The Grounded Spies

Since its inception, the Air Force has been involved in developing and operating a multitude of overhead systems to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. Those systems have included low-flying remotely piloted aircraft, high-flying jet aircraft, and satellites—and have produced high-resolution images or intercepted a multitude of electronic signals.

For most of its history, though, the Air Force has also relied on decidedly ground-based means of collecting information. People—collecting bits of trash, taking pictures (overtly and covertly), and simply chatting up acquaintances—have also provided an intel bonanza.

Some ideas for collecting intelligence seemed brilliant, but yielded little value. For at least four summers, from 1953 to 1957, airmen walked the Alaskan coastline looking for washed-up Soviet material on the shore, under the unimaginatively named Operation Beachcomber.

"Data stenciled on a packing crate, or a manufacturer's part numbers, have always been excellent sources of intelligence information. Resupply routes, factory locations, production figures, unit strengths and positions ... can be pieced together from the patient, long-term examination of such material," explained an article in the December 1953 Alaskan Air Command *Intelligence Review.*

Beachcomber I was a two-month effort, covering 704 miles of coast, including the shoreline of St. Lawrence Island, around the Seward Peninsula from Nome to Cape Espenberg, and the coast of the Chukchi Sea from Sheshalik to Point Hope.

The effort turned up a radiosonde that used a new type of tube—of interest to the Air Technical Intelligence Center—electrical equipment, and wood products bearing manufacturing and shipping data. A message in a bottle with a rude Russian message inside was also found; it had no intelligence value.

Air attachés at the US Embassy in Moscow, who were far better-placed for gathering intelligence, achieved better success in learning useful information about Soviet military air and missile capabilities. The Soviet penchant for showing off their military hardware at May Day and Revolution Day parades, and the Soviet Air Day Show in Moscow, presented opportunities too good to pass up.

In November 1948, Col. Howard M. McCoy, Air Materiel Command's chief of intelligence, estimated that "95 percent of the qualitative intelligence on Russian aircraft, and usually first knowledge of the existence of new types of aircraft, becomes known to our air attaché during the 1 May air show and the earlier practice flights."

The attachés employed the most sophisticated photographic and electronic equipment they could bring, overtly or covertly, to the parades. These items included a binocular camera and a variety of tripod arrangements with zoom lenses and telescopic sights capable of still and motion-picture photography. By November 1948, the quality of the cameras had improved substantially, making it possible to get detailed images of the engine, armament, gun sighting, navigation, and communications equipment of aircraft parading overhead.

Acting air attaché Maj. Edison K. Walters was present on July 17, 1949, at the Soviet Air Day Show at Moscow's Tushino Airdrome. Walters reported on 21 events, including a mock battle between nine Tu-2s and four fighters. "All firing was observed to come only from the lower portion of the nose of the fighters," he said. He also had a piece of leadership intelligence to convey,

The Air Force doesn't just spy from above.

By Jeffrey T. Richelson

noting that Joseph Stalin was at the show and "appeared to be in excellent health and had a suntan."

On some occasions the attachés had to use their equipment under difficult circumstances. In one instance, the air attaché found men from the Ministry of Internal Affairs standing on both sides of him as three cameras photographed his actions. Another time, to provide a protective barrier, he surrounded himself with the British and Canadian attachés, as well as his wife, "to ward off the possibility of any undesirable person asking to use the equipment ... for the ostensible purpose of watching the show."

Attachés spied on facilities where they were not guests. On April 30, 1950, Walters photographed a portion of an airfield near Moscow, from the northern side of the road opposite the airfield. The resulting photograph showed two radar systems, nine Army trucks, four dug-in huts for housing gun crews and radio operators, and eight anti-aircraft guns.

Attachés collected electronic intelligence. On March 3, 1953, Maj. George Van Laethan drove along the Kiev Highway on the way to Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, carrying a vest-pocket device. He was able to intercept radar emanations that were then stored on a wire-recorder. Thirteen miles south of the highway, his detector picked up the signals from a new, temporary anti-aircraft artillery position being installed.

On July 30 of that year, during an authorized visit to Ramenskoye Airfield southeast of Moscow, the US air attaché photographed an aircraft similar to the B-47. His images showed it to be 50 percent larger than the main Soviet bomber, the Tu-4, with a tail section and fuselage similar to those of the B-47. He also reported observing 35 Tu-4s; 25 to 30 Il-28s; 15 to 20 MiG 15s; and a number of small, unidentified aircraft.

By 1967 the Air Force's Humint effort involved two organizations. The Foreign Technology Division, at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, had units at Wiesbaden, West Germany (Det. 3), and Yokota AB, Japan (Det. 4). After an aerial battle between the

Left: Western observers and air attachés are among the viewers of a Soviet air show in Moscow. Center: Joseph Stalin (left) and the Soviet Defense Minister Nikolai Bulganin at the Tushino air parade in Moscow during the summer of 1947. Below: An early Soviet Tu-95 Bear bomber and two MiG-17s fly over Tushino Airfield in August 1955.

