BLACK SHIELD

(S) In 1965 a critical situation emerged in Asia, and interest in using the aircraft there instead of over Cuba began to be manifest. On 18 March 1965 Mr. McCone discussed with Secretaries McNamara and Vance the increasing hazards to U-2 and drone reconnaissance of Communist China. A memorandum of this conversation stated:

(S) "It was further agreed that we should proceed immediately with all preparatory steps necessary to operate the OXCART over Communist China, flying out of Okinawa. It was agreed that we should proceed with all construction and related arrangements. However, this decision did not authorize the deployment of the OXCART to Okinawa nor the decision to fly the OXCART over Communist China. The decision would authorize all preparatory steps and the expenditure of such funds as might be involved. No decision has been taken to fly the OXCART operationally over Communist China. This decision can only be made by the President."

(S) Four days later Brigadier General Jack C. Ledford, Director of the Office of Special Activities, DD/S&T, briefed Mr. Vance on the scheme which had been drawn up for operations in the Far East. The project was called BLACK SHIELD, and it called for the OXCART to operate out of the Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa. In the first phase, three aircraft would stage to Okinawa for 60-day periods, twice a year, with about 225 personnel involved.

thereby threatening our current military reconnaissance capabilities. Secretary McNamara called this to the attention of the Under Secretary of the Air Force on 3 June 1965, and inquired about the practicability of substituting OXCART aircraft for U-2's. He was told that BLACK SHIELD could operate over Vietnam as soon as adequate aircraft performance was achieved. (S) With deployment overseas thus apparently impending in the fall, the detachment went into the final stages of its program for validating the reliability of aircraft and aircraft systems. It set out to demonstrate complete systems reliability at Mach 3.05 and at 2,300 nautical miles range, with penetration altitude of 76,000 feet. A demonstrated capability for three aerial refuelings was also part of the validation process.

(S) By this time the OXCART was well along in performance. The inlet, camera, hydraulic, navigation, and flight control systems all demonstrated acceptable reliability. Nevertheless, as longer flights were conducted at high speeds and high temperatures, new problems came to the surface, the most serious being with the electrical wiring system. Wiring connectors and components had to withstand temperatures of more than 800 degrees Fahrenheit, together with structural flexing, vibration, and shock. Continuing malfunctions in the inlet controls, communications equipment, ECM systems, and cockpit instruments were in many cases attributable to wiring failures. There was also disturbing evidence that careless handling was contributing to electrical connector failures. Difficulties persisted in the sealing of fuel tanks. What with one thing and another, officials soon began to fear that the scheduled date for BLACK SHIELD readiness would not be met. Prompt corrective action on the part of Lockheed was in order. The quality of maintenance needed drastic improvement. The responsibility for delivering an aircraft system with acceptable reliability to meet an operational commitment lay in Lockheed's hands.

(S) In this uncomfortable situation, John Paragosky, Deputy for Technology, OSA, went to the Lockheed plant to see Kelly Johnson on 3 August 1965. A frank discussion ensued on the measures necessary to insure that BLACK SHIELD commitments would be met, and Johnson concluded that he should himself spend full time at the site in order to get the job done expeditiously. Lockheed President Daniel Haughton offered the full support of the corporation, and Johnson began duty at the site next day. His firm and effective management got Project BLACK SHIELD back on schedule.

(S) Four primary BLACK SHIELD aircraft were selected and final validation flights conducted. During these tests the OXCART achieved a maximum speed of Mach 3.29, altitude of 90,000 feet, and sustained flight time above Mach 3.2 of one hour and fourteen minutes. The maximum endurance flight lasted six hours and twenty minutes. The last stage was reached on 20 November 1965, and two days later Kelly Johnson wrote General Ledford:

(S) " ... Over-all, my considered opinion is that the aircraft can be successfully deployed for the BLACK SHIELD mission with what I would consider to be at least as low a degree of risk as in the early U-2 deployment days. Actually, considering our performance level of more than four times the U-2 speed and three miles more operating altitude, it is probably much less risky than our first U-2 deployment. I think the time has come when the bird should leave its nest."

(S) Ten days later the 303 Committee received a formal proposal that OXCART be deployed to the Far East. The Committee, after examining the matter, did not approve. It did agree, however, that short of actually moving aircraft to Kadena all steps should be taken to develop and maintain a quick reaction capability, ready to deploy within a 21-day period at any time after 1 January 1966.

