

XB-70 takeoff

The Blackstar spaceplane was allegedly launched from a carrier aircraft similar to the XB-70 supersonic bomber. (credit: NASA/DFRC)

by **Dwayne A. Day**
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The pages of *Aviation Week* were filled with breathless prose about an amazing new aircraft. According to a reporter writing for the magazine, a top secret, highly advanced high-speed aircraft was spotted in flight by multiple observers. There was no official confirmation of its existence, but it was clearly the kind of highly advanced airplane that the government would not want anybody to know about. The article was accompanied by an artist's illustration of a sleek, bizarre-looking craft.

Maybe you didn't read *that* article. It was published in *Aviation Week* in December 1958 ("Soviets Flight Testing Nuclear Bomber," December 1, 1958, p. 27) and referred to the Soviet atomic-powered bomber. *Aviation Week* (not yet "*& Space Technology*") ran both an editorial and an article about the supersecret airplane.

The article itself was extremely authoritative sounding: "A nuclear-powered bomber is being flight tested in the Soviet Union. Completed about six months ago, this aircraft has been flying in the Moscow area for at least two months. It has been observed both in flight and on the ground by a wide variety of foreign observers from Communist and non-Communist countries." The article continued: "The Soviet aircraft is a prototype of a design to perform a military mission as a continuous airborne alert warning system and missile launching platform."

But it turns out that the atomic-powered bomber never existed, and the plane was never "observed both in flight and on the ground by a wide variety of foreign observers." It was observed by nobody at all, but that did not prevent the magazine from reporting about it.

It is worth remembering that when you are reading about *Aviation Week and Space Technology's* latest report of a top secret aircraft known as the "Blackstar." According to three articles that appeared in the March 6 issue of the magazine, "Blackstar" is actually a two-stage-to-orbit system consisting of a large mothership aircraft and a small "transatmospheric vehicle" possibly capable of flying into orbit.

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Like Fox Mulder of *The X-Files*, the author wants to believe, even when the evidence is lacking. Admittedly, Fox Mulder was actually right. But he was also a TV character.

Manta or myth?

Many people might instantly assume that this story is credible because it appeared in *Aviation Week*, a publication that has a well-deserved reputation for obtaining insider information on aviation and space projects. But what they should realize is that *Aviation Week* also has a well-deserved reputation for publishing poorly-researched articles about top secret aircraft programs that do not exist, such as the 1958 claims about a Soviet nuclear-powered bomber. In fact, the same author who wrote the Blackstar articles, William Scott, has written several previous articles about top secret aircraft that never existed. It is his specialty, and he repeats the same pattern in all of them.

In 1990 Scott wrote an article about so-called top secret, or “black,” aircraft developed by the U.S. government in the 1980s (“Scientists’ and Engineers’ Dreams Taking to Skies as ‘Black’ Aircraft,” December 24, 1990, p. 41). Scott speculated that the Air Force had developed a hypersonic bomber capable of carrying multiple nuclear warheads in vertical ejection racks. Sixteen years later, no such plane has ever been declassified, seen, or photographed.

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In 1991 Scott was back, this time with an article about a top secret stealthy reconnaissance aircraft called the “TR-3 Manta” (“Triangular Recon Aircraft May be Supporting F-117A,” June 10, 1991, p. 20). He wrote that “about 25–30 of the special reconnaissance aircraft—designated the TR-3A Black Manta—could be placed in service eventually, based at Holloman AFB, NM, and Tonapah, Nevada.” He continued: “Several TR-3As are believed to have been deployed temporarily to Alaska, Britain, Panama and Okinawa. More recently, they are believed to have supported F-117A operations in the Persian Gulf War.”

Nearly fifteen years have now passed since that article, and no such aircraft has entered operational service. No photographs of it have been produced, nor has anybody who worked on it stepped forward to discuss it, even anonymously. If a stealthy triangular-shaped aircraft ever existed, it certainly did not become operational or the government would have declassified its existence just as it has for other operational aircraft that start out as classified projects. If an aircraft becomes operational, sightings of it will increase. But the alleged rash of sightings of the “Manta” ended over a decade ago.

In the case of the “TR-3 Manta” it is easy to speculate what happened. At the time, the military was starting a project known as “Tier-3” (there was also a “Tier-2,” which became the Global Hawk drone). Tier-3 was actually a follow-on project after the cancellation of a CIA airplane program to replace the SR-71 known as Quartz. Quartz was canceled in 1991 before any prototype was developed because it was obscenely expensive (for more, see Jeffrey Richelson’s book *The Wizards of Langley*, pp. 225-226). Tier-3 was then

created to be a much smaller stealthy subsonic drone that could fly inside denied airspace and loiter over a target. That project also got scaled back to become the “Tier-3 Minus,” which ultimately produced some real hardware. Lockheed Martin and Boeing built an aircraft called the DarkStar, flew it once in early 1996, and then crashed it during its second flight. Tier-3 Minus was canceled in favor of less stealthy unmanned aerial vehicles like the Global Hawk and the Predator.

Obviously Scott heard part of this story. He misinterpreted “Tier-3” to be “TR-3,” which seemed credible because the U-2 spyplane had been reborn in the 1970s as the “TR-1” aircraft. But Scott took rumors of a stealthy reconnaissance development project and speculated wildly, arriving at the conclusion that stealthy spyplanes were already in operation, and had even been used over Iraq.

The Manta story demonstrates a pattern that Scott repeats in all of his black airplane stories. Usually there is a small bit of real information about a classified aircraft project. Scott then connects alleged sightings of an unusual aircraft in flight to this bit of information. Then the article is padded out with a large amount of speculation, usually involving various studies and research projects conducted by various contractors. The characteristics are always the same, however: he never quotes anybody by name who has any direct connection to the alleged program, and he never even includes anonymous quotes of anybody who supposedly knows the big picture about the alleged program. All of the anonymous quotes of people who are supposedly involved are always clearly low-level worker bees who do not know what they are working on.

