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P-1947: US Spy Balloons Launched From UK In 50s

From: **John Stepkowski** <legion@MIRA.NET>
 Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998 02:43:13 +1000
 Fwd Date: Tue, 25 Aug 1998 12:13:25 -0400
 Subject: P-1947: US Spy Balloons Launched From UK In 50s

Source: The Daily Telegraph (UK) (8-10-98)

'US Spying Balloons Were Based In Britain - Public Records'
 by Ben Fenton

Years before the first satellites were launched, the United States Air Force used Britain as a base for vast camera-carrying balloons designed to spy on Russia, top secret files recently released at the Public Record Office reveal.

The Americans planned to release 3,500 balloons between 1955 and 1956 which would float at heights of up to 60,000 ft. above the Soviet Union with sophisticated cameras suspended in a 'gondola' below them.

They had to release the balloons from bases in Europe and then pick them up when they had floated all the way to the Pacific, either plucking them from the air with specially adapted planes or sweeping them up from the sea.

The details of Project 119L have never been reported before in Britain and the files show that the RAF was extremely interested in sharing the information on Russia's geography and military strength and even developing their own balloon-surveillance project.

Project 119L was disguised as a scheme to gather weather information.

When the Soviets protested about the balloons, exhibiting several they had shot down, the USAF merely apologised that the balloons had 'floated off course'.

Bogus press releases were written and only the most senior RAF officers were told what the operation was really about.

The British base judged most suitable for the operation was the Royal Naval Air Station at Evanton, north of Inverness. Although the Admiralty allowed the USAF to use the base, the papers show that the RAF did not tell its naval colleagues the true nature of the exercise.

In a paper written for the Chiefs of the Air Staff, Sqn. Ldr. F.H. Martin, the RAF's liaison officer with Project 119L, gave some idea of the scale of this project and its importance to the Pentagon.

'About \$68 million [more than pounds 650 million at today's prices] have already been spent on research and the production of some 3,500 balloons for the attempted photographic cover of the Soviet Union,' he wrote.

'The USAF have calculated that some 68 per cent photographic coverage of Soviet territory might be achieved through the use of the balloons.'

Sqn. Ldr. Martin explained that the 128 ft. wide balloons, as high as 20-storey buildings, carried a 400 lb. gondola packed with the latest photographic equipment.

The heights they reached were supposed to make them invulnerable to attack by fighters of the Soviet Union or its satellites. Each camera was able to take hundreds of pictures and in theory other instruments on board would record the speed and track of the balloon so that the terrain photographed could be identified later.

To recover the pictures, USAF C-119 aircraft would have to find and recover the gondolas, which were bright yellow and designed to float on water, once they had cleared Soviet territory.

The gondolas carried VHF beacons to guide the aircraft to them. Then, the C-119 would send a radio signal causing the gondola to detach itself from the balloon.

The aircraft were, in theory, able to recover the gondolas either as they descended by parachute or pick them up from the sea.

In the modern era, with satellite imagery taken for granted, it is hard to appreciate how important the pictures were for the Allied military.

As Sqn. Ldr. Martin put it: 'If the expected success rate is achieved, then a highly effective method of peacetime aerial reconnaissance of a potential enemy's territory will have been evolved.'

So RAF officers were sent to America to learn about 'balloonology'. Their reports are detailed in the files, originally intended to be kept secret, but released under the Open Government Initiative.

At the same time, a team of 100 American technicians went to RAF Edzell, near Montrose in Tayside.

The trials were not successful, with most of the balloons bursting at 80,000 ft., but other tests in Germany went better and it was decided to move Project 119L into full gear.

Two bases in Germany and one in Turkey were also used, although a fifth base in Norway was closed before it could get started when the government in Oslo became worried that their point of origin could be guessed by the Soviets.

As RNAS Evanton went into action, Maj Gen Roscoe Wilson, Commander of the US 3rd Air Force, wrote to Sir William Dickson, Marshal of the RAF, to emphasise the need for security and telling him about the 'weather balloon defence'.

He wrote: 'It is believed that this cover story will be acceptable in view of past publicity given balloon launchings by the USAF.'

'It is recognised that stray balloons may fall in Soviet areas. In this eventuality, the balloons will be identified as USAF meteorological research balloons.'

In fact, a lot of the balloons never made it across the Iron Curtain, crashing close to their release points or blowing off course. In their first two months of operation, the balloons caused a spate of UFO sightings in Scotland and Germany.

But by Jan 1956, five had already been shot down by the Czech air force, dashing the hopes that their balloons would be too high for Warsaw Pact fighters to reach.

The Soviets displayed others, claiming that they represented a concerted spying campaign.

In March 1956, however, the operation was scrapped. But the reason for its abandonment was not embarrassment but the poor

results.

Air Vice Marshal R.B. Lees wrote to the Chiefs of the Air Staff, saying: 'A total of 461 balloons was launched, just over half of which were estimated to have penetrated airspace above Russia and her satellites.

'Of the 123 which were thought to have crossed the Pacific, 56 were electronically separated from their gondolas and of these 42 were recovered. It is possible that some of the missing 14 camera units may yet be recovered from the sea.

'The recovery rate is 10 per cent of all successful launchings. This contrasts with an expected rate of 33 per cent.'

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