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Features

Stealth Watchers

Armed with Radio Shack scanners and PCs, Steve Douglass and a small group of private citizens are unmasking the US Defense Department's black-budget aircraft.

Phil Patton reports from Dreamland.

First Steve Douglass heard and saw familiar shapes - F-117s he had seen many times since they emerged from the black-budget world; Stealth fighters he had tracked and monitored when they were still secret. Then came one that was slower, with a different sound, a different shape.

Douglass's radio scanner crackled, the numbers churned on its readout. He was at White Sands Missile Range, and the sky was filled with B-1Bs and F-15s. He raised his video camera - and the battery warning light flashed. He grabbed seven seconds of video before the machine snapped off.

Douglass had gone that May weekend with his father-in-law, Elwood Johnston, packing his Radio Shack Pro-2006 and other scanners, to cover an exercise near Holleman Air Force Base in New Mexico. He received a tip that something interesting would happen.

Now, in the living room of his ranch-style home in Amarillo, Texas, the country's top military monitor shows his tape. Beavis and Butt-head disappear from the screen, and from a powdery mix of colors emerges a dot, a dot growing larger, a dot becoming a winged bat, a ray-shaped airplane swooping overhead - then the image dissolves to gray grit. He flicks the machine off. "Seven seconds," he says. "You live for those moments. You listen all those hours for that kind of gold nugget."

The "bat" is a still-secret TR3A Black Manta, captured on video for the first time by Douglass - the dean of a new culture of digital scanner buffs who monitor military channels to find secret planes. The image is published here (see page 83) for the first time (the 5,000 or so subscribers to Douglass's Intercepts newsletter got a sneak preview last fall). The Black Manta operates in tandem with the F-117A Stealth fighter, and although evidence suggests it was used in the Gulf War, the Air Force has yet to admit its existence.

With the help of a frame grabber, Douglass printed an enhanced view of the bat plane after he returned from White Sands. Then, consulting with his wide network of experts in the industry, the aviation press, and the military, Douglass tweaked the details to create a speculative image of the airplane the government says does not exist.

Thanks to new technology, military monitors and stealth stalkers can listen in on the President talking from Air Force One and hear pilots from mysterious planes called Manta and Aurora. Around 1970, solid state electronics replaced old crystals as the heart of scanners. Before long, you could buy a 200-channel scanner from Radio Shack for about US\$300. Radio Shack has sold more than 4 million 2006 scanners worldwide, but Douglass estimates there are probably only about 500 hardcore military monitors in this country - which is by far the most relaxed nation when it comes to civilian ownership of such equipment.

Several other companies, including Bearcat and Uniden, also make scanners. Current equipment can cover thousands of channels a second, defeating most "channel-hopping" transmitters. Encryption is used at high-level bases, but it's expensive and vulnerable to atmospheric shifts. Until recently, even Air Force One broadcast communications without first encrypting them.

It's all completely legal - except for the practice of listening in on cellular phones, something Douglass finds of little use. When he was suspected of tapping the cellular phone of a Texas congressman - the FBI paid Douglass a visit. Suits suddenly appeared in the windows of the long-vacant house behind him, and a bug showed up on his phone. The real culprit was later found, but Douglass now sweeps the place monthly for bugs.

Long before they tried to find out about the Manta or the Mach 6 Aurora, monitors, and black birders told us about the U-2 and a project called Oxcart, which turned out to be the SR-71 Blackbird. They insisted that the Stealth fighter existed years before the Air Force released the first murky snapshot and admitted its existence. (Some stealth watchers even believe the Air Force called the fighter the F-117 simply so they could go on insisting there was no F-19, the logical designation for a new plane in official sequence. "Adds up to 19, right?" smirk the stealth watchers.)

To those who criticize their listening in and who accuse them of endangering national security, Douglass and other monitors answer: "Hey, Radio Shack sells to the bad guys too; anything we can hear, the spies can hear too."

