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The Truth About Gary Powers, a Cold War Hero

By Francis Gary Powers, Jr.

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Friday marks the 50th anniversary of the famous spy exchange between U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers and Soviet spy Rudolph Abel on the Glienicker Bridge in Potsdam, Germany.

It was a cold, dark, foggy morning in Potsdam on the day of the exchange. Two prisoners and an entourage of KGB and CIA officials were on either side of the bridge in their respective delegations. Once the agents' identities were confirmed, the signal was given and the prisoners walked across the "Bridge of Spies" to their respective freedom.

Abel was welcomed home as a hero to the Soviet Union. But Powers returned home to controversy surrounding the U-2 incident because of inaccurate articles and commentaries in the media. Many questioned the role Powers played in the intrigue between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The U-2 incident, which occurred on May 1, 1960, was one of the most pivotal events in the

history of the Cold War. It was perhaps the first time in U.S. history that a president had been caught lying to the American people and to the world. The event caused such a strain on U.S.-Soviet relations that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev canceled an invitation for President Dwight Eisenhower to visit the Soviet Union later that year. In addition, the Paris Summit Conference that was planned for May 16, 1960, collapsed when Eisenhower refused to apologize to Khrushchev for authorizing the U-2 flights over the Soviet Union.

The controversy that surrounded the U-2 incident was magnified in the annals of Cold War history because Powers was captured alive and because of the dramatic show trial that followed. The event was controversial because the United States was caught spying on the Soviets by flying over their territory — a practice that continues to this day with drones flying over Iran and other countries hostile to the United States. In addition, some people thought Powers did not follow orders upon capture and that the CIA had intentionally sabotaged the flight to ruin the May 16 Paris Summit Conference.

Rumors, speculation, misinformation and some outright lies circulated in the press during Powers' captivity about his conduct, loyalty and the cause of his capture. After going through three months of Soviet interrogations, he was subjected to a highly publicized show trial designed to further embarrass the United States. Because there was the possibility that the verdict might result in the death penalty, Powers' Soviet-appointed defense attorney convinced him to make a public "apology" to save his life. As a result, instead of being sentenced to death, the Soviet judges sentenced Powers to 10 years in prison. But he ended up serving a total of 21 months before being exchanged for Abel, the Soviet spy.

During the time Powers was incarcerated in the Soviet Union, CIA Director Allen Dulles and other U.S. officials thought that the most likely cause for his capture was a flameout that caused the U-2 to descend to a lower altitude, where it was then hit by a Soviet MiG or missile.

When Powers returned to the United States, the CIA, the Air Force and the designer of the U-2 debriefed him for three weeks at a safe house in Maryland. During this time, Powers confirmed that there was no flameout or sabotage. The downing was caused by a a Soviet S-75 Dvina surface-to-air missile that exploded below and behind the tail section of Powers' airplane. This caused structural failure to the frame and brought down the plane.

On March 6, 1962, Powers appeared in an open hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services. The committee exonerated him of any wrongdoing and called him "a fine young man performing well under dangerous circumstances." After his testimony, the audience gave him a standing ovation. But at the time the U.S. government didn't clear up many of the false stories that had been circulated, and the CIA wouldn't permit him to write his account of the incident until many years later.

During the Cold War, some Americans questioned Powers' loyalty and criticized him because he didn't commit suicide when faced with capture and failed to "follow orders." But there were no such orders. On the contrary, the CIA's instructions on capture stipulated that "If capture appears imminent, pilots should surrender without resistance and adopt a cooperative attitude toward their captors."

Other critics claimed Powers gave out vital information concerning the aircraft. In fact, the opposite was true; he gave no vital information, nor did he ever reveal the names of any

of the pilots or denounce the United States.

Despite the Senate committee's exoneration, Powers was the quintessential spy who was left out in the cold. Fortunately, history has a way of correcting itself.

It has been 50 years since the melodramatic spy exchange. Many cherished illusions went down along with the U-2, and Americans grew a little wiser, but sadder. For better or worse, as time passes, current events fade into history, and historians are able to reflect upon past events.

As a result of the end of the Cold War, Powers' reputation started to transform from one that was infamous to that of a U.S. hero that was caught up in the global political environment of the time. Over the past 50 years, additional evidence has surfaced from both sides that his U-2 plane was, in fact, shot down while flying at an altitude of 21,490 meters over Sverdlovsk.

As a result of declassified documents pertaining to the U-2 incident, the U.S. Air Force recently determined that throughout the duration of his captivity, Powers exhibited steadfast loyalty and resistance to exploitation despite all Soviet efforts through insults and threats of death to obtain classified information. Later this year, the Air Force will give Powers a posthumous Silver Star decoration for the valor he exhibited in carrying out his mission.

This posthumous award 50 years after the fact goes to show that it is never too late for a government to help set the record straight.

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