

Photos submitted by Morley G. Naylor.

– Morley G. Naylor –

### Emergency landing on a lake near LaRonge 50 years ago, March 15, 1960

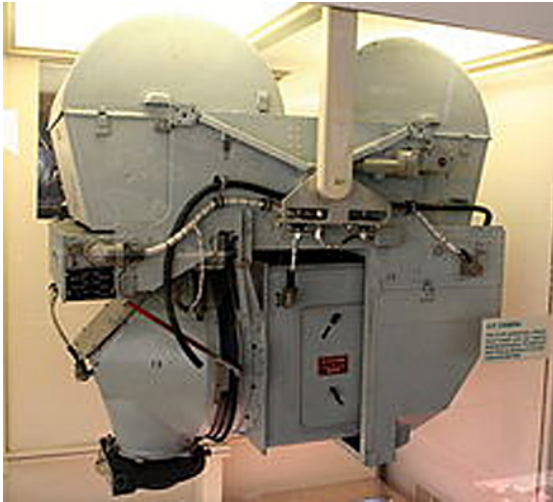
**I**t was 1960, the height of the “Cold War”. The threat and fear of an airborne nuclear attack delivered by bomber aircraft from the USSR had already led to three mammoth projects involving the installation of radar units in Canada. Basically, three famous lines of detection of incoming nuclear equipped bombers were installed across the country, namely the Pinetree Line, the Mid Canada Line, and the DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line. The systems were renditions of “Doppler Radar” (RADAR being an acronym for Radio Detection and Ranging). The system differentiates between fixed and moving targets by detecting the apparent change in frequency of the reflected transmitted wave due to motion, in this case enemy aircraft.

Groom Lake flight-testing base.





The cockpit of the U2.



The onboard surveillance camera.



CI19 Flying Boxcar.



A mid-Canada line Helicopter.

## Operation Crowflight

This program, undertaken by the United States Air Force and the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), was a top-secret worldwide operation with logistical support from a dozen countries. Even today, there are countries that refuse to talk about their involvement, including Australia, which played a large role. The concept was that Krypton-85, an isotope produced when weapons grade plutonium is manufactured and is then carried off around the planet on air currents, could be collected in air samples around the world, allowing the U.S. Air Force to calculate how much of it existed. By subtraction of the amount of gas created by the USSR they could make an estimate of the amount produced by the USSR had. The US feared that if the Soviets found out about it they would suppress the emission of the gas from their plutonium production reactors. The concept of air sampling for krypton-85 is still used today as a means of monitoring North Korea's nuclear weapons program. By extension, it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to equip the same "spy planes" with cameras on the same flight just in case you may find something interesting to capture on film. The entire operation, of course, was shrouded in secrecy, and the stated purpose of the flights was for "high altitude weather research."



## The U2 Spy Plane

The United States was growing increasingly nervous, as, by 1954, the USSR had demonstrated a thermonuclear bomb as well as a means to deliver it with a long-range jet-powered Bison bomber. Could an ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile) be far behind?

Then president Eisenhower could not wait another ten years for the advent of photographic spy satellites to settle the "bomber gap" and other security issues. A high-flying reconnaissance plane was required immediately to get answers about Soviet intentions and capabilities. A plan was approved for the CIA to develop and deploy a long-range spy plane capable of flying beyond the reach of Soviet interceptor aircraft and surface to air defenses. Not surprisingly, a plane suitable for the task was already under development at the famous "Skunk Works" of Lockheed Aircraft. The concept envisioned was a type of jet powered glider with a single engine that could carry its pilot and camera in excess of 70,000 feet at speeds up to 460 knots (over 500 MPH) unarmed and, so it was hoped, undetected by Soviet defense radars. In the early summer of 1955 Lockheed chose deserted Groom Lake in southern Nevada as the U2 flight-testing site. Bordered by mountains, and with only a few shelters and trailers, the operation was shrouded in secrecy and kept away from prying eyes and interference. The first U2 flight at Groom Lake took place on August 4, 1955 and U2s under CIA control began flights over Soviet territory in July 1956. At the time, the world had never even heard of anything known as a U2 or what these planes were up to.

