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50 U.S. Airmen Downed by Soviets Never Were Traced

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At least 50 American airmen shot down on spy missions over or near the Soviet Union since World War II have never been accounted for and may have been held as prisoners by the Soviets, according to several specialists on Cold War aerial surveillance.

Those estimates yesterday came after Russian President Boris Yeltsin wrote U.S. senators Friday that 12 previously unacknowledged Americans shot down over Soviet territory during the 1950s were imprisoned in the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin, in a letter to the Senate Select Committee on POW and MIA Affairs, acknowledged that for years Soviet leaders had lied to the United States.

The Pentagon said that it always became a matter of public record when a plane went down. But the intelligence specialists said the Pentagon did not identify them as spy craft and seldom said they were missing as a result of Soviet action. Neither the U.S. nor the Soviet government ever admitted that any U.S. spy planes were downed over Soviet territory other than the highly publicized U-2 flight piloted by Francis Gary Powers in 1960.

President Bush, a former CIA director, said yesterday in response to a question that he was unaware of the 12 Americans Yeltsin identified, adding, "I believe that [former Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev denied it."

The Yeltsin letter referred only to planes brought down over Soviet territory, not those downed along its periphery, and also referred only to those being held prisoner as of Aug. 1, 1953.

But specialists on the history of Cold War aerial spying said from 1945 until 1969, the United States

flew hundreds of flights over or touching Soviet territory, and thousands of flights nears its borders, for example, in the Baltic or near Armenia. They said many planes were downed and at least 50 airmen are unaccounted for.

James Bamford, an investigative producer on ABC's "World News Tonight" and author of a 1982 book on the National Security Agency, "The Puzzle Palace," said that after World War II and continuing at least through the 1960s, there was a "bloody electronic war" in which the United States repeatedly sent planes to learn military information.

In one incident, a U.S. EC-130

shot down in the Turkish-Russian border in September 1958 with 17 aboard. It was established that six died, but the fate of the 11 others is unclear.

Bamford's book detailed a number of such incidents and he said he believes that "at least 50" crewman on spy missions were "missing or unaccounted for."

Jeffrey Richelson, author of the 1987 book, "American Espionage and the Soviet Target," said he had found the fate of a minimum of 42 U.S. airmen on such missions had not been determined and that they are still unaccounted for. He noted that a 1961 story in the New York Times quoted a Soviet magazine, Ogonek, as saying that in the 1958 EC-130 incident 11 had parachuted safely and were captured.

Paul H. Nitze, a former deputy secretary of defense and secretary of the Navy, was involved in overseeing some of the intelligence operations, declined to discuss details yesterday.

William Burrows, a New York

University journalism professor who wrote "Deep Black," a 1987 book on intelligence matters, said that when a plane was downed the Pentagon would make an announcement that concealed that it was a spy flight. He said the announcement might say "a B-29 had navigational problems and disappeared" or the plane "was swept off course by weather" in the Sea of Japan.

Researcher James Sanders, who is writing a book on intelligence, estimated that 100 to 200 airmen were shot down and remain unaccounted for, and that two to three dozen may still be alive. Sanders compiled from declassified documents at least 10 incidents, which he made available to the National Alliance of Families for the Return of Missing Servicemen. It was published in the Morning News Tribune of Tacoma, Wash., yesterday.

They include: Navy plane downed over the Baltic Sea, April 8, 1950; Navy plane downed over Sea of Japan, Nov. 6, 1951; Air Force plane shot down over Sea of Japan, June 13, 1952; Air Force plane downed off Japan, Oct. 7, 1952; Air Force plane shot down over Sea of Japan, July 29, 1953; Navy plane downed off Russia's Asian coast, Sept. 4, 1954; Air Force B-29 downed near Japan, Nov. 4, 1954; Air Force plane downed over Sea of Japan, Sept. 10, 1956; Air Force C-118 forced down over Soviet Armenia, June 27, 1956; EC-130, shot down over Armenia, Sept. 2, 1958.