



In a famous exchange of spies on Germany's Glienicke Bridge, in February of 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union swapped Rudolf Abel (Willy Fisher) for Francis Gary Powers.

Who was Francis Gary Powers? What do we know about the man, not the spy?

He was born in Burdine, Kentucky, on the 17th of August, 1929. Burdine, among other things, is located in the heart of Appalachia's coal-mining country. Powers' father, Oliver, was a coal miner.

Oliver, and his wife Ida, had six children - five daughters and one son. Powers' parents, particularly his father, wanted their boy to become a doctor. It would be a much-less stressful life, Oliver thought, than one in coal-mining country.

Besides, being a physician would bring more income into Francis' life than the wages of a coal miner.

Oliver had more than superficial reasons, however, to keep his son out of Appalachia's mines. His son tells us what happened to his father in *Operation Overflight: A Memoir of the U-2 Incident*:

*A close call in the mine while I was a child had cemented his resolve. While he was working as a brakeman on a "motor," an electric engine used to pull strings of coal cars, another motor had rammed his, the force of the collision pinning him against the roof of the mine.*

*When other miners finally extricated him, his hip was badly injured. Neither the resultant limp nor the recurrent pain kept him out of the mines, however; it was the only work available.*

*One of my first jobs as a boy, in Harmon, VA, had been to walk up to the mine each morning to see if there was work that day. These being years of the Depression, more often than not there wasn't.*

*Sometimes at night I could hear my parents talking, not about where the next dollar was coming from, but the next nickel. Many days there wasn't enough money for a loaf of bread.*

*Fortunately my sisters and I were spared the agonies of envy. None of our friends and neighbors had much more. It was a poor region. (Operation Overflight: A Memoir of the U-2 Incident, by Francis Gary Powers, at page 3.)*

But Gary Powers never wanted to be a doctor. He had other ideas about his future. When he was fourteen, he took his first plane ride. It changed his life:

*The plane, which seemed incredibly large to me at the time, was a Piper Cub. The female pilot, viewed from the vantage point of my fourteen years, seemed like an old woman, but was probably about twenty.*

*My enthusiasm was so obvious that she kept me up double time. As my father remembers it, when we returned to earth I told him, "Dad, I left my heart up there."*

*I don't recall saying it, but I probably did, since it came as close to describing my feelings as anything could. There was something very special about it. Like climbing mountains, only better. (Operation Overflight: A Memoir of the U-2 Incident, by Francis Gary Powers, at page 4.)*

Despite his father's wishes, Powers took a job in a mine, at least for a time. It was the best-paying position he could find.

After graduating from Milligan College, in June of 1950, Powers worked as a lifeguard for a time. He hadn't

forgotten about flying, however:

*More and more I began thinking of enlisting in the service, at least until deciding what I really wanted to do. Although I had not been aloft since, I had never forgotten the excitement of that first airplane ride.*

*During my senior year in college I applied for Air Force Cadets, took the tests, passed them, and was accepted. All that remained was to sign the papers, which I intended to do the moment I graduated. (Overflight, at page 6.)*

Parental pressure, however - at least at that time of his life - caused Powers to temporarily give-up his plan.

When the Korean War broke out, Powers had his long-desired chance to serve his country - and - to fly. He enlisted in the Air Force. It was two months after he turned 21 years old.

Approved to become an air cadet, in November of 1951, Gary went to Greenville, Mississippi for training. His first plane was a T-6.

By 1955, with the rank of 1st Lieutenant, he was a "Top Gun" at Turner Air Force Base in Albany, Georgia. Powers' boyhood instincts were proving to be great predictors for his adult career.

In January of 1956, Gary was working as a civilian employee of the Air Force. Thereafter, he became involved in a brand-new program involving a brand-new plane. His employer was the CIA, and the plane he would fly was the U-2.

Before he qualified for that job, however, he had to take - and pass - a lie detector test.

After all ... the federal government wanted to know whether the men who would fly the U-2 on reconnaissance (spy) missions could be trusted.

Credits:

Image of a young Francis Gary Powers, online via the Central Intelligence Agency. Public Domain.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Francis-Gary-Powers-Background-of-a-Spy>

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