Israeli and Syrian air forces resulted in three MiG crashes in Jordan, Det. 3 personnel journeyed to the crash sites, an activity designated Operation Blue Fly, to set the stage for US recovery of the aircraft.

The bigger and more traditional human intelligence effort was conducted by the 1127th Field Activities Group. It had 201 personnel (59 officers, 110 airmen, and 32 civilians) at the beginning of 1967, the year it would receive the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award. Those personnel were based at its Fort Belvoir, Va., headquarters, overseas locations, and eight domestic stations: Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, New York, and San Francisco. During the first half of 1967 those domestic stations produced more than 650 intelligence reports.

One of the group's efforts was designated Sentinel Shotgun and began in Scotland. At the time, Soviet aircraft entering or departing the United States —such as the airplane carrying Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko in July 1967—were required to carry escort crews. The crews, consisting of a pilot provided by the 1127th, navigator, and radio operator, boarded the airplanes in Prestwick, Scotland, for inbound flights and provided escort to Prestwick on outbound flights. The Air Force pilots were responsible for keeping their eyes and ears open during the flights. This resulted in 15 intelligence reports during the second half of 1967.

A complementary project was Sentinel Sentry, whose "ostensible purpose," according to an official history, was to ensure the Soviets did not visit closed areas. On five occasions during the last half of 1967, members of the 1127th escorted the Soviet air attaché or his assistant on trips to New York in connection with the arrival or departure of Soviet aircraft. What the escorts were also doing, apparently, was gathering whatever information they could on the Soviets they were escorting—as the official history notes that on two of the trips the Air Force escort "was able to service requirements levied by the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

A third project was Sentinel Echo, the debriefing of prisoners of war released by North Vietnam. In February 1968, when Maj. Norris M. Overly, Capt. John David Black, and Ens. David P. Matheny were released, the chief of the group's Evasion and Escape Branch was involved in planning their debriefings, focusing on obtaining information on the whereabouts or deaths of personnel listed as captured, suspected captured, or missing in action but not returned.

In 1972, the 1127th took on a new name when USAF headquarters directed its inactivation and transferred its functions to the newly created Air Force Intelligence Service, which established the 7602nd Air Intelligence Group to carry them out. While the group was new, its mission was the same, including conducting worldwide human source intelligence collection and coordinating and staffing the Humint activities of other Air Force elements.

In 1973, as result of the US-North Vietnamese agreement to end the war, the 7602nd had a far larger group of returnees to debrief than the 1127th had had in 1968. North Vietnam began returning American POWs on Feb. 12, with the final transport arriving in the continental US on April 1. By the end of the month, the group had completed all intelligence debriefings, focused on lessons learned from the captivity experiences of the returnees.

The scope of the group's activities, beyond interviewing returnees, is suggested by the location of its detachments at the end of June 1974. They were located in Tokyo; Seoul, South Korea; and Taipei, Taiwan; Bangkok; and Frankfurt, Germany; with other worldwide operating locations.

By 1981, the Air Force's central Humint organization had undergone another identity change and was now the Air Force Special Activities Center (AFSAC). By the end of December 1982, it comprised 76 officers, 99 enlisted men, and 77 civilians. While that was not a trivial number, the historian of the Air Force Intelligence Service would assess that more personnel were needed. AFSAC represented the high-water mark for Air Force Humint in the 1980s. During 1984, in addition to the Fort Belvoir headquarters operations, there were three US-based detachments: two at Fort Belvoir and one at Foreign Technology Division headquarters at Wright-Patterson.

A peek into AFSAC's Humint activities were the contents of a June 6, 1984, pamphlet, "Air Force Humint Highlights," distributed by AFSAC to interested parties with the proper clearances. Those highlights included the Defense Liaison Program and the production of intelligence reports concerning communist bloc military capabilities, scientific and technical matters, the Third World, and Soviet missile and space programs.

AFSAC was not the only Air Force organization involved in Humint activities. Through at least the 1980s, US Air Forces in Europe conducted a collection program designated Creek Grab. It relied on exploiting targets of opportunity, when military and civilian USAF personnel—as well as other US employees—had access to information of intelligence value. Personnel were encouraged to photograph foreign aircraft that crashed or landed without incident. A USAFE regulation explained procedures for photographing aircraft, specifying that these shots would be most useful if they showed the cockpit interior, weapon systems controls, panel instruments, seats, weaponry, electronic gear (avionics, radar, black boxes, etc.), propulsion systems (air intake, variable geometry, fuel parts, and fuel tanks), and documents or management records.

