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Francis Gary Powers was flying a Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance plane when he was shot-down by a Soviet surface-to-air missile on May 1, 1960. This USAF photo depicts a U-2, also known as "Dragon Lady," in flight. Public Domain.

Francis Gary Powers, who piloted American U-2 reconnaissance planes, was ready for a mission on May 1, 1960. It would be a long trip, originating in Pakistan and ending in Norway.

President Eisenhower was in the last full-year of his second term as America's leader, and Cold-War tensions were increasing. Not long before a planned US-USSR summit in Paris, Powers' job was to fly his high-atmosphere plane over Soviet territory.

Specifically, he was ordered to take pictures of a site near Kyshtym - in the eastern foothills of the South-Central Ural Mountains - where a nuclear disaster had apparently occurred.

The site, U.S. officials believed, was likely associated with Mayak, a nuclear-bomb-making plant where the Soviets' first atomic bomb was produced. (According to Greenpeace, Mayak today is "the most radioactively polluted place on earth.")

No one was really sure what had happened - if anything - but reports indicated that radioactive contamination was spreading after nuclear waste, stored in underground shelters, had exploded. U.S. government officials believed there could have been five separate accidents throughout the 1950s.

Powers' mission was to take pictures of the area. His recon photos could potentially help experts to determine whether the reports of a major nuclear accident - or a series of nuclear incidents with resulting radioactive contamination - were true.

While he was flying south of Sverdlovsk (today's Yekaterinberg) - the place where Bolshevik assassins had buried the bodies of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, after executing them in July of 1918 - Powers ran into serious trouble.

His U-2 was disabled when a near-miss, from a Soviet S-75 surface-to-air missile, caused his U-2's right stabilizer to fail.



At first, Powers didn't know what had happened. He believed that his plane - flying at 68,000 feet - was not reachable by Soviet missiles. Yet:

I felt a hollow-sounding explosion. It was behind and there was a kind of orange flash. (Reported by the BBC at its "On This Day" website for 19 August.)

The plane went into a dive, gently at first. Then the U-2's wings, known to be fragile, failed.

With its failed wings, Power's plane began to tumble wildly. The plane was finished.

Although the U-2 broke apart, in the air, much of it was intact when it hit the ground. It was in good-enough shape for Soviet experts to study - and understand - the technology of America's spy planes.

Powers had the means to take-out both the plane and himself. He did neither because:

- He was unable to activate the plane's self-destruct mechanism before he bailed-out; and
- He chose not to use his poison pin on himself.

Instead, he would face a show trial at Moscow's Hall of Columns.

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Media Stream

U-2 Plane in Flight

Francis Gary Powers, working for America's CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) on May 1, 1960, was flying a Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance plane over Soviet territory when his plane was struck by a surface-to-air (SAM) missile.

This U.S. Air Force photo depicts a U-2 in flight. The USAF provides [more information](#) about this high-flying plane:



The U-2 provides continuous day or night, high-altitude, all-weather, stand-off surveillance of an area in direct support of U.S. and allied ground and air forces. It provides critical intelligence to decision makers through all phases of conflict, including peacetime indications and warnings, crises, low-intensity conflict and large-scale hostilities.

The U-2 is a single-seat, single-engine, high-altitude, reconnaissance aircraft. Long, wide, straight wings give the U-2 glider-like characteristics. It can carry a variety of sensors and cameras, is an extremely reliable reconnaissance aircraft, and enjoys a high mission completion rate.

Because of its high altitude mission, the pilot must wear a full pressure suit. The U-2 is capable of collecting multi-sensor photo, electro-optic, infrared and radar imagery, as well as performing other types of reconnaissance functions.

Click on the image for a better view.

United States Air Force photo 021107-O-9999G-031 by an unnamed photographer. Public Domain.

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