

*Dedication and Sacrifice:*



*National Aerial  
Reconnaissance in the  
Cold War*





## THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR

The United States emerged from World War II victorious, with its enemies completely vanquished. Although American leaders at the time expected an extended period of peace and reconstruction based on cooperation with its wartime allies, it soon became apparent that the Soviet Union and its newly expanded bloc of satellites were acting with increasing hostility toward the nations of the West, in particular the United States.

Confronted with a new conflict, a "cold" rather than a shooting war, policymakers in Washington undertook new actions to protect the security of the United States, among them national-level intelligence activities. Most decision makers remembered the trauma of the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, which caused heavy loss of life and great damage to the U.S. Navy and brought the United States into the Second World War. These officials were determined to prevent "another Pearl Harbor."

In the 1940s and 1950s, Soviet propaganda boasted of the USSR's strong military capabilities, and its record of achievement in World War II added credibility to these claims. The USSR detonated its first atomic weapon in 1949, years ahead of American estimates. In the 1950s, Soviet advances in rocket science increased the possibility that the continental United States could become a nuclear battleground. Washington's (incorrect) assumption that the Soviets had prompted the Korean War led policymakers to the conclusion that the Soviets were ready for a "hot" war with the West.

However, in Washington, little was known with any certainty about the post-World War II Soviet military – not its strength, not its armament, not its deployment, not its intentions. This lack of knowledge was in itself dangerous: not only did it hamper coherent planning by American policymakers, but it also increased the uncertainties of officials and the public alike, increasing the possibility that an ideological or political struggle could quickly escalate into armed conflict.

Therefore, various intelligence programs were created to acquire the information needed for effective defense planning. Among them were programs of aerial reconnaissance to collect both photographic intelligence and signals intelligence.

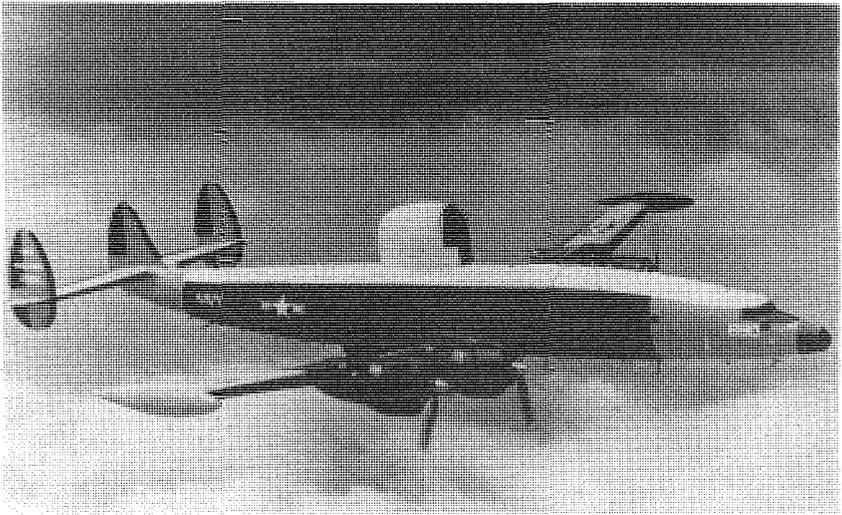
## **THE RECONNAISSANCE PROGRAM**

The USSR was a "denied" area, that is to say, travel within its territory for foreigners (or even its own citizenry) was severely restricted. Obtaining reliable information about the country or its military capabilities was difficult, if not impossible, through conventional intelligence methods. In response to this need, defense policymakers established a national program of reconnaissance, carried out by the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy. The U.S. Army also engaged in aerial reconnaissance, but usually in support of tactical objectives, as it did during the Vietnam War.

Both the Army Air Corps and the Navy had conducted some limited airborne intercept operations against the Japanese and German military during World War II. After the war, in the late 1940s, the Navy and the new U.S. Air Force began reinstituting airborne collection flights in both the European and Pacific regions in response to the national requirements for defense information.

During World War II, intercept operators often "hitchhiked" on aircraft performing other missions. In the postwar period, the services at first used standard military aircraft, such as B-29s, for these flights, but, increasingly, they outfitted reconnaissance versions of other military aircraft – the C-130, for example, became the RC-130 for reconnaissance purposes. These were sometimes known as "ferret" aircraft. The intelligence personnel, as opposed to the flying crew, were nicknamed "back-enders."