Intelligence activities or organizations sometimes fade from view because they enter the "black" or secret world. At other times, it is a matter of the outfit or activity being eliminated or sharply reduced due to budget cuts or organizational changes. In the case of Air Force Humint it was the latter.

On Oct. 1, 1991, with the establishment of the Air Force Intelligence Command, AFSAC was deactivated and AFIC assumed responsibility for Air Force Humint. Exactly two years later, AFIC was redesignated the Air Intelligence Agency, and management of the Humint operations—the responsibility of the command's 696th Intelligence Group—moved to a Humint office within the intelligence agency.

By that time, Deputy Defense Secretary William J. Perry and CIA Director R. James Woolsey Jr. had decided to establish a Defense Humint Service (DHS) that would absorb all clandestine human intelligence collection activities conducted by DOD, leaving the services with only the

Photo by Vitaly V. Kuzman

Left: Western news crews film an air show in the Soviet Union. Center: Crowds watch a parade of Soviet weaponry in Red Square. The observers with cameras are almost certainly not Soviet citizens. Right: The MAKS air show at Ramenskoye Arpt., Russia. The end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union made it easier to get photographs of Russian weapon systems, but Humint is still a critical, if much smaller, requirement for USAF application of airpower.

limited mission—if they wanted it—for overt, "nonsensitive" collection to satisfy service-specific requirements that the new DHS could not.

The Air Force did try to maintain some Humint capability. In August 1995 a small flight was established within the AIA's 67th Operations Support Squadron to provide support to more than 50 reserve interrogators. Then in June 1996, Maj. Gen. Michael V. Hayden, who himself had some Humint experience, directed creation of an Active Duty Humint flight of 15 personnel within the 67th Intelligence Wing's operations support squadron. Its mission included collecting and reporting information from human sources (defectors, emigrés, travelers) and captured documents in response to requirements from Air Force component commanders.

By 2007, the CIA's Directorate of Operations had become the National Clandestine Service and the Defense Humint Service was closing down, with its case officers being transferred to the NCS. At the same time, a nascent Air Force Humint effort had been established at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base: Operating Location Dayton.

On Nov. 16, 2007, an upgraded version of OL-Dayton, Det. 6 of the Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Agency, was activated at Wright-Patterson. The new detachment was expected to have 17 operations personnel. Their primary targets were the secret aircraft programs of China, Russia, and other potential adversaries.

Then in August 2008, the Air Force website carried a story announcing that "Air Force officials re-established [USAF] human intelligence ... as a core intelligence discipline to focus on critical Air Force Humint requirements." Maj. Gen. John C. Koziol, commander of AFISR Agency, said, "Our efforts are reintegrating Humint into the Air Force ISR arsenal" to meet combat requirements.

The press release also noted that the detachment would transition to a squadron-level effort in the next few years. That prediction came true in August 2010, when the AFISR Agency activated the Global Activities Squadron at Wright-Patterson.

As of October 2013, the squadron—with detachments at Colorado Springs, Colo., Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, Ramstein AB, Germany, and Bolling AFB, D.C.—was administratively subordinate to the Global Exploitation Intelligence Group of the National Air and Space Intelligence Center at Wright-Patterson.

Future Air Force Humint efforts are uncertain for two reasons.

One is a history of internal wavering as to the priority that should be assigned to Humint.

The second is external. The Pentagon has at various times sought to centralize control of all departmental and service clandestine and strategic Humint. In the late 1960s, the Defense Intelligence Agency established the Washington Field Activities Support Center, with the mission of coordinating DIA and service Humint activities. But it soon proved ineffective and was disbanded, although not before becoming known among its detractors as the "Washington Duplication and Delay Center."

Formation of Defense Humint Service led to the termination of the Army's substantial Humint effort and the end of the smaller Navy and Air Force programs. Then the DHS was eliminated.

Now, with the 2012 creation of DIA's Defense Clandestine Service it remains to be seen how much flexibility the services will have to conduct their own strategic or clandestine human intelligence programs. Given the history of on-again, off-again defensewide Humint initiatives—and service dissatisfaction with the relevance of both CIA and Pentagon human intelligence support—there may be more of a service willingness to fight to retain Humint capability.

The Air Force's interest in Humint can be gauged by a document issued under the auspices of Lt. Gen. Robert P. "Bob" Otto, deputy chief of staff for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. "Air Force ISR 2023: Delivering Decision Advantage" states, "Air Force Humint is a modest but essential area for investment. ... Air- and space-specific Humint requirements do not often break the national Humint system's threshold for collection priority. Even so, these requirements are critical for the [Air Force's] application of airpower and must be satisfied."

Whether the Air Force human intelligence effort prospers remains to be seen—by those approved to see it. ✪

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