

## Lessons From the Cold War

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### Article

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**WASHINGTON, D.C.** (Achieve3000, December 21, 2010). The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is coming to grips with one of the most devastating episodes in its history. A 1952 mission into China stole two decades of freedom from a pair of young American operatives and cost the lives of two pilots. In revisiting this story from the height of the Cold War, the CIA is learning lessons about how delicate secret missions can be.

At the center of the story were two eager CIA paramilitary officers on their first overseas assignment, John T. Downey and Richard G. Fecteau, whose plane was shot from the night sky in an ambush by the Chinese. The mission's outcome was not immediately clear. Very quickly, it was smothered in secrecy and is only now being revealed.

#### The Cold War

The mission took place during the Cold War, a decades-long struggle for global supremacy that commenced shortly after World War II and continued for more than 40 years. This battle-less war pitted democratic nations, led by the U.S., against communist nations, led by the Soviet Union. The U.S. wanted to weaken communist nations and contain the spread of communist ideas, while the Soviet Union had similar goals for democracies and their capitalist ideas.

This war was referred to as "cold" because neither side wanted to risk engaging in actual battle. Instead of weapons, the U.S. and the Soviets used covert operations. As the government agency responsible for collecting intelligence related to America's security, the CIA was in the thick of the Cold War. The agency conducted operations in the Soviet Union, as well as in other communist nations, including China.

#### The Story

In the early years of the Cold War, the CIA had a paramilitary force that was trained to conduct high-risk, behind-the-lines operations. Downey and Fecteau were part of that force.

Downey and Fecteau were assigned to a covert program called "Third Force," in which small teams of noncommunist Chinese exiles were airdropped into China to link up with communist generals who had turned against their government. Their objective was to destabilize the new Chinese government, led by Mao Zedong, and distract the government from the Korean War, a conflict that Chinese forces had entered two years earlier, in 1950. To do this, the Third Force aimed to create a network of Chinese who were resistant to the communist government.

On November 29, 1952, Downey and Fecteau flew into Chinese air space in an unarmed C-47 Skytrain aircraft, planning to swoop low over a meeting point marked with three small bonfires. They would then pick up a Chinese agent who was



Photo credit: AP

*The photo on the left shows Richard Fecteau being weighed by a Chinese nurse. The photo on the right is John Downey, who has just been freed by China. These men were CIA agents and spies for the U.S. during the Cold War. They were captured by China in 1952.*

working for the Americans and had promised that he had important documents from a Chinese official who had turned against the Chinese government. The plan was to use a tail hook to pick up and reel in the agent without landing.

The plan failed. As the plane descended, the sky suddenly exploded in bursts of gunfire. It was a Chinese ambush. The agent, officials now say, had likely betrayed the Americans by becoming a turncoat.

After the C-47 slammed through a grove of trees, the cockpit burst into flames and skidded to a halt. The pilots, 31-year-old Robert C. Snoddy and 29-year-old Norman A. Schwartz, did not survive the crash. Downey and Fecteau were captured on the spot and put in prison, where each man spent long stretches in solitary confinement.

For two years, neither the CIA nor the men's families knew of Downey and Fecteau's fate. It wasn't until 1954 that China announced that Downey and Fecteau had been convicted of espionage and sentenced—Fecteau for 20 years and Downey for life. The CIA, which had told the families that the four men had gone missing on a routine commercial flight from Korea to Japan, denied China's claim. During the secretive years of the Cold War, the public—even the families of the men—were not supposed to know that Downey and Fecteau were spies.

Meanwhile, the capture proved to be an intelligence bonanza for the Chinese and a nightmare for the two Americans. Both Downey and Fecteau responded to psychological tactics and revealed critical information about the CIA's operations in China. At 22, with one year of CIA service, Downey was destined to spend the next 20 years, 3 months, and 14 days in Chinese prisons. Fecteau, who was 25 at the time of the capture, was behind bars for 19 years and 14 days.

Fecteau was released by China in December 1971 and Downey in March 1973, after U.S. President Richard Nixon publicly acknowledged Downey's CIA connection.

### **The Outcome**

The story of Downey, Fecteau, Snoddy, and Schwartz remained largely under wraps for decades. In 2007, however, the CIA declassified the affair and even produced a documentary about it, though the film was not released to the public.

Experts say that the Third Force was a terrible failure for the CIA. The agency was young, and CIA officials were too confident in their ability to uncover China's secrets.

"That was a wild and woolly, swashbuckling time in the agency's history," said Donald Gregg, who entered the CIA with Downey in 1951. "It was a very damaging time."

Since then, CIA officials have admitted that they made a mistake in allowing the operation to proceed as it did. For one thing, Downey had trained the Chinese agents, so he never should have been flying over Chinese territory. He was too well informed about the CIA's plans, and therefore, had a lot to reveal when he was captured.

Today, the government's international activities continue, most notably in the Middle East, where the U.S. is at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are lessons to be learned, historians say. The CIA can use the Cold War and its operations—what worked and what didn't—to plan its missions more carefully.

*The Associated Press contributed to this story.*

### **Dictionary**

**capitalist** (*adjective*) having to do with an economic system that is based on building individual wealth

**covert operations** (*noun*) military missions that are carried out in secret.

**devastating** (*adjective*) doing a lot of damage

**Korean War** (*noun*) a war between North Korea, aided by Communist China, and South Korea, aided by the United States and other nations

**psychological** (*adjective*) having to do with the mind or the way a person thinks and feels