

# Spy in the sky

**Duncan Campbell examines the long drawn-out electronic intelligence war between East and West, which was the background to last week's shooting down of the Korean Airlines jumbo**

WHATEVER THE REASONS why last week's ill-fated flight KAL 007 was overflying such sensitive and prohibited areas of the Soviet Union, the incident will undoubtedly have provided US intelligence with unique data on the performance of the Soviet defence system. Gathering the type of intelligence the US will have gained is the primary task of the RC-135 type spy plane.

US officials inadvertently let slip at the beginning of the week that there had indeed been an RC-135 operating along the flight path of the Korean airliner. But they claim that it flew away from the area, and had landed an hour before the Soviets launched their missile attack on the jumbo jet.

US officials in Washington do not deny that the RC-135 and two other well-known American spy planes – the U2 and the SR71 – regularly fly along the borders of the Soviet Union with a battery of monitoring devices aboard. All three types of aircraft operate from the US airbase at Mildenhall in Suffolk, and from other bases in Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Okinawa. From Mildenhall, the *New Statesman* has obtained some startling evidence of the clandestine role of the RC-135 and other planes in the US spy fleet.

- On 16 January 1982, an RC-135V spy plane returning from Athens to its US home base landed at Mildenhall. On its nose were seen five small red silhouettes of the distinctively long-nosed Soviet Sukhoi interceptor (such as were involved in last week's incident). Such markings normally celebrate a 'kill'. But since RC-135s are unarmed, except for electronic jammers, aviation experts say that the markings, if they are Sukhois, are most likely to mean that the aircraft had successfully penetrated Soviet defences – and got away with it.

- Despite promising to refrain from *manned* overflight of the Soviet Union in 1960, planes like the SR71 do regularly 'taunt' Soviet fighters to try and shoot them down, according to Viktor Belenko, the Soviet pilot who defected to Japan in 1976, bringing his Mig-25 with him.

- Mildenhall's SR71 unit has recently been increased to two aircraft. But US spokesmen at Mildenhall say that they 'don't acknowledge that there are any reconnaissance aircraft' on the base. Since early this year, United States national markings have been removed from the all-black planes.

- Clumsy attempts to disguise clandestine operations with RC-135s from Mildenhall have been detected by local aircraft spotters who have noticed on at least two occasions

that false serial numbers had been painted onto one RC-135. This was first done about seven years ago, and again in 1982. An RC-135V was temporarily given the tail serial number – 14848 – belonging to a distinctively different 'U' type. On 3/4 July last year, this manoeuvre was easy to detect when both planes were parked side by side.

- The RC-135s, which first came to Britain about 1966, succeeded earlier types which are known to have penetrated Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and have been shot down. The Royal Air Force and the British Secret Intelligence Service have been deeply involved with the secret US overflights, including the U2s, since the late 1940s.

We asked the United States Third Air Force spokesmen at Mildenhall to comment on and explain the reports. On Tuesday, they promised to 'research' the questions but insisted that they were not admitting that spy planes were ever seen at Mildenhall. An SAC headquarters representative, Major Mahoney, said on Tuesday that 'we can't comment on operational missions'.

In the face of the rapid polarisation of the KAL incident into a critical Soviet-American issue, it is understandable that US officials are vigorously seeking to repudiate the Soviet claim that the dead passengers were the victims of a US intelligence operation that went wrong. But the US claim that their RC-135 in the area was quietly slipping home – uninterested in what was going on – is not credible.

*Additional research by Claudia Wright in Washington.*

For decades, the United States, the Soviet Union and their allies have fought a secret electronic war in which radar and anti-aircraft defence screens are repeatedly penetrated in order to discover how they operate – and how, in war, to evade them. This dangerous activity has been much more extensive than is generally known. An analysis of this secret war shows that since 1950 the United States has lost at least 27 aircraft forced or shot down and seen 60 others attacked in the course of electronic or photographic reconnaissance activity. At least 139 US servicemen have died in this reconnaissance programme.

The high-flying spy plane, the SR71, is no respecter of national boundaries or legal airspace restrictions. More than 900 attempts have been made, by the Soviet Air Force and others, to shoot down the super-secret SR-71 'Blackbird'. None has succeeded, for it flies too high and too fast. It replaced the slow-flying, glider-like U2 spy plane in which CIA pilot Gary Powers was shot down near Sverdlovsk in May 1960.

