



STRATOJETS OVER THE USSR

On May 8, 1954, three United States Air Force Boeing RB-47E Stratojets took off from Fairford, Gloucestershire, and headed round the north coast of Norway to Murmansk on the northern coast of the USSR. One of these aircraft was about to undertake one of the most remarkable "peacetime" missions of the Cold War. As they neared Murmansk, two aircraft turned round and flew back. The third dashed south, through the Kola Peninsula and deep into the Soviet Union. The crew of that aircraft were Hal Austin, Carl Holt and Vance Heavilin. The story of their flight had remained secret until I interviewed them in 1993.

The RB-47E, the reconnaissance variant of the B-47, had been introduced at the end of 1953, and the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (SRW) was one of the first units to receive the new type. In a vital test of the aircraft's capabilities, Hal Austin and his crew were on a top secret mission to take photographs of a number of Soviet military sites.

"We proceeded due south from the Murmansk area. I don't recall the specific targets now, but they were typically airfields and we were taking radar photography as well", says Austin, a tall, thin, amiable man who speaks with a deep Texan drawl. "The weather was gorgeous, we could see forever. We had been overland maybe 50 miles when three fighters came up, looked us over. By the time we'd been over Soviet territory an hour another group came up, and this time it was at least six aircraft. A little later on another six aircraft came up, and this time they were not MiG-

In the spring of 1954 a USAF Boeing RB-47E Stratojet flew deep into the USSR to photograph Soviet military installations — and, despite being hit by gunfire from a MiG-17, made it back to its UK base. Shrouded in secrecy, the details of this and similar missions have only recently been uncovered, as PAUL LASHMAR relates

15s. It became obvious that this group of aircraft were told to engage us. As we turned due west the third group of aircraft made pursuit passes on us."

Much to the Americans' alarm, the Soviet fighters turned out to be MiG-17s capable of matching the RB-47's performance, unlike the MiG-15s, which the Stratojet could outpace.

"Then the first aircraft more or less flew right up our tailpipes. We knew they were armed, because I saw tracers going both above and below the airplane. And I hollered at my copilot, Carl Holt. He said, 'The guns won't work', and I said, 'Well, you'd better kick something back there and get the damn things to work a little bit anyway, or we may be a dead duck here'."

Carl Holt recalled: "At one point I counted about ten MiG fighter planes,

trying to shoot us out of the sky. They could keep up with us, but after they made one pass at us, then they'd have to drop down and circle back up to make another shot at us, and then they'd drop down. I managed to get a few shots off at the pursuing aircraft, enough to make them keep their distance."

"Well it's either the third or fourth aircraft, I don't recall now, which then hit our aircraft", said Austin. "It wasn't much, but it was enough to feel it as though you'd hit a bunch of rough air. It turned out we got hit in the left wing, and near the fuselage."

In the nick of time, Austin's crew flew into Finnish airspace. Heading back towards England, Holt discovered that the aircraft was leaking and running out of fuel. Next they found that only one channel was working on their radio — the wrong one for the mission — as they called for a tanker. Fortunately, a friend of Austin's, KC-97 tanker pilot Jim Rigley, was on strip alert that day at Fairford and recognised Austin's voice making desperate calls for assistance.

Austin said, "Jim tried to get clearance to take off, but some other activity was going on, on the base, and they kept denying him clearance. So he finally told them he was going to take off anyway. He got a couple of air operations violations for doing that, but he took off. And Holt was worried that we were not going to be able to get the aircraft on to a base at all. He said, 'We got no fuel left'. When I saw a glistening of an aircraft in the far distance, the weather was gorgeous in England that day, too, you could see forever, I says, 'That's got to be a KC-97,

Heading photograph, a Boeing B-47 Stratojet arriving at Fairford on June 5, 1953. The trip from Florida took 5hr 40min. Right, the spectacular selection of cameras available for use by the three-man crews of the RB-47E reconnaissance aircraft.

so I'm going to head for it'. Well, we did head for it, and old Carl Holt swears to this day that when we moved in underneath that tanker, and hooked up on the boom, we had no fuel left for the aircraft."

The whole flight and its route over Russia was secret, and even Capt Austin's groundcrew were told nothing about it, but everyone knew something special had happened.

"And I couldn't believe how big a crowd we had when we parked the aircraft; the other crews had already returned some time before", Austin recalled. "We parked the aircraft. I've never seen so many people round an aircraft in my life. And the crew chief sticks his head up there, with eyes as big as dollars: 'What in hell did you run into?' Well, we didn't tell him what it was. But it wasn't a bird, as he thought."