These articles also have several other characteristics. One is that virtually all of the sightings are anonymous. One could imagine an Air Force officer or a Boeing employee being nervous about having their name in print commenting about a secret airplane. But how come an average citizen standing on the ground who supposedly spots an unusual airplane does not want their name in print? Another characteristic is a bit of highly specific detail that has no source whatsoever, such as measurements, specific dates and times, or tail numbers of airplanes. The information is presented as fact, but the reader is required to take it entirely on faith. A final common characteristic is that the articles are padded out with large amounts of admitted speculation. If you take a magic marker and cross out every single paragraph in the articles that is admitted speculation, you end up with very few paragraphs that are supposedly based upon real information.

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The mothership

In August 1992 Scott published another article in *Aviation Week* about an aircraft that had reportedly been spotted in Georgia and California (“Secret Aircraft Encompasses Qualities of High-Speed Launcher for Spacecraft,” August 24, 1992, p. 25). This time he speculated that the aircraft carried a spaceplane on its back and launched it at Mach 6–8. “This concept, at present, has not been confirmed by any U.S. government agency or military service. However, aeronautics and space experts agreed the concept has

considerable merit, particularly for orbiting payloads essential to national security.”

(A second article accompanied the first [“Recent Sightings of XB-70-Like Aircraft Reinforce 1990 Reports From Edwards,” August 24, 1992, p. 23] and stated that in May of that year a man named Glenn Emery spotted an unusual aircraft flying over Atlanta, Georgia, at 5 p.m. Another unnamed observer spotted a similar aircraft just before midnight in the Mojave Desert.)

The article quickly turned to the subject of the spaceplane and included another example of highly specific detail without any sourcing information. Scott wrote that a “long, slender aerodynamic shape with rounded chines was loaded into an Air Force C-5 transport at Lockheed’s Burbank, California ‘Skunk Works’ facility on the night of January 6.” The plane reportedly departed Burbank at 11:15 pm “and was cleared to Boeing Field near Seattle, Wash.” But despite the precision of this sighting, many vital details are missing. Who spotted it? Did the reporter speak to that person directly? Nor did Scott explain why he believed that “an aerodynamic shape” being loaded into a C-5 transport was associated with this program and not something else entirely.

The rest of the article was filled with speculation, such as a long discussion about the CIA’s work on the D-21 TAGBOARD drone in the 1960s, and the alleged value of microsattellites. Cross out all of the speculation in the article and you are left with about two paragraphs, and no sources for the information. But it has now been nearly fourteen years, and one would presume that in that time, the author has been able to amass significant proof that this plane exists. Alas, that assumption would be wrong.

Skeptical reading

The cover story about the Blackstar in the March 6 issue included three articles: a main one (“Spaceplane Shelved?”), one on the small spaceplane known as “Speedy,” or the “Experimental Orbital Vehicle” or “XOV” (“Speedy’ Damaged?”), and another on the carrier aircraft designated the “SR-3” (“Echoes of Valhalla”).

Like many articles about intelligence matters, the articles rely upon anonymous sources. Many media outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have rules for their reporters using such sources that generally boil down to: try to convince sources to go on the record, use anonymous sources *only* when they materially contribute to the story *and* there is no other option, obtaining corroboration whenever possible. Based upon these three articles in *Aviation Week*, it is clear that that publication does not operate via the same rules for anonymous sources.

Because *Aviation Week* does not appear to have rules governing the use of anonymous sources, the burden falls on the reader to be highly discriminating about the evidence. When approaching an article like this it is good to keep in mind several questions to ask:

- First, who are the *named* sources for information? Are they credible? Knowledgeable?
- Second, do the *anonymous* sources sound credible? Is there a credible reason for their anonymity? And are the anonymous sources *quoted*, or are they merely *paraphrased*?
- Third, does the article contain any information that you can actually check yourself using other sources?

- Fourth, is the logic of the article internally consistent? In other words, does any part of the article contradict or not fit well with other parts of the article?
- And finally, how does the logic of the article hold up? Does it make sense in light of what we know about the world?

One thing that is not mentioned in the articles is the fact that stories about a top secret supersonic “mothership” carrying a smaller aircraft have been around since the early 1990s. A simple Google search quickly demonstrates this. There is a Testor model kit of an “SR-75 Penetrator” mothership and its small baby aircraft. There are 3D models for computer flight simulators. And there are numerous websites with information on this rumored aircraft. For instance, Google the term “Brilliant Buzzard” and you will get a hit to a website last updated in 1997 that contains information on this rumored aircraft.

Just as a rash of UFO and abduction stories follow a popular report in the media, it is entirely possible that people who read about strange airplanes in the sky suddenly start seeing strange airplanes in the sky, even when they are not there.

The fact that all these other sources mention such an aircraft does not mean that it exists—two false claims do not equal a positive. But what it does mean is that *Aviation Week* does not have an exclusive story, and that it may also be merely repeating lies and legends that have been passed around the Internet for over a decade.

But there is an even greater possibility that people who have read the earlier claims are being influenced by them. Just as a rash of UFO and abduction stories follow a popular report in the media, it is entirely possible that people who read about strange airplanes in the sky suddenly start seeing strange airplanes in the sky, even when they are not there.

That fact should inform your questions about the new *Aviation Week* articles—is it possible that Scott is merely repeating stories that have been bouncing around, and being embellished, for over a decade, without having any solid evidence to support his claims?

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