

as the Covert Survivable In-Weather Reconnaissance Strike Aircraft, nicknamed "The Flying Hedgehog". But strive as they may, the damn thing keeps popping up again.

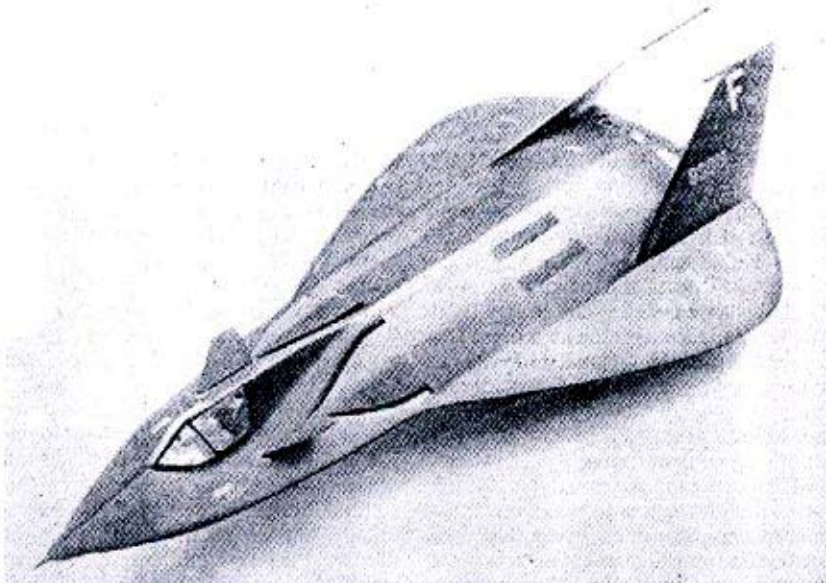
On July 12th something crashed in the Sequoia National Forest in California, starting a big brush fire and killing the pilot. Because the air force sealed off a large area of forest, gave no information and banned civilian flights any lower than 8,500 feet above the site of the crash, the press assumed the obvious: the aircraft that had crashed was an F-19 on a test flight at night, so heavily laden with intricate new equipment as to be unstable and awkward to manoeuvre. Nobody, of course, has confirmed that, but nobody has denied it either.

Not long after this, Mr John Dingell, a self-appointed scourge of secret Pentagon programmes, initiated a series of congressional hearings about the loss of more than 1,000 secret documents—all of them, according to his sources, concerning the Stealth fighter—from Lockheed's California aircraft plant. Witnesses at the hearings said that Stealth blueprints had been spirited out of the plant before: in 1983 an employee took some out, rolled in a newspaper, and showed them to his ex-wife and his girlfriend, who later reported him. But while witnesses and congressmen talked freely about the F-19, read out descriptions of it and even handed models round, the Pentagon spokesman kept to his line. The fighter did not exist.

More substantial evidence was, however, soon to hand in the form of an article in the *Washington Post* of August 2nd. This stated categorically that there

were about 50 Stealth fighters already built and ready for combat, sitting in sheds in the desert near Tonopah, Nevada (on an air base that does not exist either, according to maps). They are flown at night by members of the air force tactical air command, and are carried from place to place in C-5 cargo aircraft. The air force originally wanted 100 of them, but they are so expensive that it will probably settle for 50, and the programme can be considered completed. Completed before it had even begun, according to some.

To Representative Dingell, and others, the secrecy attending Stealth is merely a means to spend huge sums of money (each Stealth fighter has been estimated to cost about \$100m) without accountability to Congress. The Stealth fighter might never have been so secret if Mr Jimmy Carter, who ordered it as a replacement for the B-1 bomber in 1977, had remained president; the "blacking" has come from the Reagan administration, which has classified some 8,000 military projects. Parts of the Stealth programme (the bomber, being developed by Northrop, and the Advanced Cruise Missile, being developed by General Dynamics) are admitted by the air force, and their makers, to exist, though that is as far as the information goes. And technical and trade journals have been revealing bits and pieces about the Stealth fighter for years. So much so, that an enterprising model-maker has produced a kit for sale in the shops, the same kit that was displayed at the hearings in Congress. It is selling especially well among aerospace workers in southern California. Now, what could be the reason for that?



Out of the box

Company
down a

skyscrapers.

Stealth fighter

Not quite invisible

In the world's most open society, pity those who have to keep secrets. The Defence Department, the air force and the Lockheed Corporation have been trying hard for the past few years to deny the existence of the Stealth fighter, otherwise known as the F-19, otherwise known