Interview with Harold R. Austin

Harold R. Austin
Colonel, United States Air Force (Retired)
Served in World War II, Korean War, Vietnamese Conflict and the Cold War
Piloted one of the first Cold War Reconnaissance Missions over the Soviet Union on May 8, 1954
Served in the Strategic Air Command and at the Pentagon
Interviewed on 15 July 2004 in Mr. Austin's home
Riverside, California

This is an interview with Harold R. Austin and I am Rick Appleton, the interviewer. Today is Thursday, July 15, 2004 and this interview is taking place in Mr. Austin's home in Riverside, California as part of the Riverside Veterans History Project, a Riverside Public Library Partnership with the Library of Congress.

O.K. Why don't we start out just by giving your name and where you were born and when.

Austin: My name is Harold R. Austin. I go by Hal and when I was a kid I went by the initials H.M., so anybody looking on the internet will find Harold, Hal and H.M. My dad's name was Harold Merle so that's where the H.M. came from, but that's another story. I was born in Sweetwater, Oklahoma August 28, 1924. When I was four years old my folks moved to Brownfield, Texas.

Appleton: What did your dad do?

Austin: My dad was a sharecropper. He was a day laborer when I was a kid. My mom was only sixteen and my dad eighteen when I was born. So, as you can see, my dad hadn't done much up until that point in time. But he was very fortunate. He was so honest and such a hard worker that he got to be a sharecropper. A fellow by the name of Aut Graham in Brownfield, Texas had a lot of land and in those days . . . we're talking about back in the late '20's and early '30's . . . a 160 acres of land was a standard farm. My dad was hired to run a 160 acre farm on a third and fourth, a third of the cash crop and a fourth of the feed crop, and our primary money crop in those days was cotton.

We were on a farm about five miles south Wellman, Texas where I started school which was about twelve miles south of Brownfield, Texas, which is just a wide place in the road south of Lubbock.

Appleton: Now Brownfield is a town. Not a military field.

Austin: A town of about 2,500 population I think, when I went to school there. It's probably doubled in size, maybe as much as 5,000 by now.

Appleton: Still a small town.

Colonel Harold R. "Hal" Austin poses in this official photograph while assigned to the Pentagon in October 1967.

Austin: Yes on the plains in West Texas, south of Lubbock. I started school when I was six years old. I rode a Shetland pony for the first two years of school. Then I changed schools to Hunter, in the opposite direction from Wellman. Another country school and I got a full size horse to ride to school.

Appleton: How far did you have to go by horse and pony?

Austin: About five miles on the Shetland pony and about three miles in a different direction to Hunter school. Wellman was also a country school but it had a couple of grocery stores and a cotton gin.

Appleton: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Austin: Yes. I have five brothers and sisters. I'm the oldest. By the way, our dad passed away when he was only 59. My mom died in 2002, she was 94. I have three sisters and two brothers.

I'm about six years older than my oldest sister and my youngest sister is twenty years younger than I am. Both of my brothers were also career Air Force officers.

Appleton: How did you get interested in joining the military? Was it the Army Air Corps at that time?

Austin: My dad moved to a different farm about a mile and a half out of Brownfield, Texas when I was in junior high school. There were Barnstormers, flying Spaads or Jenny's; I'm not sure but probably Jenny's. Anyway, they were World War I type airplanes the guys flew around the country. They came through Brownfield when I was about eight or nine years old. I don't remember exactly my age, but one of my mom's brothers, Cecil Miller was working for my dad that summer, so we had heard these airplanes were coming so we rode to town on horseback. For five dollars, which was a whole lot of money in those days, you'd get about a fifteen minute ride in one of the airplanes. My uncle said, "Do you want to go?" and I said, "You bet!" Well, from that time on I was hooked on being an airplane pilot.

Appleton: That's wonderful. Now, when would this have been?

Austin: It was in the 1932-1933 timeframe.

Appleton: That's a tough time to be in farming, but an exciting time to be riding an airplane.

Austin: Right in the middle of the Depression, you know, in the early '30's. But my dad hung in there. He only had a fourth grade education and my mom a sixth grade country school education. Mom later finished high school when she was in her 50's. My dad was an honest farmer and did real well for himself. He raised all six of us kids and got all but two through college. Of course, I was separate. Dad always said he had two families. He had me and then he had the other five kids. My being six years older than my oldest sister had something to do with it. If it hadn't been for World War II, I would probably never had the opportunity to fulfill my dream of flying airplanes.

Appleton: Sure. When did you actually join the service?

Austin: Well, I graduated from high school in 1941. Texas only had ten grades in those days in high school so I graduated in 1941; I made the first and second grade in one year. I think that was a mistake my mom made, but, be that as it may, so I was only sixteen when I graduated from high school. I went on to college at the School of Mines at El Paso. Now it's the University of Texas, El Paso. I had almost finished the second semester and the Country was gearing up then for World War II. I figured I had an opportunity to work, I had a deferment. My dad had insisted I take a deferment because he was a farmer and I could also get a deferment for going to college.

When the Army Air Corps dropped the requirement for two years of college to get into Aviation Cadets, I signed up for the Reserves.

Appleton: Yes. You were ready. Before we get into that, you must have been then in your first year of college in December of 1941. (Austin: Yes, I was.) Can you remember what it was like on December 7th?

Austin: Absolutely. I remember vividly December 7th. It was a Sunday. In order to afford to go to college, I was working at night at a motel and later a resort hotel, about five miles west of El Paso, called Ranch-o-tel. I worked the night shift so I could go to school in the daytime and Sunday was my day off. Typically, a couple of us that worked the night shift would go to the movies. I do remember the first time I heard about Pearl Harbor. We didn't have wheels so one of the other guys would take us to El Paso. Then when we were walking toward the theater, going by a store that had a radio on, we stopped to listen wondering all kinds of things about what had happened.

Appleton: What was the conversation then from the people around you?

Austin: Well, I remember hearing President Roosevelt's words. I'm a little fuzzy on what was going on at the time because commentators were unusual in those days. Nowadays it's not unusual to have people on radio and T.V. going on and on about 24 hours a day when something happens. But, in those days it was rather unusual to hear a discussion about what was going on at Pearl Harbor. They were also repeating that all soldiers were to report back to their duty stations.

Appleton: Even before war was declared the next day?

Austin: Yes, I remember that vividly about the troops. So we went on to the movies and I didn't see any soldiers in uniform. Of course Fort Bliss is in El Paso, so normally you'd see soldiers all over town because build-up of the military had been going on since 1940. In those days the soldiers wore uniforms all the time on or off military bases.

Appleton: O.K. So, that day sticks out in your mind?

Austin: Vividly. I can't remember all the words they were saying but I remember just wondering what all that meant.

Appleton: Did that change your mind about whether you wanted to join? Or did it encourage you to think that it might be possible . . .?

Austin: Well, absolutely. You had to go through the local Draft Board to find out those kinds of things in those days. I found out about the two years of college to join the Aviation Cadets. I rather quickly decided to stay on my farm deferment and school deferment. Then when they dropped the two year college requirement in early 1943 I heard about that so I signed up for the Reserves.

Appleton: You talk about a farm deferment. What was that?

Austin: Well, if you were eighteen you had to sign up for the draft. I don't remember all the categories but there was a deferment for farmers and also a deferment if you were going full time to college. Once I signed up with the Draft Board, for the Reserves, (to go into the Aviation Cadet program) that also deferred me from being called otherwise.

I had already dropped out of college at that point. They were building an air base at Deming, New Mexico, which when finished trained bombardiers and navigators. I was driving a truck. Then in August of '43 I got called by the Draft Board that I had been selected to go to the Aviation Cadet program. So I joined the service on 3 September 1943.

Appleton: Then at that point you went into training?

Austin: I went to Fort Bliss for my physical. From there to what's now Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas for basic training. Then for those of us who did not have two years of college, they had a College Training Detachment (CTD) so, after basic training I was sent to Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa for the normal three months of concentrated schooling. We actually wound up staying there longer than that. In fact I missed two pilot classes slipping from 44K to 45B because we had a streptococcus infection go through the troops. I was one of about twenty guys that never got sick, so we spent better than a month acting as nurses and helping out.

Appleton: When you finished your college training at Coe College, then what happened?

Austin: I was shipped from there to Santa Ana, California for pre-flight. Then, to Lancaster for primary flying school, flying Stearman airplanes at a civilian contract school.

Appleton: I was going to ask you what airplanes you were flying. I guess you've seen them out at March Air Force...

Austin: Oh, yes. We have a gorgeous Stearman on the floor at the March Field Air Museum.

Appleton: So it was a civilian school contracted to the military.

Austin: Yes, we had all civilian instructors.

Appleton: So this was 1943?

Austin: No. 1944 by the time we got there.

Appleton: So you're nineteen or twenty years old then.

Austin: I joined the military service on the 3rd of September 1943 a few days after my nineteenth birthday.

Appleton: And that was the absolute minimum? You had to be nineteen?

Austin: No. Eighteen. But I had worked the college and the farm deferment with my concentration on getting into the Aviation Cadet Program.

Appleton: So, after your primary training, where did you go then?

Austin: From Lancaster we went to basic flying training, flying AT-6s at Marana Air Base, north of Tucson, Arizona. Then to advanced flying school at Marfa, Texas.

Appleton: At that point where were you assigned?

Austin: Well, I graduated from pilot training 15 April 1945 as a pilot and 2nd Lieutenant. Twenty-two of us were selected out of my class to go to central instructor's school. Following training we wound up at Luke Field, Phoenix, Arizona. Our purpose there was to get the combat returnees from Europe recurrent and checked out in the AT-6. Now, this may sound kind of silly but in those days, as a 2nd Lieutenant I made $125.00 a month. My flying pay was 50% of that. Well, the same thing applied to the Captains, Majors and so forth, coming back from combat missions over

Europe. They were at Luke for re-training and to get their four hours a month for their 50% flight pay. Training and maintaining currency getting ready to go to fight Japan. There was a big push in spring and summer in 1945 to get ready to go to the Western Pacific.

Appleton: Now, let's talk about that. The war in Europe was ending in May.

Austin: I graduated from flying school in April 1945, just three weeks before the war was over. They had started delaying the pilot training classes behind us because the need for pilots had decreased. The same thing was going on with navigators and bombardiers, too. About half of my pilot class graduated as flight officers rather than 2nd lieutenants.

At Luke Field there were a few 1st lieutenants, but most returnees were captains or majors. They were scary to us because here we are, twenty or twenty-one year old guys working all of a sudden with captains and majors who had been like God during our training program. There were also P-40s and P-38s and other airplanes to fly but we used AT-6s primarily to get these guys recurrent. The big push was getting ready to go to the Western Pacific sometime in the June, July, August 1945 timeframe.

I don't remember the numbers exactly anymore, but you couldn't hardly get in the Officer's Club for the number of pilots we had at Luke just waiting to do this retraining. So we were flying as instructors, four flights a day minimum, in the back seat of the AT-6.

Appleton: Were they very teachable?

