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Preface

It is now more than a quarter of a century since the U-2 suddenly became, for a while, the world's most famous aircraft. Time moves on and memories fade, but if you ask most people over thirty if they remember the U-2, it is still likely that they will recall the time in 1960 when US pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union and wrecked a summit meeting of the superpowers. Sometimes they will ask: 'They don't still fly those planes, do they?'

Indeed they do. In fact, Lockheed is still building them. Not to the original 1954 specification, it is true, but the U-2 that is flown today differs little in basic design principles from the machine that soared across the Soviet Union from 1956 until 1960 with impunity, in the most successful aerial espionage venture of all time. Moreover, there seems every chance that this unique aircraft will still be flying vital intelligence gathering missions in 2005, fifty years after the type's first flight.

Since May 1960, the U-2 has attracted more than its fair share of attention. Acres of print were written about the summit crisis that year, and more followed in 1962 when pilot Powers was returned to the US. Later that same year, the aircraft was back in the headlines when it played a crucial role in the Cuban missile crisis. Yet much of what was written was both speculative and misinformed. Even when Powers published his autobiography in 1970, the air of mystery and notoriety which surrounded the aircraft was not entirely dispelled. The US Air Force eventually grew weary of this image, and in an attempt to break with the past, redesignated the U-2 as the TR-1 in 1978.

In this decade, official archives from the period when the U-2 became famous have been made public, thereby prompting fresh articles and books on the 1960 and 1962 world crises in particular, and US intelligence resources of the period in general. There has also been one attempt to chart the aircraft's technical history in detail. Unfortunately, very little official material about the aircraft itself has been released, nor about U-2 operations. Many of the myths and the mysteries have been allowed to continue. This is partly due to the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in over twenty years of U-2 history. For this was no ordinary military aircraft project run by a branch of the armed services. The U-2 has led a double life, during which many of its most amazing exploits have been conducted under cover by the CIA, in an operation which was not directly accountable to the Pentagon. When Powers was shot down in 1960, for instance, he was officially listed as a 'civilian' working for Uncle Sam, rather than as a regular US military officer.

Many U-2 people are proud of their association with the programme, and anxious that the true story should not be suppressed forever. Unfortunately, the authorities appear to wish otherwise. Former U-2 pilots have been refused permission to talk publicly about their exploits and details of the U-2 flights which actually penetrated the Iron Curtain are still secret, although they took place thirty years ago. The CIA pretends that their official narrative history of the U-2 programme does not exist. Researchers have been told that histories of the individual aircraft will not be declassified 'until 2011'. By that time, no doubt, much of the material will have been lost or thrown away. As recently as 1987, Lockheed was obliged to shred thousands of U-2 documents in its archives, after a government audit revealed that the

company's security procedures did not conform to official requirements.

Meanwhile, memories are fading and some U-2 veterans from the early days are beginning to pass away. Without access to the official records, this history of the U-2 programme cannot pretend to be definitive. However, the author believes that these pages contain the most comprehensive account of this extraordinary enterprise that has yet been attempted. Hopefully, the reader will not find any of the more serious misconceptions about the U-2 repeated here. These include the frequently aired contention that the plane was intentionally flown as a glider with the engine shut down during portions of its flight. Also, that it was capable of flying as high as 100,000 feet, or that it had photographed every blade of grass behind the Iron Curtain during the four years prior to May 1960. In this book, the reader will search in vain for some of the more fantastic stories concerning the aircraft that have surfaced in the past. This author does not believe, for instance, that the Cubans froze in a block of ice the body of a U-2 pilot they shot down, although some officials in Havana apparently told a visiting American group this story in 1976. He doesn't think much of the claim by a Norwegian, who once spied for the Soviet Union, that Powers' aircraft was downed in 1960 by a bomb which had been hidden in the tail before it took off. He also finds it difficult to credit the idea, advanced by Powers and some others, that Lee Harvey Oswald passed crucial information about the U-2 to the Soviets during his three-year sojourn in Moscow from 1959 to 1962.

Nevertheless, there are many incredible tales to be told about this mysterious aircraft and the men who flew it. In the history of the U-2, truth has sometimes indeed been stranger than fiction.

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