(S) There the matter remained, for more than a year. During 1966 there were frequent renewals of the request to the 303 Committee for authorization to deploy OXCART to Okinawa and conduct reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam, Communist China, or both. All were turned down. Among high officials there was difference of opinion; CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Presidents Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board favored the move, while Alexis Johnson representing State, and Defense in the persons of Messrs. McNamara and Vance, opposed it. The proponents urged the necessity of better intelligence, especially on a possible Chinese Communist build-up preparatory to intervention in Vietnam. The opponents felt that better intelligence was not so urgently needed as to justify the political risks of basing the aircraft in Okinawa and thus almost certainly disclosing to Japanese and other propagandists. They also believed it undesirable to use OXCART and reveal something of its capability until a more pressing requirement appeared. At least once, on 12 August 1966, the divergent views were brought up to the President, who confirmed the 303 Committee's majority opinion against deployment.

(S) Meanwhile, of course, flight testing and crew proficiency training continued. There was plenty of time to improve mission plans and flight tactics, as well as to prepare the forward area at Kadena. New plans shortened deployment time from the 21 days first specified. Personnel and cargo were to be airlifted to Kadena the day deployment was approved. On the fifth day the first OXCART would depart and travel the 6,673 miles in five hours and 34 minutes. The second would go on the seventh and the third on the ninth day. The first two would be ready for an emergency mission on the eleventh day, and for a normal mission on the fifteenth day.

(S) An impressive demonstration of the OXCART capability occurred on 21 December 1966 when Lockheed test pilot Bill Park flew 10,198 statute miles in six hours. The aircraft left the test area in Nevada and flew northward over Yellowstone National Park, thence eastward to Bismarck, North Dakota, and on to Duluth, Minnesota. It then turned south and passed Atlanta en route to Tampa, Florida, then northwest to Portland, Oregon, then southwest to Nevada. Again the flight turned eastward, passing Denver and St. Louis. Turning around at Knoxville, Tennessee, it passed Memphis in the home stretch back to Nevada. This flight established a record unapproachable by any other aircraft; it began at about the same time a typical government employee starts his work day and ended two hours before his quitting time. *

(S) Shortly after this exploit, tragedy befell the program. During a routine training flight on 5 January 1967, the fourth aircraft was lost, together with its pilot. The accident occurred during descent about 70 miles from the base. A fuel gauge failed to function properly, and the aircraft ran out of fuel only minutes before landing. The pilot, Walter Ray, ejected but was killed when he failed to separate from the ejection seat before impact. The aircraft was totally destroyed. Its wreckage was found on 6 January and Ray's body recovered a day later. Through Air Force channels a story was released to the

effect that an Air Force SR-71, on a routine test flight out of Edwards Air Force Base, was missing and presumed down in Nevada. The pilot was identified as a civilian test pilot, and the newspapers connected him with Lockheed. Flight activity at the base was again suspended during investigation of the causes both for the crash and for the failure of the seat separation device.

(S) It is worth observing that none of the four accidents occurred in the high-Mach-number, high-temperature regime of flight. All involved traditional problems inherent in any aircraft. In fact, the OXCART was by this time performing at high speeds, with excellent reliability.

(S) About May of 1967 prospects for deployment took a new turn. A good deal of apprehension was evident in Washington about the possibility that the Communists might introduce surface-to-surface missiles into North Vietnam, and concern was aggravated by doubts as to whether we could detect such a development if it occurred. The President asked for a proposal on the matter; CIA briefed the 303 Committee and once again suggested that the OXCART be used. Its camera was far superior to those on drones or on the U-2, its vulnerability was far less. The State and Defense members of the Committee decided to re-examine the requirements and the political risks involved. While they were engaged in their deliberations, Director of Central Intelligence, Richard Helms, submitted to the 303 Committee another formal proposal to deploy the OXCART. In addition, he raised the matter at President Johnson's "Tuesday lunch" on 16 May, and received the Presidents approval to "go." Walt Rostow later in the day formally conveyed the President's decision, and the BLACK SHIELD deployment plan was forthwith put into effect.

(S) On 17 May airlift to Kadena began. On 22 May the first A-12 (Serial No. 131) flew nonstop to Kadena in six hours and six minutes. Aircraft No. 127 departed on 24 May and arrived at Kadena five hours and 55 minutes later. The third, No. 129, left according to plan on 26 May 1967 and proceeded normally until in the vicinity of Wake Island where the pilot experienced difficulties with the inertial navigation and communications systems. In the circumstances, he decided to make a precautionary landing at Wake Island. The prepositioned emergency recovery team secured the aircraft without incident and the flight to Kadena resumed next day.

