

U-2: ALOFT EVERY DAY

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) is always in demand. For the U-2 pilots of the 99th Expeditionary Reconnaissance Squadron (ERS), that means a lot of long missions flying 70,000 feet above the scorching heat of the desert, collecting communications and photos for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Freedom's Sentinel.

What they gather depends, said Maj. J. J., a U-2 pilot with the 99th ERS. (The Air Force does not release the full name of U-2 pilots operating downrange.)

For example, the day after an interview with *Air Force Magazine*, he was planning to fly a mission to collect images of "enemy positions, their movements, maybe what their facilities might be manufacturing, ... to kind of give the bigger pictures to keep people safe or help people make decisions," he said.

He also flies signals intelligence packages, compiling different communications.

"Everything has a frequency, whether it's somebody making a call on a radio or a signal sending out information, so we can kind of see what's out there based on the signals we're collecting, and we can do both simultaneously: We can collect images and signals at the same time," J. J. said.

The average mission for U-2 pilots in the US Air Forces Central Command region is between nine and 10 hours, said the major, and pilots spend the whole time in a full pressure suit, breathing 100 percent oxygen, at very high altitudes.

"It does take a toll on our bodies," he said. "We try to get a few days of rest before we go back out again."

The schedules for individual pilots are based on the stresses they are under when they do fly, but the planes go up every day.

"We're pretty busy," he said. "We've been pretty busy for about a decade now."

The major previously flew the C-130 and has deployed to his

current undisclosed location several times in that aircraft. Even though this is his first deployment in the U-2, he's familiar with the airfields and airways, "so it's not all completely foreign," he said.

The environment is dynamic, J. J. said, but the pilots are trained well.

"We just kind of take it as it comes, and it might surprise us, but it's something that we're going to be ready for," he said.

According to him, the biggest challenge in the region is the heat.

"It's hot. Super hot. And the U-2 does great flying at altitude. It handles great, it cools down the cockpit great, but once you start getting down to the ground, it's not happy," he explained. "It doesn't like the heat. It doesn't like to taxi; it doesn't like to land over thermals that get produced around here."

The pilots know they have to be careful when they taxi in the extreme heat, "because the tail wheel likes to melt all the time," he said. But the maintainers "do a great job of keeping the planes flying, keeping the jets good to go, and they're out here working in sweltering conditions."

There are some misconceptions about the U-2, he said: namely, that it's "an old Cold War plane that's still barely hanging on, barely flying," when in reality the spyplane he's flying was built in the 1980s and "still has a lot of years left."

The pilots spend a lot of time in the air on each mission, but there's too much to do to get bored.

"I could be scanning five different radios and talking on two other ones, ... maybe trying to get pictures of the airspace and what's going on, to see if I can help out in any way." He could be talking to people on the ground to let them know he is in their airspace, talking to airmen back in the United States to see how the ISR collection is going, and of course, flying the aircraft, he said.

"You can't just put it on autopilot and forget about it," J. J. said. "It's a pretty unforgiving plane."

Despite the challenges, the major said he has volunteered for his last few deployments and will continue to deploy.

One thing he loves about deployments is that it's "not just Air Force doing Air Force stuff, not just the U-2 collecting for the Air Force boys, and the Navy out there doing their own Navy thing."

Troops may have jokes and interservice rivalries, "but realistically, when it comes down to it, especially in a deployed environment, everybody's out there doing the best they can and doing great work."

On any given day, he said, "I guarantee there's going to be a few people I'm talking to on the radio who have an accent. And you know, ... it doesn't matter what country they're from, because I know they're great at what they do and I can trust them 100 percent." ★

Jennifer Hlad is a freelance journalist based in the Middle East and a former *Air Force Magazine* senior editor.



A U-2 Dragon Lady launches in Southwest Asia in February. U-2s flying missions for Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Freedom's Sentinel gather many different types of intelligence for the US military.