

The Inside Story of the
Cuban Missile Crisis

EYEBALL

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Edited by Robert F. McCort

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addressed the Supreme Soviet, and while he painted a rosy picture of the Soviets versus the United States in economic matters, he made note of the widening strategic gap between the U.S. and the Soviet Union: "Realization that the international situation has changed, that a basic shift has taken place in the balance of power between the socialist and capitalist states, is increasingly spreading in the Western countries. Numerous statements by government and business leaders are devoted to this subject."¹⁰

The expanded Soviet air defense was noted in the deployment of surface-to-air-missile sites. The first Soviet surface-to-air missile, the SA-1 (Guild), was deployed only around Moscow and in fixed installations. Because of the threat posed by B-47 and B-52 bombers and reconnaissance missions by the U-2, the Soviets subsequently developed a more sophisticated mobile surface-to-air system, designated the SA-2 (Guideline). Guideline missiles employed in the SA-2 system were first observed in the November 7, 1957, Moscow parade; operational deployment of the system began in 1958. Obviously, the state-of-art of the SA-2 system was such that it had the capability of downing a U-2. This deployment was disturbing to those of us who were involved in U-2 flight planning.

By 1959, SA-2 missile sites were not only being deployed around the principal Soviet cities but also at strategic industrial installations deep in the Urals and Siberia coincident with our intelligence interests and objectives. Flight tracks were adjusted so that the U-2 would come no closer than twenty-five miles to such a site.

On May 1, 1960, just fifteen days before a scheduled four-power summit conference was to convene in Paris, Gary Powers's U-2 airplane was brought down by an indirect hit from a near-miss SA-2 missile near Sverdlovsk, in the USSR. Powers would later relate that there was an explosion behind him, followed by a brilliant orange light, while he was flying at an altitude of about 70,000 feet. Almost immediately, the nose of the aircraft pitched into a steep dive and Powers began procedures to escape the doomed U-2. Powers's flight had begun at Peshawar, Pakistan, passed over Stalinabad, the Tyura Tam Missile Test Center, the nuclear plants in the Urals, and was to proceed to the ICBM missile base under construction at Yurya, the missile test center at Plesetsk, the submarine shipyard at Severodvinsk, the naval bases at Murmansk, and then on to Bodo, Norway.

(Khrushchev was on the reviewing stand for the May Day parade when Marshall Biryuzov, head of the Soviet defense forces, came up to the stand and whispered to Khrushchev that a U-2 had been downed in the Urals.) Four days later, Khrushchev, in a long speech before the Supreme Soviet, announced that an American plane flew into Soviet territory and was shot down. (In 1990, *Red Star*, the Soviet army newspaper, revealed there was confusion among ground-control and air-defense forces at the time. They believed the missile that exploded behind Powers's U-2 had missed its target and fired a second missile. That missile struck a MiG-19 tracking the U-2, killing its pilot.)

On the day of Khrushchev's announcement, a State Department spokesman told the press that the department had been informed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) that "An unarmed plane, a U-2 weather research plane based at Adana, Turkey, piloted by a civilian, had been missing since May 1. It is entirely possible that having a failure in oxygen equipment, which could result in the pilot losing consciousness, the plane continued on automatic pilot for a considerable distance and accidentally violated Soviet airspace." We at the Center had not been informed beforehand of the cover story, and when the State Department announcement was made, Lundahl shook his head. It could be embarrassing, since Powers's U-2 was well into the mission and about half of the 5,000 feet of film had been exposed. Since the film was wound tight and safety-based, it therefore would be extremely difficult to ignite. Lundahl notified CIA headquarters that even in a crash, he was sure the Soviets would have recovered some of the exposed film.

I was put in charge of a damage-control unit established at the Center to receive and evaluate all the press reports and photographs that the Russians were issuing. One such photo depicted Khrushchev holding an aerial photo purportedly from the downed U-2. Lou Franceschini and I examined the photo. It had the unique 9 × 18-inch format of the B camera used in the U-2, and when it was examined under the high-power optics, we could authenticate the clock imprint in one corner. Although the Russians had printed the photo backward, there was no doubt they now had positive proof that Powers was on a reconnaissance mission and was not merely flying a weather-research mission and off-course, as the State De-