





Cliff Beeler was a spy.

He didn't hang out on shadowy street corners with his trench coat collar obscuring his face. The Air Force major, now retired, spent his snooping time in a plane.

Beeler, 88, of Riverside , was a U-2 pilot at the height of the Cold War.

His missions took him over Russia , Cuba and China , photographing targets from nearly 80,000 feet in the sky.

His planes crashed more than once. He was occasionally targeted by MiG fighters, and he once landed on and took off from an aircraft carrier in the Pacific using only a few feet of the deck.

Beeler, who grew up in Santa Ana and spent most of his retirement in Santa Barbara, is a resident of Air Force Village West, near March Air Reserve Base. Recent back surgery has left him reliant on a walker, but his memories are as vibrant as ever.

He remembers enlisting at 19, learning to fly a P-51 fighter and being on his way to Saipan to get ready for the invasion of Japan . Then the United States dropped its atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki .

The war was over, and Beeler was sent home. Unlike many of his fellow pilots who left the service,





Beeler stayed in. He learned to fly the Air Force's first jets and then trained others to fly them.

Then the U-2 program caught his eye. "I wanted to fly the latest," he said.

There were never more than 24 pilots in the program, he said. In 1958, he entered the program. He spent seven years flying missions high above the Earth — out of the range of other planes and most other defenses — in the long-winged, lightweight plane.

It was not an easy task, he said.

As a plane climbs in altitude and the air thins, it must go faster to avoid a stall. The higher it climbs, the faster it needs to fly. Above 70,000 feet, the critical stall speed approaches the plane's Mach speed, or the speed of sound

— somewhere above 650 mph at that altitude. If that barrier is crossed, the shock waves can break the plane apart. U-2 pilots usually had a window of less than 12 mph between the two speeds. They had to keep the plane within that window for hours at a time.

CLOSE CALLS

Beeler learned the hard way what it meant to violate that window. He was above Louisiana on a night flight when he reached Mach speed.

“It tore the tail off,” he said. “The plane flipped over, and that tore the wing off.”

The plane fell apart, he said, and at 78,000 feet, “I'm out in space. That's a long way down.”

Fortunately, he was in a pressure suit with oxygen and had a parachute. After a long freefall, he opened his chute and found himself floating toward the ground. To his right, he could see lights on the ground. To his left, the same. But beneath him, all was black.

He remembered he was over Louisiana

“I said, ‘That looks like a swamp.’ ”

It was.

“I landed in a big cypress tree,” he said. “My chute got caught and swung me into the trunk.”

Telling the story, Beeler reached down toward his calf, “I always kept a doublebladed knife in my pocket,” he said. He was able to cut himself free of the parachute and use the ties to lash himself to the tree.

He took off his helmet and dropped it into the darkness below. There was a distant splash.

“All I could think about was alligators and cottonmouths in the swamp,” he said.

Lucky for Beeler, the breakup of his plane had been spotted on radar. Within an hour and a half a rescue helicopter was overhead.

Another close call came over Cuba .

Beeler said MiG jets would fly beneath the U-2 planes, at about 50,000 feet. The fighter pilots would sometimes attempt to reach the spy planes by turning on their afterburners and flying straight up, higher than the MiGs were capable of operating effectively.

A Cuban pilot's effort was particularly memorable, Beeler said.

"I look back and there's this MiG tumbling about 50 feet off my wing," he said. The plane was so close that he could see the pilot's face.

Remembering, Beeler turned his hand cockeyed in front of his face. "His goggles were like this and his face was ..." The sentence ends in a grimace, Beeler's eyes and mouth wide. "He was sure scared up there."

Beeler took the U-2 on numerous missions over Cuba , providing information on the country's armaments and the strength of its air force. Images from U-2 flights, he said, showed that Castro had only a few dozen bombers instead of the more than 400 he had claimed.

At one point, Beeler said, President John F. Kennedy stopped by the U-2 headquarters in Del Rio , Texas , to talk to the pilots.

"He said, 'You guys gave me information that prevented World War III at least twice,' " Beeler said.

AMAZING IMAGES

Sometimes the U-2's highresolution, long-range camera captured images that had nothing to do with national security.

During one Cuban mission, Beeler spent some time following the coastline. Afterward, he was called into the lab by the man in charge of analyzing the film.

"He showed me a picture of this Cuban gal sunbathing nude on the beach," Beeler said. "It was so clear I could see she had blue eyes. (The analyst) said, 'The only film these guys want to work with is your film.' "

Returning from another mission, he took some images over San Diego . Later, he was shown a photo of a man sitting in his backyard reading the paper.

"I could read the headline on the newspaper," he said.

Beeler is semi-famous among pilots for landing his U-2 on an aircraft carrier. The landing followed a mission over northeast Russia . The U-2's 80-foot wingspan meant it could only go a short distance before it collided with the superstructure of the ship. Because of the ship's speed and a headwind, Beeler said he was able to touch down and come to a stop in about five feet.

“When I came aboard they had a ceremony welcoming the Air Force into the Navy. I said, ‘I don’t have much I like about the Navy except one thing,’ ” he said. That one thing was the Navy pilots’ leather jackets. Before he left the ship the following day, the captain had given him one.

It lasted.

“I gave it to my son last week,” he said.

AFTER THE U-2

Among the military photos and plaques on the wall of his room is a framed row of medals from his service, including the Distinguished Service Cross.

He points to the photo of one plane, a B-46.

“It was the God-almighty bomber,” he said. But he declined a chance to fly those planes.

“I didn’t like the mission,” he said. “Go out and drop bombs. I wanted to shoot things up.”

After he left the service, in 1965, Beeler said he worked on the Apollo 5 program for three years. He was in charge of purchasing the equipment for the swing arm on the launch tower, he said.

He spent the next 25 years selling airplanes. He had his own dealership in the Santa Barbara area.

When his wife, Mary, developed Alzheimer’s disease, he retired to take care of her. After five years, he felt he needed help, so he moved with her to Air Force Village West, which has a nursing home on its campus.

“She lasted 11 days after I brought her here,” Beeler said. “I guess I kept her about as long as I could.”

The couple, who were married for 65 years, had two sons. The elder son lives in Corona and comes to see him most days, Beeler said.

For Veterans Day, he said, he doesn’t have any big plans.

“I’ll probably sleep late,” he said.

