





The theft of the fighter was a classic tale of Cold War skullduggery.

# Purloined Yak

**I**N **OCTOBER** 1953, intelligence agents of a Balkan country approached the Central Intelligence Agency resident in their nation, offering to hand over to the US a current Soviet-built fighter—a Yak-23 Flora—on a very short-term basis. Thus began a project involving a small number of Air Force and CIA personnel. It was called “Project Alpha.”

The Air Force declassified much of the project’s technical material in the mid-1990s, but it had expunged the names of the Balkan countries involved and three foreign officials sent as escorts. The CIA was even less forthcoming. Fifty years after the fact, the agency refused to divulge any information. It would not even acknowledge that such a project ever existed.

However, interviews with some

Air Force personnel who participated in Project Alpha have helped to lift the veil.

The story went something like this: Agents of an unnamed Balkan country (call it “Balkan Country No. 1”) knew a crated Yak-23 fighter was being transported by train through their country to another nation—Balkan Country No. 2. The agents of No. 1 suggested that the US could take the fighter, study it, flight-test it, and then return it in the crates exactly as it had been picked up.

Soon, all parties shook hands on the deal.

USAF sent a C-124 to Balkan Country No. 1. The C-124 flew the crated and disassembled Yak-23, along with the three foreign escorts, to USAF’s Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC) at Wright-Patterson AFB,

By **Bill Getz**



Photo via Robert F. Dorr



*As a cover story to explain possible sightings, USAF ordered those in the know to say the Yak-23 was the experimental Bell X-5 aircraft. The two airplanes bore a passing resemblance, and the Yak had been given temporary US markings.*

Ohio. There, the Yak was reassembled, flight-tested, disassembled again, re-crated, and flown back to Balkan Country No. 1.

### Getting the Yak

After receiving the offer, CIA agents contacted ATIC, whose mission was to acquire and evaluate foreign aircraft.

The first step was to arrange transport for the Yak. In early November 1953, a C-124 cargo aircraft, assigned to the 4th Troop Carrier Squadron, 62nd Troop Carrier Wing, Larson AFB, Wash., was dispatched to Wright-Patterson. The pilot was Capt. Leroy D. Good, a highly experienced veteran of troop carrier operations. Good and his crew received a briefing covering the bare essentials of the flight. They were not told the purpose or the ultimate destination.

The first leg of the journey took the C-124 to Westover AFB, Mass. From there, it flew to a US air base near Munich, where it was refueled. The crew was given another briefing and made ready to continue its flight, having been told that the exact destination was to be revealed en route. The C-124, a large four-engine aircraft, was easy to identify, so there was no effort to conceal its USAF markings, but the flight was to be made at night.

However, Good and his crew never took off on the mission. Instead, they were sent back to Larson. Good still does not know why. That was not his last involvement in Project Alpha, though.

Another C-124 from his same unit took over and completed the pickup. This second transport delivered the crated Yak-23 to Wright-Patterson. Upon landing, the C-124 was towed near Hangar 145, where the crates were unloaded and taken into a secure area.

### Flight Testing

Time was short, because the crates had to be returned before anyone noticed they were gone. The disassembled aircraft was quickly reassembled and underwent its first test flight on Nov. 4, 1953, at Wright-Patterson.

Heading the top secret Project Alpha at ATIC was Air Force civilian I.H. Herman. He lined up test pilots Lt. Col. Fred Wolfe, chief of USAF

fighter test, and Capt. Tom Collins. Wolfe flew a safety airplane on the wing of the Yak-23, while it was flown by Collins. Ray Gardiner was chosen as maintenance crew chief. Assisting him were two other mechanics, Stan Kulikowski and Ronnie Wilcoxin.

During the flight tests, the Yak-23 was disguised with removable USAF markings. The Air Force created a cover story to explain the "strange aircraft" to curious eyes. If asked, project members were to say it was the X-5 experimental aircraft.