As need required, aerial reconnaissance was conducted in other areas of the world, including support to American forces in the Vietnam War. Some of these flights also resulted in downed aircraft and loss of life, e.g., the shootdown of the Navy EC-121 in the Sea of Japan on April 15, 1969, and loss of Army aircraft in Indochina.



**EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft**

The existence of the program was kept classified for decades. Although it became obvious that the Soviets knew about some aspects of the program, many key features remained secret from them. The decision to keep the program secret, though necessary, had unfortunate implications: it prevented public recognition for the veterans of the program as well as public honors for those who lost their lives while conducting aerial reconnaissance.

## **THE LOSSES**

Aerial reconnaissance was dangerous. Of the 152 cryptologists who lost their lives during the Cold War, 64 were engaged in aerial reconnaissance.

The services which administered this national program recognized from the start the perilous nature of the activity. Personnel were briefed on the natural and man-made hazards of these flights. Crew members understood the critical nature of their missions, and persevered despite the danger.



**Army GUARDRAIL aircraft**

The first documented case of an attempted shootdown came in October 1949, when Soviet fighters attempted to down a U.S. B-29 over the Sea of Japan; the aircraft escaped unharmed. Over the next decades, there were thirty documented Soviet attacks on U.S. reconnaissance aircraft. A tragic thirteen were successful.

During the Cold War period of 1945–1977, a total of more than forty reconnaissance aircraft were shot down in the European and Pacific areas.

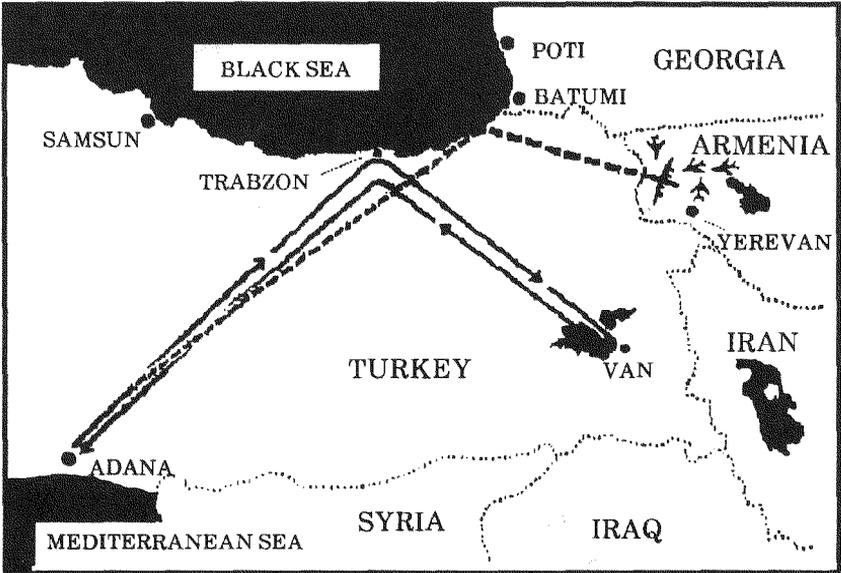
## **THE 1958 INCIDENT**

In 1997 the U.S. government placed on display a C-130 aircraft to symbolize all the losses in the reconnaissance program. The C-130 is a sister craft to one shot down in 1958. This is the story of that incident.

On the 2nd of September 1958, Soviet MiG-17 pilots shot down a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance-configured C-130 transport aircraft

over Soviet Armenia. The MiGs attacked the unarmed aircraft after it inadvertently penetrated denied airspace. It crashed near the village of Sasnashen, thirty-four miles north of Yerevan, the Armenian capital. Seventeen Americans died in the crash.

The crew members had been based at Rhein-Main Air Base in Germany, but were on temporary duty at Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey. The aircraft carried six flight crew members from the 7406th Support Squadron and eleven USAF "back-enders," Security Service personnel attached to Detachment One of the 6911th Radio Group Mobile.



**Planned and actual flight routes of the ill-fated C-130 /60528**

On September 2, the C-130 (tail number 60528) departed Incirlik on a reconnaissance mission along the Turkish-Armenian border. It was to fly from Adana, Turkey, on the Mediterranean coast, to Trabzon, and turn right to fly to Van, Turkey. From Van

the pilot was to reverse course and "orbit" (i.e., fly a racetrack pattern) between Van and Trabzon. This course would parallel the Soviet frontier, but the aircraft was not to approach the Turkish-Soviet border closer than 100 miles.

