

The Russians are Coming

During the second world war, everyone mobilized for the conflict in one way or another. If you weren't fighting in the skies over France or slogging up the boot of Italy, you were back home dealing with rationing and black-out shades and air raid drills. You could have been climbing fire towers or standing on the roofs of tall buildings waiting to spot enemy airplanes if they chanced to come over U.S. territory. In my hometown, the citizenry felt especially vulnerable to air attack, because we were only a hundred miles from Canada and you couldn't trust those damned Canadian Frenchies to do anything right, much less shoot down an enemy plane before it flew down our valley and dropped a load of bombs on us.

This fear from the skies persisted into the early days of the Cold War as folks continued to climb tall buildings and watch for menacing aircraft. But by 1957 damned few citizens thought it worthwhile to sit perched atop a water tower to watch a supersonic Russian bomber scream by overhead with an atomic bomb hanging from its belly. Better to be high-tailing it out of town. However, bureaucracies never die and the Civil Defense Department continued to enroll anyone interested into the Ground Observer Corps. My friend George and I were two 13 year olds who were definitely interested. We figured a U.S. Government assignment would be much more exciting than working on our Boy Scout merit badges.

The man at the Civil Defense office gave us a condescending smile, but he signed us up. He explained the Observers' duties ... report any

enemy planes we might see. While on duty we would be in telephone contact with the Strategic Air Command in Syracuse, 50 miles away. We knew the SAC guys would be hunched over their big radar screens and scanning the skies for "bandits," but they needed our help. We were the men on the scene, able to call out the tail numbers, or something. I asked Mr. Holcomb if enemy airplane tail numbers would be in Russian, but he appeared to not hear me. Instead, the man handed us a clipboard and said to fill our names in any time slot we wanted to work. The schedule was empty. We were the only volunteers for that month and may have been the only volunteers all year. George and I were probably performing one last hurrah for the Ground Observer Corps in our town.

Undaunted in our enthusiasm, we walked out on the roof of the city's largest hotel the next day after school. The wind whistled around us and blew stray leaves and scraps of paper up against a dangerously low wall that ran around the perimeter of our gravel surfaced aerie above the town. If not careful, we could easily trip and plummet to our deaths in the street below. We used the key from Mr. Holcomb to open a grey box mounted on a pole next to a skylight glazed with whitened glass and frosted with fresh bird poop. In the box were binoculars, a booklet of silhouettes for identifying airplanes and a grey colored phone with a label above it reading "Report."

While I was wondering what to do first, George picked up the phone and spoke into it with the officious voice of a junior grade lieutenant.

"Reporting for duty ... Sir!! What? OK, thank you. Sir!!"

A Sergeant named Carmodelli had just said he wanted us kids to behave ourselves up here on the roof. Kids? We were official government plane spotters!

Utica is ten miles from a former US Air Force base and five miles from the county airport, so the sky was quite busy with aircraft. But soon, among the commercial DC3's and the Air Force F-86 Saber Jets engaged in training flights, we spotted a Russian MiG 15. We were pretty sure of it. Of course, now that I reflect on the odds, it seems unlikely that a Russian MiG had penetrated the North American Air Defense Shield and was flying around the countryside unnoticed by the American F-86's. But George was certain the bogey he was peering at through the old binoculars absolutely matched the silhouette in the booklet. In fact, he was thoroughly convinced of it. Also, he pointed out that as duly sworn plane spotters we were not to question procedures or to analyze likelihoods, but just report our findings. And he was sure we were looking at a Russian MiG 15 fighter jet.

Trying to stall the inevitable, I asked, "Does it have bombs on it?"

"Would it matter?" asked George.

"Well, yes," I ventured. "After all, it might be a peace mission or they might be surrendering."

"I don't see a white flag," said George.

"Well, at that speed a MiG 15 can't just hang a flag out the window, George," I whined.

"Are you refusing to perform your sworn duty as an official Ground Observer Corpsman?" he asked in an intimidating voice.

"No, of course not," I said. "I just think we should give this some thought."

"You think about it," he said. "I'm going to take out an enemy plane before it hurts somebody."

George picked up the phone and spoke loudly to Sergeant Carmodelli.

"Sir !! My associate tells me that a Russian MiG 15 is in the air over Utica. Intentions unknown! Sir !! What? No, sir, my associate has perfectly good eyesight and he thinks you should scramble a squadron of fighter jets, pronto! Sir !!"

I could hear an obviously angry voice squeaking on the other end of the line. George listened intently and then he spoke into the phone.

"How much?" he asked. He nodded and put the phone back in its cradle, a serious look on his face.

"Well, what did he say, George?" I asked.

"The sergeant says you're to be court martialed and hanged in the morning," he said.

"What!? Well, what about you?" I cried.

"I'm getting a reward for bringing you in to the Air Base," he said. "I'll split it with you, if you get your father to drive us."

As I said, bureaucracies never die and they seldom get it right. A year later I received a large envelope from Washington with a letter inside saying the Ground Observer Corps was now and forever a scrubbed mission. Attached was a scroll that announced President Eisenhower's appreciation for my 10 years of devoted public service. I was 14 years old.

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