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Cold War Reconnaissance and the Shootdown Of Flight 60528



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 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, 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."

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.

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. However, the decision to keep the program secret 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.

During the Cold War period of 1945-1977, a total of more than 40 reconnaissance aircraft were shot down. 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. 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, and to tell their stories.

A Tragic Shootdown - September 2, 1958

On the 2nd of September 1958, Soviet MiG-17 pilots shot down a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance-configured C-130 aircraft over Soviet Armenia; 17 crewman were aboard. The MiGs attacked the unarmed aircraft after it inadvertently penetrated denied airspace. It crashed near the village of Sasnashen, 34 miles northwest of Yerevan, the Armenian capital.

The C-130 reconnaissance aircraft was readily recognizable as non-lethal. One MiG pilot identified it as a "four-engined transport." The C-130 (tail number 60528) crew members were 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 11 USAF "back-enders" from Detachment One of the 6911th Radio Group Mobile.

On this day, the C-130 departed Incirlik on a reconnaissance mission along the Turkish-Armenian border. It was to fly from Adana to Trabzon, Turkey on the Mediterranean coast, turn right and fly to Van, Turkey. From Van, the pilot was to reverse course and "orbit" (i.e., fly a race-track pattern) between Van and Trabzon. This course would parallel the Soviet frontier, but the aircraft was not to approach the 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, the United States in a session at the United Nations made public a tape recording of the Russian fighter pilots' conversations as they attacked the C-130. The Soviets continued to deny responsibility for the shutdown, and the fate of the remaining crew members remained unknown during the Cold War.