(S) * Neither on this nor on other flights was there much trouble from sonic boom. To be sure, the inhabitants of a small village some 30 miles from the site were troubled as the aircraft broke through the sound barrier while gaining altitude. A change of course remedied this. At altitude OXCART produced no more than an ominous rumble on the ground and since the plane was in- visible to the naked eye no one associated this sound with its actual source.

Arrangements were made to brief the Ambassadors and Chiefs of Station in the Philippines, Formosa, Thailand, South Vietnam, and Japan, and the High Commissioner and Chief of Station, Okinawa. The Prime Ministers of Japan and Thailand were advised, as were the President and Defense Minister of the Republic of China. The Chiefs of the Air Force of Thailand and the Republic of China were also briefed. Reactions were favorable.

(S) On 29 May 1967, the unit at Kadena was ready to fly an operational mission. Under

the command of Colonel Hugh C. Slater two hundred and sixty personnel had deployed to the BLACK SHIELD facility. Except for hangars, which were a month short of completion, everything was in shape for sustained operations. Next day the detachment was alerted for a mission on 31 May, and the moment arrived which would see the culmination of ten years of effort, worry, and cost. As fate would have it, on the morning of the 31st heavy rain fell at Kadena. Since weather over the target area was clear, preparations continued in hopes that the local weather would clear. When the time for take-off approached, the OXCART, which had never operated in heavy rain, taxied to the runway, and took off while the rain continued.

(S) The first BLACK SHIELD mission followed one flight line over North Vietnam and one over the Demilitarized Zone. It lasted three hours and 39 minutes, and the cruise legs were flown at Mach 3.1 and 80,000 feet. Results were satisfactory. Seventy of the 190 known SAM sites in North Vietnam were photographed, as were nine other priority targets. There were no radar signals detected, indicating that the first mission had gone completely unnoticed by both Chinese and North Vietnamese.

(S) Fifteen BLACK SHIELD missions were alerted during the period from 31 May to 15 August 1967. Seven of the fifteen were flown and of these four detected radar tracking signals, but no hostile action was taken against any of them. By mid-July they had deterred with a high degree of confidence that there were no surface-to-surface missiles in North Vietnam.

All operational missions were planned, directed, and controlled by Project Headquarters in Washington. A constant watch was maintained on the weather in the target areas. Each day at a specified hour (1600 hours local) a mission alert briefing occurred. If the forecast weather appeared favorable, the Kadena base was alerted and provided a route to be flown. The alert pre- ceded actual take-off by 28 to 30 hours. Twelve hours prior to take-off (H minus 12) a second review of target weather was made. If it continued favorable, the mission generation sequence continued. At H minus 2 hours, a "go-no-go" decision was made and communicated to the field. The final decision, it should be noted, depended not solely on weather in the target area; conditions had to be propitious also in the refueling areas and at the launch and recovery base.

(S) Operations and maintenance at Kadena began with the receipt of alert notification. Both a Primary aircraft and pilot and a back-up aircraft and pilot were selected. The aircraft were given thorough inspection and servicing, all systems were checked, and the cameras loaded into the aircraft. Pilots received a detailed route briefing in the early evening prior to the day of flight. On the morning of the flight a final briefing occurred, at which time the condition of the aircraft and its systems was reported, last-minute weather forecasts reviewed, and other relevant intelligence communicated together with any amendments or changes in the flight plan. Two hours prior to take- off the Primary pilot had a medical examination, got into his suit, and was taken to the aircraft. If any malfunctions developed on the Primary aircraft, the back-up could execute the mission one hour later.

(S) A typical route profile for a BLACK SHIELD mission over North Vietnam included a refueling shortly after take-off, south of Okinawa, the planned photographic pass or passes, withdrawal to a second aerial refueling in the Thailand area, and return to

Kadena. So great was the OXCART speed that it spent only 12 1/2 minutes over North Vietnam in a typical "single pass" mission, or a total of 21 1/2 minutes on two passes. Its turning radius of 86 miles was such, however, that on some mission profiles it might be forced during its turn to intrude into Chinese airspace.

(S) Once landed back at Kadena, the camera film was removed from the aircraft, boxed, and sent by special plane to the processing facilities. Film from earlier missions was developed at the Eastman Kodak plant in Rochester, New York. By late summer an Air Force Center in Japan carried out the processing in order to place the photointelligence in the hands of American commanders in Vietnam within 24 hours of completion of a BLACK SHIELD mission.

