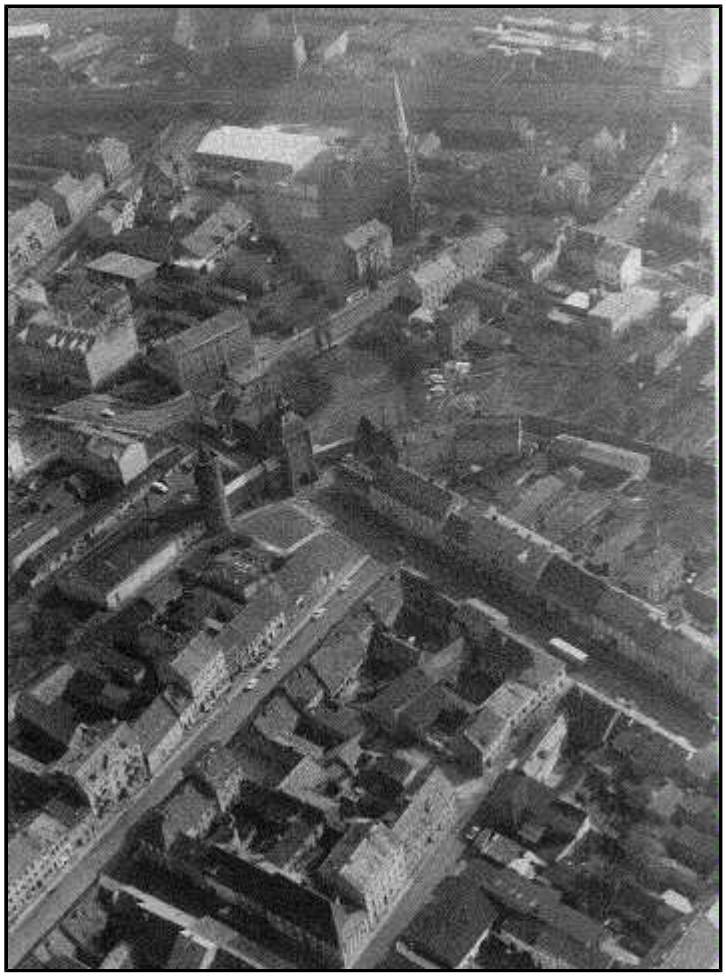
# Berlin 1969 - from the air

*For many, their first view of the island city of West Berlin was from the air. But what of the areas in the East? Glimpses of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were visible from civilian flights on their regular runs. The three Western Allies wanted to know more about what was going on there, and for that, aviation was also a way of getting a look.*

With access into East Berlin and East Germany made difficult on the ground, the importance of making observations from the air increased. These observations were carried out under the complex rules derived from the original Potsdam agreement and subsequent negotiations. My time in Berlin was at the dawn of the satellite photography era. We read about the amazing photos coming back from space, but the technology used in day to day intelligence gathering was not much different



from that of World War I. In a single engine plane, with passenger side windows removed for better photography, we flew low over the city, navigating with a city street map. When an observer spotted something interesting, such as the Soviet Army convoy that I watched on my first flight, the pilots banked the plane, which allowed us to take pictures with 35 mm cameras. At that point, I finally understood why we were warned to strap our cameras into the seatbelt.

The British, French and Americans sometimes swapped photos. I do not know if it was true, but purportedly the French could get away with more on their flights, due to their better relations with the Soviets. On the other hand, the GDR and the Soviets had little tolerance for us. Thus, there was a saying that in American photos, small people could be seen. In British photos, they could be seen waving. In French photos the people were seen close up, prone on the ground, hands over their heads in fear.

**Single Engine Fixed-Wing:**

While the agreements permitted us to fly over all of Berlin and its surroundings in a 20-mile ring, measured from the Air Safety Center, there were some constraints. Helicopters were normally kept over West Berlin, as in an emergency, they could not glide back to the Western side. They also were more limited for carrying out photography in poor light, because their vibration required higher shutter speeds. Thus, the single-engine light aircraft did the serious photo work, and in my time, typically only three pilots in the Aviation Detachment were qualified to fly these planes, according to Berlin aviation veteran Harold Smith (Avn Det, Berlin Dec 69 - Aug 70). Smith was around 30 at that time. We younger enlisted men (I was 23 on my first small plane flight and the young draftees thought that I was old) assumed or hoped that these "older and wiser" pilots were the best that the Army could find.

