

Spy Pilot: Francis Gary Powers, The U-2 Incident, and a Controversial Cold War Legacy

Francis Gary Powers, Jr. and Keith Dunavant (Prometheus Books, 2019), 296 pages, author's note, foreword, introduction, acknowledgements, list of interviews, notes, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Children often have questions about their parents' lives, a curiosity that often grows over time or relative to publicity. This latter motivation explains the publication of *Spy Pilot*, a son's 50-year quest for truth concerning his father, who happened to be famed—or defamed—U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, felled by the explosion of a Soviet SA-2 surface-to-air missile close to his reconnaissance aircraft on 1 May 1960, launching an international incident.

Before delving into Powers's life story, the authors present in the foreword and introduction some of the key individuals in Gary Powers Jr.'s circle of friends, such as Sergei Khrushchev—Nikita's son—and former *Wild, Wild West* TV star Robert Conrad, a family friend. Sergei notes that both he and Gary Jr. have a “desire to honor and preserve the legacy” of their respective fathers, which creates a common bond. In 1977, Conrad tells a nine-year-old Gary Jr. “Your father was a good man, no matter what you might hear.” (14)

The authors begin their story with the singular event that defined the life of Francis Gary Powers—an indulgent airplane ride at a small airfield in rural Virginia on the way to a family picnic in the early days of World War II. This momentous event convinced Powers that he needed to find a career as a pilot, though his coal miner father hoped he would go into medicine to escape a hard life of poverty. Instead, Powers enlisted in the US Air Force shortly after the Korean War armistice and by July 1953 was excelling as the pilot of an F-84 Thunderjet fighter. In April 1955, he married Barbara Gay Moore, several months before his enlistment expired. He inquired about civilian pilot opportunities but when no one showed any interest, decided instead to make the Air Force a career.

In the 1950s, political and intelligence officials were obsessed with the reputed “bomber gap,” the oft-repeated assertion that the Soviet Union had more and better intercontinental bombers than the United States. To disprove

such assertions, President Dwight Eisenhower needed the imagery that the U-2 could provide. He reluctantly allowed overflights of the Soviet Union before a scheduled May 1960 Paris summit meeting but none after 1 May, the date of the flight for which Powers—who was “driven by the desire to do something patriotic for his country” (50)—was selected as the pilot.

When Powers took off from a base in Peshawar, Pakistan, on Sunday, 1 May 1960, he decided this time to take the silver dollar that contained a poison-dipped needle in case he was captured and unable to endure the torture that might ensue. The authors reiterate the key point that U-2 pilots were neither required nor even expected to use the poison pin to avoid capture. Powers was thankfully unaware that recent improvements to Soviet SAMs, particularly the SA-2, colloquially known as the “flying telephone pole,” enabled it to reach the maximum altitude for a U-2, although he discovered that unfortunate fact some four hours into Mission 4154, known as “Grand Slam.”

Powers was taking notes when his thoughts were powerfully interrupted by a bright orange flash that he later estimated was behind and to the right of his aircraft, at his current elevation of 70,500 feet. The shock wave apparently detached the tail of the aircraft and caused the wings to break off. As the aircraft spiraled out of control, Powers realized that if he activated his ejection seat, the explosion would likely sever his legs. He instead decided to blow the canopy and bail out, but as soon as the canopy fell away, he was thrown out of the aircraft before he could reach the button that would destroy the camera but not the aircraft itself. He thought of using the poison needle, but decided not to because of his religious beliefs and an earlier conversation with his father about the eternal consequences of suicide. He landed in a plowed field, with onlookers standing by, one of whom relieved Powers of his sidearm. The authorities were notified, and within hours the captive pilot was on a commercial flight to Moscow, courtesy of the KGB.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

Barbara, in government quarters at a military base in Adana, Turkey, was notified that Powers's aircraft had not returned from the mission. As officials promptly flew her back to the States, she hoped "Frank," as she and others knew him, was alive and would soon return home. Key administration officials hoped just the opposite—"It would be much more convenient for the American government if he were dead." (74) By Monday morning, President Eisenhower was assured that the aircraft was likely destroyed and the pilot dead, and within hours NASA had released a cover story that the U-2 had gone down on a routine weather mission. To keep Eisenhower above the fray, the decision was made that the State Department would take the lead in dealing with Russian authorities.