The cover was soon put to the test. Some F-86 pilots assigned to a fighter-interceptor squadron at the base were taxiing out during an early morning no-notice practice alert at the same time Collins was getting ready to take off in the Yak. At the officers' club that evening, the F-86 pilots asked Collins about the strange aircraft. Collins gave them the cover story. The Yak-23 did bear a resemblance to the X-5, so perhaps the story fooled the inquisitors. One of the two X-5s built had been destroyed in a crash, but one was still flying, so it would be difficult to dispute the claim.

In all, Collins made eight test flights in the Yak-23. The last took place on Nov. 25, 1953.

### The Return

For the return trip, airlift pilot Good again got the call. He flew C-124 tail No. 0097.

Good said that when he arrived at



***To retrieve the Yak, the Air Force flew a C-124 transport from Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, to Germany, and then on to Yugoslavia. It picked up a fighter that had already been broken down and loaded into crates.***

Wright-Patterson, workers hung a black curtain inside his C-124, separating most of the cargo area from the front of the airlifter. He said that six to 12 men “who spoke a foreign language” boarded the C-124, along with a man wearing an Air Force colonel’s uniform. The colonel, who gave Good route and destination flight directions, wore no name tag and did not offer his name. Good did not ask.

The disassembled and re-crated Yak was loaded aboard the C-124 and the return journey began. The aircraft flew heavy, according to Good. They again flew to the US air base outside Munich. At the base flight operations center, Good filed an instrument flight rules plan for an airfield north of the Munich area. The C-124 departed Munich at night and flew north after takeoff. Almost immediately, the colonel ordered Good to shift to a southerly course.

Base air traffic controllers, said Good, kept trying to contact the C-124 to find out why it was deviating from its flight plan. The colonel ordered Good not to respond. When Good protested, the colonel told him that the change had “all been arranged.”

After flying the southerly course for a brief period, Good was told to take an east to southeast heading. The C-124 was soon joined by an escort of two propeller-driven fighter aircraft, one on each wing. It was

too dark for Good to identify the aircraft or see their national markings. All three aircraft flew without lights.

They landed in the middle of the night at a military airfield and were met by jeeps that led them to a remote parking area. The people who met them brought food and drink. The C-124 engineer, Sgt. Roy H. Bass, recalled one gregarious and happy member of the welcoming party giving him a yellow bottle of Sljivovica, a Serbian liqueur.

The C-124’s passengers, except the colonel, departed the aircraft

and boarded a bus. The colonel and aircrew stayed with the C-124, which was unloaded quickly. Shortly after landing, the Americans took off and the colonel told Good to fly directly to Paris. At Orly Field, the colonel thanked the crew and wished them good-bye. Good and his crew returned to Larson Air Force Base.

### **Who Provided the Yak?**

Air Force documentation clearly shows that a crated Yak-23 was being shipped via rail through Balkan Country No. 1 to Balkan Country No. 2. Both were identified as communist countries. The same records made it clear that the shipment did not originate in a third Balkan country.

Four former Soviet client states have flown Yak-23s. Two were Balkan: Bulgaria and Romania. Two were not: Czechoslovakia and Poland. Yugoslavia was undoubtedly Balkan Country No. 1—the one that “loaned” the Yak to the US.

Good confirmed that in an interview. He said he knows that, when he made the classified flight from Wright-Patterson, he flew into a military airfield near Belgrade, Yugoslavia. At that time, Pancevo field near Belgrade was a military pilot training base.

Why would Yugoslavia offer the Yak-23 to the US? At about this time, the US and Yugoslavia had been working out a military security arrangement.



***The Yak-23, shown here in its removable USAF markings, was of questionable quality but was in service with several Warsaw Pact nations. It was flown by Czechoslovakia and Poland, in addition to Bulgaria and Romania.***

Photo via Robert F. Dorr

The leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz, better known as Tito, practiced his own form of communism, independent of direction from Moscow. This difference of opinion came to a head early in 1948, and Stalin broke off relations with Yugoslavia, withdrawing all materiel support.

