



C-130 50th Anniversary Commemoration

2 September 2008

For the United States, 1946 was, to paraphrase Dickens, the best of times and the worst of times. The fascist powers had been vanquished, but the Soviet Union, one of the critical partners in that effort, had almost overnight become a dangerous adversary. Even worse, the USSR was a closed society. This made it exceedingly difficult to obtain the critical information U.S. leaders needed to understand the true Soviet threat.

In order to meet this challenge the United States was required to conduct a wide variety of bold intelligence operations. At times the so-called Cold War would turn hot in places like Korea and Vietnam. But because nuclear weapons were present, both Soviet and American leaders were averse to risking total war. Instead, for the duration of the conflict, both sides worked attentively to probe each other's capabilities and weaknesses. In this arena it was not only military superiority that mattered, but political and diplomatic as well. In short, in our nation's efforts to defeat the USSR, information was power. Aerial reconnaissance was one of the more valuable programs used to gather the critical data required to ascertain Soviet capabilities.

This dangerous work employed a wide variety of aircraft to skirt the borders of the USSR to gather both photographic and signals intelligence. The planes had to get close enough to get the job done while also taking great care to avoid entering Soviet airspace. The aircraft carried no weapons and Soviet fighters often took every opportunity to shoot the planes from the skies. Under these conditions, the aircrews and cryptologists needed to be not only competent, but also courageous.

In the early morning hours of September 2, 1958 just such a group was preparing for what they considered a routine C-130 reconnaissance flight along the Turkish Armenian border. The 7406th Support Squadron was formally stationed at Rhein-Main Air Base in Germany, but the group had been ordered to temporary duty at Incirlik, Turkey. The crew of flight 60528, like so many U.S. military units, was a cross section of America. Master Sergeant Petrochilos had served with distinction in WWII while Airmen Bourg and Moore were just starting their military careers and had spent far less time "off in the Wild Blue."



*I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above...
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.*

William Keats





The original plan was for the aircraft to fly a racetrack pattern between Van and Trabzon, Turkey. At no time was the plane supposed to be within 100 miles of Soviet airspace. Flight 60528 left the runway at 11:21 a.m. Incirlik time, at 12:42 p.m., the co-pilot; Captain John Simpson radioed Ankara control to inform them that the plane had reached Trabzon. That transmission would be the last word heard from the flight.

What happened next will forever remain a mystery. It is possible the aircrew, because Soviet navigational beacons in Armenia and Georgia were on similar frequencies to those in Trabzon and Van, became confused. What is known is that shortly after 1:00 pm, the aircraft crossed the Soviet border and was attacked by a squadron of Soviet MIGs from the 236th Fighter Air Division. To quote Larry Tart, author of *The Price of Vigilance*, “without even time for a Mayday call, 17 men, the majority of them in their late teens or early twenties were blasted out of the sky...”

At the time of the incident, Soviet authorities denied any involvement in the shoot-down. Even

when President Eisenhower, in an unprecedented move, released the intercepted conversations of the Soviet pilots the leaders of the USSR refused to take any responsibility for the attack. It would not be until decades later, during the tenure of Boris Yeltsin, that declassified Soviet documents would finally make it clear that all crewmembers had perished during the crash.

In the post Cold War period it is common for individuals to perceive the former Soviet Union as a lumbering nation state that contained the seeds of its own destruction.

History demonstrates however that the “Free World’s” triumph over the specter of worldwide communism did not come easily. It is instructive, however, to remember that while the Cold War was indeed a victory for the United States and its allies, it was a conflict that for the most part was not won on the battlefield. Instead, victory was secured by the countless groups of dedicated men and women who took it upon themselves, sometimes at the cost of their lives, to get the information our nation’s policy makers and war fighters needed to not only prepare for war, but more importantly to keep the peace. ■

