

Intelligence in Public Media

Spying From the Sky: At the Controls of U.S. Cold War Aerial Intelligence

Richard L. Richardson (Casemate Publications, 2020), 257 pages, photos, appendices, notes, bibliography, index

Reviewed by David A. Welker

In today's era of unmanned aerial vehicles and satellites, which remove the need to place a human life at risk to collect overhead intelligence, it may be tempting to gloss over an earlier time when accepting such risks was unavoidable. Those who want an in-depth, in-person view of this era need look no further than Robert Richardson's engaging *Spying From the Sky*.

In essence, this is William Gregory's life story, a man who spent his career piloting some of the nation's most important intelligence collection aircraft before the launch of CORONA—the first photographic reconnaissance satellite—in June 1960 ushered in a new era. Throughout the volume Richardson skillfully weaves intelligence history with Gregory's personal recollections, helpfully highlighting the latter in italics so the reader is never unsure what is objective history and what is William Gregory's views and experiences.

Although readers might be tempted to skip over material giving Gregory's background and youth to get to the flying and spying, this would be a mistake because his story is an inspiring tale of an average American who faced considerable challenges to make a difference. Today's media is replete with such stories—and lacking a modern hook, probably would ignore Gregory's biography—but his transition from boyhood on a Tennessee sharecropping farm to the doorstep of outer space reflects the lives and experiences of so many intelligence officers who served from the 1940s to the 1980s.

The advent of World War II changed Gregory's life, as it did so many in the Greatest Generation, and the first third of *Spying From the Sky* recounts his pilot training and wartime experiences piloting a P-38 Lightning fighter-bomber. Although not directly relevant for those seeking to learn about intelligence collection, this section is nonetheless an exciting and insightful read into the sacrifices of the rapidly fading World War II generation. This material alone makes it an engaging read.



B-36 Peacemaker on display at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Dayton, Ohio. (USAF photo by Ty Greenlees).

Like many who emerged from war intact but changed, William Gregory soon found his way back into the cockpit, transitioning from fighter aircraft to bombers. Flying both combat aircraft—the B-29 Superfortress, the massive B-36 Peacemaker, and the rocket-assisted-takeoff B-47 Stratojet—and tankers like the KB-29M for Strategic Air Command, Gregory was well-prepared for his next role as an intelligence-collection pilot.

Following Gregory's experience after being tapped by the Air Force to fly collection aircraft, readers learn of Operation BLACK KNIGHT, the US Air Force's first strategic, high-altitude reconnaissance program. This is the story of efforts to collect intelligence over the Soviet Union during the early days of the Cold War, when overflights were still possible but increasingly dangerous. Answering critical questions generated by raging US fears of the "bomber gap"—joined later by the "missile gap"—left no choice but to place men like Colonel Gregory into the cockpit of both the RB-47 and RB-57 photographic reconnaissance planes. Today, the contributions of those aircraft and crews are largely glossed over in the rush to tell the CORONA program's history, but until the early 1960s, these aircraft were the only game

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.



SR-71 BLACKBIRD on display at the National Museum of the US Air Force. (USAF photo by Ken LaRock).

in town. Richardson tells this story in a thorough and engaging way.

Next up for Gregory was flying the famous U-2 and a move from the Air Force to CIA, which came with new challenges. One was adapting to a new culture in CIA, which was quite different from the USAF life he'd lived for so long. As challenging as these changes were for Gregory, they were similarly obstacles for his wife and daughters to overcome. Richardson's account of their sacrifices in supporting his career are insightful, showing that although in a different way, they, too, served. Some of these accounts of CIA life are particularly interesting. In one example, for years Gregory regularly sent letters to "friends" in Texas, which in truth was meant to demonstrate to CIA that he retained mastery of a crypto code. When his CIA service concluded, Gregory admitted to his surprised wife one December that these friends, for whom she had already prepared a Christmas card, did not exist.

Gregory's U-2 experience begins as a pilot and eventually transitions to leader of Detachment G—which in 1960 became CIA's only U-2 unit—which gives readers a look at two important aspects of this historic program. Similarly valuable are his recollections of the effort to develop an aircraft-carrier-launched U-2. Richardson's book also discusses the move to flexibly deploy CIA's U-2 fleet—shifting from permanent deployments to as-needed postings at airfields around the globe—which is another side of this historic program that has been too frequently overlooked in the glare of the aircraft's revolutionary technology. It is this important development that enabled the U-2's vital, long-running contribution during the Vietnam conflict and throughout the Cold War. Gregory was there, too, when the U-2 flew over Cuba in 1962, giving the reader a jump-seat view of the CIA aircraft's role in that international crisis.

His final flight opportunity came when he was offered a leadership position in the unit that would operate CIA's new A-12 OXCART plane—which would become more famous as the USAF SR-71 BLACKBIRD—but it was not to be. Recognizing that his family had sacrificed much for his benefit over the years, it was time for Gregory to hang up his wings. It was the kind of selfless act that perhaps reflects more about William Gregory as a man than could any World War II combat mission or risky overflight of the USSR.

Reading this volume offers a look into not only the ground level of some of the nation's most consequential intelligence collection systems, but also the life of a man who was there during events and moments great and routine. At the same time, readers are treated to a survey of the era before satellite imagery. It's a journey worth your time.



The reviewer: David A. Welker is a member of CSI's History Staff.