

TRAITOR or PATRIOT?

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THE STORY OF U-2 PILOT FRANCIS GARY POWERS

ON MAY 1, 1960, U.S. PILOT FRANCIS GARY POWERS WAS NAVIGATING HIS U-2 reconnaissance aircraft over the Ural mountains deep inside the Soviet Union, when suddenly a dull thump rocked the plane and a tremendous orange flash lit the cockpit and sky. “My God, I’ve had it now!” Powers exclaimed as his plane began spinning.

The unfolding drama reveals as much about aerial surveillance and high diplomacy during the Cold War as it does about personal courage in the face of sudden adversity.

The U-2 plane was essentially a powered glider capable of cruising at an altitude of over 60,000 feet. U-2s began reconnaissance missions over the USSR in 1956 and were equipped with high-resolution cameras to document Moscow’s missile build-up. The planes were designed by Lockheed, operated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA, aka the agency) and flown by civilian pilots “sheep dipped” from the U.S. Air Force and under contract to the Agency. In case of an incident, each plane carried an explosive charge to destroy the film and camera, and each pilot was offered an optional poison pin. These measures were meant to ensure that sensitive imagery intelligence would not fall into the wrong hands and reassure the pilot that he always had the option of taking his own life if he was captured and faced possible torture.

His projected flight from Peshawar, Pakistan to Bodø, Norway was to take 9 ½ hours and cover 3788 miles, most of it in Soviet airspace. However, at Sverdlovsk in the Urals he passed over two Soviet battalions equipped with new S-75 surface-to-air-missiles (SAM). It was one of the SAMs that exploded behind Powers and tore the flimsy U-2 apart. Another SAM, mistakenly fired, hit a MiG flying below Powers, killing the Soviet pilot. Against all odds, Powers was able to parachute safely to the ground where he was immediately arrested and taken for interrogation to the dreaded KGB headquarters at the Lubyanka in Moscow.

The disappearance of Powers’ U-2 occurred at a critical moment in U.S.-Soviet relations. The leaders of the four Allied nations of World War II—Dwight Eisenhower for the United States, Nikita Khrushchev for the Soviet Union, Harold Macmillan for Great Britain and Charles de Gaulle for France—were about to convene in Paris to discuss a range of issues troubling the relations between their states. Khrushchev, for one, hoped to make headway with his proposal to have Berlin neutralized and denuded of Western troops.

IN CASE OF AN INCIDENT EACH PILOT WAS OFFERED AN OPTIONAL POISON PIN.



Photo courtesy of Francis Gary Powers, Jr.

Ignorant of Powers' fate, CIA Deputy Director for Plans Richard Bissell informed President Eisenhower that the pilot's chance of survival was "one in a million." When the Soviets announced that a U.S. plane had penetrated their airspace and gone down, the State Department therefore replied deceptively that an American weather plane gone off course and possibly crashed in the USSR. The American cover story was issued under the assumption that the Soviets had not captured the pilot alive and available to corroborate their claim.

On 7 May, Khrushchev revealed to the Supreme Soviet and the world that Powers was alive, and to a chorus of "shame, shame" and "bandits, bandits" touted his poison pin and photographs allegedly taken by the U-2 camera. Against advice from the British prime minister and the U.S. ambassador to Moscow to stay silent, Eisenhower now publicly assumed full responsibility for the U-2 flight. On the opening day of the Paris summit, 16 May, Khrushchev demanded from Eisenhower an apology, an assurance that U-2 overflights over the Soviet Union cease and punishment of the guilty. Predictably, Eisenhower declined. In response, Khrushchev not only left the summit but also peremptorily cancelled a scheduled presidential visit to Moscow. America's public humiliation seemed complete.

Criticism quickly focused on Gary Powers. "Hero or Bum," one paper asked pointedly while lambasting Powers for neither using the poison needle to spare Eisenhower embarrassment nor destroying his camera equipment. *Newsweek* reported that espionage experts had expected Powers to perish and *Aviation Week* wrote of Powers' "embarrassing survival." Eisenhower angrily assumed Powers had "started talking as soon as he hit the ground." Khrushchev later wrote that Powers simply did not have the will to commit suicide and had told the Soviets everything in captivity. Meanwhile, Powers languished in a Soviet prison, unable to defend himself against the accusations and innuendo.

In 1962, Powers was swapped for a Soviet spy and returned to the United States where the CIA thoroughly debriefed him. The Agency came down firmly on Powers' side—the use of the poison pin was entirely optional, its final report concluded, and he only failed to activate the camera's destruct mechanism due to the extreme g-forces in his rapidly sinking plane. Also, the report pointed out, in case of capture he was at liberty to tell his captors all about his mission except for certain technical data. In short, Powers had acted in complete accordance with his instructions. The following year, he was awarded the CIA's coveted Intelligence Star. Still, the CIA's report was classified for many years and Powers' image remained tainted. Sadly, he died in a helicopter crash in 1977.

Powers' final vindication would not come until 2006 when two researchers, Timothy Naftali and Aleksandr Fursenko, discovered the notes of his interrogation in Moscow. Although questioned for eleven hours a day, every day, Powers said little of consequence and nothing proscribed by the CIA's policy for captured pilots. He even concealed from his captors the U-2's cruising altitude, how often he had overflowed Soviet territory and the names of his CIA superiors. He also refused to explain for several days how he had maintained radio contact with U.S. authorities. Overall, he displayed remarkable nerve, breaking out in tears only when his interrogators read him a comment from his father. When they suggested he was sent deliberately to scuttle the Paris summit, Powers' response was curt and patriotic: "I don't know why I was sent. There must have been good reasons."

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