

A B-47 Overflight of Russia – 1954

By Colonel Harold “Hal” Austin

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The hot subject on both sides of the Iron Curtain in 1954 was Intelligence gathering. The political/military situation for the time period around May 8, 1954 was that the Cold War was in full swing and the Korean War was nearing the stalemate that has lasted for more than 40 years. We were quite concerned about the possibility of the Soviets attacking Europe and even the United States with aircraft over flying Canada. Russia was equally as concerned about an attack by the United States.

Some of you will remember that by the 1954-55 time period, we had two Strategic Reconnaissance Wings at Lockbourne AFB, Ohio, where my crew was stationed, with 90 RB-47E aircraft plus 20 KC-97 tankers. Also, there were two RB-36 Reconnaissance wings, one at Ellsworth AFB, SD and one at Fairchild AFB, WA. These were the aircraft expected to do the “Open Skies” project which President Eisenhower had attempted to negotiate with the Soviet Union. It would have been very interesting trying to cover the entire Soviet Union with those 150 or so aircraft! In 1955 President Eisenhower made a careful evaluation of US policy on disarmament. He invited the other four major powers of the world to join in an agreement for the reduction of armaments and on July 21, 1955, at the Geneva Summit Conference, made his “Open Skies” proposal to ensure peace in the world through the use of aerial reconnaissance.

During 1951-53, my unit, the 91st Strategic Recon Wing, routinely had about 8 RB-45C's and a similar number of KB-29P tankers deployed on temporary duty to England. In late 1953, we transitioned to the new RB-47E for the same job. During these years our “official” job was to do uncontrolled photo mapping work for the US Army over Europe, primarily the Rhine River basin and later all of Spain, so our maps could be geodetically tied into Eastern Europe. This was a very important requirement because ballistic missiles were soon to be deployed to the NATO area. Our real mission with RB-45C's, we found out later, was to occasionally furnish them to the RAF. (As a matter of interest, a flight of RB-45C's, with RAF crews, had been over Moscow the night of April 29, 1954, just a few days earlier than our day photographic mission.)

Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) RB-29's, RB-50's and later RB-47 aircraft, were also doing periphery work around the Soviet Union, primarily to keep the Soviet Radar Order of Battle up to date. I believe our overflight on May 8, 1954 was the first with the RB-47E visual photo aircraft.

On this particular TDY, my crew, Carl Holt, co-pilot, and Vance Heavilin, navigator, and myself, had been in England about two weeks when on May 6 we launched a "feint" of 7 RB-47E's toward the USSR's "Northern Exposure" taking pictures of the Spitsbergen Islands, Northwest of Norway, we were well above 75° north latitude. Although we didn't know it at the time, this "feint" was to set up our mission of the 8th of May.

On the 8th of May, the three RB-47 crews for the mission were briefed separately and apart by two SAC Intel Colonels. Our particular mission was to penetrate Soviet airspace and take pictures of 9 Soviet airfields to find out for General LeMay if the "new Migs" (MIG 17's) were deployed to the area. The other two aircraft were to proceed with us to a point about 100 miles north of Murmansk and then return to base.

Our flight of three RB-47s departed RAF Fairford about 7 AM, refueling with our KC-97's off Norway as we had done two days earlier, flying one mile separation using station-keeping technique (very loose formation) to a point about 100 miles north of Murmansk. The other two aircraft reversed course, as briefed, at that point to return to the UK. Our first Soviet airfield targets were two large airfields near Murmansk. We coasted in at 12 noon at nearly 40,000 feet over Murmansk and the NAV turned on his radar cameras and started the three K-17 large area visual photo cameras. The weather was clear as a bell across the entire Western part of the continent, perfect for our K-17 and K-38 cameras.

About the time we finished photos of the second airfield, we were joined by a flight of 3 Soviet Migs. I still don't know whether or not they were armed, but they stayed a couple hundred yards to half a mile off our wing, making visual identification, I guess. About 25 minutes later, a flight of six Migs showed up. I guess this flight confirmed we were the bad guys, because a few minutes later another two flights of three, a total of six Migs arrived behind us, with obvious intent to try to shoot us down. By this time, we had covered two more major airfield targets near Arkhangelsk and were turning to the Southwest toward our last two targets.

We had been over Soviet territory an hour and were at 40,000 feet. We had been briefed by Intel that the Mig 15 would not be able to do any damage to us at 40,000 feet with our true air speed on the order of 440 knots.

