Carmine Vito: U-2 Pilot

Code One Magazine

Eric Hehs

CODE ONE
AT THIRTY

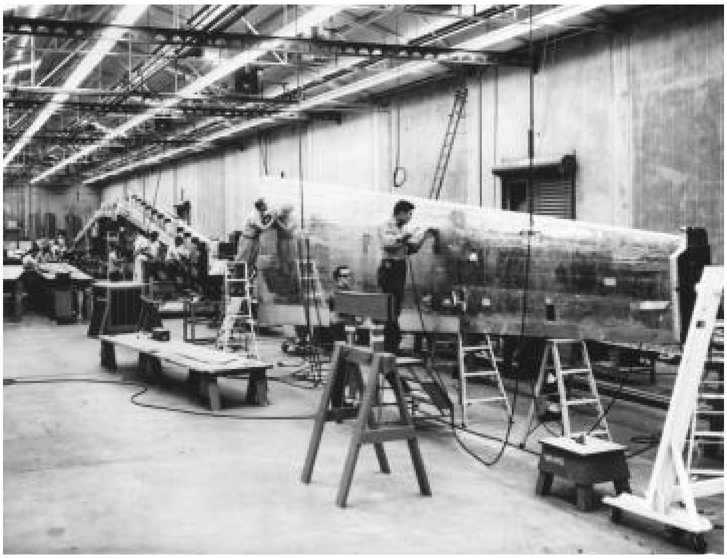
This article appeared in the 2002 Volume 17, Number 1 issue of Code One*. Carmine Vito died on 27 August 2003 in Austin, Texas.*

The first U-2 parked at Groom Lake. The first flight occurred at the Groom Lake test site on 1 August 1955, during what was intended to be a high-speed taxi run. The sailplane-like wings were so efficient that the aircraft jumped into the air at 70 knots.

The U-2 suspended from the ceiling of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, carries a payload from one of its earliest flights: a small lump of chewing gum. "If you climb up the wing of the airplane, open the canopy, and reach under the left rail, you will find my wad of tutti fruitti," says Carmine Vito, one of the first six pilots trained to fly the high-altitude reconnaissance craft for the CIA. Vito stuck it there on 5 July 1956 before taking off from Wiesbaden, Germany, on his first operational mission.

Early U-2 pilots had to resign their military commissions before joining the CIA as civilians, a process they referred to as "sheep dipping."

Lockheed constructed a makeshift base at Groom Lake in Nevada. Initially known as Site II or "The Ranch," the site consisted of little more than a few shelters, workshops and trailer homes. A 5,000-foot runway was constructed and was serviceable by July 1955. The Ranch received its first U-2 delivery on 24 July 1955 from Burbank on a C-124 Globemaster II cargo plane. The first U-2 lifted off from Groom on 4 August 1955.



The U-2 was produced at Lockheed Skunk Works in Burbank, California.

The Ranch received its first U-2 delivery on 24 July 1955 from Burbank on a C-124 Globemaster II cargo plane.

“I was a little nervous,” recalls Vito. “And my throat was dry.” His anxiety could have been attributed to his mission route right over Moscow at the height of the Cold War.

Vito is the only U-2 pilot to fly directly over Moscow. His flight was the third operational flight over potentially hostile territory, or what the pilots called “hot” flights. Carl Overstreet flew the first such flight of the U-2 on 20 June 1956. The mission covered Poland and East Germany. Then Hervy Stockman flew over Soviet territory on 4 July, going as far north as Leningrad to photograph naval shipyards and then west to the Baltic States to cover jet bomber bases. The fourth, fifth, and sixth missions were flown by Marty Knutson, Glen Dunaway, and Jake Kratt. All were successful.

“The Russians launched planes to intercept Overstreet on the first flight,” notes Vito. “But they couldn’t reach him.” Stockman’s flight was also detected by Soviet radar. Several MiG fighters scrambled to intercept him, too. As with previous flights, the intercepts failed. Soviet fighters could not approach the altitude needed to shoot down the lofty U-2.

Vito's selection for the Moscow mission was more a function of circumstance than of design when the orders came to fly. The U-2 detachment at Wiesbaden was typically given an alert notice from headquarters twelve hours before takeoff. The notice usually came before five p.m. During those twelve hours, ground crew and pilots prepared for the flight. Lockheed, Pratt & Whitney, and Kodak crews conducted ground checks of the airplane, engine, and cameras. Pilots suited up in their specialized partial pressure suits and breathed pure oxygen to ward off the effects of rapid decompression (the bends). To purge nitrogen from their blood, U-2 pilots had to be "on the hose" for at least two hours before they were given the green light for takeoff.