Meanwhile, Powers had been taken to the notorious Lubyanka Prison in Moscow for interrogation, which continued for 19 days, sometimes for 11 hours a day. An exultant Premier Nikita Khrushchev bided his time before he sprang his trap, displaying not only pieces of the wreckage in a Moscow park but also the very-much-alive pilot. A cornered Eisenhower confessed the true nature of the mission, for which he was roundly condemned. The captive pilot fell into a "fatalistic despair" over how his wife and family would take the news. In Milledgeville, Georgia, the physician treating Barbara Powers for a broken leg and a bronchial infection, was asked by a CIA friend to keep an eye on Mrs. Powers, especially her mental health.

In Powers's hometown of Pound, Virginia, his distraught father, Oliver, wrote Khrushchev a letter, one father to another, begging for Frank's release. In response, the Soviet leader invited Oliver for a visit but made clear that his son would not be released. When Oliver sold Frank's story to the media, it drove a wedge between Powers's wife and his parents, and the two parties flew to Moscow separately for the trial, with CIA paying for the travel of Barbara, her mother, attorneys, and Dr. Baugh. Powers's trial began on 17 August, his 31st birthday, and featured his contrite address, which appeared to many as overly conciliatory. Powers spoke of his shame and regret, a display prompting the authors to note, "The indignity of a US serviceman apologizing to the Soviets was difficult for many of Powers' fellow citizens to accept." (100) At the conclusion of the three-day trial, Powers was found guilty of espionage and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment—three years in prison, the remainder in a labor camp.

The authors describe the downing of Powers's U-2 as "like a grenade tossed into the bitterly contested 1960 presidential election." (104) Adding fuel to the fire was the presumption—based on the erroneous belief by some that Soviet missiles could not reach the U-2 at maximum altitude—that Powers had to have descended, making his downing more likely and leaving him more culpable, a perception that refused to be dispelled. However, the election of John F. Kennedy as president prompted the freeing of two American RB-47 bomber crewmen, who had also been interrogated at Lubyanka, giving Powers the hope of a similar release. But the debacle of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the construction of the Berlin Wall dispelled any such hopes. However, an offer made by Oliver Powers to swap his son for imprisoned Soviet KGB Colonel William Fisher, aka "Rudolph Abel," ultimately led, some 21 months later, to the famous spy swap of 10 February 1962 that freed Powers, an event popularized in the recent film *Bridge of Spies*. A US Air Force plane was dispatched to fly Powers home, but the aloof and hostile treatment by the crew proved to be an omen, a visible and palpable symbol of a nation's persistent discomfiture with the young U-2 pilot and his experience.

Frank was reunited with his parents at a CIA safe house in Maryland, along with Barbara, 30 pounds heavier and smelling of alcohol. A reporter's embarrassing discovery of the safehouse prompted relocation to the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, area for three weeks of debriefing. Although DCI Allen Dulles told Powers that "We are proud of what you have done," that was a minority opinion and not shared by Dulles's successor, John McCone, who appointed a board of inquiry to investigate the shutdown. Following eight days of closed-door hearings, the board exonerated Powers, authorized him \$52,500 in back pay, and returned him to CIA.

For Powers, his inconvenient survival and his apparent display of contrition would plague him the rest of his days. He was shocked by media articles that questioned his patriotism, dubbing him as "something less than a hero." (119) Writer of the James Bond novels and World War II intelligence veteran Ian Fleming caustically commented, "He was expendable. Expend him!" (123) The most hurtful blow, however, came from the White House, which at the last minute cancelled his scheduled 6 March 1962 personal meeting with the president—no explanation was given, though it soon became known that Attorney General Bobby Kennedy wanted to try Powers

for treason. Powers was especially pained when he recalled that the RB-47 pilots had been welcomed to the Oval Office.