Austin: Well, they wanted to fly. They wanted to fly the AT-6 like the P-51 or P-47, and it didn't fly that way. For example, in the month of July of 1945, we lost twenty-two pilots from crashes. The AT-6 had a front and back seat so if we'd get one pilot current, then we'd put two guys in the same airplane to get their training. There might be five or six airplanes taking off around the same time and they'd rat race and play combat-type flying. We didn't have a real structured training program for them after they were checked out, which was bad news. It took about four to five flights to get them checked out. In my later career in the Air Force I found out it is absolutely necessary to have a structured program for training. But anyway these guys would go out over the Serra Estrela Mountains south of Phoenix, our practice area, and they'd get too low, and the AT-6 wouldn't do the things they wanted it to do, so they'd run into the mountains or into each other.

We were changing base commanders (they were the Top Dog on base in those days) fairly frequently. I'm not sure of all the reasons why, but in August of 1945 we killed twenty-four pilots. That ties in because there was a real push in August to keep these guys current and ready to go to the Western Pacific. All of that stopped when the Atomic Bomb was dropped.

Appleton: And of course you had no idea . . .

Austin: All I could see was how busy we were flying and they would have pushed us into flying more but it was so hot there in the summer. Remember, we're talking about a time before air conditioning.

Appleton: We've talked about getting ready for the push to Japan.

Austin: To the Far East as a build up to attack Japan. Of course a lot of bombing with B-29s was already going on in Japan. We were not fully aware of it because we had all fighter pilots at Luke Field because it was a fighter pilot training base.

Appleton: And those fighter pilots had experiences in P-38s and P-40s?

Austin: All of them had been flying P-51s, P-47s, and P-38s. The P-38 was used more in the Pacific initially, although they had quite a few of them in Europe. But, they were getting recurrent in the AT-6 so they could keep their hand in and get ready for the push to Japan.

Appleton: Then what did you hear about the Atomic Bomb?

Austin: Well, I'll tell you how it affected me personally. I wanted to fly the P-38. We had five F-5s at Luke which was the photo version of the P-38. Some up-grade training was going on with those F-5s that also had cameras so we could actually do a training program for the recon mission.

So I had wormed my way into a chance to get checked out in the F-5. In those days the ground school didn't amount to a whole lot. You spent a couple of hours with an instructor and did the blindfold cockpit check. I had all that done. When Japan surrendered, we totally stopped all flying at Luke.

Appleton: But the surrender came the first week in September, I think.

Austin: The capitulation occurred a few days before and that's when we stopped flying. Everything just ceased there for a while.

We stood down, before that occurred, after we lost twenty-four guys in August. The commander wanted to know how this could be. What are you instructors doing? We'd already been through this in July. We were having pilot meetings in the theater, at least once a week. Everybody was getting chewed out about safety and killing people and tearing up equipment. So, a day or two before the end of August, after we lost twenty-four guys, the base commander grounded everybody. We didn't do any flying for two days. "Let's cut this stuff out! We can't kill anymore people!" Besides that, it was costing him his job.

Appleton: Right. But you can understand why. It's not supposed to happen here. (Austin: Absolutely.) Well, was there more talk about the fact that you weren't flying or was there any talk about the implications of the Atomic Bomb and what that meant as a method of warfare?

Austin: Well, in retrospect I guess I was thinking about some of that. But I was a 2nd Lieutenant. My job was to instruct pilots. Some of these guys were scaring the hell out of me anyway and I finally did learn how to chew out a captain or a major because they were about to kill me. It served me well, by the way, years later, but my world was so small at that point. What can I do better to keep these guys from killing themselves?

Appleton: Well, I can understand that.

Austin: So I knew the war was going on but as far as we all knew we were going to be going to the Far East sometime over the next few months. So that's where all of our thoughts were. When VJ Day came, it just stopped everything. You know, captains and majors could hardly wait because shortly after the surrender of Japan, the talk was about how they were going to start letting people out of the service that had points.

Appleton: You didn't have points.

Austin: I didn't have any points so that wasn't part of my concern.

Appleton: So you were in and all these guys had been in for several years.

Austin: Our thoughts, after the surrender and everything was over with, were what would happen to the twenty-two of us. We had got to know each other real well in the few months we'd been through the central instructor’s school and at Luke Field. We were advised to find a job other than flying airplanes. In September 1945 there was no consideration of us being able to get out.

So I found a job with the Army Air Corps Communications Service who was developing a lot of the things that would later serve the FAA. That was interesting to me so I got a job at Base Operations in the control tower in communications. Of course we're still flying our four hours a month but its cut back considerably. We're back to flying on a very limited basis compared to what we had been doing before. We're flying maybe once a day and sometimes no more than three or four times a week.

Appleton: No more four times a day stuff.

Austin: No. That was a big change so we actually could do something besides just fly and get ready to fly.

Appleton: When did the Army Air Corps change over to the Air Force? (Austin: 1947.) A couple of years later then. Was there any appreciable change then?

Austin: Well, we changed uniforms but gradually, really. The Army was basically a green theme. Pinks and greens was what we had in the Army Air Corps. Of course we had the Eisenhower jacket that General Eisenhower made popular.

I got out of service briefly in November of '45 after they finally started releasing anybody that wanted to get out. In addition to working at the Deming Army Air Field before I had gone into service, I'd also had a chance to work in the post office, on a temporary basis.

Appleton: Oh, I see. So you actually left the service for a short while then?

Austin: I left in November of '45. My job was still available at the post office. I got that job because I was tired of driving trucks and I only worked for about three months before I went in service. So I went back to that job and I said, "I don't like this. I like to fly airplanes." By this time things were changing real rapidly.

I made a trip back to Luke Field and they said, "Yeah, you can come back on Active Duty if you want to, but you've got to go to some kind of a school." So, I said, "O.K. What kind of school is available? I was involved with communications." So they looked it up the 0200 MOS. They said, "Yeah, you can go to school at Scott Field for that." So I said, "Well, O.K. I'll go back to Active Duty." Well, the Army Air Corps had other ideas. After I signed on to go to communications school, they said, "Oh, no. We need you in Seattle at the Repo-Depot. The POE (Point of Embarkation) for the Far East was in Seattle. "We need you in the Transportation Corps to help out."

"Well, O.K. Can I still fly?" They said, "Oh, yeah. They got a reserve outfit at Boeing Field in Seattle so you can fly down there with the Reserves."

"O.K. I'm still just a 2nd Lieutenant so I don't know much about what's going on except I want to fly airplanes. That's my objective."

So I went on and played that game for a while with them up there and did the POE. We were replacing the war guys in the Far East with troops with most of them in the training program when the war ended. So we're getting young guys that had not been in combat and shipping them over. And a lot of them didn't want to go. So that was a very interesting timeframe. The only time in my life I ever really actively worried about using the 45 pistol that all officers had to carry at the Port of Embarkation.

Appleton: It was that serious, right?

Austin: It was that serious. We had to carry the holstered 45 on the base. Of course some of the guys didn't want to go but we usually talked them into it. So I turned into partly a Chaplain.

Appleton: What were the main reasons why guys didn't want to go?

Austin: Well, the war was over. "I only signed up because I had to. I got drafted. And now the war's over. I don't want to go." (Appleton: It's a waste of time.) "It's a waste of my time," and all that kind of stuff. But you know, it was amazing. I learned a lot that probably served me well later on about human psychology, I guess, in dealing with those guys. Of course, I'm working for a couple of captains and with a couple of other 1st and 2nd lieutenants. We were all kind of in the same boat. So anyway, this captain said, "Look. We'll set these guys down one at a time, the ones that were really fussing about it and just talk to them. And for 99% of them, that did the trick.

But I found out that my flying was going to be limited. The Reserve guys were trying to get going there with their AT-6s. But I said, "This ain't for me. I want to fly real airplanes."

Appleton: So how did you get from there to . . .?

Austin: Well, I kept working with the Army personnel people. There were two or three of us wearing Wings but the personnel people and most other people around the base were all ground pounders. I finally found a lieutenant colonel who would talk to me about my options. He said, "O.K. What you've got to do is get out of the service, again. Apply to get out of the service." "Yeah, they still want officers to go to communications school. It looks like you need to get out of the service here as that's the only way you'll break your contract with the Transportation Command. Then, go back to Luke Field and ask to get right back in."

He said, "As a matter of fact, I'll submit the paperwork for you if you want to do that."

So I wrote the letters and he submitted them. I decided to take a little time and went back home to see my folks, before I went back to Luke. I then went over to Luke Field and signed up again and off to communication school at Scott Field in February of '47.

Appleton: So it worked. The system worked.

Austin: It worked. But I had to have breaks in the service in order to make that thing work.

Appleton: Now you talked a little earlier about this mission into Russia. How did you get into that?

Austin: O.K. I went through communications school. My first assignment was McCord Field at Tacoma, Washington. I was communications officer there and also the outfit was getting new C-82s. The C-82 was the forerunner of the C-119 which was known as The Flying Box Car. It was built with a box car type fuselage with a twin boom tail and a twin engine airplane. Lt. Colonial Tobias, I remember his name very well, my Squadron Commander, said, "You want to check out in the '82?"

I said, "You betcha!" So I went to C-82 school and checked out, I was also Squadron Communications Officer and co-pilot in the C-82. Guys were still getting out of the service. Now this was in the summer of '47. There was a push to get pilots upgraded. So I was flying first pilot in the airplane three months after I checked out. Our job was hauling the Army guys out of Fort Lewis, Washington into Alaska for training. In a twin engine airplane they wouldn't let us fly up the coast so we had to go inland to Great Falls, up to Big Delta through Canada and into what used to be called Mile 26, now Eielson Air Force Base and Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska. We hauled troops up there for their winter training. It wasn't all winter training because we were up there in the summer time too. We'd take a new load of troops up and bring some back and we'd do this usually flying in formation. It was training for a mission as troop carriers. We'd go in three, six, nine and sometimes twelve airplanes in formation over to Great Falls and do the same thing all the way in and out of Alaska. That trip would take about six to eight days to make the round trip.

In August or September of '48 since I had not gone overseas I came up on a routine overseas assignment. I qualified for overseas assignment two ways; as a pilot and as a communication officer. To make a long story short, my orders were to go to Japan. The POE was Hamilton Field, north of San Francisco, so I went down there. The Berlin Airlift had started already in August/September timeframe of '48. To get the Lift going they sent the MATS guys (Military Air Transport Service) the forerunner of MAC now (Military Airlift Command). They had sent them on temporary duty to Germany to start flying the Airlift. When I hit the POE at Hamilton Field, they said, "Well, wait a minute. Your orders are probably going to be changed." Anybody that had twelve hundred hours flying time as a pilot was going to be rerouted to the Airlift.

I was cooling my heels along with some other guys I got to know while we were turned around. They were all headed for Japan but those who had more than twelve hundred hours flying pilot time were also held up there. After two or three weeks we received orders sending us to Great Falls, Montana. They had set up as a training school for the C-54 and we spent about a month there for C-54 upgrade training. Then we went to the Berlin Airlift, I was assigned to a squadron at Rhein-Main Air Base.

Appleton: And that was the plane that was used mostly?

