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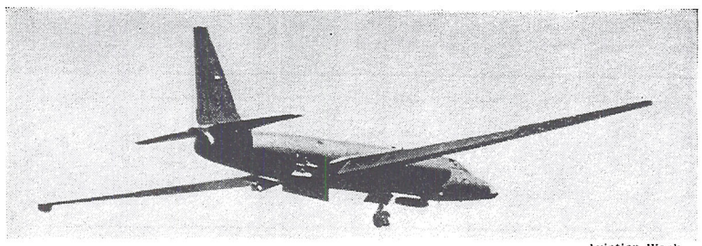
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



Aviation Week

Associated Press

Jim Collison

Powers, Johnson (with SR-71 model), U-2 in flight: Uncovered role

'U' for 'Utility'

It was an ungainly bird with long, droopy wings, but it could fly incredibly high, cruising at more than 50,000 feet as a matter of routine and even reaching 70,000 feet. The United States dubbed it the U-2—the "U" stood for "utility"—and said it was a weather-research plane. Actually, the high-flying machine was designed as a "sky spy," and assigned to carry out high altitude reconnaissance missions over the Soviet Union and other Communist countries for the Central Intelligence Agency. Built in an incredible 80 days by Lockheed Aircraft's Clarence (Kelly) Johnson at the company's super-secret "Skunk Works," the plane flew unmolested over Russian territory from 1956 to 1960 gathering information on Soviet radar and missile installations.

Then, in an incident reminiscent of the capture of the Pueblo, a Russian surface-to-air missile downed the plane and captured its civilian pilot, Francis Gary Powers. The result was the U-2 crisis of 1960: Nikita Khrushchev torpedoed a summit meeting in Paris with the U.S., Britain, and France and sharply denounced a grim Dwight Eisenhower.

Cover Story: As a result, U-2 flights over Russia were ended, and although the U-2s continued to photograph Cuba and Red China, the United States developed orbiting reconnaissance satellites and a more advanced, high-altitude plane to take over the U-2's intelligence-gathering functions. Today, in an ironic turn of events, the spy plane of the cold-war era now performs its original "cover" role, serving largely as a scientific-research craft.

Of the original 38 U-2s, the Air Force now has twenty left (the other eighteen crashed). Most of the remaining ships operate out of Davis-Monthan Air Base near Tucson, Ariz. Two planes, however, fly from South Vietnam's Bien Hoa air base over North Vietnam and Communist China, and Chinese Nationalist pilots use a few U-2s for reconnaissance flights over the mainland. The rest of the U-2s are mainly involved in scientific and military research, chasing thunderclouds as high as 12 miles above the earth to collect data about tornadoes, investigating clear-air-turbulence phenomena, and sampling the air for the radioactive evidence of nuclear explosions.

Successors: While the U-2s now carry out research tasks, the U.S. continues to obtain electronic and photographic data on Communist military installations through Samos photo satellites carrying infra-red and other sensors and through scores of flights near Communist countries by the SR-71, successor to the U-2. The SR-71, also designed by Lockheed's engineer Johnson, can fly faster and survey a greater amount of territory than the U-2. And even higher-flying and faster planes may be in the works at Kelly Johnson's fiefdom in the desert country of Antelope Valley, just north of Los Angeles. Now 58 and a vice president of Lockheed, Johnson is said to be designing more and better planes for the U.S. Government, but exactly what he is doing, no one will say. Johnson's motto, in fact, is "Be quick, be quiet, be on time."

Working with Johnson is another reticent veteran of the U-2 program, former pilot Powers. His hair graying at the temples and heavier than in his CIA flying days, Powers, now 37, is married to a former CIA psychometrist (he and his first wife, Barbara, were divorced in 1963). He test-flies U-2s that have been returned to Lockheed for overhauling and installation of new equipment.