

Mission Impossible: the Kidnapping of Lunik 5

by Dwayne A. Day

Editor's Note: The following article is based upon a true story. One of the prime sources for this account was an article entitled "The Kidnapping of Lunik," which originally appeared in Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 11, Winter 1967. The story has since been confirmed by noted space analyst Jim Oberg who originally heard it from a book agent seeking to publish the story some 15 years ago.

During the height of the Cold War, espionage was an art form, conducted by nameless CIA agents operating in the shadows of international relations. Within this cloak and dagger world, international law had little meaning and information about an adversary was the recognized currency. Information about Soviet strategic weapons capability was at a premium. The launching of Sputnik and the onset of the Space Race did not change this. But it was clear to U.S. intelligence that information on Soviet space capabilities could provide an indication of Soviet strategic missile capabilities.

In 1959 the Soviet Union toured several countries with an exhibition of commercial animal furs. As an exhibit, it was not of particularly high interest to the Central Intelligence Agency--until one day when a large crate was added to the exhibit on its way to Mexico City. Inside was a copy of the Luna-1 ("Mechta," or "Dream") space probe, commonly known as a "Lunik."

Mexico City was the Casablanca of the Cold War. Although not as tense or important as Berlin, it was a focal point for espionage activities in the Western Hemisphere, particularly as they pertained to the spread of Communism through much of Central and South America. As such, Mexico City was the site of a very large CIA Station and much clandestine intrigue. The CIA regularly sent teams from a covert operations unit known as the "Joint Factory Markings Center" to international trade fairs to evaluate and measure foreign equipment. A four-man team from "Markings" arrived in Mexico City with specialized tools and photographic equipment. They immediately bought complete sets of local clothes and met with the Mexico City CIA Station personnel to make plans and determine additional equipment they would need. Station personnel had extensively photographed the shipping crate, which revealed that the

only access to it was through the top. They decided that the best time to access the Lunik was at the end of the exhibit, while it was being shipped to the rail yard by truck. Mexico City-based CIA agents followed the truck and when they were sure that there was no escort, they stopped the truck at the last possible turnoff and the driver was taken to a hotel for the night. They threw a large canvas over the crate to disguise it and a new driver took over the truck and drove it to a rented salvage yard with a high fence around it. The driver backed in and the gate was closed. CIA agents patrolled the entire area in cars with two-way radios. Everybody sat quietly for half an hour to see if the Soviets would react. At the railyard the Soviet checker waited a short time for any more trucks and then left for dinner. He then proceeded to his hotel room, where CIA agents kept him under surveillance all night.

The Markings team then moved in, entering the salvage yard around 7:30 PM. Their equipment and food had been left by the local station agents. Two of the team members climbed up on top of the crate where they began working on removing the cover. There was a tense moment when the street lamps suddenly came on, illuminating the men working on top of the crate, but they quickly realized it was not an ambush and went back to work. Once the cover was off, two men climbed inside the front of the crate with lights and a camera. They quickly removed one of the inspection windows in the nose section of the spacecraft and one man climbed inside and began photographing the small Lunik probe and its antenna. The second team entered the rear of the crate and began removing the Lunik's large base cap. The Soviets had removed the engine from the vehicle, but the mounting brackets and fuel and oxidizer tanks were still in place. The men measured everything, particularly the fuel tanks, and even took swabs to check for any remaining propellant residue. There was a rod running through a baffle plate connected to the payload. There was also a wire connection covered by a plastic seal bearing a Soviet stamp. After determining that the local Station could duplicate the plastic, stamp, and wire, they cut the wire and removed the seal. This allowed them to disconnect the payload so that they could then examine the basket in which it rested, along with its electrical connections.

The replacement materials showed up soon enough, but reconnecting the payload back on its rod proved difficult. Eventually

the team accomplished the task and made sure that they left no traces of their presence. They then closed up the spacecraft and the crate and left at 4:00 A.M. An hour later a CIA driver came and moved the truck to a prearranged point where the canvas cover was removed and the original driver drove the truck to the rail yard. The Soviet checker arrived shortly later and logged in the crate, which was then loaded onto a flat-car. The train left without incident. A Markings Center Brief was prepared based on the data collected. It identified the producer of the stage and several electrical producers who supplied the components. It also determined that the Luna probe was the fifth one the Soviets had produced. Their efforts also apparently revealed the guidance system used for the Lunik and other Soviet hardware. Far more important, however, was the weight of the vehicle. This, combined with intercepted telemetry data, provided the United States with accurate performance data for the Soviets' SS-6 ICBM--information which was of critical importance to a nation worried about the Soviet ballistic missile threat.

And the Soviets never suspected a thing... ●

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