Austin: Well, the C-47 started it. I had flown C-47s at Scott Field while going through communications school. The C-54 became primary aircraft as President Truman pulled in all the C-54s from around the world, Navy and Air Force. I arrived at Rhein-Main, Frankfurt, Germany on a contract DC-4, which was the same type airplane as the C-54, but it was flown under contract by Alaskan Airlines. At mid-night, the day after Thanksgiving 1948 . . . it took us a few hours to get squared away but by 6 o'clock that night I'm back out on the line to fly my first mission on the Airlift.

Well the MATS guys were anxious to get the hell out of there. They'd gone over there on for a month's TDY and they had been there about four or five months.

Appleton: Flying every day?

Austin: Flying their tail off so they had a set routine to check you out but I only got half of that because the instructor that I was assigned to really was anxious to get home. His wife was due to have a baby and, I don't know, he had all kinds of other family problems. But he was real anxious to get out of there. My first trip that night to Berlin . . . I showed you that picture of the final approach . . . I never saw that because it was dark. You couldn't see anything there at night. I was sitting in the right seat, of course, on that first flight. During the Airlift we typically made two round trips to Berlin if it didn't run too many hours. On my first trip to Berlin I flew co-pilot, so on the second trip I was in the left pilots' seat and I don't remember much about that approach to Tempelhof because it was still dark when we got there. This was in late November. After two trips we would get a minimum of 12 hours off. Well, the MATS pilot that was checking me out met me the next time for one more trip with him. After the third trip, on the second day I'd been in Germany he said, "You're checked out." I got a co-pilot then I had never met before, for my second trip that night to Berlin.

1 st Lieutenant Harold R. "Hal" Austin is standing in front of his C-54 aircraft during the Berlin Airlift at the Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany in February 1949.

Appleton: You were checked out and he was checking out. Right. He was leaving.

Austin: So, during my tour I flew 156 missions on the Berlin Airlift. The tour was a six month permanent change of station tour. I hadn't been there more than a couple or three weeks before they were after me to get off the line and do communications. They said I could still fly the line but they wanted me to do communications.

Appleton: Before you leave that, in flying into Berlin, did you fly mostly or only from Frankfurt or Rhein-Main?

Austin: All of my missions were from Rhein-Main.

Appleton: Were there any difficulties that you encountered going in and out? Were you followed by chase planes?

1 st Lieutenant Harold R. "Hal" Austin makes his final approach to Tempelhof Airport, Berlin, Germany, during the Berlin Airlift in 1949. This photograph was taken from the cockpit of his C-54 cargo aircraft.

Austin: It was not too unusual during the day to have Soviet fighters flying close enough to us to look us over. We kept on flying during all kinds of weather. There were times when you might get held-up because of something wrong with the airplane. If it wasn't too long they'd still have you fly two trips. When you got back from your second trip, then you're allowed a minimum of twelve hours off. Depending on what the time separation was between airplanes. We flew the May Day Parade in 1949 with the interval down to three minutes between airplanes. From all three bases Fassberg, Celle and Rhein-Main. The idea was to show the Soviets that we could really push if we wanted to. The 1st of May, May Day, was and is a big deal for the Russians. Well, for this May Day Parade, we called it I was in the first batch of airplanes to take off out of Rhein-Main that night, we started at mid-night on May 1 st. The weather was pretty good so we could maintain three minute intervals between airplanes. I flew three trips on my first rather then the usual two, that's how fast we were turning. The Germans were loading and unloading those airplanes quickly. The first unload took about eight or nine minutes. By the time I had made the second trip, they had that coal off in about five minutes. We were just hauling coal and flour in about 80 lb. gunny sacks so it was real easy to load and unload. I lifted them several times and I think they weighed about eighty pounds.

But my second mission on that May Day Parade, they unloaded that airplane in five minutes. Later on when the weather was good and we could push the load and unload time down to about five minutes. We would leave the two right engines running since the cargo door was on the left hand side of the airplane. They'd have their truck there before 1 and 2 props stop turning. We didn't even get out of our seat, they'd bring us a sandwich from the Roach Coach so we had something to eat and drink on the return trip.

Appleton: Why did you call it the May Day Parade because you wanted to make it look like a parade?

Austin: It was to impress the Soviets.

Appleton: Or did they have a parade and you flew over their parade?

Austin: No. I don't have any idea how many tons of stuff we moved in that 24-hour period, but it was really something else. I wound up flying a total of five missions in that 24 hour period. On May 2nd we slowed down and backed off to about eight to ten minute intervals for the next several days.

But that was a real interesting time. It was not unusual for some Soviet fighter to fly alongside us. We just made sure that we were in the Corridor. A twenty-mile wide corridor and our navigation were precise. You trusted everybody in front of you because when you called over Fulda, our first check point coming out of Rhein-Main, you were sure you were exactly on the time interval. Then you called over Berlin radio and the flight time was an hour and fifty minutes up and one hour and forty minutes back. You watched your Bird Dog to be sure that you stayed inside that Corridor. The Soviet fighters never flew at night.

I can tell you about why they never flew at night. Darryl Lamb was my co-pilot and he was a hell of a nice guy but he couldn't fly an airplane for sour apples. He was a nice jovial guy but he was a permanent co-pilot. He was assigned to me. Darryl was about four or five inches taller than I am and outweighed me by about thirty pounds in those days. He was just a great big loveable guy.

Appleton: A teddy-bear.

Austin: But he'd go to sleep that quick! So we would take turns at night, you know, particularly on the second trip, you know, if you're taking off at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and you've already made one trip, it was a long day already. So we'd take turns. On that particular night it was Lamb's turn to fly after we crossed Fulda and I was going to take a nap by leaning against the window. Well, I took my nap all right. After a while I woke up and I looked at the instruments and the Bird Dog was pointing to the tail of the airplane and it ain't supposed to be happening. It should be set on Berlin radio. So anyway I look over and Lamb's sound asleep against his side of the plane. Most of the airplanes didn't have working autopilots, but that one happened to work pretty good.

Anyway, I finally started looking around and outside, this was 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, and it's just dark as hell out there. No lights. No nothing. So I knew, having seen that area east of Berlin before at night that there were no lights. That was Soviet territory. If you saw a light of any kind during the night it was very rare. So I said, "Oh, gee whiz!" So I woke Lamb up and said, "What the hell have you been doing?" He said, "I don't know." Well, it turned out that we were about 45 minutes northeast of Berlin.

Appleton: Well that's way out of the Corridor.

Austin: W-a-y out of the Corridor. I mean w-a-a-y out! I turned the airplane around - it was a fairly clear night - so I thought that in the distance I could see a glow, and, of course, the birddog turned around too, and I checked in the headset to see where we were going and, sure enough, we were northeast of Berlin. What got me concerned now was we had checked in over Fulda but we had not checked in over Berlin Radio, the final approach check point for Tempelhof. Over those checkpoints you always called in so the guy behind you knew where you were on your interval. I think we had about an eight or ten minute interval at that point so it was not like we were flying three minute intervals.

Anyway we proceeded back toward Berlin and we were listening and heard guys calling in over Berlin radio and then calling in over the Berlin approach Fix.

Anyway, to make a long story short, we started to try and figure out when we could work our way into the pattern and call over Berlin radio because, I knew we were going to be dead ducks for being out of the line. No two ways about it. We called our call sign number, the two digit hard stand number over Berlin radio and I figured, "Well, O.K. We'll just have to face up to it." So coming in from the east I waited about eight or ten minutes after one guy called in over Berlin Radio. I then called over Berlin radio and worried about the guy coming up the Corridor from behind. Well, fortunately there was a gap. There occasionally were gaps except during the May Day Parade. So anyway I made my calls and we landed and I told Lamb, "Don't you dare get out of this damn airplane. We're gonna get back off the ground as fast as we can."

The airplane was unloaded and we went back to Rhein-Main. Nobody has said a word to this day about us being out of the Corridor.

Appleton: Well, should we erase this part of the tape?

Austin: I've told a couple of guys since and they said, "You can be hung yet for that!"

Appleton: That's amazing. Not a word from anybody.

Austin: Not a word from anybody.

Appleton: Well now, were there some planes, however, that did crash. Was it mostly in the Airlift? Was it the weather?

Austin: Mostly weather, I don't know the details on any of the aircraft that we lost. We didn't lose any airplanes in my squadron during the nine months I was there. We always tried to get a rundown on what had happened. We were flying the airplane at least eight to ten thousand pounds over designed gross weight to move that much stuff. When you're taking off in bad weather and just lose concentration and that's what most of the accidents were. However, there was a couple that we are pretty sure lost an engine. We had excellent maintenance and you just knew all of the airplane and engines would work fine.

Appleton: Well, the Berlin Airlift is legendary. (Austin: Absolutely.) For the amount of traffic and the amount of cargo moved and the number of planes, the short intervals and all that.

Austin: General Tunner got most of the credit for all that but General LeMay was his predecessor in setting up the Airlift. General LeMay is the one that set up the traffic procedures that we lived by. Now, Tunner modified them a little bit, but the interval, the checking in in the clear, LeMay set that up where he said, "You don't lie about where you are because the guy behind you is depending on you being exactly where you say you are." So we waited for that birddog to turn and when we were over the check point and then we called. The Bird Dog is a radio compass. LeMay left about the time I got there. Tunner took over but that was one thing grilled into our heads from the very start. If you're over Fulda so you say what time you're over Fulda and you better be over Fulda. You want that guy behind you and the guy in front of you to be where he said he was at that time. I felt that kind of precise training all the way through my years later in SAC.

Appleton: And do it right. So, from the Berlin Airlift, then what?

Austin: I got my orders to go to SAC. I extended my stay a little on the Berlin Airlift to marry Rosemary. We met in January of '49.

Appleton: Now, you met her over there in Europe?

Austin: I met her over there. She'd graduated from high school in '47 and joined her mom and step-dad. He was a warrant officer in the U.S. Army and was stationed there as part of the Occupation Forces. We wanted to get married but I found out my squadron commander said, "You can't do that." I said, "What do you mean I can't do that?" He said, "Well, she's an American." I said, "So?" And I didn't talk to him that way, by the way. So anyway we finally worked the details out. I had to go through the process of applying, just like you would if marrying a German National. I applied to my squadron commander for the right to get married, had to be endorsed all the way up to the Group Commander and finally, "O.K." You had to explain who the spouse-to-be was. The only way you could get married in Germany was by the Mayor of the town. So our marriage was by the Mayor, the Bergermeister of Frankfurt.

Appleton: Now, I assume there were others who were doing this as well.

Austin: Yeah. Also, Rosemary is Catholic so we also got married twice that day.

Appleton: Once in the chapel and once down at the Town Hall.

Austin: The Town Hall was first. That was the official part. I got my orders and it said, "SAC - Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. Now, I didn't know what SAC (Strategic Air Command) stood for. Well, twenty-five years later I thoroughly knew what SAC stood for. But anyway I was assigned to Barksdale in B-29s but, I was pulled off of B-29s because Second Air Force Headquarters was stationed at Barksdale and they had two C-54s. In those days everybody (pilots and navigators) had to keep their flying training up and I was an instructor in the C-54. I had become an instructor pilot during the Airlift. I'd been an instructor at Scott Field in the C-47 and flown a lot of time in AT-6s. They had all those airplanes at Barksdale and that's what I wound up doing mostly, instructing in those airplanes.