(S) Between 16 August and 31 December 1967, twenty-six missions were alerted. Fifteen were flown. On 17 December one SAM site tracked the vehicle with its acquisition radar but was unsuccessful with its Fan Song guidance radar. On 28 October a North Vietnamese SAM site for the first time launched a single, albiet unsuccessful, missile at the OXCART. Photography from this mission documented the event with photographs of missile smoke above the SAM firing site, and with pictures of the missile and of its contrail. Electronic countermeasures equipment appeared to perform well against the missile firing.

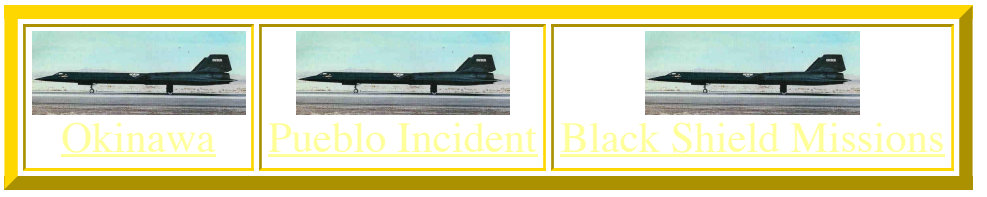
(S) During the flight of 30 October 1967, pilot Dennis Sullivan detected radar tracking on his first pass over North Vietnam. Two sites prepared to launch missiles but neither did. During the second pass at least six missiles were fired at the OXCART, each confirmed by missile vapor trails on mission photography. Sullivan saw these vapor trails and witnessed three missile detonations. Post-flight inspection of the aircraft revealed that a piece of metal had penetrated the lower right wing fillet area and lodged against the support structure of the wing tank. The fragment was not a warhead pellet but may have been a part of the debris from one of the missile detonations observed by the pilot.

(S) Between 1 January and 31 March 1968 six missions were flown out of fifteen alerted. Four of these were over North Vietnam and two over North Korea. The first mission over North Korea on 26 January occurred during a very tense period following seizure of the Pueblo on the 23rd. The aim was to discover whether the North Koreans were preparing any large scale hostile move on the heels of this incident. Chinese tracking of the flight was apparent, but no missiles were fired at the plane.

The Department of State was reluctant to endorse a second mission over North Korea for fear of the diplomatic repercussions which could be expected if the aircraft came down in hostile territory. Brigadier General Paul Bacalis then briefed Secretary Rusk on the details and objectives of the mission, and assured him that the aircraft would transit North Korea in no more than seven minutes. He explained that even if some failure occurred during flight the aircraft would be highly unlikely to land either in North Korea or in China. Secretary Rusk made suggestions to alter the flight plan, thus becoming the projects highest ranking flight planner.

(S) Between 1 April and 9 June 1968 two missions were alerted for North Korea. Only the mission which flew on 8 May was granted approval.

Visit the links below for glimpse into the declassified aspects of BLACK SHIELD.



CIA Star for Valor

CIA Legion of Merit

Outstanding Unit Award

HONORARY MENTION

In a ceremony at Groom Lake in Nevada on 26 June 1968, Vice Admiral Rufus L. Taylor, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, presented the CIA Intelligence Star for valor to pilots Kenneth S. Collins, Ronald L. Layton, Francis J. Murray, Dennis B. Sullivan, and Mele Vojvodich for participation in the BLACK SHIELD operation. The posthumous award to pilot Jack W. Weeks was accepted by his widow. The United States Air Force Legion of Merit was presented to Colonel Slip Slater and his Deputy, Colonel Maynard N. Amundson. The Air Force Outstanding Unit Award was presented to the members of the OXCART Detachment (1129th Special Activities Squadron, Detachment 1) and the USAF supporting units.

We members of Roadrunners Internationale hope this web site honors and extends remembrance to these and all the other Roadrunner heroes who gave so much to keep our nation safe.

MEMORIES OF KADENA, OKINAWA

Norbert "Norb" Alber's Memories of Kadena during Operation Black Shield

Photos furnished by Roadrunner Norbert "Norb" Alber

THE CIA GUYS

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Suicide Cliffs, Okinawa

MORGAN MANOR

The housing area occupied by the CIA and 1129th SAS during Operation Blackshield in

Kadena in 1967 to 1968