

Government-Industry team comes in from the cold

Washington, D.C., May 24

In ceremonies at the National Air and Space Museum today, early members of the Corona program, the Nation's first photoreconnaissance satellites, will be honored for their achievements in developing, launching and operating the first spacecraft to provide timely images of activity behind the Iron Curtain. Recognizing these pioneers in space are the Director of the National Reconnaissance Office and the National Space Club.

During the series of 145 launches, Corona satellites photographed vast portions of the earth's surface. That photography allowed the United States and its allies to keep track of military targets and operations in denied areas and to understand Sino-Soviet strategic capabilities. With Corona data the Free World could track arms sales and activities of Soviet client states. But above all, the imagery allowed the U.S. Government to make more informed national security decisions based on accurate information rather than guesswork.

Jeffrey K. Harris, Former Director of the National Reconnaissance Office, in prepared remarks, will pay tribute to early Corona program members. He terms them pioneers, iconoclasts, and risk-takers. "Many powerful people said it couldn't be done. But you did it, motivated by an acute national need. You pierced the now rusted and corroded Iron Curtain."

"You are enablers in the most positive sense," Harris continued. "The Nation was very much in the dark and the information Corona gathered shed light on dark corners in denied areas. As history shows, it was worth the risk in money, time and your human efforts."

Begun under tightest secrecy, Corona was a shared Defense Department-Central Intelligence Agency effort with aerospace industry playing a leading role in making the program a successful reality.

Corona was a series of satellites that carried cameras to photograph denied areas. Launched into polar orbits by U.S. Air Force Thor boosters, the spacecraft flew at approximate altitudes of 100 nautical miles to take pictures of selected target areas. The exposed film, some 2.1 million feet, was returned to earth in capsules ejected from the satellites. They were snatched in midair by Air Force crews over the Pacific Ocean and then airlifted to processing facilities.

Declassified earlier this year, Corona images will be available to the public next year. The Clinton Administration and scientific community judge the imagery useful for research and environmental purposes.

[Those to be recognized](#) during the ceremony included both current and retired representatives of government, the Armed Forces and industry.

During their years of operation, Corona satellites achieved an enviable list of lasting firsts. They were the first spacecraft to gather photo intelligence and the first to map the earth from space. They were the first satellites to use midair or catch recovery of capsules returning from space as well as the use of multiple reentry vehicles. Corona was the first program to gather stereo-optical data from space and the first space reconnaissance effort to fly 100 missions.

In addition to its technical and scientific achievements, Corona served as a model for the management of high priority operations. Today's National Reconnaissance Office brings together the best talents of the CIA and DoD to design, build and operate Corona's successors.

Contractors

Contractors played leading roles in the program. Itek Corporation designed the spaceborne cameras. Lockheed Missile and Space Corporation developed the upper stage and served as integrator for the program. Eastman Kodak furnished new film designed to operate in the unique environment of space. Numerous other defense contractors helped develop and manufacture the necessary subsystems and ancillary equipment.

Declassification

Until February of this year, the Corona program and the imagery it collected were classified. President Clinton's executive order of 24 February 1995 declassified the Nation's first generation of photo-reconnaissance satellites in the Corona, Argon and Lanyard programs. More than 800,000 images of the earth's surface collected by the satellites between 1960 and 1972 are now declassified. The public will be able to access the imagery by August 1996 after it has been transferred to, archived, and catalogued by the [National Archives and Records Administration](#). Copies are also being sent to the [U.S. Geological Survey's](#) EROS Data Center Customer Service, Sioux Falls, SD