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‘A Brotherhood of Spies’ and ‘Above and Beyond’ Review: When Spies Took to the Skies

At the height of the Cold War, a series of secret missions nearly caused one war but averted another.

By Edward Kosner
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The California condor is a magnificent bird—the largest in North America, its slim black body supporting a 10-foot wingspan. With a few flaps of those mighty wings, the condor is airborne, soaring and sailing for hours as high as 15,000 feet on its endless hunt for carrion. At the height of the Cold War, three Americans desperate to protect their country from nuclear annihilation by the Soviet Union perfected a condor of their own in seamless secrecy, a spy plane with long, slender wings that could fly higher than any other. To obscure its sensational capabilities, they gave it a plain-vanilla name—the U-2. It nearly caused one war and averted another. The men—and their notorious ace pilot—are long dead, but six decades later the U-2 flies on.

It's the pilot, of course, who first comes to mind when the U-2 is mentioned. His name was Lt. Frank Powers, but after he was shot down in 1960 over the Soviet Union, captured alive and put on a show trial, he became known forever by his full name, Francis Gary Powers, and reviled as a traitor by some and embraced by others as a martyred stooge of great-power conflict. The blustery Nikita Khrushchev seized on the incident to scuttle a summit meeting with President Dwight Eisenhower and turn the Cold War even colder. Two years later, another U-2 flew over Cuba and revealed that Khrushchev had secreted nuclear missiles 90 miles from the American mainland, touching off the crisis that proved to be President John F. Kennedy's finest hour.

Both episodes have been retold so often in books, movies and TV shows that it's fair to ask why two new versions needed to be written or read today. It turns out that “A Brotherhood of Spies” by Monte Reel and, to a lesser extent, “Above and Beyond” by Casey Sherman and Michael J. Tougias cast intriguing light on this familiar history. The rock-steady, nuanced leadership of Ike and JFK in these crises, supported by deeply experienced advisers desperately seeking to avert nuclear war, is a sobering contrast to today's White House melodramas.

Mr. Reel's “A Brotherhood of Spies” is an old-fashioned tale of the American ingenuity, resourcefulness and grit that remade intelligence gathering—a triumph over implacable technical obstacles, bureaucratic inertia and military-turf defense. The heroes are Edwin Land, the scientific wizard who invented the Polaroid instant camera; Clarence “Kelly” Johnson, the Lockheed aeronautical engineer who developed the P-38 Lightning fighter, the P-80 Shooting Star jet fighter and the Super Constellation airliner; and Richard Bissell, a tweedy CIA spook whose career ended in ignominy as the architect of the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Land's company was the Apple of its day, a revered technological wonderworks. He had a second, shadow career as a technology whisperer to American defense officials. In the mid-1950s, Land had a brainstorm: America needed a revolutionary intelligence technology to monitor the Soviets' development of intercontinental nuclear missiles, heavy bombers and atomic submarines capable of devastating the U.S. in a surprise attack or nuclear exchange. Conventional spying—“humint”—couldn't do the job.



ILLUSTRATION: SEAN MCCABE

Mr. Reel, a veteran journalist and author, tells the story in granular detail, starting with the establishment of a skunk-works facility at a dry salt lake in Nevada called Area 51. (Yes, that Area 51, later the supposed hub of hush-hush UFO research by the Air Force.) Land got Eisenhower and Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA, enthusiastic about the project, and secret funding was secured. Kelly Johnson conceived the condorish design of a lightweight aircraft that could stay aloft for 10 hours or more above 70,000 feet, being thus immune to ground-based missiles and Russian jets. Bissell oversaw the project, and Ike kept the U-2 with the CIA when Gen. Curtis LeMay, the bombastic—in every sense of the word—chief of the Strategic Air Command, tried to snatch it away.

While all this was going on, Land's technicians produced high-resolution cameras that could function in the freezing skies 13 miles above the earth. The CIA specialists recruited and trained a cadre of test pilots, created pressure flying suits for them, and instructed them in celestial navigation and the use of a poison “L pill” if needed. Top of the class was Powers, who was sworn to secrecy and transferred from the Air Force to the CIA. His cover story was that he was the civilian pilot testing a new Lockheed high-altitude weather research plane.

Finally, in July 1956, Powers and the other pilots began to fly over the Soviet Union. They brought back 30,000 feet of film that was scrutinized by a flabbergasted band of photo-interpretors who delivered enlargements to CIA headquarters. “Bissell and Dulles stood in front of a long table, marveling at the clarity of the prints,” writes Mr. Reel. “They counted the cars in the streets of Leningrad. . . . Bissell was amazed that he didn't even need a magnifying glass to pick out” Soviet bombers at an air base. “How much would you have paid for the information in this photography?” Dulles asked his head of covert intelligence. “About a million dollars,” he replied. The pictures soon went to the White House.

However enthusiastic Ike may have been, he was always concerned that a U-2 might be downed over Russia or that a pilot might be captured alive, triggering an international incident. Which is just what happened at the worst possible moment: Soviet missiles downed Powers's U-2 over Sverdlovsk, in central Russia, on May Day 1960, just two weeks before Eisenhower and Khrushchev were to meet at a summit in Paris. Unaware that the Russians had the pilot and the fuselage of the spy plane, the Americans lied repeatedly about the mission—only to have Powers paraded before the world and later put on trial after hundreds of hours of interrogation, during which he shared many but not all secrets. Soon after the Paris summit began, Khrushchev demanded an apology from a humiliated Ike and essentially stormed out. A future summit in Russia was canceled outright, and U.S.-Soviet relations plunged to a new low.

Ultimately, the frost thawed. In 1962, Powers was swapped for Soviet spy Rudolf Abel (who, unlike Powers, never blabbed to his captors). Beyond that, the vast U-2 photo file enabled American defense officials to disarm claims by hawks that the Russians had achieved a dangerous “missile gap” or “bomber gap” that put America at risk.

Mr. Reel carries his narrative through the U-2's redemption in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. “Above and Beyond” focuses on that incident. Its writers, between them the authors of 40 other books, make heavy use of transcripts of recordings made by Kennedy of the countless meetings with his advisers over two weeks as they agonized over the crisis. The tick-tock narrative reanimates the half-century-old drama. “Oh shit! Shit! Shit! Those sons of bitches Russians,” Bobby Kennedy explodes when a CIA man first shows him U-2 photos of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Indeed, it was irrefutable photographic evidence from the perilous spy-plane flights over the island that enabled JFK to identify the threat, monitor the assembly of the rockets, confront the Russians at the United Nations and finally get Khrushchev to remove the missiles in exchange for America scrapping missiles in Turkey aimed at the U.S.S.R. “Above and Beyond” documents the skill and courage of the U-2 pilots, one of whom was shot down by an isolated Russian air-defense crew in Cuba certain that nuclear war had already broken out. The pilot, Rudy Anderson, was killed in midair by missile shrapnel, but the lightweight fuselage made it to the ground “barely crumpled,” the authors write, after “spinning down slowly, like a leaf falling from a tree.”

Taken together, these books are at once reassuring and disquieting. They remind us of how resilient, inspired and successful American military, industrial and political leadership could be in the direst days of the Cold War—and show how today's jangly crises pale compared with those the country survived in the 1950s and '60s. Still, it's hard to feel confident that the people playing the same roles today have the right stuff displayed so deftly in the glory days of the CIA's condor.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News and the author of a memoir, “It's News to Me.”

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