## U2 Spy Plane 66717 – Crowflight

It is March 15, 1960, and the so called "Ides of March" United States Air Force pilot Captain Roger Cooper, whose first solo flight in a U2 was in July of 1956, has completed his "Crowflight" mission over the Soviet Union. He was flying U2 number 66717. His mission profile was HASP, or High Altitude Sampling Program, which consists of

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collecting radioactive debris in the upper atmosphere for analysis of Krypton-85. Some sampling equipment is located in the nose of his aircraft, with further sampling units on the port side just in front of the nose wheel well. Filter membranes inside the sampling units are used for collection and are sent away for analysis after the flight. He has flown the aircraft in straight lines north to south and then reversed course, hence the name "Crowflight" (i.e. As the crow flies). It is also very likely that camera surveillance was incorporated into his mission profile, as it was common practice to incorporate air sampling and surveillance into the same mission. Such missions were referred to as dual-purpose crow flights. His mission length was to have been ten hours, about two hours short of the aircraft's flight endurance, at a planned altitude of approximately 75,000 feet (14 miles) over the vast Arctic tundra.

**Flameout – U2 Down in Northern Saskatchewan**

Cooper was on his return trip when, apparently without warning, a flame-out occurred. Experts confirm that this often happens when the engine is at an intermediate or low power setting (such as descent), which indicates the U2 was likely in descent phase to an unknown base in the U.S.A. Cooper obviously tried several restarts, but possibly due to electrical or mechanical failure, the U2 became a giant wingspan of 100 feet. He would pressurization quit, filling his compressed air. Several things going wrong. He was over a very high altitude aircraft had an glide ratio. The where to glide to. surmise that eject the aircraft crash question, as an the potential to off" the whole it was that the 66717 came to lake known as just south of the Saskatchewan community of La Ronge and its nearby lake of the same name.



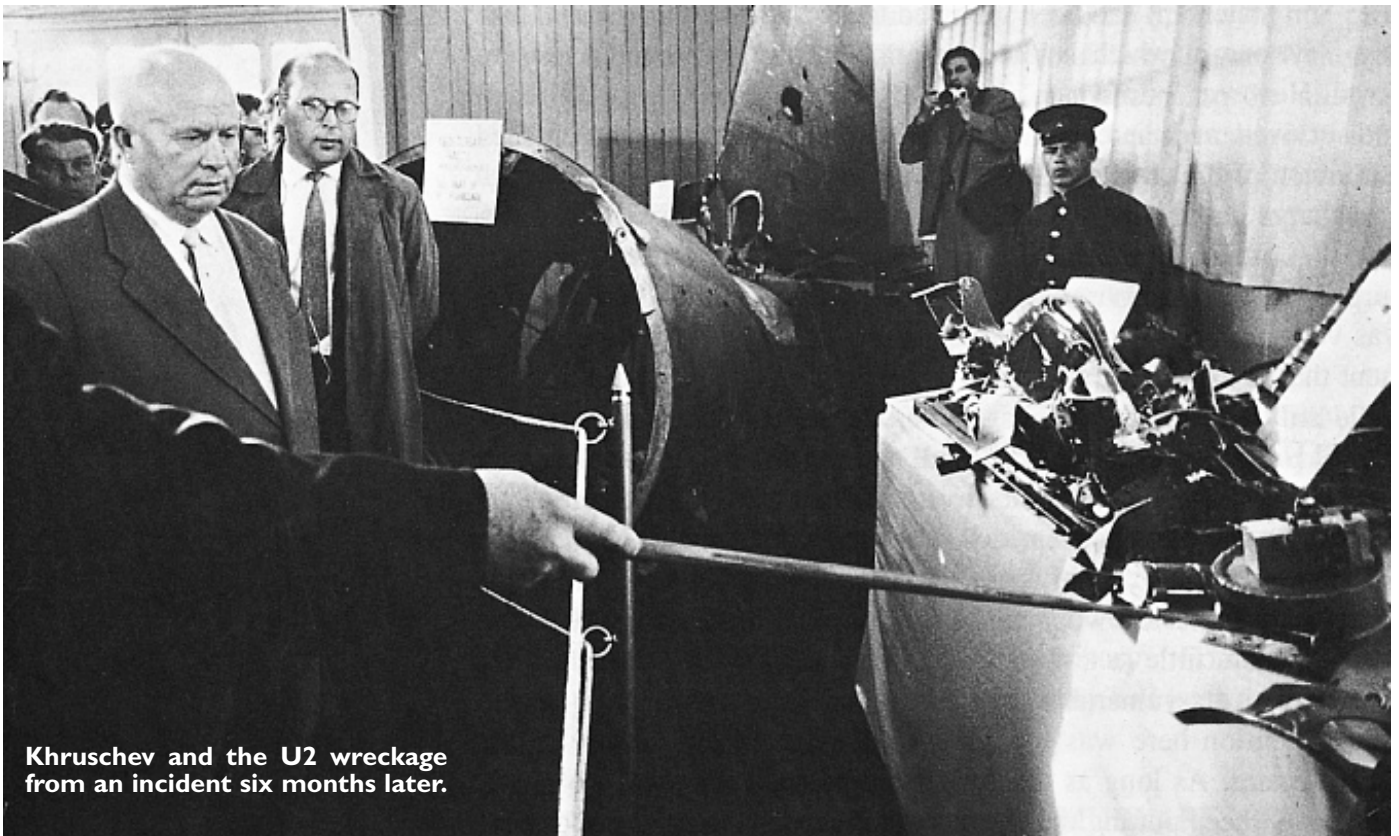
**The guards enjoying their brush with national security.**

