

December 16, 2020

Aerial Reconnaissance

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, T. Gum, Site Admin.)

Even though the Korean War had come to a standstill a new form of warfare was being lit off between the United States and the USSR. To remain ahead of the curve, the ability to deliver substantial payloads of ordinance and conduct aerial reconnaissance was critical.

The history of the B-47 is relatively well known, and on this day in history (17 DEC 1947) it completed its first flight. The related, and subsequent, iterations of this six-engine subsonic long-range flyer are perhaps lesser known by the general public; the “B” standing for bomber/bombing and others based on this platform carrying various lettering respective to design or purpose.



DAYTON, Ohio -- Boeing RB-47H at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. (U.S. Air Force photo)

The RB-47H being a (*r*)econnnaissance outfitting of the B-47E platform, was a crucial option when dealing with an adversary well accomplished in deception and misinformation. The role played was quite simple – gather intelligence on the size, location, and capability of the Russian air defense and radar networks. From 1955 to the mid 1960s the RB-47H filled this role until being replaced by the RC-135... arguably a more capable option.

The RB-47H was capable of long range missions due to it’s base-design, and successfully operated out of countless airfields and bases. The positioning of these airfields of course played a strategic role in staging and coordinating defensive measures when an RB was intercepted.

One unfortunate interception occurred 1960 incident resulting in a shutdown of an RB-47H by the Soviets. The American crew, part of the 55th Reconnaissance Wing, was performing intelligence gathering along the arctic coast of the Soviet nation, in the Barents Sea when it was shot down by a MiG-19.



United States Air Force RB-47 pilots recently released from the Soviet Union greet their wives upon arriving at Andrews Air Force Base, along with Pres. Kennedy. Credit: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston



U-2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers sits in the witness chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, holding a model U-2 plane, in Washington, D.C. on March 6, 1962. It was his first public appearance since his release by the Russians on Feb. 10. Credit: AP Photo

The RB-47 that was shot down resulting in the capture of the surviving crewman. Ultimately the two crewman were returned to the United States as an act of goodwill between Nikita Khrushchev and incoming President, John F. Kennedy.

Interestingly, a Pennsylvania connection to this time period and AO (area of operation) – this particular shootdown occurred two months after the U2 incident involving Francis Gary Powers (adjacent picture)... relative of Mr. Gary Powers, lecturer at the PA Military Museum, who's cousin, Francis Jr., will be lecturing on this very topic in the future.

Unfortunately, the business of reconnaissance is dangerous, including innovation and practice. Our aviators operating in various altitudes performing no-fail missions are critical in ensuring the United States, militarily and politically, remain aware of the evolving battlespace we find ourselves in... being proactive is far better than reactive, though the line between is often a matter of fractions.