

ML.96.Sara Jane

[Excerpted from The History of Big Safari by Colonel Bill Grimes, USAF, Retired, Archway Publishing, copyright c 2014 by the Big Safari Association, Bloomington, IN, reprinted with permission]

BIG SAFARI annals are replete with fascinating tales of aircraft rapidly configured under a cloak of secrecy and operated under the clandestine veil of need-to-know, when there is often a very small circle of individuals with the requisite need. SARA JANE was one such program involving two C-54E and one C-54D aircraft modified at the Convair Division of General Dynamics in Fort Worth, Texas — the location of BIG SAFARI's Liaison Office General Dynamics (LOG). Later, LOG became BIG SAFARI's Det. 1.

SARA JANE 1 (C-54E) received its complex modification during a short turn at General Dynamics from 26 May through 6 November 1955, including a modified interior for full staff configuration with private quarters. Workers installed small fuel-tight cavities in the outer panels of the aircraft's wings to house fourteen P2 cameras. The C-54E aircraft had 'wet wings' to help maintain its covert capability -- a sump was added to each cavity allowing fuel to flow out in the event panels were removed that covered the cameras.

The SARA JANE covert modifications included wires routed through existing harnesses and tubes in the fuel cells, with camera controls concealed in a modified AN/AIC18



interphone control panel at the copilot's position. The proper positioning and combination of push-pull monitor switches on the control panel opened and closed fast-action pneumatic camera doors in the wings and activated the concealed cameras when in flight over areas of interest.

Fairchild panoramic cameras were installed to be interchangeable with the P2 configuration and the entire modification was completed with such precision and expertise that even an X-ray of the wing would not have detected the installation.

During the development of the pneumatic doors that would allow concealment and operation of the special camera equipment on the SARA JANE aircraft, the customer would not attend any engineering design reviews so as to be totally unaware of the details surrounding the covert installation.

When the effort was completed, the customer provided a team of experts to thoroughly examine the aircraft at a neutral site, as a means to test the detectability of the doors. When the pneumatic doors were not discovered during a week-long examination, the customer accepted the aircraft.

When SARA JANE 2 (C-54E) arrived at the end of June 1955, only 20 working days were required to modify the aircraft and return it to service, using the outer wing panels and camera installations completed during the first phase of work on SARA JANE 1. When SARA JANE 2 cycled back to depot as SARA JANE 1 departed, the aircraft also received modifications allowing the interchangeability of Fairchild panoramic cameras. Additionally, interior modification to provide a VIP configuration included installation of seats, tables, crew comfort provisions, rugs, upholstery, and passenger viewing windows.

Shortly after SARA JANE 2 left the Fort Worth facility, a C-54D arrived as SARA JANE 3 to receive the same covert camera installations and interior VIP modification as its sister aircraft, which eventually included the interchangeability of Fairchild cameras in place of the P2 camera systems. SARA JANE 3 was received 20 July 1955 and delivered the following month on 24 August.

For the next several years, the three SARA JANE aircraft continued to annually cycle back to General Dynamics, receiving basic avionics up-grades as well as improvements to the Distinguished Visitor (DV) accommodations. A solution was conceived to overcome complications of frosting conditions that affected performance of the camera compartments' precisely machined pneumatic doors. During cycles through Fort Worth subsequent to their initial modifications for this mission, all three aircraft received new cabin windows at the radio operator's station and at the navigator's station.

During the time SARA JANE missions were flown in Germany, there were few, if any, regularly scheduled commercial flights that pierced the Iron Curtain and flew to Eastern Bloc countries. Given the nature of their modifications, it is likely that SARA JANE C-54s were flown for embassy support within the Eastern Bloc.

Three VIP C-54s were stationed at Germany's Rhein-Main AB and flown by crews from the 7499th Support Group -- presumably a particular Flight from the 7405th Support Squadron that handled secretive missions. These were the only C-54s assigned to the 99 that were not flown from Wiesbaden AB, and these three aircraft were unique in that their exterior fuselage was routinely shined to a high gloss.

The tail numbers for the SARA JANE aircraft were classified and not maintained, as other project aircraft were, on a chart of special projects aircraft input and output at General Dynamics in Fort Worth. However, birdwatchers captured photos with tail numbers (and least ones used on that day) of high-gloss VIP C-54s landing at Templehof AB, Berlin: -72748, -49075, and -49123. While those tail numbers do not coincide with any other C-54s missions operating in-country, their association with SARA JANE is circumstantial and speculative.

Dan Gareri, a retired USAF colonel, wrote an article on the history of the National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) in which he referred to an Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC) C-54 as 'Sarah Jane.' ATIC was the forerunner of the Air Force Systems Command (AFSC) Foreign Technology Division (FTD). Gareri noted that an "Air Force C-54 occasionally flew embassy support and people on the Berlin route. A Russian navigated the airplane in Berlin to establish and monitor the route. However, the clandestine controls in pilot's interphone panel would have allowed surreptitious photography during overflights of target areas, without the awareness of the Russian navigator or any unwitting DV personnel (like the Ambassador and his staff) aboard the flight. While assigned to the Air Technical Liaison Office at Wiesbaden, Col. Gareri was the navigator on one of the embassy flights.

The SARA JANE mission consistent with operations conducted at the time. When Soviet Nikita Khrushchev visit United States in 1959 in a TU-114, all intelligence agencies in Washington assumed that the Soviet crew had used the opportunity to take aerial photographs of American military installations.