Several days later a Helsinki newspaper reported an air battle between jet aircraft of unknown nationality over northern Finland. The Finnish foreign ministry denied that any such fight had taken place. The paper said that residents in Lapland had heard jets shooting and added, "It is possible that American and Russian planes had been involved." A spokesman at US Air Force headquarters in Wiesbaden said that no American aircraft had been in the area named by the newspaper.

The mission had shown the limitations of the RB-47, which was out of date when it went into service. Although it could



fly faster than the MiG-15, it could not outpace the new MiG-17s. With a service ceiling of only 39,000ft (compared with the Canberra's 50,000ft-plus), it could not climb above the enemy. Although it was to remain the mainstay of USAF strategic reconnaissance for some years, it was really only viable for the electronic intelligence (ELINT) task.

Austin and his crew were summoned to meet Gen Curtis LeMay at Strategic Air Command's headquarters at Omaha in the USA. When they arrived they were taken into a secret briefing room. Carl Holt recalls: "I said, 'General LeMay,

Below, an RB-47E taking on fuel from a KC-97 tanker over Lockbourne, Northern Ohio, circa 1954.

they were trying to shoot us down'. And he says, 'What do you think they would do to you, give you an ice cream cone?' Everybody got a big chuckle out of that. But we survived. We did our piece for history, and now realise how important it was; we had done a little thing to keep the world at peace."

LeMay wanted to decorate them for bravery. Hal Austin recalls: "He said, 'I tried to get your guys a silver star but you gotta explain that to Congress and everybody else in Washington when you do something like that, so here's a couple of DFCs each we'll give you for that mission'. There wasn't anybody in the room except the wing commander and us three guys, General LeMay and his intelligence officer."

General Curtis E. LeMay had ended the Second World War as a war hero for his command of the strategic bombing of Japan. He was appointed head of Strategic Air Command (SAC) in 1948, a command demoralised by the post-war run-down of the air force. With the onset of the Cold War, LeMay rapidly turned SAC into a highly disciplined military force and the USA's primary offensive nuclear force during the 1950s.

LeMay had perfectly legitimate military intelligence reasons for overflights. In the first Cold War years of the late 1940s the West's reconnaissance operations against the Communist Bloc had grown rapidly. The American military's immediate concern was to find how many airfields the Soviets had for a new generation of bombers which brought the American mainland into range for the first time.

Photo-reconnaissance aircraft would fly over the Soviet borders with special oblique cameras capable of photograph-



ing targets dozens of miles inside the Soviet Bloc. Electronic intelligence flights probed the Soviet air defences and recorded the radar and radio transmissions. Every day the Soviet borders were being patrolled, probed and infringed by NATO aircraft, much to the mounting irritation of the Soviets. But none of these aircraft could come within range of the Soviets' major bomber airfields. That required overflights.

Don't tell the President

The mission flown by Austin's crew appears to have been one of at least three organised by LeMay behind President Eisenhower's back. From 1947 until the spring of 1950 the USAF was able to overfly the borders of the Soviet Union with impunity. For example, from 1947 the 46th (later the 72nd) Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, based in Alaska, used specially stripped-down Superfortresses to photograph large swathes of the northern Soviet Union. A number of well informed sources say that the USAF used the giant mixed-powerplant Convair RB-36, carrying 14 cameras in two of its four bomb bays, to conduct intrusion flights in 1950. One, writer Vic Flintheim in *Air Pictorial* of June 1971, said, "... although it is unlikely that long overflights took place during the period".

At first the Soviets did not have the defence capabilities to intercept the intruders. But in the spring of 1950 the first spyplane casualty, a Consolidated PB4Y-2 Privateer of US Navy Squadron VP-26 on patrol over the Baltic, along the Latvian coast, was shot down by Soviet Lavochkin La-11 fighters.

The shootdown increased tension between the USA and USSR, and, worried that it might provide an excuse for Soviet military action, President Truman banned overflights. This ban was to stay, with the few exceptions of limited permission, including the U-2 operations.

Investigating the true history of USAF overflights is difficult because they are still wrapped in secrecy and misinformation. The confusion is best shown by the memoirs of Gen Nathan Twining. In



1950 he was USAF Vice Chief of Staff, deputy to Gen Vandenberg. He says that in the autumn of 1950 he was elected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to tell President Truman about aeroplanes to make overflights of the USSR. Twining took the papers and maps to the Oval Office, where Truman studied them: "Chiefs all buy this?", asked the President. "Yes, sir. We're very anxious to start on this programme right away. We realise the seriousness of it, but we feel this is the only way we're going to get this information." By Twining's account, the President

signed the authorisation and said, "Listen, when you get back there, you tell General Vandenberg from me: *Why the devil hasn't he been doing this before?*" Twining later said, "One day, I had 47 aircraft flying all over Russia and we never heard a word out of them. Nobody complained."