When flying off the coast of Soviet Asia, the primary mission of the RC-135 spy plane is to document the 'electronic order of battle' of the Soviet defenders. The Americans want to know where the radar stations and anti-aircraft missile bases are and how defences will react if the Soviet Union is penetrated by B52 nuclear bombers. But often, important defence systems are turned off to prevent just such eavesdropping. Thus for decades such spy missions have involved deliberate 'provocative penetration', designed to measure Soviet alertness and monitor the response.

For the Elint (electronic intelligence) analysts of US Strategic Air Command, last week's Korean incursion will have provided a treasure trove of electronic gold. A chain of US listening stations is dotted across the northern coast of Hokkaido Island, Japan, including such huge eavesdropping centres as Misawa Air Base with 1,600 intelligence operators and analysts. They routinely listen to and monitor radio signals between Soviet pilots and their ground controllers. Both sides know what the other is doing; on one occasion at least, Soviet radio operators included a Christmas greeting to the specific US station in Japan which was monitoring them.

The Korean jumbo jet would have been closely followed by the US and Japanese Sigint (signals intelligence) stations. The Soviet Union was being deeply penetrated by a large unidentified aircraft which was crossing the highly sensitive Kamchatka pen-

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insula on a course for Vladivostok. In the course of two hours in the early morning, large parts of the Soviet military command and electronic defence systems were suddenly activated. Gathering that part of this sudden intelligence windfall accessible only from the air should have been the job of the RC-135. The US government has not revealed whether other Elint monitors, included a Christmas greeting to a specific US monitoring station in Japan.

THE ELECTRONIC spy mission of the RC-135s has been well described by senior US Air Force officials and others. The leading US military journal *Aviation Week and Space Technology* explained in May 1976 that the SR71s and RC-135s fly:

peripheral intelligence missions . . . to pinpoint locations and characteristics of potentially hostile signal emitters . . . Information of this nature helps (Strategic Air Command) to develop ways of evading troublesome emitters . . .

The reason for all this activity is unambiguously offensive. The purpose is to analyse:

the environment that bombers may be directed to penetrate in the event of war . . .

While the Korean airliner's unaccompanied penetration could not be mistaken for a lone attacking bomber, it is understandable that the Soviet Air Force might be trigger-happy if it suspected that the ill-fated Boeing 747 might be a US Air Force RC-135 lining up a possible bombing run.

During a flight of up to 17 hours, automatic Elint computers on the RC-135 record Soviet radar signals on reels of 1 inch magnetic tape. When the plane returns to base computers use the tapes to provide an up-to-date map of Soviet radar stations. Prominent on the RC-135 are flat panels near the nose, which carry 'sideways looking' radar. This produces maps to help bombers and cruise missiles navigate to their targets.

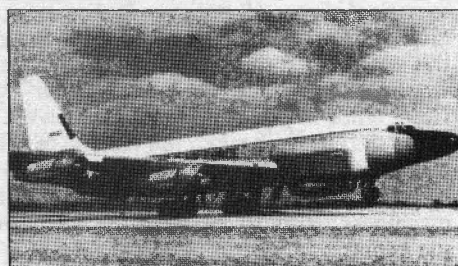
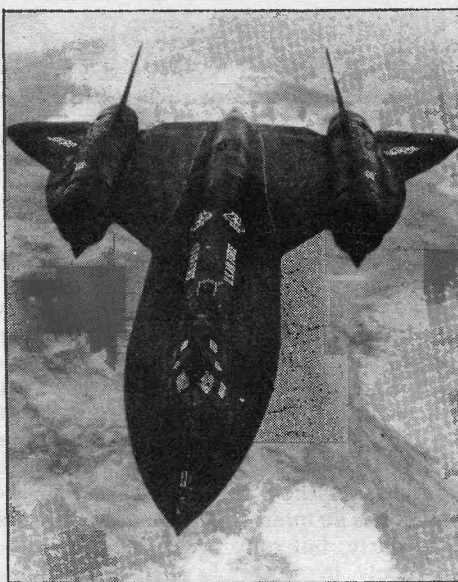
'Provoking' air defence systems is necessary in order to 'trigger' interesting signals, as the then commander of Strategic Air Command, General R. H. Ellis, indicated to the official *Air Force Magazine* in September 1978. Referring to the RC-135, U2, and SR71, he said:

It is possible to operate these systems in a way that induces the 'other fellow' to react in a way that tells us things we want to know. This can't be done with satellites.

