

Balance of Fear



A FEATURE LENGTH DOCUMENTARY ABOUT A TOP SECRET,
COLD WAR MISSION THAT BECAME ONE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY FLIGHTS IN HISTORY

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PRODUCERS LETTER

“He was a good stick.” That was how Lt. General “Rock” Brett quietly described his best pilots. It was a fascinating description of men who flew the most powerful vehicles in existence into harm’s way. We wondered why these men – elite fighter pilots who saw the world at heights and speeds few would ever see – referred to themselves this way. Our answers were found in a 12 ½ hour mission that pushed these men to the limits of endurance and changed military strategy for a generation.

On July 15th, 1958, the men of the 355th squadron out of Myrtle Beach AFB, South Carolina volunteered for a task that had never before been attempted – a military mission with staggering implications on the world geopolitical stage.

Since the 1930s, the Middle East has emerged as the world’s most important source of energy and the key to a stable global economy. On that Tuesday in 1958, it was about to explode. A coup in Iraq had toppled the West leaning Government, Egypt’s powerful ruler was pushing the region towards Communism, and Syria’s Communist government was threatening the democratic government of Lebanon. The Soviet Union was looking for an opportunity to gain control of the region, and to American leadership this looked like the Soviets’ chance. America couldn’t let that happen.

Based on recently declassified documents, *Balance of Fear* is the story of an impossible mission and the men who flew it. During their record-breaking 12 ½ hour flight over open ocean, these pilots battled not only the elements, inadequate preparation, and a lack of modern technology, but the invisible enemies of loneliness, fatigue, doubt and fear. On the ground behind them, commanders feared the Soviets would view the U.S. response to Lebanon’s plea for help as an aggressive act that could trigger a massive retaliation and even war.

In this era of expanding trade and international cooperation it’s hard to imagine how isolated and dangerous the world was at that time. And yet the issues in this film hold striking similarity to contemporary issues including a frightening enemy diametrically opposed to our way of life (terrorists instead of Soviets), fear of those with different beliefs (Muslims instead of communists), the threat of nuclear weapons, and dependence on oil from Mideast countries with dangerously unstable leadership.

It’s perhaps inevitable that from the most dangerous of situations, emerge the greatest stories of courage and human achievement. We marvel at the accomplishment and wonder how they achieved it. The answer is as simple as it is complex -- they were good sticks.

Laura Cartwright
David C. Stuart



SYNOPSIS

On July 15th 1958, 14 young Air Force pilots took off in F-100 Super Saber fighter jets from Myrtle Beach Air Force Base on a mission that had never before been attempted.

Reacting to an urgent communist threat in the Middle East, the men were briefed only hours before a flight that would take them more than one third of the way around the world. It was a mission ordered at the highest level of government; a mission that held dire implications in the Cold War with the Soviet Union; a mission the commanders at Tactical Air Command thought could never succeed.

Aided only by their training, their skill – and hopefully, luck - they would face extraordinary challenges. They would fly for 12 ½ hours with no autopilot, navigate across 6400 miles of open ocean with only a map and a compass, somehow rendezvous with tanker planes for three night refuelings, all while facing the concern of severe weather, the loneliness of being separated and out of radio contact, and the fear of being lost over open ocean. They would have no break, no sleep, and had to be ready for a possible combat situation at the other end.

Brought to life through the testimony of the pilots who flew the mission, *Balance of Fear* is a feature length documentary about the Air Force pilots who flew one of the most extraordinary fighter missions in history. Their achievement was the fastest flight over the greatest distance ever made under real conditions. It was ordered to prevent Communist aggression and threatened to catapult the world's two superpowers into war. For 12 ½ hours on that Tuesday in July, their lives and the fate of the world hung in the balance.

Based on recently declassified documents, this story is now being told for the first time.

**"When they come looking for me, tell
'em I turned left."**

Out of fuel, this was Lt. Zeke Zielinski's last communication as he prepared to eject.



PRODUCTION PLAN

Framed against the Cold War tensions of the time, *Balance of Fear's* narrative is based on a top-secret mission ordered by President Eisenhower – the first under the Eisenhower Doctrine authorizing the commitment of forces “...against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by international communism.”