I have been unable to find any corroboration of Twining's gung-ho account. Declassified USAF documents, for example, only record border flights. The USAF spyplanes shot down by the Soviets in this period were mostly ELINT aircraft flying in international airspace, or just inside Soviet airspace. Under the Freedom of Information Act I obtained a top-secret report by the USAF research

Below, an RB-45C photo-reconnaissance aircraft takes on fuel from a KB-29P tanker — Lockbourne AFB, Ohio, 1951.



Left, the view from the cockpit of an RB-47E in mid-1954. Note the vortex generators on the wings; these reduced turbulence and delayed the onset of high-speed stall effects.

Top right, a reunion, held in Kansas City in September 1993, of RB-47E overflight crews who had been based at Lockbourne AFB, Ohio, in May 1954. From left to right, Vance Heavilin (navigator), Hal Austin (pilot), Carl Holt (copilot) and the author.



Lower right, 43 years ago at Lockbourne AFB, 1953. From left to right, Hal Austin (pilot), Gene Williams (copilot) and Vance Heavilin (navigator).



think-tank, RAND, entitled *Case studies of Actual and Alleged Overflights, 1930-55*. In its 400 pages it makes no mention of Twining's overflights. The same applies to Soviet air defence logs for the period, listing intrusions by foreign aircraft.

Certainly, SAC used the Korean War as cover to conduct reconnaissance missions for nuclear targeting over China. Documents in the Library of Congress reveal that the commander of the Far East Air Force had authority to sanction missions over some parts of China and Manchuria — all other areas requiring Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) authority — but Russia was off the menu. North American RB-45Cs were attached to the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. A telegram from LeMay states that, in the event of nuclear war with Russia the 91st, based at Yokota, would have to perform all of the Far East pre-strike missions on the day.

Only this year it has been discovered that, in 1952, Truman was asked to approve two overflights of the far eastern Soviet Union. He appears to have authorised one flight known as the "Northern run", but he certainly was not gung-ho about the missions.

A memorandum to the Chairman of the JCS from the Secretary of Defense shows that Truman refused to sanction the second mission: "With respect to southern run, the President expressed concern at the length of the flight and depth of penetration, with particular apprehension expressed over the fact the egress route virtually parallels the

ingress route". Details of this flight have been uncovered by American historians Don Welzenbach and Cargill Hall, in the archives of NACA (NASA's predecessor). They have also traced the pilot, Colonel E. Hillman.

The mission was requested by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defense, and was to fly over the Chukotskiy Peninsula across the Bering Strait from Alaska, where Soviet aircraft might converge and prepare for a surprise atomic attack on America.

Change of role

The RB-47 had not yet entered service, so the unusual step was taken of using bomber variant aircraft and crews from the 306th Bombardment Wing, the only unit with B-47s, based at McDill AFB. Hillman was deputy commander of the Wing. The mission, assigned the title Project 52 AFR-18, was flown from Eileson AFB in Fairbanks, Alaska, on October 15, 1952. The route entailed flying past Wrangel Island, then turning south-west into Siberia.

"When we had finished covering two of our five targets, taking radar and visual photography, the instruments on board announced that we were being painted and tracked by Soviet radar", says Colonel Hillman. "A few minutes later my copilot, Ed Gunter, announced that he had Soviet fighters in sight to the rear desperately climbing to intercept us. Gunter kept his eyes on the ascending aircraft but they had scrambled too late."

The exit route passed south of Egvekinot, then through the coastline of Chukotskiy. Hillman continues: "As events transpired, we completed photographing the remaining three sites without encountering any more fighters. Altogether the mission spanned seven and three-quarter hours in the air and we had overflown some 800 miles of Soviet territory". He says: "Six months later I was assigned to Headquarters, Strategic Air Command; I was summoned to the CINSAC's office. When I entered, General LeMay arose and came round the desk, closed the door and without a word pinned on my shirt a Distinguished Flying Cross. When he saw my puzzled expression, he flashed a very slight and very rare smile and said 'It's secret'".

