

The Pilot Who Went Out Into the Cold

OPERATION OVERFLIGHT. By Francis Gary Powers with Curt Gentry, Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 376 pages; \$6.95.

Reviewed by
Charles Howe

ON MAY 1, 1960, an obscure civilian airplane jockey working for the Central Intelligence Agency took off from Pakistan flying a U-2 reconnaissance plane. His mission was to invade the airspace of the Soviet Union and, once inside, push various buttons that would take pictures of military installations thousands of feet below him. The United States had been conducting these flights for some time—it was perhaps not too surprising that the pilot—Francis Gary Powers—was promptly brought down by a Soviet rocket.

Somewhere within this amazing document Powers, who was much—and unfairly—maligned in the American press for doing a minor cop-out at his Russian trial (sentenced to ten years, he served less than two before he was exchanged for a Russian spy we captured) quotes a CIA man who had conducted his pre-employment investigation:

“The amazing thing is how clean you came out. I’ve been doing this sort of thing for a long time, and you’re the closest to Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy, I’ve seen.”

Powers added: “I think he meant that as a compliment.”

Using the Jack Armstrong frame of reference as a leitmotif, then, what emerges within this book is a simple man’s litany of abuse at the hands of others: the name of the game was shaft: Francis Gary Powers and, by the pilot’s lights, everybody from the Air Force to the CIA to Soviet intelligence to his former wife took their best shot at this simple pilot whose defense before Russian interrogators was limited to the Eichmann gambit: “I was only following orders.”

Southern Populist

Brought into the CIA direct from the Air Force, Powers, with the admitted political

naivete of the Southern Populist he is, was gazetted into the U-2 program.

This affair, a kind of “Pueblo” in the air, was managed—or mismanaged—by the CIA. That this intelligence agency was taking orders directly from President Dwight D. Eisenhower even as that gentleman prepared to meet Premier Nikita Khrushchev for the Summit Talks (remember them?) is made clear by Powers, who seems amazed, and hurt that the CIA and the President, when Powers was shot down, virtually disowned him.

Just why he failed to activate equipment that would have destroyed the cameras and electronics gear on his plane—and why he failed to use a curare-tipped needle that would have destroyed him after being captured—Powers explains in detail.

Accused by the American press and others of being something less than a hero when he asked for mercy before a Soviet court (this was years before the Navy gave Bucher & Co. a clean bill of health for what they did in North Korea) Powers—or Mr. Gentry, his ghost—writes with the battered elan of a club fighter heavily outclassed.

Money Mad

For example, sandwiched in between details on how Powers—he believes—was able to mislead his Russian interrogators, are bits of personal minutiae one associates with the man, the parochial—the man who immediately judges the worth of a foreign country solely on the merits of the local Officer’s Club.

With the meticulousness of a pathologist dissecting the cadaver of an infant, the reader is subjected to a wealth of seamy, irrelevant details regarding Jack Armstrong’s unhappy married life (he has remarried—a former CIA employee).

When this unfortunate couple filed for divorce after he returned to the States she did, in fact, charge that Jack Armstrong “was excessively concerned about money.” Powers champs at this claim, noting that while he was paid a good deal of money for his labors, in-

cluding imprisonment, he was worth every dollar.

At one point in the book, he notes with some sarcasm that the CIA had diddled him regarding when they would allow him to finally tell his story to the public.

“Since they (the CIA, the press, et al) had helped perpetuate the Francis Gary Powers mercenary label, I’d play the part. Sarcastically I wrote to them (the CIA) that I was going to write this book, and while entertaining bids, and since they’d been so anxious to suppress it, I’d be glad to consider their best offer.”

No Pat Story

With perhaps excellent reasons for being peeved at the CIA, Powers enumerates why he feels the mission went wrong.

He also notes that the late Lee Harvey Oswald, though but a Marine private, had U-2 details he could have passed on to the Russians some time before the flight.

To a degree, one can sympathize with Powers; neither a Leamas nor a Rubashov, he was sent out into the cold with all the inner doubts of a Willie Loman about to make his last big sale.

An unsophisticated airplane jockey caught up in the machinations of super-states with meager morals, he no doubt did the best he could when he was delivered up to the Russians with an American disclaimer, all the while expecting, as he writes, to be given a bullet in the back of the neck at any moment.

Nevertheless, one wishes the CIA had sent up a real bastard instead of Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy. A man who would have either used his poison needle long before he touched ground or else a man who could have cheerfully denounced the CIA at the time he was captured and had done with it.

Instead, Powers did what too many Americans would likely have done. He did it for money and, like too many Americans these days, he wound up by telling all about it after the slow realization that he had been had financially sank in.