The former Soviet Mig-25 interceptor pilot Viktor Belenko has described in his autobiography how this was done by the SR71s; they flew off the coast of the Soviet Union:

taunting and toying with Mig-25s sent up to intercept them, scooting up to altitudes the Soviet planes could not reach and circling leisurely above them, or dashing off at speeds the Russians could not match.

The SR71 flew faster even than Soviet air-to-air missiles and could not be shot down. SR71s repeatedly overflew China during the 1960s. After Chinese protest notes, this activity was stopped before President Nixon's 1971 visit. A former US Air Force Sigint analyst, has explained how the SR71s would just disappear from the view of Mig-21 in-



Top: The record breaking SR71 is the world's fastest plane and has flown between London and New York in less than two hours. No other aircraft can intercept it, allowing the US to send its spy planes almost anywhere. Middle: RC-135 electronic intelligence aircraft is a military conversion of the civil Boeing 707 type. Flat panels in the nose carry sidelooking radar to map attack routes for bombers and cruise missiles. Bottom: U2 spy planes returned to Upper Heyford in 1964 to carry out high altitude 'weather research'.

terceptors. Egypt protested about SR71 overflights during the Yom Kippur war; meanwhile Soviet Mig-25s successfully overflew Israel at high speed.

In 1979 the government secretly gave permission for SR71s to be based in Britain. Companion U2s have disappeared from Mildenhall since, in January this year, newly manufactured U2s - renamed TR1s - started arriving at Alconbury air base, near Huntingdon. Three or four out of an expected total of 20 TR1s are currently stationed at Alconbury. There are usually two RC-135s at Mildenhall, on long visits from the Strategic Air Command's 55th Strategic

Reconnaissance Wing in Nebraska.

SPY PLANES FROM this and similar units have been coming to Britain for years. RAF and USAF pilots based at Sculthorpe, near Fakenham in Norfolk, shared spy missions to map bombing routes into Eastern Europe between 1951 and 1954. The first U2s operated from the US air base at Lakenheath, before moving to Turkey. RAF pilots also flew on U2 missions over the Soviet Union. Decorations and medals were awarded to RAF pilots for successful penetration operations, which were kept a well-guarded secret.

In 1958, two Oxford undergraduates who had worked in British Sigint stations in West Germany were jailed for publicly describing the provocative penetration missions in a university magazine:

Since the Russians do not always provide the required messages to monitor, they are sometimes provoked. A planes 'loses' its way; while behind the frontier tape recorders excitedly read the irritated messages of Russian pilots; and when sometimes the aeroplane is forced to land an international incident is created. The famous Lancaster bomber incident near Berlin was deliberately provoked in this way.

Soon after this was written, there was to be a succession of major international incidents of this kind:

- 27 June 1958 - CIA spy plane was shot down in the Caucasus, with nine men aboard. A secret briefing to President Eisenhower about the incident was only declassified nine months ago.
- 2 September 1958 - spy plane carrying 17 National Security Agency monitors shot down over Soviet Armenia.
- 11 May 1960 - U2 shot down over the Urals - the famous incident.
- 1 July 1960 - RB47 (predecessor to the RC-135), from Brize Norton near Oxford, shot down in the Barents Sea area; as in many such incidents, the Soviet and US sides disagreed on whether the plane had encroached on national airspace.
- 28 January 1964 - T-39 shot down over East Germany.
- 10 March 1964 - RB-66 from Alconbury shot down over East Germany.

Losses have continued at a more modest rate since. Soviet losses as a result of their parallel activity of this kind are not known. But the risk-taking goes on. Apart from the exotic devices like the SR71, there are still continual spy flights over East Germany by simulated US transport aircraft flying to Berlin. Codenamed 'Creek Misty', these are actually C130E Hercules spy planes. Only six months ago, an RAF Hercules flying the same route was shot at by East German interceptors.

US sources, including the former Commander-in-chief of Pacific forces, Admiral Noel Gayler, are angrily dismissive of suggestions that the Korean airliner was deliberately used by the Americans to stir Soviet defences. But it is clear that the airline passengers have been innocent victims of a long, secret, electronic cold war in the air. □