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The Washington Merry-Go-Round



U. S. HEARD RUSSIANS CHASING U-2

While Drew Pearson is en route to the summit conference his associate, Jack Anderson is covering the Washington scene.

By Jack Anderson

The terse radio exchanges between the Russian pilots who shot down an American spy plane over Sverdlovsk 1200 miles inside Russia were picked up by supersensitive listening devices in Turkey, it has now been learned.

The last words that crackled over the radio were one pilot's excited shout: "He's turning left!" Then silence.

Despite the great distance, the Red fliers' conversation was overheard distinctly through monitoring equipment which Uncle Sam uses to keep an ear to the ground along the Soviet border.

From official reports that no longer can be considered secret, this column has pieced together the dramatic story of Francis Powers' fateful flight into Premier Khrushchev's arms.

Powers was on the lookout for a space spectacular which the Russians had hinted they might attempt on May Day. His course took him over the missile center from which they were expected perhaps to launch a man into space. As it turned out, Powers provided the May Day spectacular.

Soviet Trap?

Some officials suspect he was lured into a trap which the Russians had baited with their May Day hints. But although Uncle Sam was curious about what the Russians might be up to, surveillance of the missile center was only a small part of his assignment. He was supposed to complete a photo-reconnaissance mission through the heart of Russia from the Pakistan border to Sverdlovsk, then left over Murmansk to the Norwegian air base at Bodo.



The weather determined the course and timing of his mission more than the Soviet's May Day plans. The upper altitude had to be free of moisture, so his high-soaring jet plane wouldn't leave a vapor trail. He also wanted to avoid clouds which might obscure his camera's vision.

Conclusion: It is unlikely the Russians had any advance warning of his coming, though their vigil may have been sharper than usual on May Day.

Powers posed as a civilian pilot flying weather reconnaissance missions for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration out of Adana, Turkey. Not even his wife was permitted to know of his true work.

He took off from Adana, as Khrushchev reported, on April 27. He stayed at Peshawar, Pakistan, until the weather was right for his daring mission.

Poisoned Needle

His orders did not call for him to commit suicide in order to avoid capture. In fact, he carried a survival kit which was supposed to help him keep alive in case of mishap. It was true the kit included a poisoned needle, however, which he was expected to conceal and use only to escape torture.

Powers cruised across Russia in the thin, blue-black air above 75,000 feet. As he approached Sverdlovsk our monitors picked up excited Russian commands which indicated he had been detected.

Even as the Soviet interceptors gave chase the American trackers were not unduly alarmed. A U-2 spy plane had been spotted once before over Russia, but on its lofty course it had kept out of Soviet reach and had fled home safely.

The Soviets have planes which can soar far above 75,000 feet, but they can't maneuver at the same level as the light, glider-like U-2.

The Russian shout "He's turning left!" indicated Powers was calmly following his prescribed flight plan which called for a left swing over Sverdlovsk.

What happened thereafter can only be conjectured. Khrushchev's statement suggests a rocket fragment may have crippled Powers' plane. Or the motor may have stalled, forcing him to dive below 40,000 feet to start it again. The first Russian report claimed he was bagged around 30,000 feet.



State's Fabrication

The news that Powers might be down in Russia was flashed immediately to Washington. Only the topmost officials knew what Powers was doing over Russia. They got together last Sunday for a frantic hush-hush conference. The State Department representative wanted to fabricate the story that Powers had reported an oxygen failure on a weather flight over Lake Van, Turkey. The Defense Department argued it was senseless to deny what Khrushchev probably would be able to prove.

The decision was referred to the White House which approved the State Department plan. Whether President Eisenhower was personally consulted isn't known. Certainly he should have been.

In a desperate attempt to make the phony story stick, a report of an oxygen failure over Lake Van was circulated through normal channels, and search planes were sent from Adana to comb the lake area for the mission plane.

Not until Khrushchev revealed Russia had captured Powers complete with his survival kit and espionage equipment did Secretary of State Herter decide it would be better to confess the truth before matters got any worse.