

SYMPOSIUM: COLD WAR IN FLAMES

With George Back's vivid painting of a North Korean MiG attacking an RB-47 setting the stage, a sold-out symposium audience of more than 200 listened to compelling stories of airborne reconnaissance from those who flew the missions and those who continue to analyze the historical record. The new SAC Museum was the venue, on 12 September 1998, for the review which covered post-World War II through the 1960s, a period cited as "The Cold War in Flames" by Dr. John Farquhar.

John Farquhar has sterling credentials: a 55th SRW veteran, an Associate Professor of History at the Air Force Academy and a PhD, whose subject for his doctoral dissertation was Cold War Reconnaissance.

He led off the symposium with a presentation on the origins of post-World War II airborne reconnaissance with details on specific programs. He cited the pioneering work of **Major Maynard White's** 46th Reconnaissance Squadron at Ladd Field, Alaska, the first operational reconnaissance outfit in postwar SAC. The 46th flew the F-9 (RB-17) and the F-13 (RB-29). John gave credit to the 46th for having accomplished the radar mapping of the Arctic flying out of Thule, Greenland. (This was an activity for which **Howard P. Smith**, MGen, USAF Ret., was honored at the recent Birthday Ball). He also recounted the B-17 ferret missions inserted into the traffic flow during the Berlin Airlift in 1948. Those aircraft monitored allied flights in the corridors between West Germany and Berlin and would report aircraft problems to the tower.

Greg Skavinski told the story of 10 shoot downs of US Air Force and Navy reconnaissance aircraft during the Cold War each of which involved some crew members whose fate has never been resolved. Greg's uncle was one of those who perished when an RB-29 was downed by Soviet fighters in the Sea of Japan on 13 June 1952. Through Greg's efforts that crew was awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses and Purple Hearts, posthumously. Greg has donated his collection of aircraft models and research material related to those 10 incidents to the SAC Museum where they now form a special exhibit. This material previously had been displayed at CIA and DIA.

Colonels **John McKone** and **Bruce Olmstead**, USAF, Ret., recounted the details of their being shot down in the Barents Sea on 1 July 1960, and their subsequent incarceration in the infamous Lubyanka Prison in Moscow. They made a special tribute to the courageous wives of the crew members who sat in the front row at the UN hearings in New York. At those hearings the Russian representative tried to rebut US Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge's claim that the RB-47 was over international waters when shot down. The wives maintained their resolve and were stoic and unemotional when confronted with typical Soviet Cold War bombast, even though they did not then know the fate of their husbands.

John and Bruce provided a bit of humor when they recalled that after their release from prison and return to the US, some finance office zealots tried to reclaim the TDY pay advanced them prior to their departure from Forbes. The claim was that 'rations and quarters' had been provided them while they were rotting in Lubyanka. Supported by the strong championing of their case by then 55th Strat Recon Wing

Commander, Colonel [Bill Kyle](#), an accommodation was finally reached with the ‘bean counters.’

Lieutenant [Serge Sherman](#), USN, of the Defense POW-MIA Office presented an update on recent searches of Soviet archives and his visits to Russia. A Russian linguist, Serge recently returned from a survey of cemeteries on the Kola Peninsula where he looked for any evidence of burial of the remains of McKone and Olmstead’s fellow crewmembers: EWOs [Oscar Goforth](#), [Dean Phillips](#) and [Eugene Posa](#). That search will continue on future trips. However, Serge noted, there is little likelihood of final closure since the Soviet system was based on duplicity. Even the official archives from that era often contain what the recorder believed the higher-ups wanted the record to show, or what was politically expedient, rather than the unvarnished truth.

[Gary Powers, Jr.](#), whose resemblance to his father is so uncanny as to evoke a time warp, recounted the story of the U-2 shoot down over Sverodvinsk on 1 May 1960 and the subsequent trial. [Gary Powers](#) had been a SAC F-84 pilot at Turner AFB, Georgia in 1956 when he volunteered for a “special mission program-risky but patriotic.” That proved to be the U-2 program, shrouded in secrecy and directed by the CIA. Air Force pilots accepted for this duty were ‘sheepdipped,’ i.e. magically transformed into civilians for the duration of their CIA employment. Their Air Force ‘discharges’ were kept in the desk of the Secretary of the Air Force so that they could be quickly reinstated without a break in their Air Force service when their hazardous duty with the CIA was terminated. President Eisenhower didn’t want uniformed crewmembers subject to the grave legal implications of an over flight, shoot down and capture.

[Gary Powers, Jr.](#), has since, however, been able to have his father posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, a military decoration, for “extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight 1 May 1960. This medal, approved in 1986, is “by order of the Secretary of the Air Force.” [Gary Powers, Jr.](#) has formed a Cold War Museum foundation and is currently seeking funding to further the concept.

