

## **Histories of Airborne Collection**

### **The History of Big Safari**

Col. Bill Grimes, USAF Ret. (Archway Publishing, 2014), 484 pp., images, timelines, bibliography, index.

### **Listening In: Electronic Intelligence Gathering Since 1945**

Dave Forster and Chris Gibson (Hikoki, an imprint of Crécy Publishing, 2014), 176 pp., images, index.

### **Reviewed by Gary K.**

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*Big Safari* is the history of the US Air Force's program of "rapid acquisition" of sensitive airborne collection platforms while *Listening In* is the history of British airborne electronic intelligence (ELINT) collection. Both of these books are well-researched, visually appealing, and easy to follow; they are arranged chronologically and each book has a helpful glossary and index. *Big Safari* boasts a remarkably detailed set of four timelines (by detachment) of all of the aircraft ever flown by Big Safari, many revealed to the public possibly for the first time in this book.

USAF Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) conducts "routine" airborne collection for the Air Force and flies missions roughly comparable to those flown by the British RAF ELINT aircraft addressed in *Listening In*. However, the book *Big Safari* looks not at American ISR but instead at the sensitive arm of the Air Force that specializes in the rapid fielding of purpose-built or purpose-modified platforms to perform specific, usually sensitive, missions. The use of bomber aircraft in these roles was avoided when possible.

While the Big Safari organization is not part of USAF ISR nor directly comparable to RAF ELINT programs, each of these books nevertheless adopts a similar format: both are squarely aimed at the aircraft, surveillance equipment, crew, and missions flown.

*Listening In* gives its purpose in an overview (6) in which the authors explain that ELINT about Soviet radars and other anti-aircraft defenses was required if British bombers were to be able to penetrate Soviet airspace during war.<sup>a</sup> *Listening In* reviews many aircraft and

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a. *Studies* readers may be interested in the award-winning article by Australian Signals Directorate analyst Kevin Davies, *ELINT "Commandos": Field Unit 12 Takes New Technology to War in the Southwest Pacific* (*Studies in Intelligence* 58(3):11–20, 2014).

missions that contributed to the British understanding of Soviet air defenses and is fairly detailed up to 1975, but much less so from 1975 to 2013. *Big Safari* specifically asserts that much less is included about US aircraft after 2001 because many programs are still active and classified today.

Each work is extensively illustrated with photographs of aircraft and diagrams illustrating the location of specific types of collection equipment and operators' seating. Equally important in *Listening In* are the maps of routes of some of the missions flown that quickly drive home both the extent of the reconnaissance undertaken by these programs and also the danger inherent in flying many of these routes. *Big Safari* has few route maps, but the text sometimes discusses where the planes flew.

Conspicuous by its absence in both books is much discussion about specific targets, the results of the collection of ELINT or other intelligence from those targets, and the impact of the eventual intelligence produced—who saw it and how it was used. One can forgive the authors of both books for not including this kind of material, of course, as most of it remains classified, but it is worth noting that the very point of these flights—intelligence collection and its use by military and civilian analysts and leaders—is mostly missing from these books.

A few examples of exceptions will prove the rule: *Listening In* observes in one case that the operational reason for a given mission was to collect against Soviet cruise missiles (57–59), but all the authors could say about the results was that the mission was "apparently very successful." Similarly, another vignette offers an interesting map of a Soviet air defense system, (72) yet we learn only that the missions supported the UK's nuclear deterrent. Elsewhere, we read that RAF aircraft flew missions off

the Egyptian and Syrian coasts, (83) and targeted mobile phones in Afghanistan after 2002 (185). *Big Safari* treats the targets and the intelligence collected from American missions similarly and includes little about the intelligence collected by the American aircraft.

*Listening In* may read a bit more smoothly, but when it comes to bibliography and sourcing, *Big Safari* is far and away the better sourced book. *Listening In* offers only nine bibliographic references and no endnotes; one of the nine bibliographic sources for *Listening In* reads, “Many files (too numerous to list) at the [British] National Archives.”

For credibility, books about once-classified subjects should be selected on the basis of readers’ ability to trust the authors know what they are talking about or to provide source notes and bibliographies that allow readers to identify and evaluate sources. Each of these books about Cold War airborne surveillance faces the challenge of presenting the aircraft, missions, and targets without revealing still-classified information. While readers have no reason to suspect that the authors of *Listening In* have the story wrong, the book provides almost no sourcing other than the blanket reference to a vast number of newly-declassified documents. *Big Safari* succeeds here by supplying almost 700 endnotes and over 12 pages of bibliography.

The best previous treatment of the Big Safari program was a chapter in *By Any Means Necessary*, published by

William E. Burrows in 2001. Burrows includes in chapter 6, “The Raven’s Song,” a reasonably accurate, albeit general, 30-page account of the program. Most of Burrows’s book deals with traditional ISR, but he does not withhold a nod to the more covert aspects of US aerial surveillance. Burrows is light on details compared to *Big Safari*, has few photos, route maps, or diagrams and includes none of the newly-declassified information supplied by Col. Grimes, but offers an easier read with a narrative overview. Read together, the two books provide sound insight into Big Safari.

Each of these books will be powerful and, in some cases, emotional reminders of the past for those who flew these aircraft or were associated with them, their crews, and programs. American and British veterans of these programs will keenly remember the crews lost in shoot-downs and accidents during the Cold War and after.

The photographs, aircraft and equipment diagrams, route maps and timelines in these books bring together a wealth of information. In fact, this reviewer was surprised to find a number of previously classified American aircraft and programs covered in *Big Safari*. Historians can now easily reference certain types of aircraft, pieces of gear in use at a particular place and time and the fact that specific missions were flown against specific target sets. Books like these are welcome in the home of any aviation buff and in any public library or the offices of professors who study aviation history or intelligence history.

