

The Black Cats of Osan: U-2 Spy Plane Escapades and Calamities in Korea

Rick Bishop (Casemate Publishers, 2023), 288 pages, photographs.

Reviewed by Kevin Ayers

Former US Air Force pilot Rick Bishop's account of U-2 operations at Osan Air Base in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, a particularly fraught period on the peninsula, is a revealing account of his experiences inside and outside the cockpit—sometimes perhaps more revealing than intended. The U-2 was then a key airborne intelligence platform for US and South Korean military and intelligence organizations trying to monitor North Korean forces along the Demilitarized Zone. In an era before ubiquitous, near-real-time space-based collection, the CIA-developed U-2 was irreplaceable.

From the outset, the book is missing historical context of the Koreas in 1984, when the author was the director of operations for U-2 Detachment 2 (Det 2), diminishing what could have been a compelling narrative. Bishop makes no mention of the Cold War tensions and political divisions of that era, marked in the South by assassinations and violent crackdowns on political protesters, the Soviet shootdown of a South Korean airliner in September 1983, and the North Korean attempted assassination of the South Korean president and cabinet officials in Rangoon, Burma, in October 1983. North Korea had started importing more Soviet arms, including fighter jets and air-defense systems, and Soviet warships were making port calls.^a While the author may have been wary of disclosing classified information on what he knew about intended aims of missions, adding some level of situational awareness of what drove those strategic reconnaissance missions would have provided a richer narrative.

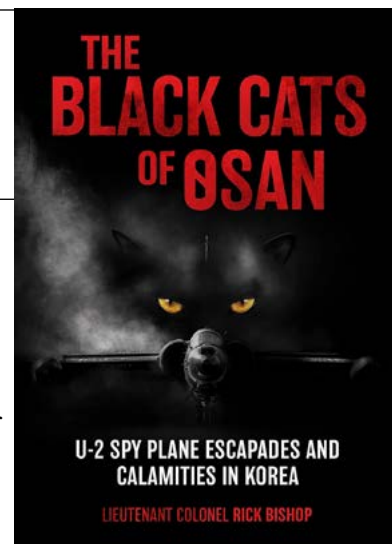
Bishop offers a combination of *Catch-22*-like absurdity and technological reverence, switching between a relaxed tone in which his personality shines through and a more professional, objective tone. Along the way, Bishop's depictions of the culture surrounding U-2 operations at Osan often are less than flattering. For example, the opening chapters detail the development of the U-2 as a tactical and strategic reconnaissance platform, and then readers are introduced to Oscar, Det 2's black cat

mascot, along with a detailed account of the disposition of the cat's testicles after Oscar's been neutered and the condition of the U-2 camera bay after Oscar was taken on an "initiation" ride to 10,000 feet.

And thus the book goes on. Throughout, his use of language addressing certain groups and the absence of any mention of others paint what appears to be a toxic brotherhood of the "Right Stuff." Bishop sees the U-2 itself as the pinnacle of the hierarchy and portrays the aircraft as the most three-dimensional character of the book. The U-2 pilots occupy the next tier with fully fleshed out biographical descriptions and experiences, which go hand in hand with illustrating the aircraft itself. The maintenance crews and the Physiological Support Division (PSD) units are presented as the next most important and are given lots of space for their experiences, especially for their various pranks ("pimps") pulled on the new pilots or crews. All others are deemed as barely relevant.

Bishop's treatment of the female members of PSD is patronizing, as when he recounts "pimp" involving his urine collection device or recalls "Peppermint Patty," the sensually voiced sensor-link monitor at "Skivvy 9"—the collection ground station unit. Even less regarded are the "cone heads" or "bean counters" who are more hindrance than anything to the unit. Bishop claims:

All this good fun, which is some instances might be frowned upon today, actually had the effect of bringing the officers, enlisted, and tech reps closer together in this tight-knit unit at a faraway location, halfway around the world. (101)



a. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. (Basic Books, 2001), 146, 157.

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South Koreans are draped in racist tropes that include wholly unnecessary, awkward approximations of their dialogue and references to eating cats and dogs. Women in the book are either paragons of virtue, like his wife, or “whores” in the *kijichon* (village). The reader is offered no introduction to how the air base is situated relative to the local population, minus the nearby “Strip” where US personnel shop for tailored suits, indulge in alcohol (some of which is enhanced by formaldehyde), and try the local cuisine. Bishop writes how the patrons of Miss Penny’s “Honeymoon Club” were enticed in with free drinks and access to waitresses who provided escort services on the side, managed by Miss Penny’s husband. Bishop could have cited scholars who have documented that for poor, rural Koreans—displaced, widowed, and orphaned by the war—US military bases were often the only source of income.^a

It has been a long-held tenet in the Air Force that “real men fight wars, not observe them” and that “fighter pilots are carnivores, reconnaissance pilots are herbivores”^b. The author appears to be reframing the perspective: at least U-2 pilots faced unique circumstances that required the best-of-the-best to manage the characteristics of the aircraft and to face different dangers than fighter pilots. Certainly, flying through irradiated clouds to collect against Chinese nuclear tests took courage and patience with the decontamination process. And like fighter pilots, reconnaissance pilots seem to have an intimate relationship with their aircraft, which is very clear from the language used throughout the book. Bishop refers to the aircraft as “the Lady” or “Dragon Lady” and enjoyed the “dance” of each flight. The pilots “sweet talk the old girl” out of the reconnaissance orbit and “terminated the

affair” on landing. New variants of the U-2 were referred to as “new chicks.” So, the tenor of the book is one of a clear love affair between pilot and aircraft. However, the same love could have been expressed through attention to details of the capabilities and the operations, without the sexualized tone.

Bishop addresses how various problems with the aircraft were solved through ingenuity of the maintainers. *Black Cats of Osan* shines in these sections, which shifts into a professional, unemotional tone. His discussions on how to approach various landings in certain weather conditions tended to be riveting, especially when things start getting dicey. The calamities in the title—usually involving airframe failures in flight—were the best portions by far, including his own ejection-seat activations.

In the end, *Black Cats of Osan* cannot find its central theme or voice. In many ways, the book seemed to be trying to be a combination of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, the television show *M.A.S.H.*, and Tom Clancy’s oeuvre. It’s no surprise that a book about U-2 pilots and operations would be centered around the author, but his ego clearly got in the way of competent storytelling. This would have been a richer description of U-2 operations with more social and historical context and less individual commentary from the author, who clearly has fallen into a nostalgia trap. In fact, the final chapter and epilogue are devoted to the declining standards of the US Air Force since the 1980s and its “wokeness,” which struck an unnecessary final false note. With some edits, *Black Cats of Osan* could have been *The Right Stuff* for reconnaissance pilots. Sadly, the author’s ego crashed the narrative before it could take off.



The reviewer: Kevin Ayers is a CIA careerist and GEOINT analyst at NGA, currently on a joint-duty assignment in the National Counterproliferation and Biosecurity Center.

a. See Eui Hang Shin. “Effects of the Korean War on Social Structures of the Republic of Korea,” *International Journal of Korean Studies* (Spring/Summer, 2001): 146.

b. Robert Stiegel, “Is the Air Force Serious About Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance?” *War on the Rocks*, June 25, 2019, accessed September 13, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/is-the-air-force-serious-about-intelligence-surveillance-and-reconnaissance/>