Now the speculation begins. Based on the information at hand we can begin to piece together a very credible scenario from the known facts. Were the sensing "membranes" full of krypton-85 samples? Was there a camera system on board with film footage? We'll never know, and many of those involved likely don't know either. One thing is for sure: Crowflight U2 aircraft 66717 wasn't out photographing caribou and polar bears to make picturesque Christmas cards.

**Mid Canada Line to the Rescue**

In our introduction we made specific reference to the mid-Canada radar line (MCL) stretching across the 55<sup>th</sup> parallel of Canada from coast to coast. Cranberry Portage was a SCS or Sector Control Site and La Ronge was a POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) supply point. Briefly, Cranberry Portage was a fully manned MCL operation with a fleet of helicopters on hand to service the unmanned DDS (Doppler Detection Sites) in between the next Sector Control Sites on either side. La Ronge was a POL Supply Point established to supply fuel and other necessities to keep the diesel generators at each DDS in operation, in most instances over land by "cat train" (bulldozer). The radar system entailed a DDS radio tower site approximately every 30 miles, similar to the former Trans-Canada Telephone microwave system.





**Khrushchev and the U2 wreckage from an incident six months later.**

Back to our story. We know that U2 66717 was down on Wapawekka Lake, intact, thanks to the skill of USAF pilot Captain Roger Cooper. (He was later commended for his skill.) It is reasonable to assume that, prior to the emergency landing, radio communications were frantic and swift (as each of the three radar lines across Canada had communications with each other) and a recovery plan was developed with the priority being that no breach of security was to occur regarding the U2 aircraft of which the world was not yet aware.

The first priority was to secure the downed aircraft from curious eyes and cameras as for all intents and purposes the U2 did not even exist. The Cranberry Portage RCAF station was only 200 km (125 miles) away by air, so armed guards could be quickly dispatched to the site by helicopter to cover the plane with tarps, zone the area off and provide security from intruders and cameras. The fact that the area was remote and isolated was a big advantage for security, the nearest towns being La Ronge itself, Pelican Narrows, and the Creighton/Flin Flon area. The pilot, Captain Roger Cooper, was likely quickly evacuated from the scene before any questions could be asked. With the assistance of the La Ronge RCMP the lake was cordoned off.

What now? We have one of the Cold War's biggest secrets sitting on a frozen lake, basically in the middle of nowhere.

