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Description

In 1998, NBC's Mike Boettcher gets rare chance to fly in a Air Force U-2 spy plane at subsonic speed, 12 miles above the Earth, just below the "line of death."

Keywords

Transcript

High Stakes, High Altitude: Onboard a U-2 Spy Plane

ANN CURRY, co-host:
As the crisis continues on the ground in Iraq, the U-2 spy plane becomes an indispensable eye in the sky for the United Nations. Just a few moments ago, the latest U-2 flight over Iraq took place gathering new information. If you've ever wondered how the U-2 works, NBC's Mike Boettcher can tell you. Recently, he became only the second civilian ever to fly in one.

MIKE BOETTCHER reporting:
Twenty-four hours a day, at the edge of space, a U-2 spy plane is up there watching Bosnia, Korea, Iraq and other places we can only guess. It is as secret as it is dependable; but recently, the Air Force allowed us a rare look inside. For a day I would be a u-2 pilot, a member of one of the world's most exclusive clubs. Only 650 have ever flown one. U-2 pilots must wear the same space suits as those used by shuttle astronauts.

Unidentified Man #1: You're ready to close up.

BOETTCHER: The suits and cockpit are confining, and a pilot must be willing to endure the tight fit for eight to 10 hours, the length of the average U-2 mission.

Offscreen Voice: And away we go!

BOETTCHER: We were flying in one of the four dual cockpit U-2’s used for training. My pilot is Major Ed Barnette. His backup pilot for the flight is Major Brandon King, who, today, will support us from the ground and later assist us in landing. U-2 pilots don't talk about the missions they've flown, but you get the sense these two have been over dangerous territory many times.

Unidentified Man #2: We can read the paper and, although we aren't mentioned, we may know ‘yeah, I
was part of that piece of news.’

Unidentified Man #3: I don't know if you have to be really good to be a U-2 pilot or maybe a little twisted.

BOETTCHER: A little of both, I thought, as we rose from the runway and made what seemed like a near-vertical takeoff.

Major ED BARNETTE: Today, we will probably max out at about 12, 13 miles above the earth.

BOETTCHER: The U-2 flies at subsonic, airliner speeds, but its long, 104-foot wingspan helps it fly even higher than the 80,000 feet the Air Force officially acknowledges.

Maj. BARNETTE: You can see a long, long way out here.

BOETTCHER: At 63,000 feet, we reach the so-called line of death.

Maj. BARNETTE: Armstrong’s line. You bet you. We passed that.

BOETTCHER: A malfunction at this point, known as Armstrong's Line, can be instantly fatal. To prove it, the U-2 support team put me in an altitude chamber the day before our flight.

Unidentified Man #4: OK. We're at 60,000 feet, and your suit is looking great.

BOETTCHER: They place a glass of water in the chamber and simulate a loss of cabin pressure at 63,000 feet.

Unidentified Man #5: Chamber operator, lock and level, 2-9-5.

Unidentified Man #6: We're at level 2-9-5.

BOETTCHER: The water boils, like my blood would if the pressure suit was not protecting me. Major Barnette leveled our craft at 72,500 feet. All systems normal.

Maj. BARNETTE: One of the mottos of the U-2 pilots is “Towards the Unknown”. And at above 70,000 feet at the edge of the atmosphere, you surely are. Deep blue sky above you. Striations in the atmosphere. Off to the side, that's good to look at. But this is a working platform. This gathers photographic intelligence and carries sensors. And that's why the U-2 is so important.

BOETTCHER: Its data is read in darkened rooms at Beale Air Force base near Sacramento, where young men and women in front of flickering screens monitor live pictures of a U-2's mission via satellite. Even if clouds or darkness cover a target, they can magnify the image, then send it instantaneously to the Pentagon, the president, or, amazingly, into the cockpit of a US fighter patrolling the no-fly zones over Iraq. When the U-2 lands, old-fashioned film developed from its powerful cameras provide even more detail. Sergeant Theresa Kaye looks for tracks in the sand and other clues.

Sergeant THERESA KAYE: We have a suspicious mind. So, what are they changing? What are they trying to hide? What kind of deception are they trying to use? It's a game. It's a spy game.

BOETTCHER: A game that can get dangerous if you're flying over hostile missile batteries or your temperamental aircraft develops problems. Since 1991, seven U-2 pilots have died in crashes resulting from mechanical failure or freak high-altitude weather.

Maj. BARNETTE: You have the aircraft?

BOETTCHER: I have the aircraft. Its pilots say the U-2 can be a handful to fly, as I soon learned. (An alarm sounds).

Maj. BARNETTE: Don't go over 160. I got the aircraft. I got the aircraft.
BOETTCHER: OK.
Maj. BARNETTE: We'll blow the wings right off this airplane if we wanted to.
BOETTCHER: By the time a U-2 mission is complete, the pilot is exhausted, and his ability to judge small distances from a cramped cockpit is impaired. So, on the ground, Major King must guide us to a landing.
BOETTCHER: He chases the descending U-2 in a speeding sports car and radios our distance from the runway.
Maj. KING: Four, three, two, one inches.
BOETTCHER: My time at the edge of space is over, but somewhere in the world, someone else's is just beginning. Another solitary pilot flying towards the blackness of space and an unknown reception over a far-off land.
For TODAY, Mike Boettcher, NBC News, Beale Air Force Base, California.