Then I finally said, "I want to get into B-29s."

Appleton: That was all your experience in the Berlin Airlift.

Austin: I had almost a thousand hours in C-54s during the eight months I was over there. I finally got into B-29s a little later on. In November or December of 1950 SAC showed their interest in a jet airplane for reconnaissance. The first American jet bomber built after World War II was the four engine B-45. Actually it was on the drawing board since World War II and the first 100 were built in '47 and '48. The first ones were not much of an airplane because the early American jet engines hadn't caught up with technology yet. The United States Military had hung back on jet engines, while the British pushed development of jet engines during World War II. The United States made a decision to stick with the super-charged reciprocating prop engines, otherwise jets may have been available a lot sooner.

The B-45 was built by North American Aviation at Los Angeles International Airport. The first F-86 was also built at that factory. North American Aviation contracted the Douglas Aircraft plant at Long Beach to build the reconnaissance version of the B-45, the RB-45C.

Secretary of the Defense Wilson, under the Truman Administration, had said, "That's too much money for recon airplanes and we don't really need that airplane," so he cut production at only 32 RB-45C airplanes. Then in 1950 they were trying to figure out what to do with them.

General LeMay said, "Well, I'll take the airplanes for SAC." The 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing already had RB-29s and RB-50s at Barksdale. They were mostly electronic reconnaissance airplanes but there were a few visual photo reconnaissance RB-50s. So LeMay said, "I'll take the airplanes and give them to the 91st Wing at Barksdale."

I found out this was occurring, decided this was a chance for me to get into jet airplanes. I had got to know my bosses pretty well since I was an instructor pilot and had checked many of them out in various airplanes. I had made 1st Lieutenant by then and got to know the majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels that way. They encouraged me and put me on the list to transfer to RB-45s when we got the airplanes. We only received a total of twenty-eight airplanes, the others were test airplanes. We started flying the RB-45C in late 1950.

In early 1951 we started doing temporary duty in England with the RB-45Cs. There's a separate story here that comes into play with my later Soviet Mission overflight. During the same timeframe, late '51 and early '52, the 91st Wing cross trained some RAF flight crews in our RB-45Cs. Truman had said, "I ain't gonna put my boys at risk in recon overflights." Well, Churchill said, "I'll put my boys at risk but you've got better airplanes than we have." So the RAF transitioned some of their pilots and crews in the RB-45. I was not involved with that, except my assigned airplane was missing for a while and I got upset about it. I later found out my airplane had been loaned to the RAF and repainted with RAF markings.

The airplanes, usually three, were transferred to the RAF while we're doing temporary duty at Sculthorpe RAF Base in England. While we were over there on temporary duty, usually two to three months at a time, our primary mission was to help the Army Map Service do what they called "uncontrolled photo work" of the entire Rhein River system. Western Europe had never been tied in geodetically to Eastern Europe, now part of the Soviet Union.

Surface to surface missiles were coming in to U.S. bases in Western Europe later on and we were helping prepare for them. Well, if you're going to shoot ground-to-ground missiles, you've got to know where you depart from in order to know where the missile is going. Every morning at 8 o'clock we'd take off two airplanes (RB-45Cs) out of Sculthorpe. We'd go over to the Rhein River area and the RAF weather guys would try to predict a spot where we might be able to do aerial photography of the Rhein River. That's a very long river! I got in trouble flying over Switzerland a couple of times because I didn't realize that we were flying over Switzerland while making turns back and forth to complete photo flight lines.

We had KB-29 tankers there and so we'd go over to the Rhein River, if you find a place, take pictures. After about four hours we would air refuel from our KB-29 tankers, then go back to the River for more photos. A typical mission would be ten hours long. We could spend about six hours over the Rhein River area. We might start at the north end at 20,000 feet and there'd be too many clouds so we'd go on down the River to look at something further down.

Another interesting sideline. The RAF had found something that we now know is a jet stream. Remember, very few airplanes at that point in time flew anywhere near the altitudes where the jet stream is usually located. We were going over to Europe anyway so the RAF weather guys started trying to predict where we might find the jet stream. If we couldn't find enough places to take pictures, then we were to depart the River area and go to the area and altitude predicted for the jet stream. Sometimes they missed it completely and other times we'd get into it l-o-n-g before their prediction. So it was kind of interesting.

They put a big temperature gauge in the navigator's compartment because the temperature goes up when you get into the jet stream. You might be at minus fifty degrees at 30,000 feet, but the temperature might go up ten or fifteen degrees as we entered the jet stream. You could also tell because of the rough air going into it. You could also tell when you come out the other side. We would record altitude, outside air temperature, distance and sometimes there'd be days we'd take off and the whole Rhein River was socked in, so we'd spend the whole mission trying to stay in that jet stream.

Appleton: Going in and out of it.

Austin: Going in and out of it or trying to follow it. We got into it one day over Southern Europe area and my navigator said, "We ain't gonna do that anymore!" And I said, "Hell, we're not! We'll do what we're told." I've never had a fear of turbulence but I never witnessed in a civilian airliner anything like it was that day. The RB-45 was a tough airplane. We stayed in that one for about 30 minutes to an hour that day.

The RB-45 was a great airplane, by the way. Every air refueling we took on six thousand gallons of fuel so we could do a ten hour mission. We had other targets occasionally. On one we went down to Italy to take some pictures. I don't remember what the targets were anymore. We did our usual air refueling over Southern France. Our last target going southeast was well south of Rome near the boot of Italy. We finished that and had turned around heading back toward England. So, now we're looking for the jet stream. It was supposed to be around 35,000 feet. The RB-45 didn't work too good above 30,000 feet but we finally got into it. It wasn't too rough and after about thirty minutes the navigator said, "Hey! We've got some horrendous headwinds! We ain't gonna be able to get back home unless we get outta these headwinds!"

I said, "How much?" He said, "Well, I've recorded somewhere around 150 knots of headwind." I could tell by looking at the ground around the clouds that we weren't moving very fast over the ground. In those days the only radio calls we made was leaving England going through 11,000 feet, climbing out, and as we coasted out. We never called anybody else over Europe, there was no reason to since there wasn't any other airplanes at high altitudes.

We only had a four channel radio in the RB-45. I heard some guy call and said, " U.S. airplane over Italy. This is so and so..." I answered. "Well, this is a RB-45. Who am I talking to?" He said, "This is an RB-36. The reason I'm bothering you is we've got a little bit of a problem here. We're going west heading back towards England and we have some hellish headwinds."

I related to him what my navigator said. "We've got about 150 knot headwinds." I said, "Our ground speed is down to about 200 knots." (Our normal true airspeed was around 380 knots.) There was a long pause, then he said, "Our ground speed is a negative fifteen knots!"

Appleton: Some jet stream!

Austin: We used to talk about this at our reunions about that B-36. We never did get a chance to talk to him on the ground. But, anyway, we both figured out that in order to get out of that headwind we would have to go down to a lower altitude.

The RB-45 was a great airplane and I enjoyed flying it. We moved from Barksdale to Lockbourne Air Force Base, Ohio with the RB-45's in the summer of 1951. Then the B-47s started coming in in late 1953. Well we got our transition B-47s in the summer of 1953. My crew went to B-47 school at Pine Castle Air Force Base, Florida. We had the B model test airplanes that Boeing had refurbished. Since I had been an instructor pilot in the RB-45 I was an instructor in the B-47 almost from the start.

We received our first RB-47Es, fully equipped with the same photo equipment used in World War II, black and white visual photo cameras. (The same photo equipment as was in the RB-45C.) The problems with the photo equipment in World War II was trying to keep cameras cool and/or warm, as the case may be, depending on where you were with the B-17 or B-24 flying at low or high altitude.

That was our biggest concern in the RB-45 because sometimes we'd come back and the film fogged because the heater system on the cameras didn't work right. Well, it had been upgraded considerably by the time we got to the RB-47Es. We had the same K-17 trimetrogon aerial cameras on RB-45s, area cameras, one vertical and a left and right oblique. The idea was you turn them on as soon as you get over your target area and run it all the way through the mission area. You could run it, depending on the interval set, for two or three hours. The photo interpreters used that film to know where you were as your mission went along.

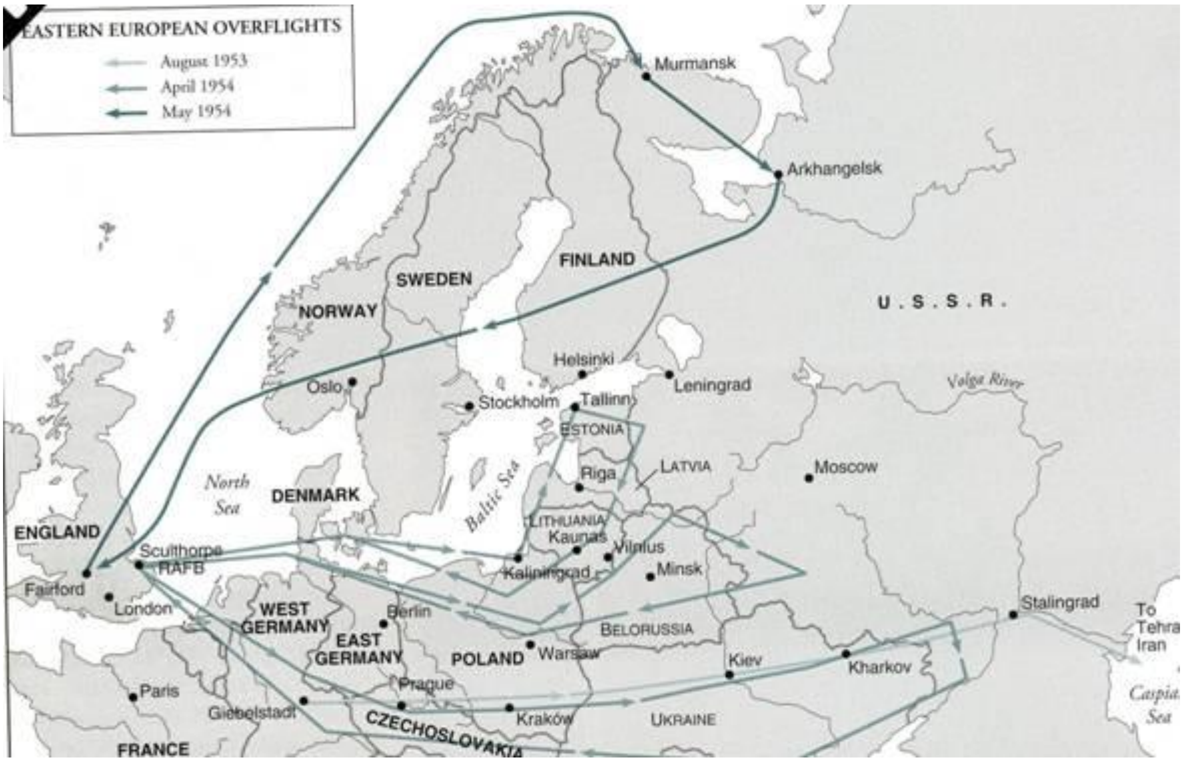
We also had K-38, 36" focal length cameras for target photos. You only had enough film to run them for a total of about twenty minutes. So typically three to five minutes for each target which was a typical run. It was very detailed. We also had a forward oblique camera in the nose for low level photos.