Crafted as much like an adventure film as a documentary, the producers plan to structure the narrative and edit the documentary for suspense rather than chronology. The film will be shot from a script that organizes the narrative with a fragmented timeline that will reveal the Cold War tensions, the palpable fear of communism, the strategic importance of Mideast oil to fuel the American economic engine, the mission, and the men by crosscutting between explanatory narration and recreations that build the stakes and place the viewer in the cockpit.

In addition to historical footage, the producers will incorporate several filmmaking techniques, including state-of-the-art CGI technology, dramatic recreations, present-day interviews, and a vibrant sound design and score. This will present the massive scale of the mission – politically, geographically, and personally - and reveal what made it such a daunting voyage.

Historical political information will provide a context for the audience of the very grave consequences this mission held. The documentary will then take the audience along on an emotional journey through the experiences of these men during their 12 ½ hour flight. The journey will pay off with answers to the questions – on a mission this complex, and with so much at stake, will they survive to reach their destination? And if they do, what would be waiting for them on the other side? Will this provoke the Soviet Union and trigger war?

The richness of the narrative comes from the pilots themselves and their workmanlike view of a mission that held the highest stakes. The recollections of the pilots are surprisingly candid as they talk about their training, families, love of flying, and sense of adventure. The stories become poignant as they concede more painfully their concern for their comrades who became separated and were feared lost.

For those that made it across to the other side, their flyby of the base tower in Turkey was a testament to pride, relief, loyalty, and signified what they all felt: they were immortal guys who could do anything. In the words of one pilot: “we all knew that this mission could fail...we thought it, but we never believed it. We were probably the only ones who didn't.”



ACCESS

The producers have full and exclusive access to each of the surviving pilots who flew this mission. This access is built on relationships spanning more than 50 years.

Laura Cartwright (producer), is the daughter of Lt. Col. Jim Cartwright, one of the pilots who made the non-stop flight when he was just 23 years old. Although Jim Cartwright has passed away, Laura and her mother have remained in close contact with the pilots and their families.

Each of the surviving pilots has been pre-interviewed and has agreed to participate in the documentary. Each has provided a signed Letter of Support and is allowing use of their photos, letters and other personal items relating to the mission.

The producers have also contacted the military and have secured numerous records regarding the flight and the mission from the National Archives, AFHS, AFHRA, and other military and civilian organizations. Originally classified as Top Secret, many of these records were declassified specifically for this project.

"By the time I reached the canopy no one was in sight. I was low on fuel, lost over open ocean, and I was alone."

AUDIENCE

Ostensibly a story of a top secret mission, the producers believe Balance of Fear will appeal to a broad audience attracted to the universal themes of American heroism, individual courage and sacrifice and ordinary people overcoming incredible odds.

Another aspect of the story sure to draw attention is the almost totally unknown nature of this harrowing moment in history.



SUBJECTS

There is something distinctive about being a fighter pilot. They fly the fastest, deadliest, most technologically advanced vehicles ever built into harm's way, yet refer to themselves simply as good sticks. They are adventurers who view the world from heights few ever see and family men who share an unbreakable fraternity. They are also born storytellers. To listen to them speak is to be instantly captivated.

Though they are all now in their 70's, these men are alert, fit and eager to share both their recollections of the mission and their very personal thoughts on what they experienced. But there is an urgent need to tell this story now, before the men and women who lived it are gone and their testimony is lost forever.

Listed below are the men of the 355th squadron who flew the mission. The names in bold are the surviving pilots:

Lt. Col Devol "Rock" Brett

1st Lt. Carl Cathey

Capt. Shelby Evans

Capt. A. George Branch

Capt. Mack Bulger

Capt. Morris Uden

1st Lt. Russell Youngblood

1st Lt. CR Morgan

1st Lt. Dan "Firecan" Walsh

1st Lt. Clyde Garner

1st Lt. Jim Cartwright

1st Lt. Zeke Zielinski

1st Lt. Sid Ragsdale

1st Lt. Craig Fink