"Without a go signal from headquarters, everyone headed for the club after five that evening," explains Vito. "On that particular weekend, the 4th of July, most everyone was celebrating. When the late go came down from headquarters, I was the only one who had had only one drink. So, even though our order of mission flights had been predetermined by drawing straws, I was selected for the mission."

After forty-six years of describing this particular U-2 mission, Vito can't be certain if he's telling the story from actual memories or telling it from memories of previous descriptions. Whichever the case, he remembers the firework display keeping him awake that night and the obligatory steak and egg meal early the next morning. "They always fed us steak and eggs before a flight," he says. "I didn't want steak and eggs at two in the morning, but they were on the checklist. So I had to eat."

Vito's route took him over Kracow, Poland, and then to Brest and Baranovici in the Ukraine. He stayed on this east-northeasterly route, overflying Minsk on his way to the Soviet capital.

The mission began in bad weather. "We had about 200 feet of visibility on the ground," recalls Vito. "The sky was clear at 3,000 to 4,000 feet, but I had undercast halfway inbound." The weather cleared as Vito followed a railroad line from Minsk to Moscow. At an altitude of more than 66,000 feet, he listened to Peter and the Wolf, a Russian musical composition with narration, transmitted from a Soviet radio station. Small mosaic fields of the collective farms passed below him. "Those fields reminded me that Russian farmers tilled the land by hand," he says. "I couldn't get mad at people who work that hard. I was never mad at the Soviet people themselves, just at their government."

Vito's mission took him directly over Moscow and its extensive network of newly built air defenses, which ringed the city in three concentric circles at twenty, forty, and sixty miles from the city center. A smoggy sky hid the city below. "My bubble burst," Vito recalls. "I thought, Gee I came all this way for nothing. But the filters on my camera cut through the haze. A year or so later, I learned that the resulting film picked up some remarkable detail."

According to a CIA history of the U-2, Vito's mission came back with images of the Fili airframe plant where the Soviets were building their first jet bomber (known as the Bison to the West);

a bomber arsenal in Ramenskoye; a rocket engine plant in Khimki; and a missile plant in Kaliningrad. From just east of Moscow, he turned north to the Baltic coast and then back south to West Germany.

"I learned later that the Soviets launched at least five fighters to intercept my flight," says Vito. "Two planes took off initially. The lead plane aborted takeoff, ran off the runway, and exploded. The wingman went through lead's flames and then bailed out. Two more airplanes scrambled and were refueled in the air. Those airplanes got lost or collided. The pilots bailed out. A fifth plane scrambled but couldn't find the tanker. He was lost and never found to this day." Vito never received credit for five aerial victories. "After all, I never fired a shot," he says.

On his way back to West Germany, the Canadian radar came on the air: "Lone Ranger, this is Tonto. Keep heading the way you are going. You have twenty-two minutes to touchdown."

"I knew they were talking to me because they had the best radar around and had picked us up on previous flights," recalls Vito. "But U-2 pilots had to observe complete silence on the radio. To this day, I wish I could have replied, 'Ti Ee Kemosabe.'"

Vito accumulated about 450 hours in about sixty-five flights in the U-2 from 1955 to 1959. His last flight was in the first U-2C at Edwards AFB. He left U-2 headquarters at the CIA in August 1960.

Vito's mission over Moscow as well as previous and subsequent U-2 flights have gone largely uncelebrated for reasons of national security. Only recently have these details surfaced from CIA files made public. Public programs sponsored by the CIA have even included discussions with their counterparts from the former Soviet Union. What was once the domain of government officials with the highest security clearances has now become primary research for Cold War historians. Vito and others associated with the early days of the U-2 program are finally enjoying some deserved recognition and acclaim.

Explained George Tenet, director of the CIA, in a symposium on the U-2 in 1998: "From the U-2 data captured by our overflights, data that was corroborated by intelligence obtained by other means, President Eisenhower could confidently resist the fierce domestic pressure to engage in a massive arms buildup. He knew for certain, for certain, that we had no bomber gap and no missile gap with the Soviet Union, all Soviet boasting to the contrary. By any measure, that was an intelligence triumph. The men and women who worked long and hard and often took great risks for the U-2's early successes can be forever proud of that.

"I want to say a special thanks to the pilots," Tenet continued, "from Carmine Vito to the U-2 pilots of today. The courage that Carmine and his colleagues showed made an enormous difference to the security of our country. These men allowed generations of Americans to live in peace and prosperity. On behalf of all Americans, I want to thank you, Carmine, and all your co-pilots and colleagues, for your great and selfless heroism."

Today's U-2 pilots of the US Air Force carry on that legacy in missions just as critical to the security of the United States and of its allies.