

Unveiled: plastic model of the now you see it now you don't plane built to beat Soviet radar

Spotlight turns on 'invisible' jet

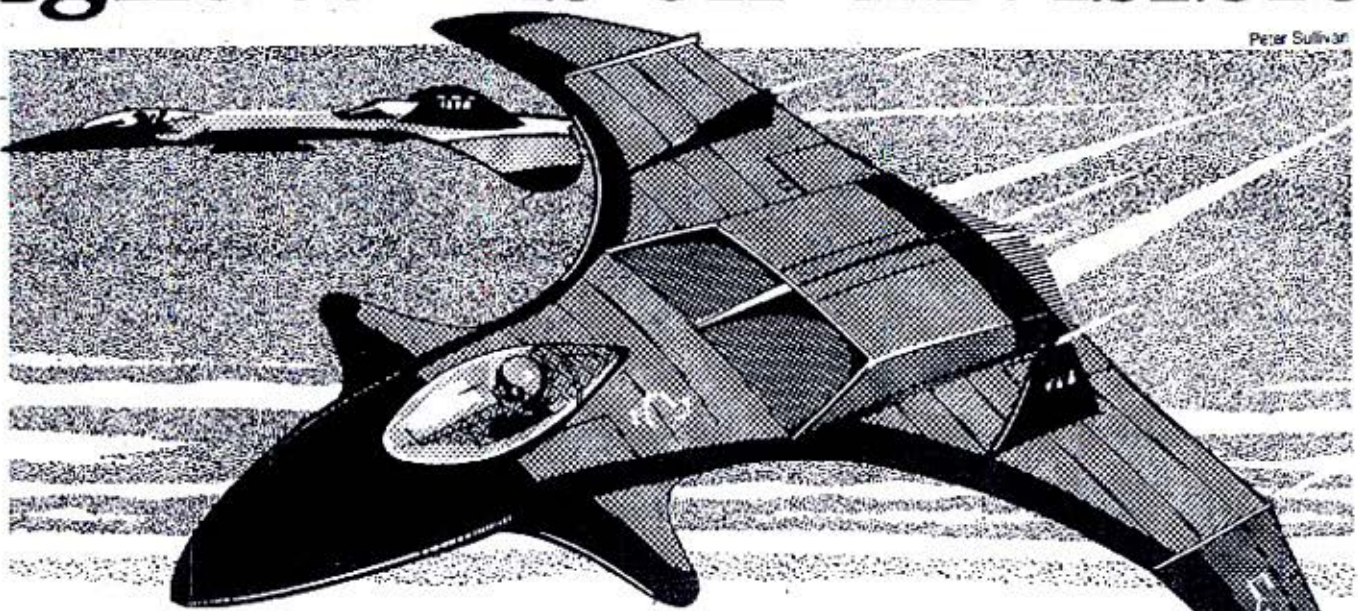
by Mark Hosenball
Washington

FOR AN aeroplane which is supposed to be invisible to both Soviet defence forces and American voters, the Pentagon's secret Stealth fighter jet is attracting a lot of attention.

The fighter, which is also known by assorted secret codenames such as Have Blue and F-19, is one in a series of top secret aircraft the American military services are developing. They use advanced technology such as plastics, and unconventional design, to make them invisible to Russian air defences.

These projects are so confidential that government officials have been ordered not to admit their existence. Even members of Congress claim to have difficulty finding out hard facts through official military channels.

But the extreme secrecy in which the Reagan administration has shrouded these projects may now be backfiring. Extraordinary security measures instituted by the air force after the crash of two suspected Stealth fighters have only served to intrigue aggressive television cameramen. In Congress, a noisy controversy has erupted over allegations that a company building Stealth jets may have lost hundreds of top-secret papers.



Low-radar, infra-red and optical signatures dominate the Lockheed F-19 single-seat fighter

Defence journalists and toy-makers have also taken the government's efforts to keep Stealth under wraps as a challenge to their skills in unmasking government secrets.

The American government has been trying for about 30 years to design planes that are invisible to enemy radar. But its research was well cloaked in secrecy until President Carter's administration revealed the bare outlines of the Stealth programme in an effort to make a political point.

The Reagan administration tried to put the genie back in the bottle by acting as if Stealth had never been men-

tioned in public and did not exist. But a trickle of leaks began to occur after a mysterious aeroplane crash near Bakersfield, California, in July last year.

The Pentagon deployed military police to seal off the crash site and television helicopters were banned from the area. But within weeks of the accident, it emerged that the crashed plane was one of 50 Stealth fighters built by the air force at a tightly-guarded Lockheed Corporation factory near Los Angeles known as the "skunk works".

The trickle of Stealth leaks rapidly turned into a torrent.

First, Testor Corporation, a toy company in Rockford, Illinois, produced what it says is an authentic plastic scale model of the F-19. At \$9.50, the replica became an instant best-seller at hobby shops.

A senior Pentagon official, Donald Hicks, told Congress that he wished the Russians would use the plastic replica as a model for their new aircraft because the toy is inaccurate and any planes built to the same design would crash. However, John Andrews, the model's designer, claims that it is about "80% accurate", and a shop near the "skunk works" sold 100 of the replicas

to enthusiastic Lockheed employees.

To the Pentagon's horror, the toy attracted the attention of a congressional sub-committee which was investigating suspected malfeasance by American contractors who work on what are known as "black programmes" — secret weapons projects the existence of which the government will not acknowledge.

The sub-committee came

up with evidence that about 1,000 documents related to the Stealth fighter, most of them classified top secret, had disappeared at Lockheed. A senior congressman suggested that the Testor designer might have used the documents to create his model.

The two latest breaches in Stealth's cocoon of secrecy are another accident and a new book laying out many of Stealth's technical secrets. The accident occurred just over a week ago.

Again the air force refused to reveal any information about the nature of the aircraft which crashed in the Nevada desert, other than the name of its pilot. Television networks took this as a sure sign that the plane was another malfunctioning F-19.

Sources in the aviation industry even offered speculation on the cause of the crash, suggesting that the ports which take air into the engine are so elaborately shaped, to avoid radar reflections and heat emission, that when the plane flies in certain patterns, they can also obstruct the flow of air, thus causing the engine to stall.

One of Washington's defence newsletter companies, Pasha Publications, has, meanwhile, produced a 157-page book — Stealth and Future Military Aircraft — which, at \$147 is undoubtedly a bargain for lazy spies.