special hanger ringed by guards carrying machine guns. An FBI document reveals that Oswald's squadron actually kept its gear inside this hanger. After Atsugi, Oswald's unit was transferred to the Phillipines, where its assignment was to guard the U-2 hanger there.

Oswald was discharged from the Marines in September of 1959. A month later he defected to Russia, allegedly because he preferred a communist system. At the American embassy in Moscow, he denounced America, praised Russia and announced his willingness to provide the Soviets with radar secrets - including "something of special interest". Whether this obvious reference to the U-2 was designed to make American officials squirm or was Oswald's way of advertising himself to the Soviets, who had the American embassy thoroughly bugged, is not known. After some hesitation, the Russians took him.

Seven months after Oswald's arrival in Russia, in May 1960, the Soviets finally caught the black lady. Not only did they down

Francis Gary Powers' U-2 but they captured plane, pilot, and a decade's worth of advances in aircraft and photographic technology. The cause of the U-2's downfall may never be known, but Powers claimed that it was data provided by Oswald. Said Powers: "He had access to all our equipment. He knew the altitude we flew at, how long we stayed out on any mission, and in which direction we went".

Oswald claimed to have had an ideological change of heart: he returned to the United States in June 1962. The State Department loaned him the money to get home. He was not prosecuted for spying or for giving away secrets. In fact, he was never even investigated in this regard, according to American authorities. The CIA claims never to have questioned him about his U-2 connections and secrets, because, asserted CIA, Oswald was of no interest to them.

One of Oswald's jobs in Dallas was as a photographer at the graphic-arts firm of Jaggars-Chiles-Stovall. Though primarily involved in advertising work, the firm did have a contract with the U.S. Army Map Service to work with photographic data - data obtained from U-2 flights. While Oswald had no security clearance and was not assigned to U-2 work, he had managed to continue his pattern of U-2 connections.

In the summer of 1963 Oswald worked in New Orleans as a maintenance man at the Reilly Coffee Company. Adrian Alba, who ran a nearby garage, recalls Oswald saying: "I have found my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow". According to Alba, Oswald meant that he soon expected to have a job at the New Orleans plant of the National

Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Of course, Oswald never went to work at NASA: He went back to Dallas - to his appointment with historical infamy, and with death at the hand of Jack Ruby.

Except for spending a lot of time in the shadow of the U-2, nothing in Oswald's background seemed to suggest a suitability for aerospace work. Was the NASA job simply a fantasy created by the derranged psyche of a budding assassin? Perhaps. But there seems to have been a rather strange linkage between the coffee company and NASA during the summer of 1963.

In July Oswald was fired, allegedly for "poor working habits". Within that same month, after Oswald's departure, four Reily employees who worked with him all took jobs with NASA in New Orleans - the man who hired him, Oswald's immediate superior, and two of his co-workers (one of whom was hired the same day as Oswald).

It is not as if the U-2 was as ubiquitous as Coke or McDonald's restaurants so that there was nothing unusual about Oswald encountering it everywhere he went. It is unusual. The question is whether it is anything else. To some, Oswald's proximity to the ultimate spy tool suggests that he might have been a spy. If so, the next question is whose spy was he - ours or theirs?