

INTRODUCTION

A Non-violent Weapon

A weapon that makes others look like child's play was first detonated by the United States at 5:29 a.m. on July 16, 1945, in Alamogordo, New Mexico. It's a good thing no human was in range. At ground zero an unfathomable heat melted the dirt into radioactive glass. A blinding flash lit up the sky. From a safe distance onlookers could see the white plume of fall-out rise in a towering mushroom cloud to neck-craning altitudes. The sound bellowed and the tremble registered on distant continents. Less than a month later, two of these bombs were used to kill more than 120,000 Japanese in an instant.

As if that weren't testimony enough to its power, in the decades that followed hundreds of these explosions rocked the Nevada Test Site, ninety miles northwest of Las Vegas. This was also a powerful promotional tool for Las Vegas. To draw tourists, the emerging, world-renowned city encouraged word to leak out about when each "secret" explosion would take place. Crowds of tourists and locals would gather at Mount Charleston to

hear the rumble, feel the power and fear course through their bodies, and watch the enormous clouds of deadly dust rise and drift away in silence. Long after the visitors were gone, the radioactive fallout spread into the atmosphere every which way. It would often envelop Mount Charleston like a blanket on the very ground where the unsuspecting audiences had gathered.¹

Four years after America's first explosion, Russia began its path of decimation with its first detonation of a nuclear device. The arms race was on. This was beyond the rattling of sabers. The thunderous test explosions filled the sky with mushroom clouds as superpowers pounded their soil like gorillas beating their chests — messages across continents between unofficial enemies. Americans who lived through it say it was like two men standing in a pool of gasoline, neck-deep, fighting over who had more matches. Igniting just one of the many matches they were feverishly amassing could annihilate them both and alter the world as they knew it. This was their world.

As the years wore on, the enthusiasm and awe of these weapons gave way to an increasing awareness that these explosions on what was, and remains to this day, a remote plot of land were one thing; but if these monsters were unleashed in the world's cities, the heat and rain of fallout could erase untold numbers of lives. We had already witnessed what would happen.

Admiration of these weapons turned to fear, becoming a part of how Americans lived their lives, from school bomb-raid drills to home fallout plans. My father was among them, having built a makeshift bomb shelter and amassed food rations. He told me his plan. If the world broke out into nuclear war and a bomb hit San Diego, he hoped it would only take three days for the fall-out to reach our farm in Potrero, California. We would drain

our concrete pool, cover it with telephone poles and plywood and lock ourselves inside the makeshift cave with the food and port-a-potty until the danger had passed. His friends in the aerospace industry even came to see his plan and made a pact with him to join us in the shelter if need be.

For a decade, this terrifying arms race deadlocked our rival nations. So impenetrable were the Soviet Union's secrets that the United States coined it the "Iron Curtain." The only information that was willingly, enthusiastically, and widely disseminated by each side was the ferocious rate of building these deadly nuclear weapons. The Soviet Communist Party leaders boasted that behind Russia's Iron Curtain was a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons and long-range bombers with which to deliver them. But was the Soviet bark worse than the bite?

What our nation needed was a new weapon, one that could derail the two superpowers and our people from the rush down the path to nuclear annihilation. That disarming weapon was an unlikely one. It was information, and its acquisition could not be gained with brute force.

Trying to get this information was more than tough. Up to this point, most of the nation's information about the Soviet Union had been acquired through the interrogation of German World War II prisoners returning from Russia. As time passed, the information was outdated and the source itself was also drying up. So in the 1940s the Air Force and Navy attempted aerial photography of the Soviet Union. US aircraft were outfitted with radar-detecting devices and when a hole in the Soviet Union's air warning network was detected, the pilots would dart in and take photographs. But in the 1950s, the Soviets began aggressively defending their airspace, attacking numerous US, British, and Turkish aircraft. Even so, the US wasn't about to abandon the

idea of aerial photography.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower felt he had no choice but to do everything in his power to learn the truth about what was behind that Iron Curtain. The CIA determined that the only way to find out was to develop a plane like no other. It would have to fly through the earth's stratosphere in the highest of the earth's clouds, at least 60,000 feet above the earth, hopefully beyond the capabilities of Soviet defenses. It would have to be capable of flying 1,500 nautical miles carrying a 500 pound high-resolution, large format camera to take pictures of the reality on enemy ground. Many aeronautic engineers called it impossible.

This tool was only a concept. This would be the secret card in the US's sleeve in what was the highest stakes poker game of posturing and bluffs, a poker game where each side hoarded secrets and worked relentlessly to un-cloak the other. Winner would take all.

On this mission, the CIA chose to enter into a contract with a company called Lockheed, the premiere aerospace company at the time. Not only was the plane to be top-secret, but also there needed to be a top-secret airbase at which to test it. That was something California didn't have, and while the company's development operations were in California, the testing would have to take place somewhere else. To the public, the aircraft did not exist and neither did the airstrip where the plane would be tested. The CIA called it the "U-2" and the secret airbase was commonly known as "Area 51," "Watertown," and "Groom Lake."

Once the U-2 was shaping into reality, it was not an easy matter for President Eisenhower to approve actually using it for surveillance flights over this undeclared enemy's territory. In 1955, he said:

Well, boys, I believe the country needs this information,

and I'm going to approve it. But I tell you one thing. Some day one of these machines is going to be caught, and we're going to have a storm.

At the time of the development of the U-2, there was no greater top secret or “black project” in the United States. Secrecy was believed to be paramount to its success and few outside the project knew much about it. Little did we know, the path of secrecy was also paved with corpses, casualties of many classified U-2 missions. The military and CIA determined that the success of these missions depended on keeping even the casualties quiet, even if dead men tell no tales.

The entire mission of the U-2 was not declassified until 1998. That same year the CIA published *The CIA and the U-2 Program*, a book that was initially labeled as “secret,” too. Names and locations were even redacted in the declassified document, but still the book explained how a unique classified flight started between Burbank and Area 51 on the development missions of the U-2. According to the text, in 1955 the deliveries of U-2 airframes to the test site in Nevada increased, creating a major logistical problem: how to bring Lockheed employees from Burbank to the secret airbase without raising a lot of curiosity about what strange thing was going on in this desolate plot of Nevada desert. The decision was made to bring employees to the site only twice a week, every Monday and Friday. Despite the desire for ultimate secrecy and keeping the flights to a minimum, flights only twice a week weren't sufficient for the size of the project. According to the CIA, daily flights soon began carrying essential personnel, supplies, visitors, and contractors. These flights began on October 3, 1955, on what became known as “Bissell's Narrow-Gauge Airline.” Only a few weeks after the flights started, one exploded on the peak of Mount Charleston, killing the CIA's Proj-

ect Security Officer for this entire secret mission. The CIA called this event “the greatest single loss of life in the entire U-2 program.”

No one knew the U-2 existed, but on that tragic day in the infancy of the project, that secret was nearly revealed. In these pages are the incredible stories of how a project was kept secret and how it affected the families of fourteen victims. The victims included the private industry U-2 developers, flight crew and CIA security.

These unheralded victims and their brain trust were a loss in the nation’s secret arsenal, our best weapon in the Cold War. They engaged in what was largely a war of information, a unique war, not one of muscle but of mind. Their mission was one of many that helped America cut through the Iron Curtain and eventually led to the end of the Cold War.

Sadly, by the time the official truth was revealed with the declassification of the U-2 project documents in 1998, it was too late for many of the victims’ families. They died never knowing the honorable work of their loved ones. For the family members who are still alive, the truth brings recognition and heroism that could never come too late.