Dr. [Robert Hopkins](#), a 55th SRW veteran and specialist in diplomatic history, gave a *tour de force* on the critical role that airborne reconnaissance played in providing early Cold War intelligence and in debunking the so-called ‘Missile Gap’ when some believed the Russians had acquired missiles exceeding those held by the US. Krushchev’s thundering to the contrary, intelligence based upon detailed collection by the reconnaissance fleet provided irrefutable evidence that the US was well ahead in offensive and defensive missile capability. Robert’s tribute to the veterans of the RB-17, RB-29, RB-45, RB-57, RB-50, RB-47 and U-2 programs was presented with respect and profound insight into the hostile realities and the dangers to the reconnaissance crews. He stated that many revisionists in academia have other views, but that simply redoubles his resolve. [Hopkins](#) also noted that today’s students arrive at their colleges with a high school background almost bereft of understanding or any comprehension of the Cold War. His mission, he said, is to provide them with a realistic context and historical basis for understanding how the Cold War and its outcome affects the world in which we live.

[Cargill Hall](#), the premier chronicler of over flights of the Soviet Union and Chief Historian of the National Reconnaissance Office, chaired a panel discussion on the

impact of Cold War reconnaissance. **John Bergen**, SAC intelligence veteran and Cold War scholar, and **David Haight**, archivist for the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, KS, joined as panel members. **Cargill** spoke to the compelling national interest (Pearl Harbor must never again happen) that drove Presidents Truman and Eisenhower in supporting sensitive programs for the collection of vital intelligence data. **Bergen** provided insight on the Cuban Missile Crisis and the application of intelligence in supporting war plans. He noted that by the late 50s, spurred by the shock of Sputnik, US technology was in full development mode. The dawn of operational intelligence satellites in the early 60s did not obviate the need, however, for the peripheral programs, as several wars, shaky cease fires and rogue nation belligerence continue to demonstrate.

Haight discussed the role of Presidential Libraries and their continuing declassification of sensitive documents in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. These include subjects of considerable interest to both scholars and the general public. He offered examples of recently declassified material and encouraged public contact and visits to Presidential Libraries.

Attendees included **Hank Dubuy**, copilot, **Bob Rogers**, navigator, and **George Back**, EWO – crewmembers on RB-47 #290 which was severely damaged by North Korean MiG gunfire over the Sea of Japan on 28 April 1965. Copilot **Hank Dubuy** returned fire from the tail guns and dispatched one of the attackers. The crew autographed prints of **Back's** painting of this attack. An effort is underway through congressional channels to gain official credit for Hank with a MiG shoot down based upon eye witness testimony, recently declassified, of the aircraft commander, LtCol **Hobart Mattison**, USAF, Ret.

Pat Phillips, her daughter **Roxanne**, and **Maria Goforth McAtee** attended the symposium where they reunited with 55th veterans and friends. The whereabouts of the remains of the three EWOs (**Phillips, Goforth and Posa**) remain unresolved. The body of the aircraft commander, **Palm**, was returned to US custody by the Soviets, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Gail Olmstead and **Norma McKone** joined their husbands at the proceedings and the events that evening.

John Roche, sole survivor of the shoot down of **Stan O'Kelly's** RB-50 on 29 July 1953 in the Pacific off Vladivostock, also attended. John lives in northern Nebraska and tends his collection of Model Ts.

The peripatetic LtGen **C. Norman Wood**, USAF, Ret., ('Norm' to those of us who knew him as an RB-47 crew member when he crawled to work on his hands and knees), attended the symposium. He is now the Chief Executive Officer of Armed Forces Communications Electronics Association (AFCEA) and covers the globe nurturing new chapters in places like Poland and the Czech Republic. Norm rose to the highest level in the military of any of those who started their careers in that humble posture inching through the crawlway.

Don Sonnek, a Navy ordnanceman on a P-2V(5) Neptune, was in the audience. Don's Neptune was attacked by Russian MiGs in June 1955 and crash-landed on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Straits. Don was asked to attend because we Air Force veterans know well that there is a Navy side to the Cold War reconnaissance story which also deserves full airing.

LtCol **Ron Maynard**, USAF, Ret., Defense POW-MIA Office North Korean specialist, also attended. Ron was an RC-135 flyer earlier in his career. He has visited North Korea as part of the US delegation seeking to learn about Korean War MIA cases.

The Cold War in Flames symposium was sponsored by the SAC Museum and co-sponsored by the Strategic Roost, Association of Old Crows; Society of the Strategic Air Command; Nebraska Humanities Council; Omaha World Affairs Council; and the 55th SRW Association. A video recording of the proceedings (a three-cassette set) is available for \$49.95. To place an order, call Sara McFarland at the SAC Museum: 1 – 800 - 358 - 5029, extension 211.

The symposium was adjourned with a quote of President Ronald Reagan's profound statement which is carved on the obelisk donated by the 55th SRW Association and which greets visitors to the SAC Museum:

*“We must never forget that freedom is never really free;
it is the most costly thing in the world.
And freedom is never paid for in a lump sum.
Installments come due in every generation .
All any of us can do is offer the generation
that follows a chance for freedom.”*

By Robb Hoover