Appleton: This photo here is the RB-47?

Austin: RB-47E was visual photo. The RB-47H was for electronic intelligence and countermeasures. There were also two wings of RB-36s that were visual photo equipped. They had twice the number of cameras and film capability that we had.

Appleton: So your Russian mission then was in a RB-47?

Austin: Yes. We started receiving the RB-47Es in the fall of '53. We eventually had 45 airplanes assigned to the wing plus 20 KC-97s. The RB-47E then was well suited to the visual aerial mission. We deployed over to England, eight of us did, in February of '54 for a couple of weeks. I think we may have been sent over there at that point to do the Soviet overflight mission. We did some local missions over Europe and up around the Scandinavian area. I believe it was also a short test the new RB-47E airplanes over there. All new airplanes have troubles. It may have been that if the weather had been good, that we'd have flown this mission then. But we were there a couple of weeks and then came back to Lockbourne Air Force Base.


ASTERN EUROPEAN OVERFLIGHTS
August 1953
April 1954
May 1954
Murmansk
Arkhangelsk
FINLAND
SWEDEN
NORWAY
U.S.S.R.
Helsinki
Leningrad
Volga River
Oslo
Stockholm
Tallinn
ESTONIA
LATVIA
Riga
Moscow
North Sea
DENMARK
Baltic Sea
LITHUANIA
Kaunas
Vilnius
ENGLAND
Sculthorpe RAFB
Kaliningrad
Minsk
Fairford
London
Stalingrad
To Tehra Iran
WEST GERMANY
Berlin
EAST GERMANY
BELORUSSIA
POLAND
Warsaw
Kiev
Kharkov
Caspia Sea
Paris
Prague
Giebelstadt
Krakow
UKRAINE
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
FRANCE

Major Hal Austin's overflight is indicated by the flight path at the top of the map tracing a route around Scandinavia over Murmansk and Arkhangelsk (Archangel), over Finland and back to Fairford Air Base in England on May 8, 1954. This map appears in the Spring 1997 issue of ***MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*** *(p.30) as part of an article on overflights as military reconnaissance missions over the Soviet Union during the Cold War.*

Then in late April eight airplanes and crews, about four of us were the same crews as before, were sent back to Fairford RAF Base. A feint mission was flown on the 6th of May 1954 and then the 8th of May was our real overflight mission. Now, something else we didn't know for forty years. I mentioned before about the RAF training in our RB-45s. Well, in 1952 RAF crews had flown three RB-45s, refueled by our tankers and covered three different approaches over the Soviet Union at night: one of them going all the way to Moscow, taking radar O-15 camera pictures. By the way we also had 0-15 radar cameras in the RB-47E as well. Those photos were for navigators to study for their Emergency War Order routes and targets. Nowadays they are in Technicolor but, in those days, they were all the same color, sorta yellow. Well, again on the 29th of April of 1954, nine days before our mission, three RB-45Cs with RAF markings and RAF crews flew roughly the same mission as in the spring of 1952. They also flew out of Sculthorpe up north to a refuel area south of Norway/Sweden. As before, one covered several targets north of Moscow. One went to Moscow and one went the southern route. Now, you can imagine that the Soviets were excited when nine days later we penetrated their territory again. We found all this out some forty years later. A young man under contract of the BBC, not only wanted to know what we did on our overflights but they went over to the Soviet Union (Russia) and looked-up the Soviet guys that had long since retired, to have them relate what their thoughts were as this was going on.

Well, the former Soviet Commanders were upset with the RAF because they couldn't get their fighters up to the altitudes where the RB-45s were flying. First off the Russians, like during the Berlin Airlift, never liked to fly at night. It's just routine for us and the RAF. This is one of the reasons the RAF were doing it at night. It is nice to hear a former Soviet general saying, "we were so upset because we couldn't get any of our airplanes up high enough." They even tried the zoom maneuver to get up high enough to have a chance to shoot down one of the airplanes. By 1954 they had MIG-17s a more modern airplane. The MIG-15s was what was used during the Korean War against our F-86s. Still in 1954, our intelligence briefing said the MIG-15 was widely deployed and the MIG-17 was not yet.

Anyway, these RAF guys who flew the 29 April mission told their story on video tape to the BBC in about 1994, some 40 years after our mission. The crews talked about how they could see tracers, the Soviets used tracers heavily in their fighter ammunition because their MIGs only had a look and shoot capability, every sixth shell was a white phosphorus tracer, so the pilot could see what he was shooting at. I saw plenty of those damn things on our mission May 8, 1954.

Anyway these RAF guys said they just kept pressing on with their mission.

Appleton: And then your mission was about a week later.

Austin: On the 8th of May, nine days later. The Soviet Air Defense had to be ready for us! Our mission was to coast in over Murmansk at high noon, local time to provide the best camera angle, and for the weather too. So, we're coming in over the Soviet coast at high noon and putting out heavy contrails making us really easy to follow.

Now, to give you the sequence of events, we took off with six airplanes out of Fairford, refueled with our tankers off of Stavanger, Norway about fifty miles off the coast with our own KC-97s from Lockbourne, all in radio silence. We then flew up to the northern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and turned east, three of us. The other three aircraft went on north back to where we had been two days before. We proceeded east to a point about 100 miles north of Murmansk. The other two airplanes with us reversed course and returned to the UK. As we coasted in and had covered our first three targets, we saw about six airplanes off our left rear. Carl Holt was my co-pilot and Vance Heavilin was my navigator. The next photo targets were in the vicinity of Arkhangelisk (Archangel.) Holt saw about three MIG-15s well below us. At 40,000 feet we were giving up probably thirty or forty knots ground speed because we were too heavy (with fuel) to be at that altitude. Vance Heavilin was one heck of a navigator and he was very picky about how we covered targets. We didn't yet have the ability in those airplanes that we have nowadays where control of the airplane could be turned over to the navigator for the target run. We had autopilot but the pilot had to do the flying. Vance was very picky about one or two degree corrections which are pretty tough with the size of instruments we had in those days. He wanted to try to be as precise as he could.

Major Harold R. "Hal" Austin, in May 1954, was the pilot of an RB-47E aircraft on a top-secret photo reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union surviving a hit from enemy fire and nearly running out of gas on that mission as his plane returned to England.

As he was giving me corrections for the next target, Holt said, "Well, looks like six airplanes off to our left. We're not worried too much about it." Well, after we turned over Archangel's area to go to our fifth target, then all of a sudden there were six airplanes . . . two flights of three in formation off our left rear again. Carl said, "Wait a minute! These guys are right at our altitude!" Our briefing was "Don't worry about their fighters making 40,000 feet. The MIG-15 was not supposed to get that high, but the MIG-17 can."

The first two flights of MIG fighters did not make passes at us. The third flight started making passes at us but we didn't see anything so they probably were not armed. Within about another fifteen minutes though here comes the fourth flight of six, two flights of three which was their standard procedure. Next thing I know I'm seeing something going over and under the canopy and they were coming in from the left rear. Holt said, "Those sons-of-bitches are shooting at us!" And I said, "The hell they are!" We had already tested the guns. The tail guns in the RB-47s had two 20mm cannons in the tail but they just hadn't been reliable at all. Our training with the guns was almost nil because the darn things wouldn't work. They might fire a couple of seconds, they were operated remotely by radar control with the co-pilot turned around backwards. He checked them out over the ocean after we had left the other two airplanes. I said, "If they're shooting at us you'd better turn around and get those guns going."

So he turned around and each of the six airplanes did make one pass at us. They were very limited on fuel, the way the airplane was designed and therefore very short legged.

Anyway that second batch of MIG-17s that were armed, Holt said, "These guys are shooting also!" and I could see the white phosphorus going over and under the airplane. So I said, "Get those guns going and see if you can't get one of them." He said, "Well, they're too far off to the side." I said, "Well, fire them anyway! Maybe they'll see it!" I'm sure the fighters knew our guns had an effective envelope of 90 degrees, 45 degrees on either side of the tail. They also had 20 degrees up and down. Anyway he fired the shots and they only worked about two seconds and quit. It was not at all unusual.

I said, "Do you think they're jammed?" He said, "Oh, I think they're probably jammed." So right away those airplanes moved out further to our left because they saw the guns fire. While this batch of airplanes was shooting at us, Vance Heavilin was calling for a 90 degree turn to the left. He said, "You better bank it up quick!" So I'm making a 90 degree turn to the left and these guys were coming in from our left too. So we think it was the fourth airplane, the fourth guy making a pass, got off a lucky shot as he came in while we're in this turn. The only reason we knew we were hit at all was that we lost our intercom. In a tandem airplane with the navigator about eight feet in front, the co-pilot about six feet behind and you've got no intercom, you're in trouble! I hollered at Carl . . . yelled at him to get down in the aisle and relay the headings Vance wanted. I pushed the nose over to go down about 4,000 feet to pick up speed. I said, "The hell with this 40,000 feet stuff." Down at 36,000 feet we picked up about 20 knots of indicated airspeed. Good for about 40 knots of true airspeed. The Intelligence guys told us that the MIGs had a bad gun platform at 40,000 feet, fortunately for us they did.

When I'm pushing over, we're picking up indicated airspeed it's just noisy as hell . . . air noise and everything else . . . we couldn't hear anything. We really hadn't experienced any rough air but, the intercom had quit. With Holt down in the aisle, he was relaying headings to roll out on for our next target which was very close. Holt spent the rest of the time while we were over Soviet territory going back and forth down the aisle telling me what Vance wanted and yelling it at me.

Anyway we got to that next to last target then did about a 30 degree turn back to the right, toward our last target. None of these flights of MIGS were with us more than about five to six minutes because they didn't have that much fuel. So time for about one pass, although we think that one or two of those airplanes in the flight that hit us may have made two passes at us. It was hard to count them at that point.

We then headed back to the west to get out of Soviet territory. The last target was in the western part of that Soviet Union area then we were over Finland. Well, we're getting that target and here comes another flight of six two flights of three. I don't think they were armed because we're now quickly getting over Finland but the Soviets did not give a damn about that though. They were not supposed to be following us over Finland. At one point one airplane, probably the leader, came up and sat off our right wing tip. He kept dipping toward us.

Well, forty years later I find out that their tactics were supposed to be: If an intruder comes through and they couldn't shoot them down, they're supposed to ram the airplane, to knock it down. So I guess that's what he was trying to do. I stayed at a straight level and just ignored him. As we told General LeMay at the debriefing back at SAC Headquarters, he obviously didn't have guts enough to do what he was told to do. This is forty years later I'm talking to General LeMay about that part of it. I don't know whether the U.S. knew about these tactics or not.

Appleton: Well, what was the main purpose of your flying over this area?