Meantime, much as the U-2 had, Powers's personal life went into a death spiral. Divorce, remarriage, and relocation to California in service as a test pilot for Lockheed followed. While there, he wrote an autobiography, over CIA objections, published as *Operation Overflight*. Lockheed then fired him, which both Frank and his son believed was done at CIA's behest, fueling Frank's "creeping cynicism and resentment" of the agency. (137) Frank then became a reporter for local radio station KGIL, piloting a traffic helicopter. Just 10 months later, on 1 August 1977, his chopper crashed while he reported on California wildfires, and Frank was killed instantly.

Francis Gary Powers Jr. was nine years old at the time, and his reaction to the tragedy in the coming years would cause him to go increasingly off the rails—cutting class, drinking alcohol, breaking and entering, stealing test results, picking locks. But as his internal compass righted itself, he had a growing desire to learn the truth about his dad, becoming what he termed "a vigorous defender of my father's memory." (170) In 1990, at 25 years old, Frank Jr. managed to wrangle an invitation to the 30th anniversary of the shootdown in Moscow, where he saw from afar pieces of his dad's plane, stood in his dad's former cell, and immersed himself in his father's experience and thoughts. Five years later, he met Sergei Khrushchev (who became a US citizen in 1991), and in 1996, when Powers Jr. founded the Cold War Museum, Sergei became a member of the board of directors; as he put it, "It is important that we remember." (169)

Following a 1998 declassification conference at Ft. McNair, Powers Jr. located a document indicating that when his father was shot down, he was flying at 70,500 feet, finally dispelling the idea that Frank had descended before the explosion. Powers Jr. continued to push the Air Force to award his dad the POW Medal, which the service ultimately did, and donated a large collection of items to the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in 1995. Not until after the fall of the Soviet Union did Powers Jr. learn from former Soviet officials an unknown part of his father's story—in a "friendly fire" incident, one of the MiG fighters dispatched to shoot down the U-2 was destroyed by another SA-2 missile, killing the pilot, Sergei Safronov.

Powers Jr. tells of connecting with Safronov's son and coming to a touching reconciliation. (262)

Reminded that the RB-47 pilots had received Silver Star medals, Frank Jr. was energized to push for one for his dad, a request finally approved in December 2011. It took the approval of President Jimmy Carter to do so, but he was able to get permission to have his father buried at Arlington National Cemetery, although the Air Force allowed only an Honor Guard to represent the service. Still looking for answers, he returned to Moscow in December 2017 and, in the company of a pair of former KGB officers, visited the Hall of Columns, where his father's trial had taken place 57 years earlier. During this trip Frank Jr. became, as he put it, "a man at peace"—with his father's actions, with the restoration of his father's good name, and with his mission to tell the story of the Cold War, with a powerful personal twist.

Regrettably, the book is marred by several factual errors, items not mentioned in Joseph Goulden's February 2019 review of the book in the *Washington Times*. The authors misidentify OSS as the "Office of *Special Services*" (28) and exhibit ignorance of both the origins of CIA and the way the agency conducts covert action. The implication that CIA's presence in the offices on E St. Northwest in Washington in the early days was somehow "spooky" is belied by the CIA sign that hung outside for all to read. The authors also used poetic license in spelling the "Bridge of Spies" as the "Glienicke Bridge" (164).

On the other hand, the authors note that one of the first Americans to see the wreckage of the U-2 in Moscow was, amazingly, the father of Steven Spielberg, who was on business in Moscow at the time, and who also expressed the opinion that "CIA failed its pilots by not preparing them to be captured," (72) a lesson apparently not learned from the experiences of World War II POWs, who made the same lament. The text is nicely complemented by several photos, including three from the Center for the Study of Intelligence publication *The CIA and the U-2 Program, 1954–1974*, though readers will note the glaring omission of any photos of Barbara.

In sum, *Spy Pilot* is a brief but engaging and readable book on a significant event in Cold War history, a deeply personal book about a young man's relentless search for the truth about his often-maligned father and his ultimate recognition as a hero.