There are American records of numerous border flights in the period. One USAF document, *Information on Operation Pieface*, dated early 1953, says: "This operation involves the use of very large camera with unusual capabilities, carried by a RC-97, for photographic reconnaissance". It continues: "A similar aircraft operated in Europe during the summer of 1952. A special photographic mission, the only one of its kind performed to date, was performed on September 16, 1952, under the operational control of USAFE". According to the document the aircraft flew from Wiesbaden to "13° east 55° north", which I locate off the Danish Island of Mons, north of Rostock. The unit was the 7499th Composite Squadron.

Other documents refer to the existence of two K-30-equipped RB-50s "in UK for a special reconnaissance mission". (The K-30 was the USAF's extraordinary camera with a lens of 100in focal length.) One of these aircraft was transferred to the Alaskan Command for "late summer reconnaissance" off the Siberian Coast.

All of the evidence indicates that the overflight ban continued through Eisenhower's Presidency. General Andrew Goodpaster, Eisenhower's defence aide from 1954, says, "President Eisenhower, on a number of occasions, said that he was not going to have members of the armed forces flying over the Soviet Union. That amounted to an act of war."



Above, a formation of B-47s overhead Seattle, Washington, having flown non-stop from England in October 1954, bound for March Air Force Base.

This is why pilots for the CIA's U-2 overflights project, which began in mid-1956, were "retired" from the USAF, "sheep-dipped" with new civilian identities.

The overflight ban seems to have been total on the western side of the Communist Bloc, where Soviet air defences were at their best. As shown in previous *Aeroplane Monthly* articles, SAC was desperate for overflight intelligence, and asked the RAF to carry out a number of deep-penetration flights between 1952 and 1954. All required the permission of the British Prime Minister.

The last and most spectacular of these flights, three aircraft flying deep into the USSR on the night of April 29, 1954, occurred just eight days before Hal Austin's RB-47 mission. It was flown by RAF crews using RB-45Cs of the 91st SRW, based at Sculthorpe in East Anglia, a different section of the unit to which Hal Austin's crew belonged.

It is possible that LeMay considered that asking the RAF to do SAC's dirty work was just too humiliating, and decided that the USAF must do it. A more sinister interpretation is that LeMay, supported by the largely hawkish Joint Chiefs of Staff, was putting into action his own belief that overflights could be used to force the USSR into confrontation while it was militarily inferior, a theory that abounded in USAF circles at the time.

There are rumours of further single RB-47 deep-penetration flights into the western side of the Soviet Bloc, but so far I have found no hard evidence.

However, two years after Hal Austin's flight, LeMay ordered an even more spectacular invasion of Soviet airspace. In April 1956, he sent nine RB-47 photo-reconnaissance aircraft from the 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (SRW) up to Thule Air Force Base in Greenland for a secret mission. The officer in charge was General "Shorty" Wheelus. The plan was to penetrate the northern region of the Soviet Union simultaneously over a

broad front. In addition there were four ELINT RB-47Es of the 55th SR Wing offshore to monitor the response of the Soviet defences.

Colonel Joe Gyulavics, now retired in Florida, was one of the 55th SRW's pilots: "In 1956 we were sent up on a special mission. There were three or four crews of the 55th SRW. I think we were sent to Alaska and landed in Greenland although it could have been the other way round. Other 55th SRW pilots include Bob Hubbard and Bert Barrett and Cosmo Grant. I think it was called *Home Run*. The 26th SRW had a major, John Lappo, a flamboyant type. He was later court-martialled for flying under a Mississippi bridge". Gyulavics says that they were told they were unlikely to encounter any Soviet aircraft.

First-hand account

John Lappo now lives in Alaska. In 1993 I met him and heard his account of the mission.

"In 1956 we were notified that we were going to go up to Thule, Greenland, for approximately 45 days. I think we took nine aircraft up there. And we had the photo recon capability, and they wanted pictures of targets to find out whether they were in exactly the same places that they thought. So we verified these by taking the pictures and getting the co-ordinates of the targets in northern Russia. Flying out of Thule we almost always went right over the North Pole and into Russia. I flew three missions out of there, but I only can recall two of them, out of Thule, and we all went over the North Pole, and we went over the island of Novaya Zemlya."

With the RB-47 the flights had to be done as quickly as possible. If they were caught by the Soviet fighters they would

have stood little chance, and one crew had a narrow squeak. It was Lappo's crew who had the most exciting trip on that first mission. Because of thick cloud he overshot the target and needed to circuit again, causing a risky delay. "We went in there about 30 miles, solid overcast... So I asked the crew if they were with me on making that 360° turn and they told me, 'Well, the General told us not to make a 360'. And I told them, 'Hey, if we don't get that target, he's going to have to send another aircraft after it'."

