WHAT DO SPY PLANE PILOTS EAT?

News /

As part of events to mark the 60th anniversary of the U-2 this week, reporters were granted rare access to the inside of Site 2, Lockheed Martin's U-2 ‘Dragon Lady’ lair at the U.S. Air Force's sprawling Plant 42 facility in Palmdale, California.

Located on the north side of the airfield, the hangar once housed the TR-1/U-2 production line in the 1980s (earlier U-2 generations were built in Burbank and Oildale, a suburb of Bakersfield, Calif), and now performs depot maintenance, testing and update work on the fleet. Programmed depot maintenance, or PDM, requires about eleven months and approximately 15,000 man-hours. Every U-2 goes through PDM every seven years or 4,800 flight hours, whichever comes first. With a 32-aircraft fleet (NASA does its own periodic maintenance), the requirement equates to around six airframes moving through the Palmdale site every year.

Site 2 also houses support facilities for the U-2 test pilots who perform post maintenance check flights and evaluate the performance of any system changes or upgrades.

To survive in the thin atmosphere where the U-2 operates above 70,000 ft., pilots wear pressurized space suits. During our visit we visited the area where the suits are checked and pilots prepare for high altitude flight. One hazard of flying so high is High Altitude Decompression

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Sickness, or HADCS, which is caused by the formation of nitrogen gas bubbles in the blood. Also known to divers as the bends, the condition can be very painful or even trigger neurological effects because the bubbles lodge in the body anywhere from joints and lungs to the spinal cord and brain. To counter the build-up of nitrogen bubbles the gas has to be purged from the body by pre-breathing 100% oxygen prior to flight.

What do spyplane pilots eat?

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The U-2 pilots were suffering from incidents of the bends so Lockheed modified 27 mission aircraft with the Cockpit Altitude Reduction Effort (CARE) upgrade. The program decreases the cockpit pressure altitude from 29,500 ft. (3.5 psi) to 14,700 ft. (7.8 psi), through a combination of structural enhancements, pressurization control changes, new control software and increased engine bleed. The last CARE upgrade was completed in February.

However If, for some reason, the cockpit suddenly depressurizes the suit will inflate to protect the pilot. This would make it virtually impossible for the pilot to reach the controls so to get around this problem a hollowed out golf ball is attached to the upper part of the suit. The ball is big enough for the pilot to grasp in a gloved hand and pull down on, helping contract the suit and bringing the head back down into the cockpit seat.

As flight durations can be lengthy (9-12 hr. is not unknown) pilots eat a form of liquidized food through a tube which is inserted into the helmet through a special port. Food is usually washed down with water or Gatorade, or a mixture. Similar to the foods provided to astronauts for consumption in zero gravity, the U-2 pilots eat by squeezing the contents from large metallic containers resembling toothpaste tubes. A small heater is provided to warm up some meals. Several food options include supplemental caffeine to help pilots stay alert on longer missions. So what's on the menu? Here's what was on offer this week:

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‘Jazzy Mac and Caffinated Chocolate Pudding’

‘Hashbrowns with Bacon’

‘Polenta with Cheese and Bacon’

‘Peaches’

‘Chicken ala King’

‘Beef Stroganoff’

‘Truffle Mac ‘n’ Cheese’

‘Chicken Tortilla Soup’

…and everyone’s favorite ‘Cinnamon Zapplesauce’

The key requirement is to sustain the pilot and keep him active and alert. As Lockheed Martin U-2 Senior Test Pilot Greg ‘Coach’ Nelson says “it’s a survival contest between you and the jet, and you don’t want the jet to win.”

25 AUGUST 2015

SOURCE: GUY NORRIS
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ids.50skyshades.com/news/manufacturer/what-do-spy-plane-pilots-eat

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