Stranger than 'Strangelove': A General's

Did a Zealous Curtis Le May Try to Start World War III? Some of His Pilots

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By Paul Lashmar

Did Gen. Curtis E. Le May, chief of the Strategic Air Command in the 1950s and the model for one nuke-crazed general in the film "Dr. Strangelove," have a real-life secret agenda of trying to provoke nuclear war with the Soviet Union?

That's the question raised by the recent disclosure of unauthorized U.S. Air Force spy flights over the U.S.S.R. in 1954, 1957 and 1958. These overflights were revealed in a BBC documentary in May in which U.S. airmen talked about how Le May ordered provocative flights over the Soviet Union, apparently without the permission of President Eisenhower.

Le May, stocky, taciturn and fond of cigars, had been a hero of World War II for his running of the strategic bombing of Japan. After being appointed to head the Strategic Air Command in 1948, he turned SAC into a highly disciplined military force. During the 1950s, SAC was the United State's primary offensive nuclear force.

Le May was a brilliant officer and an ardent anti-communist. In liberal circles he typified the excesses of nuclear advocates. Director Stanley Kubrick used Le May as the model for the character of Buck Turgidson in his 1964 film "Dr. Strangelove." Le May later became infamous for his comment in his 1965 autobiography that the North Vietnamese should "be bombed back to the Stone Age." Le May died in 1990.?✓

In the mid-1950s Le May had legitimate military intelligence reasons for wanting to conduct spy flights over the Soviet Union. The Soviets had deployed a new generation of bombers that for the first time brought the U.S. mainland into range. The U.S. Air Force sent photo reconnaissance aircraft to fly along Soviet borders with special oblique cameras capable of photographing targets dozens of miles inside enemy territory. But, after May 1950, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff issued strict orders requiring U.S. spy planes to keep to international waters. President Truman observed the guideline and so did his successor, Dwight Eisenhower, according to Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower's top defense aide.

"President Eisenhower, on a number of occasions, said that he was not going to have members of the armed forces flying over the Soviet Union," Goodpaster said in a recent interview. "That amounted to an act of war."

But Eisenhower's intentions do not seem to have been in effect at Fairford Air Force Base in Britain on May 8, 1954. That day three RB-47 "Stratojets" from the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing took off from Fairford and headed round the north coast of Norway to Murmansk. Two aircraft turned around; the third cruised south deep into the Soviet Union. The crew of that aircraft were Hal Austin, Carl Holt and Vance Haverlin. Last year I tracked down all three and, for the first time, they publicly told the story of the overflight.

"We proceeded due south from the Murmansk area," says Austin who now lives in Riverside, Calif. "I don't recall the specific targets now but they were typically airfields and we were taking radar photography as well. . . . We had been overland maybe 50 miles when three fighters came up, looked us over. By the time we'd been over Soviet territory an hour another group came up, and this time it was at least six airplanes. A little later on, another six airplanes came up. . . . As we turned due west the third group of airplanes made pursuit passes on us."

Much to their alarm the Soviet fighters turned out to be MIG-17s capable of matching the RB-47s performance.

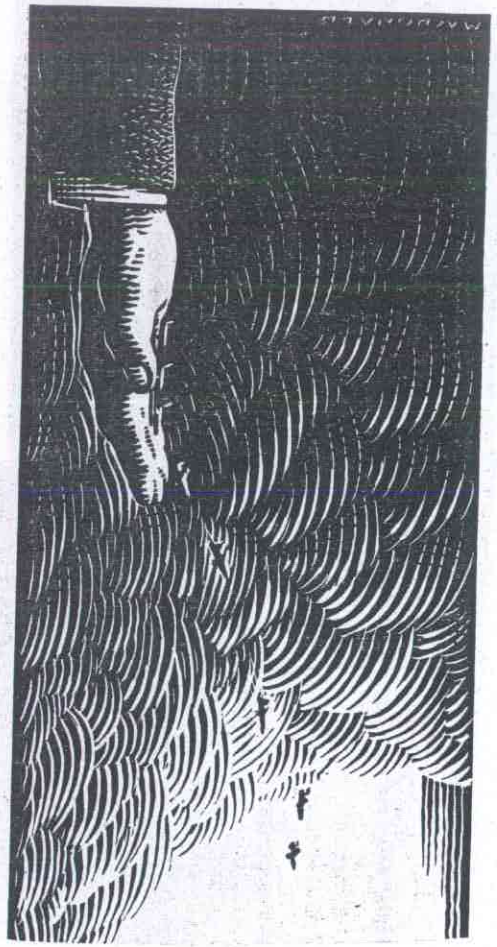
"Then the first airplane more or less flew right up our tailpipes," says Austin. "We knew they were armed, because I saw tracers going

Paul Lashmar is the producer of "Spies in the Sky," a documentary about spy flights over the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Forays Into the Nuclear Zone

Think We Came Close in the '50s

Tiger File



both above and below the airplane. And I hollered at my co-pilot, Carl Holt. He said, 'The guns won't work,' and I said, 'Well, you'd better kick something back there and get the damn things to work a little bit anyway, or we may be a dead duck here.'