The aircraft's crew reported passing over Trabzon at an altitude of 25,500 feet. The crew acknowledged a weather report from Trabzon – the last word heard from the flight.

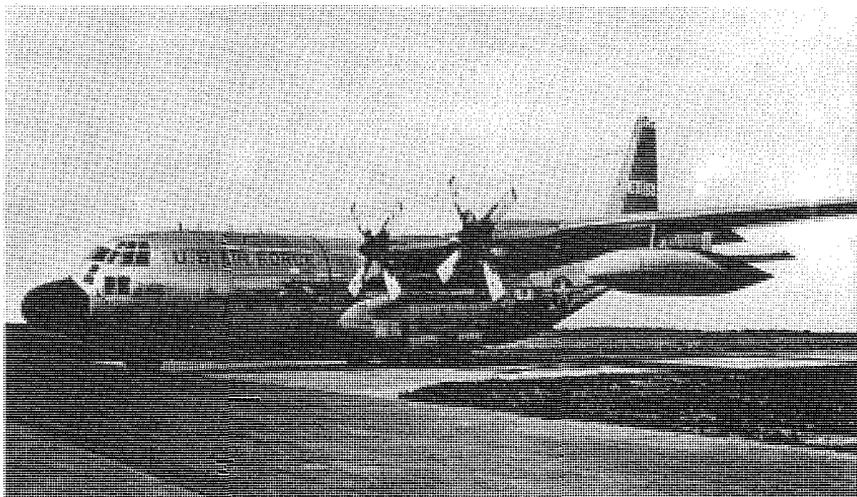
What happened next is unclear. The C-130 crew may have become disoriented by Soviet navigational beacons in Armenia and Soviet Georgia, which were on frequencies similar to those at Trabzon and Van – one signal in Soviet Georgia was stronger than that in Trabzon.

At that time, the Soviets denied downing the aircraft, claiming that the C-130 "fell" on their territory. On September 24, 1958, the Soviets returned six sets of remains, but, when queried, stated they had no information regarding the eleven missing crewmen. On February 6, 1959, seeking to get the Soviets to reveal more details, President Dwight Eisenhower made public a tape recording of the Soviet fighter pilots' conversations as they attacked the C-130. The Soviets continued to deny responsibility for the shootdown, however, and the fate of the remaining crew members remained unknown during the Cold War.

Declassified Soviet documents, released by Russian president Boris Yeltsin, indicate that all crew members aboard the C-130 perished in the crash. Ground and air observations note that the crew did not parachute out of the aircraft.

## **VIGILANCE PARK**

The secrecy of the reconnaissance programs prevented recognition of the slain military personnel at the time of the incidents. Their loss was mourned by their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines in similar programs, but the fallen could not be accorded public honors.



C-130

The end of the Cold War has allowed the United States to lift some of its security restrictions concerning the reconnaissance programs, permitting us at last to accord due recognition of the achievements and sacrifices of these intrepid military personnel. To this end, the United States has established National Vigilance Park on Fort Meade, Maryland.

The centerpiece of Vigilance Park is a C-130 aircraft, refurbished to resemble the C-130A which was downed over Soviet Armenia in September 1958. The Vigilance Park C-130 was reclaimed from storage at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, refurbished by Raytheon/E-Systems in Greenville, Texas, and flown to Fort Meade. It has been located adjacent to the National Cryptologic Museum, where displays and other presentations help educate the public about the significance of signals intelligence and information systems security.

The National Vigilance Park's Aerial Reconnaissance Memorial was dedicated to our lost servicemen in a ceremony on September 2, 1997, in the presence of family members of those lost in the September 1958 incident.

Surrounding the Aerial Reconnaissance Memorial are planted eighteen trees, each symbolizing a type of reconnaissance aircraft lost during the Cold War (twelve Air Force airframes, four Navy airframes, and two Army airframes). These trees help us to remember that all services participated in this program and that they all suffered losses.

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**The efforts and sacrifices of these intrepid soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were not in vain. They were part of a program that was vital to the security of the United States during times of peril, crisis, and war. They helped keep the peace, and when the nation was involved in war, helped save American lives. We will not forget them.**



For further information or additional copies, contact the Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, 20755-6886, ATTN: S542.