

# Invisible killer takes off

The secret American "stealth" bomber will take to the skies for the first time in the next few days, ushering in what the US Air Force hopes will be an era of air superiority over the Soviet Union.

After a handful of initial proving flights, the plane will be flown under cover of darkness to the Groome Lake base in Nevada. From there it can fly through the Nellis ranges which will quickly show if the plane really is made of the "right stuff".

United States Air Force General Lawrence Skantze said recently it will fly "in the near future... the very near future", and another air force source says it should be airborne before the end of this month.

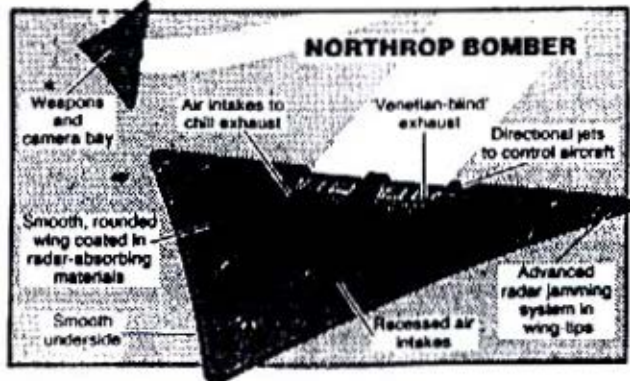
The Northrop B-2 advanced technology bomber (ATB) will render practically all known air defences worthless. It will be undetectable by radar, heat, light or even sound, becoming virtually invisible once in the air.

The technology behind stealth has been under test for three years in the F-19 Aurora, the reconnaissance plane the Pentagon still claims does not exist. Fifty of these Lockheed stealth planes are flying on secret flights over targets considered too sensitive to risk the loss of U-2 or SR-71 Blackbird spy planes.

British plane spotters have been besieging RAF Mildenhall for months in the hope of catching a first glimpse or snapping a photograph of the plane. The F-19 must be using Mildenhall since both U2 and SR71 spy planes have been operating from there for years.

The B-2 project was forced into the limelight a year ago by Congressional worries about its viability, an optimistic 1993 deployment schedule and, above all, a \$3.6 billion

## In the next few days, America will deploy the 'secret' stealth bomber



price tag. The military, however, have shown growing enthusiasm for the plane's potential.

Congress was not convinced and arranged for a group of independent engineers to give the whole project the once-over. Their secret report was presented last week and largely backs the claims made for it by the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, an arm of the CIA.

Even if the B-2 is a winner, it remains a high-risk project. Its survival rests entirely on remaining hidden. This cumbersome sub-sonic jet may be immune to radar-guided or heat-seeking missiles but it has neither speed nor agility and only a handful of anti-aircraft missiles to defend itself against a gunfire attack by conventional fighters if they can find it.

The next few months will see the stealth bomber's greatest test - will pilots be able to fly this bizarre new plane? The B-2 is an RAF Avro Vulcan-sized delta wing aircraft with no tail fin or tail planes. It is a flying wing with a cockpit, weapons and engines buried

deep inside the thick, rounded wing shape.

Computers control jets of air to turn the plane in the direction the pilot wants - there are no conventional control surfaces. Already, a hand-picked group of US Air Force pilots are "flying" the plane in a simulator at a secret base in Nevada.

The cockpit has only tiny windows in the ceiling and a TV monitor helps the pilot to land. In flight, the plane constantly senses its environment like a living thing.

It presents the crew with colour images of the terrain ahead, with threatening radars and missile sites in red and orange, each surrounded by a lethal zone where even the stealth bomber might be detected.

However well the plane performs, stealth is here to stay. All future USAF aircraft designs are incorporating stealth technology and two stealth missiles are already under development by Boeing. One is a conventional cruise missile, the other a crafty electronic fifth columnist designed to slip into enemy air space undetected and wreak havoc by jamming defensive radar and radio communications.

Keith Hindley

© Times Newspapers Ltd 1987

## CONCISE CROSSWORD

- ACROSS
- 1 Shaped (6)
  - 5 Yellow brown (4)
  - 8 Thin, piping (5)
  - 9 Reusable orbiter
  - 11 Van Diemen's (8)
  - 13 Mediocre
  - 15 Rear-doe
  - 18 Go in for
  - 19 Well of
  - 22 Coodi
  - 23 Olive leaf
  - 24 Inter (4)
  - 25 Un

- DOWN
- 2 P
  - 3 I
  - 4
  - 6
  - 7
  - 10
  - 12
  - 14
  - 16
  - 17
  - 19
  - 20
  - 21
  - 24