Well, you can imagine what we called those Intelligence weenies as the first Soviet Mig 17, not a Mig 15, made a firing pass at us from the left rear and we saw cannon tracer shells going both above and below our aircraft. And, the Mig was still moving out rather smartly as he passed under us in front. So enough of this 40,000 feet stuff, I pushed the RB-47 over, descending a couple thousand feet picking up about 20 knots indicated airspeed in the process. The second Mig 17 made his firing pass and I don't care who knows, it was scary watching tracers go over and under our aircraft.

This guy had almost come up our tailpipes. The co-pilot turned around backward to operate our tail guns after the first Mig shot at us. It was typical for the two remotely controlled 20mm cannons not to fire. I told Holt he'd better kick them or something because if our guns don't fire the next SOB would come directly up our tailpipes. Fortunately, when the third Mig started his pursuit pass, our guns burped for a couple of seconds.

General LeMay did not believe in tracers for our guns but the Soviet pilots must have seen something because the third guy broke off his pass and the flight of six, and the next flight which joined us later, stayed out about 30 to 40 degrees to the side, out of the effective envelope of our guns. Of course, the Migs didn't know that our guns would not fire again even though the co-pilot pleaded, and I believe he did, at least, kick the panel trying to get them to work.

The fourth Mig of this flight made a firing pass and made a lucky hit through the top of our left wing, about 8 feet from the fuselage through the wing flap. It exploded into the fuselage in the area of the #1 main tank and knocked out our intercom. We felt a good whap and all three of us were a little bit anxious (scared) but doing our mission as briefed, basically because of habit. I firmly believe that's what good, tough, LeMay-type, SAC training did for his combat crews. Later we also found out, it hit our UHF radio in a way that it would not channelize but was stuck on channel 13, our command post common.

By now we had covered our last photo target and had turned due west toward Finland to get the hell out of there. That flight of six ran out of range I guess and, we were near the Finland border. Real soon another three Migs showed up. Two Migs of this flight made individual firing passes but our

added speed obviously made it a bit tougher, or I am pretty sure I would not be here writing about this mission today.

After those two made passes, one of the Migs came up on our right side, close enough to shake hands and sat there for two or three minutes. Two more Migs tried firing passes, but without hitting us, by this time we were well out of Soviet territory. At the debriefing in Omaha, General LeMay asked, "Why were you not shot down?" My answer was that there was no doubt in my mind the Mig 17 pilots could have shot us down, if they had been willing to come right up our tailpipes! He made the statement that he was ". . . convinced that most fighter pilots are basically cowards anyway." General LeMay also said, "There are probably several openings today in command positions there, since you were not shot down."

Our excitement for this mission was not over. An airborne stand-by KC-97 tanker was holding for us about 50 miles from Stavanger, Norway. We really weren't sure how the damage to our left wing and fuselage would effect fuel consumption. Initially it didn't look that bad. As we came into radio range of our airborne tanker, I heard him calling (garbled) in the blind on command post common, the only working part of our UHF radio. We were running about 30 minutes behind schedule; I heard the tanker state he was leaving the orbit area at the appointed time. I tried to acknowledge his call but he later said he never heard me transmit anything. Of course they had not been briefed on our mission but were aware that three B 47's went through refueling areas that morning and only two had returned.

As we coasted-out off Norway, it was obvious we had fallen behind the fuel curve, We climbed to 43,000 feet and throttled back to max-range cruise. It did appear however, that we could get to a base in England and we knew there was a strip alert tanker at Brize Norton awaiting our call. My co-pilot had spent much of the time since the last Migs departed sitting in the aisle acting as the intercom between me and our navigator. You just don't realize how handy the intercom is until you don't have one in a tandem airplane.

Holt was beginning to panic on the fuel as we reached a point about 150 miles from the Wash. He said all this effort was for naught if we have to bail out of the airplane, and left no film for intelligence to process that would prove where we had been. Within about 100 miles of the Wash, I started calling for the strip alert tanker to launch. Jim Rigley, the tanker pilot, said he heard a word or two, enough to recognize my voice (these were our tanker guys, so we all knew each other).

Anyway, he attempted to get permission to launch. Well, as it sometimes goes, the RAF had an emergency working at Brize. Rigley announced that he was launching anyway and did. When he returned to base, the Base Commander threatened him with a court martial and British Air Traffic Control gave him a violation, both situations were later “fixed” by General LeMay.