Back at the Mid Canada Line, it just so happened that a contractor from the POL Supply Point in La Ronge was in the area servicing the remote DD Sites, basically hauling generator diesel fuel by cat train. The contractor was hired to quickly clear a runway of approximately 4000 feet with the bulldozers from the cat train. Within a matter of hours after the runway clearing, a huge USAF C119 (Flying Boxcar) aircraft landed on Lake Wapawekka with a well

equipped support crew. The precision-drilled men had a new engine installed in the "secret little spy plane" and both aircraft took off from the lake, their mission accomplished. As far as the USAF and CIA were concerned, the incident never happened.

#### **Personalities – They Were There**

Even after 50 years, we were able to contact some of the personalities involved. Since it was such a unique incident, memories are still sharp. We spoke with a person, preferring anonymity, who worked for the contractor clearing the lake for a runway. Of course, the U2 aircraft was down on the frozen lake when they arrived. As he states, "The aircraft was completely covered in canvas, the whole area was cordoned off, and there were armed guards around the tented area. What appeared to me to be a USAF Colonel was barking orders. Obviously these guys meant business." Our contact further revealed that "the air force guy arranged with our boss, Henry, to clear a runway with our TD6 International Caterpillar and a smaller John Deere. The orders were clear: Stay away from the taped off area, clear the runway as directed, get the hell out of here when you're done, don't come back, and keep your mouth shut." Our friend said he would never forget the "air force guy" reeling off \$100 bills (American) to get the runway cleared and to keep his contractor boss quiet. He said that he did not see the C119 (Flying Boxcar) land on the lake with the rescue team, but his boss had heard that it was on the way. There was at least one Sikorsky helicopter on the ground, and others around, at the time painted in the typical red and blue Mid Canada Line colours. It appeared to our friend that the entire episode only lasted a couple of days, and on their way back from delivering fuel to a DSS late the next day, the lake was vacant.

We also contacted two RCAF personnel who were posted to the RCAF station in Cranberry Portage, the Sector Control Station. Their normally routine day was interrupted by a short notice helicopter flight to the emergency landing site on Wapawekka Lake to cover up the downed aircraft and provide military security. They were well armed, and their orders were likely brief: no one gets near the aircraft. Photographs supplied by the two air force technicians speak for themselves.

### **The Jig is Up**

After such a daring mission in northern Saskatchewan to protect the secrecy of the U2 flights, probably quite successfully, it was a mere six weeks or so later that the lid was blown off the secret U2 Crowflight program. Francis Gary Powers, piloting a U2 Spy Plane for the CIA, was shot down by air defenses while flying over Soviet air space, half a world away from Wapawekka Lake. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ignited a furor, which eventually brought down the planned Paris summit meeting between himself and President Eisenhower. The Americans tried a cover story but it blew up in their face as the Soviets had both the U2 wreckage and Francis Gary Powers in tow. The jig was up.

### **Fast Forward 50 Years**

Obviously things haven't changed (or improved) much in the world of espionage since the story of the U2 spy plane incident some fifty years ago. World powers and

“rogue states” still spy on one another, only now with the sophistication of satellites and computer hacking.

We conclude with a status report on the players involved in the 1960 U2 incident at Wapawekka Lake. Both “guards” from the Cranberry Portage RCAF station are retired and living in Atlantic Canada. The contractor employee who helped clean off the runway still lives in the north and remains full of enthusiasm about the event. The U2 pilot, Captain Roger Cooper, went on to a successful career in the USAF attaining the rank of Colonel. The Mid Canada radar line, which was constructed at a cost of \$250 million, was phased out by 1965. The Cranberry Portage Sector Control Station was up to full operational status by the beginning of 1958 and closed in January of 1964. As with all technologies time marches on. With the introduction of faster jet aircraft and the advent of missile systems as opposed to bomber aircraft, the minimal warning time that the Mid Canada line provided no longer justified its operational expense.

What about the “star of our story”, the U2 spy plane 66717 that caused all the commotion in a remote area of northern Saskatchewan on Lake Wapawekka, near La Ronge? Well, it continued to fly many more flights for the United States, finally crashing in 1965 on a mission for the CIA. What was the U2 doing and where did it crash?

By now you may have already guessed...that's a secret.



All that's left of the downed U2.