

“The Berlin for Lunch Bunch...”



The 7405th Operations Squadron was a different organization. Had it been automotive instead of aeronautical, its carefully protected section of the air base at Wiesbaden would have looked like a used car lot. There were RC-54 transport planes, spookdom's adapted version of Donald Douglas's ancient DC-4, a propeller driven crate that had been designed at the end of the 1930s for transcontinental airline use. The DC-4 had a younger cousin, the four-engine DC-6, and it too worked for the 7405th as the C-118. There were also twin-engine, propeller-driven Convair T-29s, developed immediately after WWII as "flying classrooms" to train Air Force navigators and radar operators. Convair sold passenger-carrying models of the T-29 to the airlines, in particular American. Those used by the 7405th made an average of a dozen flights a month along the three Berlin Corridors, taking aerial photographs as they went.

Most of this motley collection of flying machines did electronic intercept in one form or another, but the star of the stable was an RC-97, that took pictures with the largest camera ever used in U.S. aerial reconnaissance. It was called "Pie Face," weighed 6500 pounds with its mount, had a lens-to-film focal length of 240 inches (20 feet) and could take oblique photographs of objects 70 miles away. Each photograph was 18 x 36 inches and came from the largest roll of film ever ordered from Kodak. This huge camera was used about twelve times a month along the corridors.

Unlike most reconnaissance planes, those belonging to the 7405th had no telltale radar bulges, antennas, or other external paraphernalia that would give them away. They therefore appeared innocuous. An RC-97 belonging to the squadron looked like a transport plane, so much so that the men who flew in it called it a C-97. One of the planes carried a 48-inch oblique looking panoramic camera, a 12-inch vertical looking panoramic camera, an infrared scanner, a forward-looking infrared sensor (FLIR), and four electronic intercept stations. The camera ports were hidden behind sliding external panels or via retractable domes. All sensors, including the electronic eavesdropping equipment, were secreted below the deck in the RC-97. The planes could carry real cargo and unwitting passengers while collecting intelligence. The C-130s carried their sensors in fake cargo containers.

Naturally, the men of the 7405th wanted to believe they were fooling the opposition, but they weren't and they knew it. Of all the planes that flew the Berlin Corridors, only those of the 7405th asked to be allowed to navigate on their own, following routes that were different than other aircraft, routinely wandering 500 from their assigned altitude, and made random flight patterns. The deviations were carefully noted on the ground. Furthermore, both the Russians and East Germans took their own telephoto pictures of the ambling aircraft at below the 10,000-foot maximum altitude that clearly showed open camera doors. And it couldn't have taken counterintelligence specialists at Templehof Airfield long to conclude something suspicious was going on when as many as fifteen men emerged from one of the planes, had lunch, then climbed back into the plane and left to return to West Germany – without delivering a single passenger or gargo, or leaving with them. The "cover" was so obviously transparent that the crews called themselves the "Berlin for lunch bunch."

Buy the book from our store. Excerpt from "By Any Means Necessary," by William E Burrows, (p189-191).
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