Tito believed that survival of his government depended upon getting the support of Western powers, particularly the United States. The US saw an opportunity to use a split in the communist bloc to its advantage, including gaining a foothold in the Balkans to help defuse the communist problem facing NATO member Greece.

Starting in 1949, Western nations began limited economic support to Yugoslavia. Two years later, the US began shipping weapons to Tito.



Photo via Robert F. Dorr

*The purloined Yak is shown here in flight with its temporary markings and designation of FU-599. In all, the Yak was flown eight times at Wright-Patterson between Nov. 4 and Nov. 25, 1953, when it was spirited back to the Balkans.*

## A Long Intelligence History

The Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC) traces its roots to 1917. It was in that year that the Army Signal Corps' Airplane Engineering Department formed the Foreign Data Section at McCook Field, near Dayton, Ohio. The mission of the section was to study foreign aircraft, translate aerospace documents, and maintain a technical library on foreign equipment.

By 1942, during World War II, the section had evolved and become the Technical Data Laboratory. By 1945, TDL had grown from 25 to 750 people and had been redesignated the T-2 intelligence section. Along the way, it moved from McCook to Wright Field. T-2's primary job was to evaluate German and Japanese aircraft and technical documents.

In 1951, the Air Force created ATIC and made evaluation of Soviet technology its primary scientific and technical intelligence mission.

Although ATIC was discontinued 10 years later, its mission continued. On July 1, 1961, USAF created, within Air Force Systems Command, the Foreign Technology Division, headquartered at Wright-Patterson.

Out of FTD grew today's National Air and Space Intelligence Center, still headquartered at Wright-Patterson. NASIC is a component of the Air Intelligence Agency.

Some unofficial sources claim that US military personnel were also sent to Yugoslavia in the early 1950s to help train the Yugoslav Air Force.

In October 1953, the opportunity to provide the US with a Soviet-built fighter aircraft—even temporarily—would have seemed a ready-made way to further cement US-Yugoslav relations.

### No Real Value?

There was probably no way for

Yugoslav officials to know that, weeks earlier, the US had acquired a MiG-15 when a North Korean Air Force pilot, Lt. Kum Sok No, flew one to Kimpo Air Base, near Seoul in South Korea. In September 1953, the 21-year-old defector landed his MiG near a USAF F-86 and turned over his fighter.

Air Force tactical intelligence personnel at Kimpo partially disassembled the fighter, which was flown aboard a C-124 to Okinawa. After it was reassembled and its North Ko-

rean markings were replaced with USAF emblems, Air Force test pilot Collins, the same one to fly the Yak-23 about a month later, became the first to fly the MiG. In all, Collins and Maj. Charles E. Yeager made 11 test flights at Okinawa before the MiG was disassembled again and, in December 1953, transported to the Air Technical Intelligence Center at Wright-Patterson.

The Yak-23 fighter, built by the A.S. Yakovlev design bureau, was obsolete the day it first rolled out the factory door in 1948.

According to an ATIC summary report contained in the Air Force documentation: "The Yak-23, like its predecessors, is a single-seat, low-wing, lightweight fighter, ... which was given in quantities to [Soviet] satellite air forces. ... There is a minimum amount of equipment installed in the aircraft. ... The outstanding features of the aircraft are its takeoff, climb, and acceleration capabilities, which are excellent. ... Lack of cockpit pressurization, a 0.8 Mach No. restriction, and poor directional stability above 325 knots IAS [indicated air speed] are its major drawbacks."

The Yak-23 was outclassed by the MiG-15, which was introduced at about the same time. However, the Yak was a fairly new Soviet fighter and was flown by several Warsaw Pact countries. The offer to study one was an opportunity ATIC obviously could not refuse.

*Bill Getz is a retired Air Force pilot and industry executive who now focuses on writing and publishing. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.*