"Well, it's either the third or fourth airplane, I don't recall now, which then hit our airplane. It wasn't much, but it was enough to feel it as though you'd hit a bunch of rough air. It turned out we got hit in the left wing, and near the fuselage."

Austin's crew then flew into Finnish airspace. Leaking fuel they just made it back to Fairford. The whole flight and its route over Russia was secret—including to Capt. Austin's ground crew.

Austin and his crew were summoned to meet Gen. Le May back in the United States. He wanted to decorate them for bravery.

BY JOHN MACDONALD FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"He said 'I tried to get you guys a silver star,' but he said 'you gotta explain that to Congress and everybody else in Washington when you do something like that, so here's a couple of DFCs [Distinguished Flying Crosses], we'll give you for that mission. There wasn't anybody in the room except the wing commander and us three guys, Gen. Le May and his intelligence officer."

It was at this meeting that the question arises about Le May's motives. Hal Austin recalls what happened next:

"Then Gen. Le May said, 'Well, maybe if we do this overflight right, we can get World War III started.'

"I think that was just a loose comment for his staff guys, because Gen. Tommy Power, his hatchet man in those days, chuckled and he never laughed very much. So I always figured that was a joke between them. But we thought maybe that was serious. To our knowledge we were the only U.S. Air Force crew that had flown an overflight at that point."

One reason to take Le May's aside seriously was the concept of "preventive war" which, at the time, was secretly touted at the highest government and military levels. The idea was that the Soviets should be forced into a confrontation with the United States before they had equal or superior nuclear forces. Le May was one of the officers associated with the concept but later he and others have played down its significance. Le May though was frank about his view that SAC was capable of wiping the Red Air Force off the face of the earth, if ordered to do so.

In any case, in April 1956, Le May sent another unauthorized overflight. This time nine RB-47 photo reconnaissance aircraft from the 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing were sent to Thule Air Force Base in Greenland for a secret mission. The plan was to penetrate the northern Soviet Union simultaneously over a broad front. On the first mission thick cloud cover caused one crew to overshoot the target.

"We went in there about 30 miles, solid overcast . . . ," says the pilot Col. John Lappo, who now lives in Alaska. "So I asked the crew if they were with me on making that 360-degree turn and they told me well the general told us not to make a 360. And I told them hey, if we don't get that target, he's going to have to send another airplane after it."

The last plane out, Lappo's aircraft was closely pursued by MIGs and narrowly escaped being shot down. In the operation, nine SAC aircraft penetrated Soviet airspace three times in one month to take their photographs.

"When the missions were over we were given awards as a unit. It was not publicized, it was played down, because it was, at the time, it was high tension," says Col. Richard McNab, another RB-47 captain who took part in the operation.

Gen. Goodpaster, who was responsible for conveying Eisenhower's approval for overflights to the Pentagon brass, was surprised by the navigator's accounts.

"I would be astounded, A, that it happened, and B, that I don't remember if it did happen. And I do think I would have known, because that was my job. I was the Defense Liaison Officer in Eisenhower's office. And I doubt that the Air Force would have ventured into anything like that on their own. That's—that's why I say it's astounding to me to hear reports that such flights did in fact occur."

Remarkably, the Soviets did not complain to the State Department about these flights. Instead, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took the matter up personally with Le May's boss, Gen. Nathan Twining, head of the Air Force. On June 24, 1956, Khrushchev hosted international military chiefs—including Twining—at the Red Air Force Day display. General Georgi Mikailov, Khrushchev's Air Force aide, heard Khrushchev say that U.S. planes in Soviet airspace were "flying coffins."

Nonetheless, six months later, Le May authorized more flights. In December 1956, he sent three RB-47 aircraft over Vladivostock. This time, the Soviets went public. Still-classified minutes of a White House meeting shows that Eisenhower was furious and rebuked the Air Force. The Air Force, in response to Freedom of Information Act requests, says it cannot find the records of these flights.

The leading historians on nuclear strategy, David A. Rosenberg and Marc Trachtenberg told me they doubted that Le May, as a military man, would try to provoke war behind Eisenhower's back. But why the general ordered a series of highly provocative missions apparently without the president's knowledge is yet to be answered.

One clue comes from Robert Sprague, a top civilian defense adviser to Eisenhower, who was interviewed by author Fred Kaplan in the early 1980s. Sprague remembered once asking Le May about SAC's state of readiness and said that Le May replied, "If I see that the Russians are amassing their planes for an attack. I'm going to knock the [expletive] out of them before they take off the ground."

That was an earthy way of describing a preventive war.

"But General Le May," Sprague recalled saying, "That's not national policy."

"I don't care," Le May replied. "It's my policy. That's what I am going to do."

Another clue comes from Hal Austin. He crossed paths with Le May again in the late '80s, at Air Force Village West, a retirement community in Riverside, California.

"I brought up the subject of the mission we had flown," Austin recalled. "And he apparently remembered it like it was yesterday. We chatted about it a little bit. His comment again was 'Well, we'd have been a hell of a lot better off if we'd got World War III started in those days.' Well, who knows? We'll never know because history didn't go that way."