



Cold War Aerospace Technology History Project: Creating a Cold War Archive

Project #
05-268

Background:

The Cold War, generally considered the years between 1946 and 1991, stimulated the aggressive development of modern military technology. This military technology “build-up” was a primary component of the multi-decade stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union. Recently, efforts to preserve Cold War geographic history have proliferated, while published literature focuses on the diplomatic, political, economic, or sociological perspectives. Biographies and memoirs offer “insider” views while scholarly works examine corporations and government institutions. However, the Cold War’s technological significance, which many scholars regard as one of the primary reasons for the eventual success of the United States, remains negligently under-explored.

This is nowhere more apparent than at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, in Dayton, Ohio. As home of the Wright Brothers, Dayton is center in the history of aviation, and that significance continued with the creation of McCook Field, and later Wright Field, as one of the country’s most advanced research and development centers for aeronautical engineering during the 20th century. In addition to the technology itself, Wright-Patterson contributed significant changes in how research, technological development, systems engineering, organizational structure, and management systems occurred system wide.

The genesis of this project was recognizing a significant need to preserve the history of the development of Cold War Aerospace Technology from the very people who created it. Fearing a loss of this valuable information through both natural aging of the subjects and historical attrition, the creation of a Cold War research archive was proposed to collect and preserve this important part of technological history.

Objective:

Originally conceived as a multi-year project to create a Cold War Aerospace Technology Archive, the goal of the first year planning phase was to construct a means to collect and preserve the professional contributions of individuals who created and developed Cold War aerospace technology, with an initial focus on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

Summary of Approach:

Focusing on the history of aerospace technology through its creators, the project adapted current methodology to capture, preserve, and create access to

historically valuable research materials and to establish processes and guidelines for the continued collection and preservation of significant Cold War cultural and historical resources.

Based on consultations with the project Advisory Board and historians from WPAFB, work centered on: 1) identifying the critical technologies and individuals for inclusion in the Archive; and 2) developing best practice methodologies for permanent retention of, and public access to, the materials gathered.

Benefit:

The project is building a unique, culturally significant research archive documenting the history of aerospace technology of the Cold War, and how the Cold War was supported by the work of these individuals. These important historical materials and recollections on the development and deployment of aerospace technology in the Cold War era will be lost if not collected in a timely fashion. Additionally, the Cold War archive establishes a formal academic setting that enables scholars to analyze the nation’s investment in technology by examining material and information directly from the people who created it. This work assists a public understanding and appreciation of the significant contributions of the DoD and its agencies in creating the fundamental technologies that made eventual American success in the Cold War possible. Initial materials have already generated significant research interest and request for access.

Accomplishments:

Work on the initial planning year exceeded projections, completing interviews with nine individuals (approximately 30 hours), and transcribing those interviews (approximately 450 pages). The archive accessioned five and processed two manuscript collections. These materials form the cornerstone of the Cold War Aerospace Technology Archive. In addition, a reception was held honoring the interviewees and a Cold War exhibit was mounted to close out the planning year.

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