

# This week

## SOVIET SPY PLANES FLY OVER BRITAIN

High altitude Mig-25 aircraft of the Soviet Air Force are making regular reconnaissance and electronic intelligence gathering missions over Britain and other NATO countries. The aircraft, code named Foxbat by NATO, fly from a base near Dresden in East Germany at a height which is beyond the reach of NATO fighters or surface-to-air missile defences.

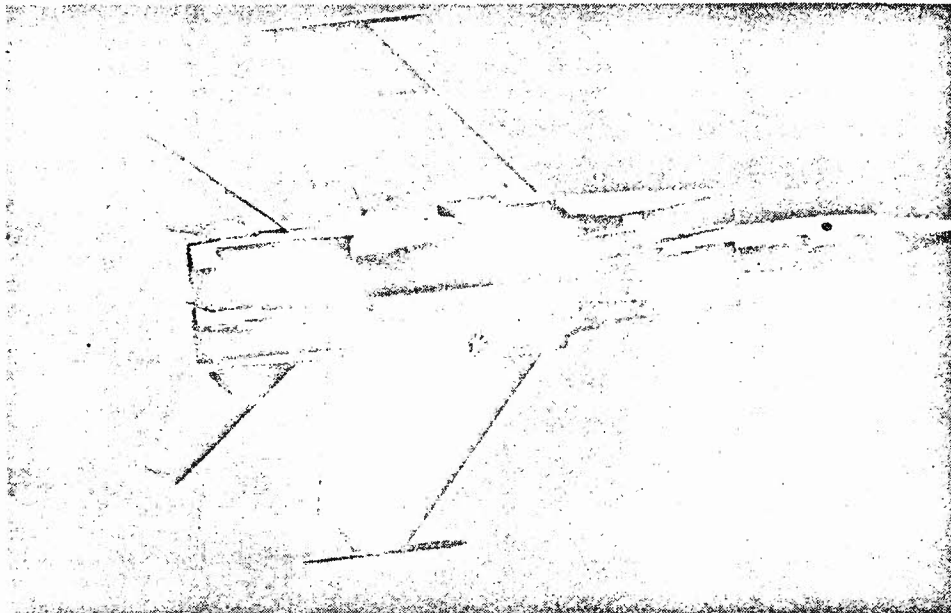
Photographs of the Mig-25, one of which is reproduced here, were published last week in *Aviation Week*, which claimed that the aircraft were carrying out daily surveillance missions over Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. The photographs were apparently taken clandestinely inside East Germany for the West German magazine *Flugrevue*.

In Brussels last week, a NATO spokesman said he was "not surprised" at the report of Mig-25 overflights. However, earlier this week, NATO said they had "had no reports" of such flights, while on Monday RAF Undersecretary Brynmor John, replying to a written question from Kenneth Warren MP, said that there had been no high altitude intrusions "into United Kingdom sovereign airspace in the last 12 months".

Flights over the British mainland take place once every 7 to 10 days, according to estimates made by Professor John Erickson of Edinburgh University, a prominent Soviet analyst who does regular work for NATO. The frequency at present may be slightly greater, Professor Erickson said, because of the temporary presence of several extra squadrons of United States Air Force aircraft in East Anglia.

The Mig-25 overflight—known by the military euphemism of "provocative penetrations"—have two objectives. The first objective of an intrusion, or near-intrusion, into hostile air space is to trigger the air defence system. The aircraft continuously record radar signals, radio transmissions, and the speed and extent of the fighter response. This tactic has been practised against Britain and NATO for many years by Bison and Bear aircraft of the Soviet Long Range Air Force. British and American aircraft fly similar provocative missions against the Soviet air defence system, turning back at the last moment. The second Mig-25 objective is direct photography of targets or manoeuvres.

The Mig-25 was first observed by US intelligence in 1966, but did not enter



*This Mig-25R Foxbat aircraft, photographed near an East German base, shows multi-angle camera ports, and dielectric panels for electronic intelligence gathering, at the front of the fuselage*

front line service until fairly recently.

Reconnaissance flights over Britain and NATO began, however, only when squadrons of the reconnaissance variant were deployed to forward bases at Brieg near Dresden and near Gdansk, Poland, about 18 months ago. The Brieg aircraft, which are believed responsible for the NATO overflights, would have the wartime role of reconnaissance for Backfire long-range bombers.

The move forward has brought most parts of Britain within range. But, flying at around 27 000 metres and at speeds up to Mach 3, there is very little "loiter" time. A typical pattern would be a single high-speed pass using a battery of panoramic cameras (see photograph) while passive electronic sensors record radar and communications signals. Prominent targets for photography include major RAF and USAF base concentrations.

Generally, Britain's air defence system UKADGE is able to record at least part of the high-altitude path, but only inaccurately and without any data on height. And Soviet electronic counter measures (ECM) have reportedly been effective in radar jamming. ECM may be used if the pilot detects radar observation of his path.

In the use of the Mig-25 reconnaissance aircraft, the Soviets are exploiting a technology gap between the introduction of Mig-25s to their Frontal Air Force and the deployment of new high-performance interceptors to NATO. The F-15 Eagle aircraft, which has only recently entered service, will be in Europe by the end of the year. It will be able to intercept overflying Foxbats.

One attempt has been made to shoot down a Mig-25, when an Israeli Phantom fired a Sidewinder missile unsuccessfully during a Soviet overflight of Tel Aviv. Although NATO forces have identically equipped aircraft, no attack on a Foxbat has been made over Europe.

Several American and British "provocative platforms" have been shot down over Soviet territory, the most famous being Gary Powers' U-2 in 1960. But the total score includes several more aircraft, and crews, including, according to US intelligence sources, two RAF aircraft in the early 1960s which were spying for Britain's signals intelligence organisation, GCHQ.

Theoretically, Britain could just about bring down over-flying Mig-25s with its existing ground-based Bloodhound missiles. But, as far as is known, these have never been deployed in this "total commitment" role. One of the main arguments put forward for the air defence version of the Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MRCA), 165 of which Britain wants solely for its own purpose, is to be able to "go up and have a look" before shooting down an over-flying Mig-25. This version of MRCA will be armed with Sparrow air-to-air missiles which will be able to "snap-up" to 25 000 metres or more. □