Austin: Nine airfields. As I mentioned to you real early in this whole thing, Intelligence and Soviet Air Order Battle were the key, just like all the things going with Iraq, both the first Gulf War and the second too. On the Soviet May Day Parade . . . now that's just one day after the RAF guys had flown over Moscow. At that May Day Parade in Moscow they flew this batch of bombers . . . four engine bombers (The Bison). It turns out the Soviets flew the same bomber at least six times that day. Our intelligence people thought it was at least six different bombers. What they were doing was flying the one bomber in the May Day Parade over Moscow, going back and landing, changing the tail number on the tail and reflying it again.

The U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff was in the audience that day as the Soviets had invited him. Of course all of our Embassy guys were there too, so this was the thing that created the "bomber gap." So part of our mission was to cover two of these targets, one of them was and R&D Base that the Soviets used and the other one was what they figured was the first base they would deploy the Bison bomber airplane.

Appleton: Now was this type of overflight of Russia one of the few times . . . or was this a fairly common thing?

Austin: Bits and pieces of top-secret missions were being declassified about 1994, '95 . . . I believe we were the first RB-47 to penetrate Soviet territory in Europe. Now, in one of the books since written about overflights, they had modified two bombers of the first B-47Es to be assigned to McDill Air Force Base. They modified two bombers with just target cameras, in the bomb bay. In late '53 they overflew the Soviet Far East. I don't know the total details of the mission. Rather than do air refueling en route like we do routinely nowadays, they flew from McDill to Rapid City, South Dakota and landed to ground refuel. Well, these guys had never seen a B-47 before and in the process of refueling it, they got a fire started and burned up one of the two airplanes.

The other airplane was O.K. and flew on to Alaska. They then took off from Alaska with their route of flight taking them over the Bering Straits to some targets in the Far East Soviet Union, then back out. They said MIG-15s tried to chase them, but only got close to their altitude.

In February of 2001 Dr. Cargill Hall (Ph.D.), who spent a career as a civilian in the U.S. Air Force History Office, and later in the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), set up a Symposium and invited many of the guys that had made overflights during the Cold War. It was a fantastic experience for all of us. That's where we found out other things that had gone on forty years before. For example, the guy that flew the mission I mentioned earlier, one of the first B-47Es at McDill Air Force Base that was modified with K-38 cameras. In his briefing he said chances are they saw at least one MIG-17 but it probably was not armed. Anyway, they got in and out O.K.

That was the first overflight mission of a B-47. LeMay was saying then that he has to have Intelligence, he has to know what's going on in the Soviet Union and has to know the air order of battle in order to do his job of deterrence.

Appleton: So you're looking for airfields?

Austin: Airfields and also ground radar sites. We want to know the air order of battle. In one of the pictures from my May 8, 1954 mission, you can count the MIGs on an airfield and see the way they're deployed. In looking at this, Intel can determine the runway as well as number and type of aircraft. My crew didn't know anything about this because we were not permitted to see any of these photos and we couldn't talk to anybody about it. General LeMay told us at our after mission debriefing, "You don't talk about this mission." And we didn't for forty years. At this briefing in '01, they told us that at the time, the photo interpreters and the Intelligence people said, "You guys really didn't see any MIG-17s." Fortunately we had pictures to prove it. So they backed off real quick and said, "O.K. They must have been MIG-17s."

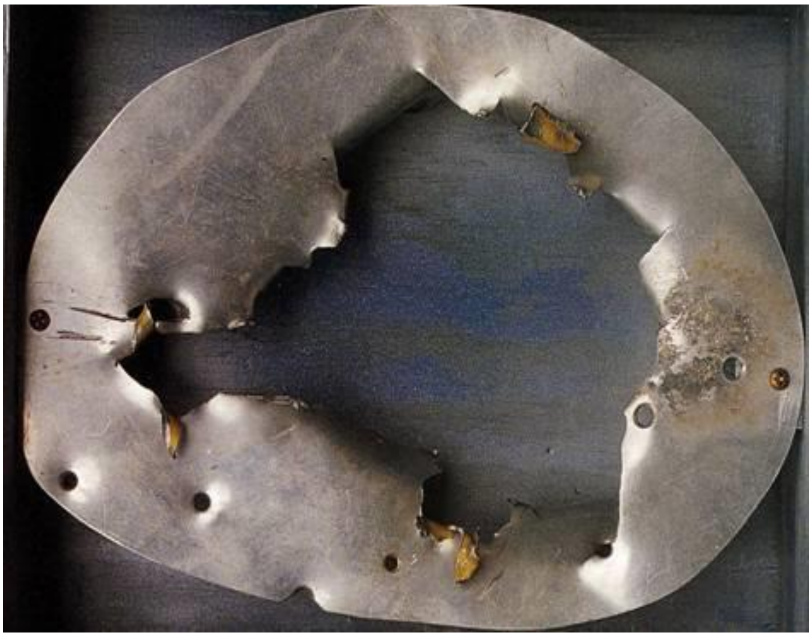
Anyway our mission was a big help in confirming the air order of battle through the primary approach for SAC bombers, had there been a World War III. That approach was right across the area we covered on our mission, the northwestern portion of the Soviet Union. That's SAC's main penetration area. I have some pictures of where Intel could verify some of the fighter deployments and also two bomber bases. They found only one bomber in the photo of one bomber base, I'm told. Other air photos were used to determine location of radar sites and that sort of thing. Electronic intelligence that we're still doing today, along the periphery was determining site locations too. Well, our pictures over the Murmansk area and the Archangel areas as you know, a visual picture's worth a thousand words, LeMay said that.

An RB-47E aircraft is being air refueled by a KC-97 aircraft over central Ohio in 1954. Major Harold R. "Hal" Austin is piloting this aircraft which was assigned to the 91 st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, Strategic Air Command.

Now, another thing was going on at the time. Kelly Johnson was developing the U-2, although it wasn't called the U-2 yet. He was working on it in Lockheed's Skunkworks. I'm told by Dr. Hall that President Eisenhower made the decision to build the U-2 because we were shot at and hit during our overflight. By the way, the only damage we had was a 23 mm shell through the top of the left wing that exploded into the left side of the fuselage along the forward main fuel tank. The maintenance guys presented a piece of the fuselage skin to me about three or four weeks after the mission and said, "Well, that was a big bird you hit."

The Symposium was very interesting. They talked about other overflights of F-86s rigged with a special camera, over the Far East area. Later on B-57s a twin engine airplane they built for high flight, flew overflight missions of the Soviet Union. There's another big overflight operation in my old outfit, I was long gone. They took RB-47s up to Thule, Greenland and from there they photographed a large portion of the northern part of the Soviet Union. By this time, the late '50s, and they didn't encounter very much opposition from Soviet fighters. They'd fly day and night and they'd fly in conjunction with the RB-47H, the electronic Intelligence airplanes. They would penetrate forty, fifty miles and in some cases a hundred miles. Our mission in 1954 was over seven hundred miles. They were doing this near where there weren't very many Soviet fighter bases.

On the other hand, for us in 1954, we crossed about six of their primary fighter bases.



The danger of overflights of the Soviet Union in the early days of the Cold War is illustrated by this hole from a single hit by a Soviet MIG 17 fighter on Major Hal Austin's RB-47 reconnaissance aircraft over the Soviet Union on May 8, 1954. This reminder of his close call was presented to Major Austin by the ground crew for his mission, and he proudly displays this piece of memorabilia in his home in Riverside, California. This photo appears in the Spring 1997 issue of ***MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*** *(p. 2).*

Appleton: At the same time was the Soviet Union capable of overflights over the United State? Or were you even aware of that?

Austin: Yes. In our war planning briefings we were told by Intelligence that the TU-4, they copied our B-29s that landed in the Far East during World War II. We thought the Soviets were friendly, but as you know, our crews and airplanes were captured. We had some crews that we never heard from again. Anyway the Soviets copied B-29, they were still flying until the Cold War was over. They could come all the way across the North Pole to cover parts of the United States but they'd have to have some place to land, like in Cuba. We figured that was part of the deal with Castro to use Cuba bases. During a lot of the Cold War their submarines were extremely active off our coast.

Appleton: It was a different sort of surveillance. Well, this is amazing. So, there were hundreds of pilots . . .

Austin: Well, no, it wasn't hundreds, but there were several men involved. The Symposium Proceedings Document covers the details of a lot of the early Cold War overflights. Not much was covered about periphery flights. The President's "O.K." of overflights was not included in the 2001 program. Dr. Hall had said that the only thing they found on my overflight was an "O.K. Ike," on a small note pad he usually used to O.K. things for the military.

General Andrew Goodpaster opened the Symposium by talking some about his part with Ike. He was Ike's primary military advisor, a colonel at that time. My route of flight and a lot of the details are in the Symposium Proceedings prepared by Dr. Hall. It took Dr. Hall almost two years to get these documents cleared by "God" and everybody in Washington to get it printed.

So it was extremely interesting to get together with others who had made overflights.

Appleton: Oh, I'm sure. Well, you've had similar experiences. Then you remained in the Air Force . . . of course by this time then it was the Air Force.

Austin: I'd made my decision to stay in the Air Force long before that following the Berlin Airlift. A lot of guys were called back to active duty just for the Airlift, and also during the Korean War. But I had stayed in all that time.

Oh, one more thing on our overflight mission before we finish. We were hit by a single 23mm shell by one of the MIG 17s. We really didn't know we got hit except we lost the intercom and you can't operate very well in a tandem airplane without it. We knew all our engines were running and all the instruments were working fine. But we didn't know what else had happened. We finally decided, sure enough, we had got hit since our intercom went out. Later, back on the ground, we found out our self-sealing tanks worked because the shell hit in the left wing and exploded into the forward main fuel tank. For our return to England a tanker was standing by off Norway in the refueling area we used earlier. Most of the guys back home didn't know what was going on. They knew that six airplanes had gone out in the morning and only five had come back.

Appleton: Because they didn't know your mission either.

Austin: No. Nobody did except the wing commander and he didn't know any of the details. He knew it was a special mission but he was not in the room when they briefed us. By the way, when General LeMay came by several months later to give us our two DFCs for the mission (a different wing commander at that point) the wing commander was invited to leave the room. Only Holt and I in the debriefing room at Base Ops with General LeMay. Normally an aide would be with him but not this time.

So anyway after getting out of the Soviet Union we had our fuel checks and time checks, and all that kind of stuff to run. We did that, and we're behind on fuel. Anyway, we got in over Sweden Vance Heavilin said, "I think you'd better try and contact that tanker. We're gonna be a little close getting back home."

So I hit the mike on the radio then. No more radio silence. Hit the radio mike and nothing! You normally hear feedback in your headset, nothing. I quick started flipping channels and had Holt and Heavilin check theirs, too. No feedback. We knew our radio gear, intercom and a lot of other stuff is located on the shelf above the forward main wheel well.

So I made a couple of calls in the blind and I'm listening and I heard a muffled something or other . . . I recognized the day's call sign. I don't remember what it was now because we changed them every day. It was the tanker saying he was leaving the area so, we were that far behind in time. He was scheduled to stay there for a precise time then leave. I told Vance, "I think that's what I heard." We kept trying to call again but obviously our transmitter was not working.

