

## The Russians are Coming

During the second world war, everyone mobilized for the conflict in one way or another. If you weren't fighting in the skies over France or on the ground in Italy, you were back home dealing with rationing and black-out shades and air raid drills, or you were climbing fire towers or standing on the roofs of tall buildings to spot enemy airplanes should they chance to come over US territory.

In Utica, the citizenry felt especially vulnerable to air attack because we were only a hundred or so air miles from Canada and you couldn't trust those damned Canadian Frenchies to do anything right, much less shoot down an enemy plane before it flew down our valley and dropped a load of bombs on us.

This fear from the skies persisted into the Cold War, when folks still climbed tall buildings to spot menacing aircraft overhead. But by 1957 most people realized the futility of trying to flag down a Russian bomber from atop a fire tower or building. However, bureaucracies never die and the Civil Defense Department still enrolled just about anyone into the Ground Observer Corps. Anyone who was interested.

George and I were two 13 year olds who were definitely interested. We figured that a U.S. Government assignment would be much more exciting than working on our Boy Scout merit badges in cooking.

The man in the Civil Defense office gave us what I thought might be a condescending smile, but he signed us up. He explained the Observers' duties ... report any enemy planes seen ... and said that while on duty we would be in telephone contact with the Strategic Air Command in Syracuse, 50 miles away. We knew SAC was the bunch of guys who huddled around the big radar screens scanning the skies for "bandits." Mr. Houdini handed us a clipboard and told us to fill our names in any time slot we wanted to work. The schedule was empty. We were the only volunteers for that month, or that year for all I know.

Undaunted in our enthusiasm we walked out on the roof of the Hotel Utica the next day after school and used the key from Mr. Houdini to open a grey box mounted on the railing that ran around the building's top. In the box was a time sheet, a pair of binoculars, a booklet of airplane silhouettes for identification and a grey colored phone with a label above it that said "Report."

While I was wondering what to do first, George picked up the phone and spoke into it, "Reporting for duty ... Sir!! What? OK, thank you Sir."

A Sergeant named Carmodelli had just said he wanted us kids to behave ourselves up here on the roof. Kids? We were official government plane spotters!

Utica is only ten or so miles away from what was then a US Air Force base and also the county airport, so there were lots of planes in the sky. But pretty soon, among the commercial DC3's and the Air Force F-86 Saber Jets engaged in training flights, we spotted a Russian MiG 15. We were pretty sure about it. Yes, now that I reflect, it seemed unlikely that a Russian MiG had penetrated the North American Air Defense Shield and was flying around Utica unheeded by the American F-86's, but the aircraft we were looking at did seem to match the silhouette in the booklet and, as George pointed out, ours was not to question the booklet or to analyze the likelihoods, but rather to simply report our findings, and he was sure we were looking at a Russian MiG 15 fighter jet.

George picked up the phone and spoke loudly to Sergeant Carmodelli:

"Sir !! My associate tells me that a Russian MiG 15 is in the air over Holland Patent. Intentions not known! Sir !!"

"What? No, sir, my associate has perfectly good vision and he thinks you should scramble a squadron of fighter jets, pronto ... Sir !!"

George seemed to listen intently and then put the phone back in its cradle. "The sergeant says we needn't be so careful up here on the roof and he would like us to stand near the edge."

Like I said, bureaucracies never die and they also never get it right. A year later I received a large envelope from Washington with a letter inside saying the Ground Observer Corps was now and forever a scrubbed mission. With the letter was a scroll that announced President Eisenhower's appreciation to David M. Griffin for my 10 years of devoted public service. I was 14.

*David Griffin*

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