That this was serious work was underlined by the sergeant on duty at Tempelhof, who required that any personal information items, such as phone number lists, family photos, etc. be removed for safekeeping during the flight. He checked to make sure that we were wearing our dog tags. If the plane went down in the GDR, we were not to be carrying anything that would aid an interrogation or reveal names of friends and family members.

On my first flight, the pilots were discussing whether to fly clockwise or counterclockwise. I asked why it mattered, and was informed that the Soviets or East Germans would turn on their missile radar as we flew over. They explained that the liked to change directions every now and then to keep them on their toes, and wondering what our deep motive was for choosing a direction. As we left to walk out onto the tarmac of historic Tempelhof, a sergeant called to tip off the electronic intelligence experts to our departure. In this game of cats and aerial mouse, THEY would try to intimidate us with their radar spotting, and WE would study their radar system. We now know that this was the beginning of the missile radar analysis used in the Gulf War and subsequent ground-air struggles over the No-Fly Zones of Iraq. For me, as the most junior participant, it was interesting, but I also gained some sympathy for the young police men or women who play the bait in "sting" operations.

Twin-engine fixed wing craft were used on corridor flights between West Berlin and West Germany. I saw them from time to time, but look forward to learning more about them in the future.

**Helicopters:**

Captive to our concerns about losing a craft over the East, helicopter crews made up for the limits imposed upon them by some fancy flying. During the period covered by this website, many of the "chopper" pilots were Vietnam veterans. This gave a certain edge to their style of flying, even though landing on the ball field between our apartment-style housing at Andrews Barracks was not quite the same as coming into a Landing Zone (LZ) in the brutal flying conditions on the other end of the world from us. Other pilots could be detected as novices, making neatly controlled, precise landings on the chalk lines that marked the 50-yard line of our field.

The "helichoppers" as some Berlin GI's called them made regular landings on the field in mid-afternoons for their role in transporting Military Police to and from the tiny "island" suburb of Steinstuecken, an exclave of West Berlin that was at risk of being cut off by the ever more comprehensive Berlin Wall. Their comings and goings would interrupt my mid-afternoon naps when I had worked all night, reminding me of where I was.

Claus Mehnert, GP (German Police) liaison in that era recalled on 16 Dec 2002:

*"I remember our pilot, a fairly young guy. He was heading head-on for an East German watchtower, out by Rudow Radar Station. I just about sh... . My GP partner was turning all white and slumped down on the seat. I saw the EG soldiers hit the floor, fearing we would run right into them. OK, we made it clear of them. After that I was askin' that guy what he was maybe trying to show us. He just said: 'Were you guys afraid?? I know HOW to fly that bird, I was a gun-ship pilot in 'Nam. Believe me, it was still a lot of fun. Unfortunately, this was the only flight I could be on."*

Frustrations came out in other ways, too. I recall seeing a bulletin warning wall patrol pilots not to fly low over the nudist colony south of the Wannsee. Of course, this just increased the desire to see what could be seen from the air.

**Tempelhof:**

The U.S. Army Aviation Detachment and U.S. Air Force operations were located at Tempelhof Flughafen. This field was shared with commercial flights of the "Allied" airlines: Pan American, British European Airways and Air France. This setting looked incredibly familiar to some of us when we first saw it, because the architecture had changed little since World War II and the Blockade. As one friend of mine in Headquarters Company said, "every time I get on or off a plane there, I feel like I should stop and give a speech to the crowd."

I could not help but remember the newsreels in Mr. Toby's seventh grade class at Irvington Elementary School. A World War II veteran himself, he made sure that we saw plenty of documentaries on the European war and its aftermath. As with my friend, it felt strange to be walking through this newsreel scene, now a participant, or to be in a propellor-driven plane rolling what seemed like forever toward the apartment houses at the end of the runway, pulling the plane up off the ground by willpower.

Acknowledgement:

Exchange in the Bulletin Board of the Berlin U.S. Military Veterans Association, 15 Dec 2002 through 1 Jan 2003 with Harold Smith, Grant Jackson, Claus Mehnert (former Berlin Police liaison officer), Robert Rynerson and others.

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