We really hadn't yet gotten into the long range cruise stuff in the B-47, but I'd flown a B-45 before and I knew if we climbed up higher and pulled the power back we could save fuel and buy time. So we climbed to 43,000 feet and by this time we were a whole lot lighter. Can we get back to U.K.? Holt said, "We ain't gonna make it. We got to land." Stavanger was one of our emergency landing spots. I said, "Hell, if we land at Stavanger we got to explain a whole lot of things like what the hell are you doin' here? There'll be all kinds of confusion, so we can't do that. We've got to get back to the U.K."

So, anyway, we had a strip alert tanker, it was not called strip alert in those days. Jim Rigley, who lives over here in Grand Terrace and a friend of mine for all these years, was the aircraft commander on that KC-97. The only instructions he had was to stay out there from a certain time to a certain time. He had about an hour-and-a-half timeframe to stay out near the end of the runway. He's located at Mildenhall RAF Base, a different base then where we were. They don't know what they're out there for but they've got a loaded airplane and they're to stay out on the taxiway near the end of the runway so they could take off in a hurry.

We're about 150 miles north of the U.K. and I kept trying to call on the radio but I don't hear anything. I let Holt try his and Vance try his. A blind call to whatever that tanker call sign was and whatever our call sign was that day. Nowadays receiver aircraft never know who the tanker belongs to, but in those days we all knew each other. We trained together. Well, Jim Rigley said he heard a broken transmission and he recognized my voice. He called the tower for clearance to take off. The tower said, "No, you cannot take off, we have an emergency in works."

"What do you mean 'emergency in works'?" "Well, we've got a fighter that's got fuel problems or hydraulic problems or something." "Well how long before they get on the ground?"

Reluctantly the tower said, "Well, probably about five minutes," so Rigley then said, "Thank you very much. I'm taking off anyway!" And the tower said, "NO! NEGATIVE!" Anyway, he took off, the weather was good. So at about 115 or 120 miles out we started our let down. We had figured out that we had enough fuel to get on the ground at Mildenhall or Sculthorpe, our old base, but we could not get all the way to Fairford. Carl Holt kept saying, "Ahh, we ain't gonna make it!" I pulled the power back and we let down fairly slowly to get down to about 10,000 feet at coast in. We get no call from the tanker although he said he called us but we never heard anything. I knew where Mildenhall was and I knew where he was gonna be. We spotted Mildenhall, we were probably about 50 miles out at that point and I thought I could see Mildenhall.

I said, "I'm gonna head for Mildenhall. I think we can make that. We may be the first to ever try to "dead-stick" a B-47 with no engines running. Carl still gives me hell about that statement. Then. I saw what I thought was a KC-97. These were all new airplanes in those days. We didn't paint them so they were shiny. I said, "I'm gonna head for that. I think that's a KC-97." Vance's radar was still working and he was looking for radar beacon.

I finally confirmed as we continued to let down that that was a 97 and Holt swears to this day that our fuel gauges had quit wiggling. They were not the fancy ones like nowadays. We make contact with the 97 and got 10,000 lbs. of fuel, disconnected from the boom and headed for Fairford. We had used a radio out procedure for the approach to the 97.

Appleton: So you were right close to coastal land when you got your fuel . . .

Austin: Well, about twenty minutes further to get to Fairford.

Appleton: So you found each other visually then.

Austin: Yes, it was strictly visually. I spotted his shiny airplane in the late afternoon. He only got to about 3,000 feet by the way. The KC-97 is a very slow airplane and we were lightweight, so I had trouble slowing down. Actually using the old RB-45 procedure, I went under him, climbed up to kill off air speed then let back down to get under him. It was the quickest refueling contact I'd ever made.

Appleton: He saw what was going on. (Austin: He knew.) That's a great story. You continued in Strategic Air Command after this?

Austin: Well, when we got back to the States, we debriefed General LeMay. When we got back to the unit they gave us a week off for free, not leave. Colonel Preston was our wing commander at that time and he knew something special was going on but didn't know the details. When we got back from our week off they broke up our crew. They said that the Soviets would know who was flying that airplane. They sent Vance Heavilin to McDill Air Force Base, a permanent change of station. Carl Holt was given another crew and they put me in aircraft maintenance.

We spent several more years at Lockbourne, I went to Command Staff School in 1958. I was a captain when we did all this. I was on the major's list so when the picture was taken later in '54, I was a major. From Command Staff School, I went to SAC Headquarters. I was assigned there for six years. Virtually all the time at SAC was in Operations Plans. I was a planner in the event of war with the Soviet Union and/or World War III.

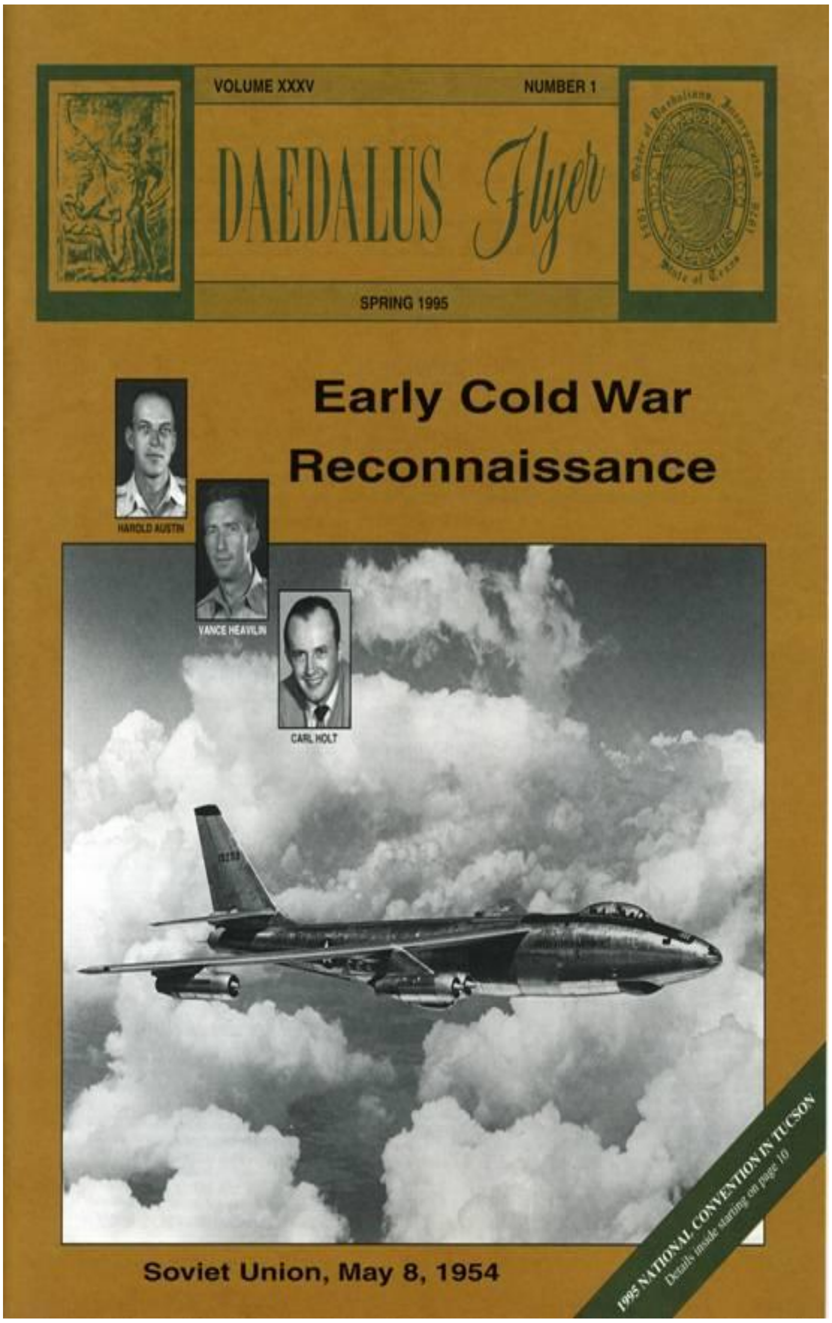
Appleton: Planning was nothing quite as exciting as the overflight.

Austin: LeMay told us not to talk about our overflights and we didn't for forty years. Nobody ever asked us anything about it. The guys who were in our outfit knew we done something different. Nobody at SAC Headquarters ever asked about it. The only time General LeMay ever brought it up was at Air Force Village West here near March AFB. He lived there before he died. He didn't much like to be around women. I was running the marketing office there when he came out just about once a week, sometimes only every two weeks, for his heart condition. The base hospital was still running then. I had gals working in the marketing office out there. General LeMay was a fantastic individual to work with. We were sitting there one day when he came to my office and sat down while Mrs. LeMay was talking with the gals. I don't know what the occasion was, why it was brought up, but I said, "General, I still remember the day you decorated Carl Holt and I with two DFCs." He said, "Well, when the hell was that?" or something like that. Then he said, "Well, yeah. I kind of remember that too." That was the extent of the discussion, he was a man of fairly few words you know. We didn't talk much more about it but I did mention that for forty years we hadn't talked about it.

This was about the same time that a young man from England under contract to BBC had been bugging me to find out about our RB-45s that the RAF had been using. Sam Meyers, who lived at Air Force Village West died a year ago. He flew RB-45Cs out of Korea during the Korean War, over China. He and I had known each other since the Lockbourne days. He said he was being bugged too. We finally said, "You know, if we don't talk about this a little bit, nobody is gonna know what happened."

Appleton: How did you know when it was declassified?

Austin: Well, it's not all declassified even yet. But enough of it was declassified so I found out from this kid . . . I call him a 'kid' but he was in his thirties. He came over here and kept bugging me and I finally agreed to talk to him. I found out he knew a hell



VOLUME XXXV NUMBER 1

DAEDALUS Flyer

SPRING 1995

Early Cold War Reconnaissance

Soviet Union, May 8, 1954

1995 NATIONAL CONVENTION IN TUCSON
Details inside starting on page 10

The Spring 1995 issue (pp. 15-18) of the ***Daedalus Flyer****, the official journal of the Order of Daedalians, published the story by Major Harold "Hal" Austin of his unescorted cold war overflight of the Soviet Union on May 8, 1954. This reproduction of the journal's cover highlights the major story of that issue.*

of a lot more about overflights than I did. The first time I wrote anything down about the overflight story was in the Spring issue, January 1995, *Daedalus Flyer*. That's my crew and our airplane on the cover of that magazine. I don't know if you're familiar with *MHQ*, the Quarterly Journal of Military History. It's a quarterly journal. On this one Spring 1997 issue, he wrote this after my article in the *Daedalus Flyer* about the B-47. "The truth about overflights" is what the story was about.

Appleton: A lot of people are not aware of all this. Certainly not at the time.

Austin: Well, not at the time but once they started getting information, even the *New Yorker* magazine, I became infamous. They said of General LeMay, "He did all this on his own. He didn't have the O.K. from anybody. His idea was to start World War III." Well, we know that's not true. General LeMay was a soldier's soldier. He would not do that sort of thing on his own, although he probably threatened to.