In all of my nine years of flying up to that time I was never more thrilled to see another airplane in the air than I was to see that beautiful KC-97 that day. I saw Rigley s airplane and headed for it. We had already decided to try to land if need be at Brize Norton, and were letting down to do just that. Holt said, “We’re going to run out of gas.” Rigley had his guys looking up for us and caught a glimpse of what they thought was our airplane and leveled off at 3,000 feet heading south. I circled once letting down. As we maneuvered and pulled into contact position, Holt said, “We are taking on fuel.” He swears to this day, all tank gauges showed empty when we made contact. I told Holt to tell me when we had 12,000 pounds of fuel. When he said “NOW”, I punched the boom loose, gave the Boom Operator a salute and headed for Fairford. We buzzed the tower and as we came around, they gave us a green light to land.

When we reached the ramp and parked, the crew-chief was first up the ladder, “What the hell kind of seagull did you hit?”

Because of the “need to know” classification, my crew was never allowed to see the pictures we took that day, but General LeMay said they were really good.

If General Curtis E. LeMay was still alive I might have second thoughts on telling about this mission even though its been over 55 years (1954-2009). My crew, Carl Holt, co-pilot and Vance Heavilin, navigator and myself, were decorated by General LeMay, then Commander in Chief of the Strategic

Air Command, with two DFC's each in lieu of the Silver Star, for a single RB47E visual photo reccey overflight of the Soviet Union.

When General LeMay presented our DFC's he apologized stating that the recommendation for the Silver Star had to be approved in Washington which could cause two problems; first they'd get the thing screwed up, and second, and I quote, "I'd have to explain this mission to too damn many people who don't need to know."

About the Author:

Colonel Harold (Hal) R. Austin retired in December 1976 from the USAF with nearly 34 years of military service. He is a command pilot with nearly 10,000 flying hours in 22 different types of military aircraft.

Born in Sweetwater, OK, Hal went on to earn a Bachelors Degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and later a Masters Degree from George Washington University in Washington DC. He was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Air Corp. and earned his pilot wings on 15 April 1945. Hal graduated from Command and Staff school in 1959 and the Air War College, 1966 at Maxwell AFB, AL.

Military duty has included flying the Berlin Airlift from Frankfurt, Germany; 24 years in the Strategic Air Command as Aircraft Commander; Maintenance Staff Officer; and Commander of the 384th Air Refueling Wing, McConnell, AFB. Austin's career also included Operations Staff Officer at SAC Headquarters and J-3, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon.

After retirement from the USAF, Colonel Austin was employed as a stockbroker and later Director of Marketing for a retirement community. This past summer he joined and purchased interest in a long distance telephone company primarily serving California. Very active in his community, Hal is the past president of the Riverside, CA Chapter of the AF Association; member and past chairman of the Riverside Chamber of Commerce Military Affairs Committee; Club and numerous other civic organizations. Hal has been a Life Member of the Order of Daedalians since 1971. He carries Named Membership #0695, for Founder Member, Don Gilmore and is a member of 30th Flight (Hap Arnold).

Hal and his wife of over 46 years, Rosemary, reside in Riverside, CA. They have four children and nine grandchildren.

Comments From the Back Seat!

By Carl Holt, co-pilot

It was a clear day (not a cloud in the sky) as we coasted in to the Soviet Union. Suddenly we started to generate contrails like six white arrows pointing to our airplane. (Not in the forecast!) As we passed over our first recon target I could see the fighters circling up to meet us and knew it would only be a matter of time before they reached our altitude

When I saw the flashes of fire from the nose of the fighters I knew it would not be a "Milk Run." I had trouble getting the tail guns to fire and since I was in a reverse seat position I could not eject in case of a direct hit. Also, the radar firing screen would not work so I felt a little like Wyatt Earp, looking out the back end of the canopy and firing at will (visual bore sighting). I did not hit any of the fighters, but it kept them out of a direct rear-firing pass. They could only make passes from either side at a greater than 45 degree angle.

Later, after we were hit in the left wing and fuselage, one MIG tried to ram us by side slipping his fighter into our aircraft. On one "ramming" pass he stalled out right under our aircraft and our vertical camera took one of the first close up pictures of the new MIG-17. (The Intelligence community was elated at the picture!)

As we coasted out of Finland one of the remaining fighter pilots flew up to our right wing gave us a salute and then turned back toward the Soviet Union.

Having flown combat in WW2 and later recalled during the Korean War, I thought we were in a Cold War with Russia, not a hot one, since all the Reconnaissance plane "shoot downs" had been kept very secret. During our de-briefing with General LeMay, I said to him, very innocently, "Sir, they were trying to shoot us down!" Smoking his usual long cigar he paused, leaned back and said "What did you think they would do, give you an Ice Cream Cone?" His aides all smiled -But I was serious.