

Francis Gary Powers

1929–1977



WHY HE MADE HISTORY Francis Gary Powers flew a U.S. spy plane that was shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960. The incident revealed to the Soviets and to the world the secrets of the U-2 spy plane and U.S. Cold War strategy.



As you read the biography below, consider the effects of the U-2 incident on the U.S. military. How did this Cold War conflict differ from an actual battle in a declared war?



Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a war of nerves. Many of these Cold War battles took place behind closed doors, as each side worked in secret to develop deadlier weapons. In this battle, detailed knowledge of the enemy's military capabilities made all the difference. In the 1950s U.S. scientists invented a new way of gathering such information: the U-2 spy plane.

The U-2 could be flown at high altitudes, above the reach of enemy radar. Special cameras on board took clear and detailed photos of the ground. The images revealed important information about Soviet defense systems, military sites, and training facilities. U-2 flights and the U-2 planes themselves were top secret. U.S. officials did not want anyone to know that the country had this kind of technology.

Francis Gary Powers was one of the first pilots recruited in secret by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and trained to fly the U-2. Born in 1929, he had been determined to be a pilot from the time of his first flight as a teenager. Powers attended college and then joined the Air Force.

Powers flew successful U-2 spy missions for several years. Then, in 1960, his plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over the Soviet Union. Powers parachuted to safety but was taken captive. The plane had been designed to blow up once a pilot ejected, but the system failed. The Soviets were able to study the spy plane as well as the photos taken in flight. The Soviets used the incident to their advantage.

A U.S.-Soviet summit meeting was being held in Paris. There, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev accused the United States of hypocrisy, of spying even as they participated in a peace conference. As proof, he produced photos taken by the U-2, photos of the downed plane, and Powers' confession. Then he walked out of the talks.

Postwar America**Biography**

Powers was tried as a spy in the Soviet Union and received a sentence of two years in prison, followed by eight years of hard labor. However, in 1962 he was released in exchange for a Soviet spy, Rudolf Abel, who had been imprisoned in the United States.

When he returned home, Powers worked again as a test pilot. But his former coworkers at the CIA questioned Powers' behavior when he was shot down. He had failed to blow up the U-2, allowing the aircraft fall into Soviet hands. And he had not used the "suicide pin" hidden in a hollowed-out silver dollar. The device was designed to kill Powers, sparing him the pain of torture or forced confession, and preventing him from revealing state secrets.

In the years that followed, Powers wrote a book about the U-2 incident. The CIA reviewed the publication and Powers removed material they did not want to reveal. But even with the CIA's informal approval of his book, Powers lost his job as a test pilot. He then became a helicopter news reporter for a television station in Los Angeles. In 1977 he and another reporter died in a helicopter crash.

At the order of President Jimmy Carter, Powers was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. His memorial service ended with a flyover by a single U-2 plane. Powers' wife and son worked to ensure that he received the medals he had earned and to see him recognized for his service in the Cold War. The family received Powers' medals in 2000, and his son continues to work for a permanent site for a Cold War museum in Washington, D.C., to help future generations better understand this period of history.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall and Describe** How did planes influence the life of Gary Powers? Consider these events: a) his choice of a career, b) his military service, c) his life as a public figure, d) his death.

2. **Develop an Argument** Do you think Powers deserved the treatment he received when he returned from Russia? Give reasons for your answer.

ACTIVITY

With a group of classmates, research a specific aspect of life in the 1950s. For example, you might choose music, fashion, important historical events, trends and fads, technologies, or people's hopes and expectations. Create a visual display and share your findings with the rest of the class.