Appleton: Well, then it becomes politics.

Austin: *The Air Force Magazine* has carried a lot about the B-47 in the Spring of '96 issue. They all start picking the stuff up and I got invited to talk about the overflight. I gave presentations many times.

Appleton: Well then you stayed in the Air Force until you finally retired.

Austin: O.K. From the B-47 days, SAC Headquarters for six years, then went to the Air War College, then back to the Pentagon in the J-3 Joint Chiefs of Staff. I was there 1966 to '69 during much of the Vietnam War. During those three years I spent half of my time in Southeast Asia on temporary duty. We would go to CincPAC (Commander-in-Chief Pacific) and talk about military tactics. The military thought we were supposed to win that war. My whole mission there was planning and briefing the Joint Chief's staff. Allen Hill, we called him "Boot," who's a retired Rear Admiral living here in Riverside, he and I were in the same operations shop. He was the fighter aircraft coordinator and I was a bomber coordinator. I was the bomb coordinator because I'd run the iron bomb test program for the B-47, B-52s when I was at SAC Headquarters, before we got them into the Vietnam War.

That was another thing. The B-52 was never designed to drop iron (non-nuclear) bombs. In fact they retired the B-47s in order to find pilots to fly the old airplanes, the C-47s, the B-26s, etc. The three years with Pentagon was very interesting. I spent half my time between there and CINCPAC. Admiral Sharp was the commander most of the time I was there. His predecessor was Admiral McCain, the Senator from Arizona's dad. We would usually brief him going over to Southeast Asia and also on the way back. Our mission was how we were going to get the B-52s and fighters into Hanoi and Haiphong and finish off the war. Well, as you know that wasn't allowed to happen until several years later.

After my tour in the Pentagon I went to B-52s at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in the 17th bomb wing, 1970-71. From there I was assigned as Wing Commander of the 384th Air Refueling Wing at McConnell Air Force Base, Kansas, 1971-73. From there to 15th Air Force Headquarters here at March. I'd spent a lot of my career trying to get stationed in California and finally got stationed here. Then, shortly after arriving here in late 1973, I got fingered to do one of two things, retire or be reassigned as the base commander at U-Tapao Air Base, Thailand in 1974. I told Rosemary, I had enough time to retire but I said, "You know, I think it might be interesting. If you'll promise to come over to visit a couple of times, I'll take that one-year assignment."

So I did and wound up being right in the middle of things as we wrapped up the war in Cambodia and the war in Vietnam in 1974 and '75. The Khmer Rouge closed the Mekong River at Phnom Penh, December 31st 1974 and all hell broke loose. We started an airlift from U-Tapao to Phnom Penh that was second only to the Berlin Airlift, with C-130s. A C-130 outfit was stationed at Clarke Air Base in the Philippines and we always had a bunch of them at U-Tapao. I had a big outfit at U-Tapao. The base commander of more than a dozen tenants including SAC with B-52s and KC-135s.

We also had the U.S. Army at U-Tapao with their C-12s. We had some 10,000 people on U-Tapao to Phnom Penh. It was only about a 40-45 minute flight each way for the C-130s out of U-Tapao. Then we also contracted eight DC-8s, civilian contracts, and when they came in we had them operating the airlift, too. I had a big morale problem at U-Tapao. We had all these people there, SAC, MAC, all the different commands, Army and Navy guys on the base. We had a whole Navy contingent there with their P-3s. When we got ready to start that airlift, although it wasn't my idea, we could load the airlift aircraft with all the people we had at U-Tapao. They were talking about how many months it would take to build up regular loading crews like we used on the Berlin Airlift. So they were talking about six or eight months to build up to train people. My guys kept saying, "Look, we've got three or four thousand guys on this base that are not doing anything from day to day except going to whorehouses at night and getting in trouble. I held a staff meeting once a week with all the commanders on the base. I got them in and covered what we thought we could do. I said, "Look, would you guys be willing to do it?" There was a uniform problem. So I said, "O.K. What if we let everybody wear a white tee-shirt. They can wear their unit baseball cap. All the units had a baseball cap. We can tell who they are by their hat and they'll put their rank on it and let's just do our own training program out here."

We did and old General Wilson, Commander at PACAF said, "You're outta your cotton pickin' mind!" And I said, "Yes, Sir." I really just about worked directly for him. My bosses were all fighter pilots and I'm runnin' U-Tapao which is a bomber base, but I worked for PACAF. He was over there quite often but I said, "Let's see how it works." So we got the Red Horse crews, the MAC crews, the airlift crews, out there and started a training program loading the airplanes. They were loading pallets to be slid on to airplanes. I told them "You are instructors. You teach these guys how to do it."

Well, in a matter of about two weeks we had enough crews trained and willing to do the work. The MAC guys said they could turn forty 130s a day. The DC-8s had an automatic loader type thing to load the pallets. It was absolutely amazing how well it was working. General Wilson came over to watch some of that operation and he just couldn't believe you could take a bunch of mechanics and others from different services and make loading crews out of them. But we did. The airlift was supporting the good guys in Phnom Penh with ammunition, food, all kinds of things going in there.

Just as we thought things were going real good, one of Stretch DC-8s came back and we started counting bullet holes in it. Then the C-130s come back with bullet holes in them. Well, the bad guys, the Khmer Rouge, had surrounded that air field primarily with small arms. The C-130s were coming back with too many holes, so we said, "Wait a minute. We can't do this anymore." It was too dangerous. I happened to be there the day one DC-8 captain came out of the airplane and we found about four bullet holes within in a small area, not too far from the cockpit in the belly of his airplane. His eyes were t-h-a-t big! So he said, "That's it. I ain't going back!"

Appleton: Did you lose any planes?

Austin: No. We lost no airplanes but the airlift came to a screeching halt. The Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh and it went from bad to worse over there. Then the Vietnam War . . . we were sitting at U-Tapao and doing a lot of support for them too. When the final collapse of Saigon occurred the Vietnamese Air Force flew a lot of airplanes out. We had several C-130s come in, eight, I think it was that the Vietnamese Air Force had. They had a real tragedy on one of them. I didn't know about this until several hours after it occurred. They were stuffing people on board the airplane to get out of Saigon and the co-pilot's wife was helping everybody get in. At the very last, the airplane started taxiing before they got the door closed, and she was trying to get inside.

Anyway, they never told the co-pilot about it until they got on the ground to U-Tapao, but she fell out and the trucks (wheels) of the 130 ran over her and, of course, killed her right on the spot. That was really a sad story.

My guys swear that they got 118 people off of one of the C-130s. There didn't seem to be any way you could stuff 118 people into a C-130. We had several single cockpit F-5s (fighters) come in and we had one with three guys in the cockpit. The pilot and two of his ground crews.

Appleton: People were trying to get out. Any which way.

Austin: Oh, yes. Any way they could. I was Base Commander at U-Tapao as we wrapped up those two wars. My daughter graduated from medical school in June of '75 and everything had stopped by that time, so I asked if I could come back to the States early to make her graduation. And I did. I then spent another year here at March Air Force Base before I retired.

Appleton: As you look back on your military career, what do you consider the highlight?

Austin: The Cold War. Starting with the Berlin Airlift, 156 missions and then 25 years in SAC. Everything I did in SAC was about the Cold War. The real downside of my career was not knowing for most of the three years while in the Pentagon, (I should have been able to figure it out), that Secretary of Defense McNamara was the primary reason we weren't supposed to win the Vietnam War. Every time we turned around, we were dealing with these "quiz kids," we had to brief them informally before we could take a briefing to the chiefs, the two star, three star or four star level. One of those guys became Under Secretary of Defense several years later. He had got out of the Air Force as a First Lieutenant, and all of a sudden he's telling us guys in the J-3 that we can't do this or that and the other thing. That was the downside of my career, that era 1967-69 when we worked so hard and spent so much time and effort.

Harold R. "Hal" Austin in December 2001, Riverside, California

Appleton: The most important thing was the Cold War ended the way it should have. That kind of overshadows everything else.

Austin: That's right. I contributed to the Cold War for a lot of years. I'm proud of it. Just yesterday a group of *Daedalians* got a briefing on the C-17 operations in Iraq. I said, "Where can I sign up?"

Appleton: I guess once you're up you don't ever want to stop flying. (Austin: I never flew anymore after I retired from the Air Force.) As you look back on your military career, what kind of an assessment do you have? Do you feel pretty good about it?

Austin: I feel very good about it. Again, it relates to the fact that freedom is not free. And, boy, did I learn that over all my 33 plus years in the military. I've tried to assess my career as we talked about it and I don't think politically that we did much wrong. We, as a country, seem to always muddle through and we'll muddle through this one (Iraq). It'll come out all right. There's no doubt in my mind about it. But, in looking back over it, World War II was an absolute necessity. We had to become the Number 1 World Power. The thing I think I appreciate most about our military, there's never been any doubt during my lifetime that civilians are always in charge of the military. That's our real strength. Economics are extremely important but so is the military. I went through sinking spells, you know, the Vietnam era, I was awfully upset with the way the people treated the military. But I blame it all . . . almost all of the nightmare on President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara. We couldn't have had two worse guys in charge.

Appleton: I don't think they understood . . .

Austin: Johnson was a politician. He was never qualified to be President and he's from my home state of Texas. I've never forgiven him. We found out that L.B.J. was picking the targets for the B-52s in Vietnam. Now, I don't care what kind of intelligence system you're working, and I've been involved in intelligence my whole life, how in the hell are you gonna make a decision in Washington and not have the bad guys find out about it before you can execute the mission, when the execution is gonna be 24 to 48 hours after he makes his decision?

Appleton: Well, one would hope that the World War II experience would have helped people realize that the leader, for instance, picking the target, didn't work.

Austin: Well, I've got a lot of admiration for George W. Bush because he decides what he's gonna do with a lot of input from the military, a lot more than most people think. And then he goes with it.

Appleton: And let's the military do what has to be done.

Austin: Well, you know, he gives them the guidance and then approves what is recommended and gets on with it! They are gonna make mistakes! And this business of war! I don't want to lose another soldier or airman or anybody in any military action, but when you compare what's going on in Iraq with every other conflict we've been involved in, we've been extremely lucky. And we've always, in World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, all of those, we have had more people killed NOT in combat, than we have lost in combat. Guys get carried away. They do things in airplanes and other vehicles that you can't do. The HumVs rolling over, etc. Guys get carried away and that's the way we kill people.

Appleton: That happened yesterday. In Iraq. These soldiers drove their truck off the road.

Austin: You get younger guys and they're all charged up and they're gonna do their thing. They're going in combat so they can get away with things they can't do otherwise while in training. It's ridiculous.

Appleton: This is probably a good place to stop, and I've taken up most of your morning. I want to thank you for participating in the Riverside Veterans History Project, and when we're through we'll have this all typed up and you'll get a copy. Then we'll go back and get it corrected. This then concludes the interview.

Note: Hal married Rosemary Gahegan on 2 July 1949 and they have three sons, one daughter and eight grandkids. They have lived in Riverside, California since July 1975.