

THE BLACKBIRDS

Project OXCART, A-12 CIA Induction

By CIA PILOT KEN COLLINS

The primary professional selection criteria were century series fighter-type aircraft. The pilot had to have more than 1000 operational flight hours in the century aircraft and a total of 2000 flight hours. He had to be currently qualified and proficient in a current fighter-type aircraft. At that time I was an experienced instructor pilot in the RF-101 having had over fifty air to air refueling training sorties and about ten transatlantic deployments each with multiple air-air refuelings. This was the easy part for the Pentagon selection group. Either you had it or you didn't. The requirements that you were highly qualified as an officer and a pilot were basic an absolute minimum. All of your flight, professional and medical records were meticulously scrutinized at all levels before your name was released for further evaluation.

The initial personal requirement was that you had to be married and preferably that you had children. They were adamant about this after the problems that they experienced with the previous U-2 program. Their explanation for this was that the family unit is more socially established, dedicated and dependable. All of our wives were also interviewed separately and psychological evaluations were conducted. Expanded background investigations were run on them also.

At this phase (April 1961) of the overall evaluation we did not know for what we were being evaluated. The following events and schedules were generally the same for all of the pilots being considered. Each was individually and separately tasked for the respective events. I initially did not know that there was another pilot (Captain Walter Ray) from Shaw AFB, SC. We started running into each other about a year later when the field of consideration was narrowed by elimination. From the beginning you were given the option of withdrawing from the selection at any time without prejudice. This option continued throughout the program.

Our medical records were acceptable for an initial evaluation, because we were all on flying status. They were not extensive enough and we were about to find out what that really meant. I was scheduled for my "astronaut" physical at the Lovelace Clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is the same facility that the original astronauts received their medical evaluations. It was also the medical facility for the original U-2 pilots. I discovered this after I ran into and met Francis Gary Powers at the clinic. The Lovelace Clinic was founded by Dr. Lovelace (Deceased) who was one of the pioneers of aviation medicine. His work was continued by his son, Dr. Randy Lovelace, until he, his wife and their pilot was killed flying into a mountain west of Colorado Springs.

I had a government contact (an Air Force flight surgeon) that I met at the clinic. He established all of my schedules and appointments and observed all of the tests. He and I would have dinner together more as a part of the evaluation than just being social. The first medical phase lasted for five days; arriving there on Sunday and departing the following Saturday. In those five days they checked out every bodily orifice, X-rayed every part of you from head to toe, flushed you out totally, took samples and measured everything (I carried a large brown bottle around for 48 hours to collect every drop of urine). They conducted extensive EKGs and EEGs. I was hydrostatically weighed in the large water tank, ran the bicycle pulmonary functions and passed other physical stress exercises. I was then flown to Los Alamos Laboratory to be inserted into the "body counter", which mapped the fat versus muscle tissue of the body. When correlated with the data from the hydrostatic weighing, theoretically they determined the total body capacity, regardless of size. After all of that I was ready for the hospital.

From this date forward, I was subjected to many different kinds of personal and professional evaluations. There was the sound proof black box where you had to remain for twelve hours in total darkness; sleepless in Philadelphia and the polygraph. Various dinners and/or lunches with a whole variety of "professional" people, medical people and intelligence people, ranging from the senior managers to the basic company employee. All were there to get an opinion, except the lesser guy. He was there to keep me out of trouble.

After the sorting was near completion, I learned that there would 8 selected for the initial program. This sounded reasonable, since that was the average group for the astronaut program.

I finally received my orders assigning me to the Headquarters, USAF, Pentagon with a reporting date of 28 October 1962. In fact, the day the movers were finishing packing me and we were driving out the next day, I received a call from Lt. Colonel Clyde East, who was my squadron commander (20th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, Shaw AFB, SC). He said that I was to report to the base immediately, because the RF-101s were on alert for immediate deployment (to MacDill AFB, FL for the Cuban Crisis).

Obviously, I was not available for the deployment although I would have liked to have gone with the squadron. The week before I departed Shaw AFB, SC, I was again called to Washington D.C. for a final meeting at which time you still had the option to

withdraw from the program. I was told that it was not the astronaut program, but a project to fly and test an exotic new airplane for the Central Intelligence Agency. Still there was no pictures or any other details. I then met Bill Skliar, Lon Walter and I already knew Walt Ray from Shaw. (Note: Lon Walter resigned after a couple of flights in March 1963, Bill Skliar was killed in his racer in Reno, NV after he retired and Walt Ray was killed during an A-12 ejection in 1966). I was told that I was to be in L.A by November 1962 and further instructions and contacts would follow when I got there.

I arrived in Washington D.C. with Jane and the four children. The next day I was taken to headquarters to sign on the dotted line. We headed West the following day. Jane was interviewed and evaluated during this process. That was done separately from me. She was not told what I would be doing and she was not to talk about it to anyone. She could say that I decided to resign from the Air Force and to work for Hughes Aircraft. (For all who thought we received a great salary, we all made about \$4000.00 per year more than our then current Air Force pay, but the job was well worth it.)

The first time I saw the A-12 or even heard the name was in December 1962 after I arrived at Area 51. Colonel Doug Nelson, Project Operations Officer, took me to the hangar and let me walk in by myself. What an amazing sight! There were no hangar lights. The sunrays entered the upper hangar windows illuminating only the nose and the spikes. As your eyes adjusted to the restricted light, you began to take in its sleek length, the massive twin rudders and its total blackness. A vision that will never be forgotten.