His was the last aeroplane out; it was closely pursued by MiGs and narrowly escaped being shot down.

"I just poured the coal to it and started climbing at what we call buffet", said Lappo. "When we were going too fast, the aircraft would buffet. I just kept it at buffet, all the way, and the copilot, of course, is the radar gunner, and he says, 'John, I got three targets back here. What should I do?'. I said when they get close enough, lock on them. And if they start firing, just fire back. But wait for my order for it. And we went out there, I can't tell you time-wise, but we went out there long enough that he had them at 3,000yd and locked on, and it was a short time after that they broke off, and went on back."

"When we got back to Thule, the General says, 'John, we told you not to make that 360', and I explained to him why I did. And he says 'Well you should not have, but I wish I had a squadron of you'. Consequently I felt better."

In a massive secret operation, nine SAC aircraft penetrated Soviet airspace three times in one month to take photographs.

Another RB-47 captain who took part in the operation, Colonel Richard McNab, said, "When the missions were over we were given awards as a unit. It was not publicised, it was played down, because it was, at the time, it was high tension and not the time to mention stuff like that."

The Kremlin chiefs were furious, but fortunately they did not retaliate. The Soviet military writer Lt Col Anatolij Doukuchaev recently said of these overflights, "Specialists of the day could not rule out that there were nuclear weapons on board". Remarkably, the Soviets did not complain to the State Department about these flights. General Goodpaster was responsible for giving Eisenhower's approval for overflights, and I asked him about these missions.

"I would be astounded (a) that it happened, and (b) that I don't remember it if it did happen. And I do think that I would have known, because that was my job. I was the Defense Liaison Officer in Eisenhower's office. And I doubt that the Air Force would have ventured into anything like that on their own. That's why I say it's astounding to me to hear reports that such flights did in fact occur."

All of the declassified U-2 documents that have been released tend to confirm Goodpaster's statements. They show Eisenhower as being very reluctant to sanction even overflights by the U-2, which was theoretically immune to the Soviet air defences.

LeMay's nose had been put out of joint by the assignment of the U-2 programme to the CIA. LeMay's biography gives an account of the struggle for control of the project. "The CIA fought him from the start and finally, Gen Nathan Twining signed an agreement accepting a sub-

ordinate role for SAC in the U-2 programme." LeMay was angry that SAC no longer had control over the assessment of intelligence on the Soviet air threat. Talking to a biographer, LeMay claimed that at one point in the mid-Fifties he flew the entire SAC reconnaissance force over the city of Vladivostok.

"It wasn't my idea," he hastened to explain in recalling the incident, "I was ordered to do it. They [the Eisenhower administration's intelligence chiefs] were worried about something that was going on in Vladivostok. So I laid out a mission. From Guam or the Philippines. Maybe fifty 'planes. Maximum altitude about 40,000ft. We picked a clear day and all of our electronic reconnaissance 'planes crisscrossed the area. They practically mapped the place. Two of our 'planes saw some MiGs but there were no interceptions. As far as I know, the Russians never said anything about it."

There is no supporting evidence for this claim. But what is certain is that, on December 11, 1956, LeMay sent three Martin RB-57s over Vladivostok. The modified American variant of the Canberra had really replaced the RB-47 as the only PR type (other than the U-2) that could successfully intrude against the now much tougher Soviet defence system. This time the Soviets went public and complained bitterly. The Department of State's reply was: "A

thorough investigation has revealed that the only authorised American Air Force flights in general area of Sea of Japan were normal training activities. If, however, USSR would offer information to enable positive identification of aircraft allegedly involved, or otherwise establish proof of allegation, US Government would be pleased to conduct a further study of the matter."

A still-unreleased White House minute shows that Eisenhower was furious and rebuked the USAF. Although I can find no documents which show whether Eisenhower ever found out about the earlier overflights, it was not the first time that the President had caught the USAF exceeding its remit. From 1954 the USAF had run a series of balloon operations against the Soviet Union. The unmanned balloons, each carrying a camera, were sent across Russia and picked up. The operations suffered from severe problems and cock-ups. Many balloons fell short into Soviet hands, sparking major diplomatic incidents. Despite Eisenhower's protests, the USAF continued to exceed its limits, finally leading him to cut off the project's finances.

Why LeMay ordered a series of highly provocative missions apparently without the President's knowledge is a question yet to be answered.

Paul Lashmar's book *Spyflights of the Cold War* is to be published by Alan Sutton Ltd at the end of 1996.