In Douglass's thickly carpeted retreat, six scanners work steadily, hopping from channel to channel - short wave, VHF, UHF, sideband - all feeding into a little voice-activated Radio Shack tape recorder that vacuums up every scrap of voice, packing a day's talk into 90 minutes or so that Douglass listens to late at night. After years of practice, his ear strips away the static; he listens simultaneously to stereo, television, and multiple scanners.

Models of planes hang from the ceiling, pictures of planes line

the walls. In one corner lurks a huge oscilloscope - military surplus - and a Hallicrafter's short-wave set, packed with tubes, picked up for \$25 at a garage sale. There are maps of military bases and of New Mexico, as well as a Landsat photo of the F-117 base at Tonopah.

Red and blue lines on a map show main air routes, and refueling courses. Amarillo is dead center in the heart of the country's military flyways. "Why go to Groom Lake," people ask him, "when the planes seem to come to you?" Douglass has been uncanny in catching, say, F-117s coming almost over his house. "It's as if they know where you live," his colleagues joke.

Flying high and fast, taking off and landing from secret bases of sand and sage as big as Switzerland, the black aircraft elude the senses: By the time you hear them, they have passed. But as Douglass knows, a scan of radio frequencies will tell you where to look.

In one of the coups from which his reputation was made, Douglass took the first pictures of the "donut on a rope" contrail associated with a mystery aircraft, possibly the long-rumored Aurora reconnaissance plane that the Air Force denies exists.

Now he shows off his latest find, the Black Manta. He loads sound bites captured at White Sands onto Soundscan files on his Performa 450. This allows him to set them off one by one, clicking each little folder, so they explode like little firecrackers, with sharp sparks of voice amid the smoke of static.

"You've seen one of these before, haven't you, Steve?" says the voice of one airman talking to another (the coincidence of the name seems like a taunt). And the pilot complains, "I've got a couple of screws loose on the heat shield." The tail number is given - 806 - but F-117s stop in the 600s. All this tells Douglass the airplane is an unusual one - almost certainly a TR3A or another secret plane.

The maintenance and security people talk about the arrival of a VIP in the morning. Later, Douglass would discover that General Colin Powell, then chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had been visiting El Paso, Texas, the day before. He suspects Powell might have made an unpublicized side-trip for a glimpse of the Black Manta.

Douglass and his wife Teresa, an artist and computer whiz, write and publish Intercepts - a newsletter for monitors - from their home. Douglass also runs a BBS and operates the Above Top Secret forum (under Aviation, Military) on America Online. He is a stringer for CBS, and monitors fire and police channels for the Amarillo Globe Times, where he spent six years as a news photographer.

He's just finished *The Comprehensive Guide to Military Monitoring*, which is likely to become the bible of military monitoring, sharing tricks, frequencies, and some of the wonderful American music of callsigns and radio vocabulary. In the pages of *Intercepts* he runs letters and columns above the code names of correspondents: Darkstar November, Big Red, Lone Star, Ghost rider - some of them people with jobs they don't want to jeopardize by using their real names.

Douglass has subscribers at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia and throughout the military. His followers are hackers of a black-budget world, an underworld that costs American taxpayers about \$16 billion. Looking at the federal budget, it's hard to figure out how all that money is spent. But one can see where it ends up: The parking lots at Lockheed remain full and analysts show the sum of its work from federal projects swelling from \$53 million a few years ago to some \$400 million last year.

Bubbling away on an old Commodore 128, soon to migrate to a Mac, Douglass uploads selected items from the *Intercepts* bulletin board to America Online. On AOL, he finds, many stealth chasers are meeting each other for the first time. The service, Douglass says, has become a clearinghouse for monitors to share military intelligence. "It's almost like a public intelligence network," he says.

Douglass's frame-grabbed print of the TR3A looks at first glance like a flying saucer. No wonder monitors are often equated with the UFO gang. "That word is misused," he says. "Yes, (secret military planes) are objects, they fly, and they are unidentified." Some of his subscribers are saucer buffs; others threaten to cancel their subscriptions if "any of that UFO foolishness" shows up in his pages. But, like it or not, some of the best-informed stealth watchers believe that the military is "reverse engineering" alien craft at a site called S-4, near Papoose Lake inside the military reservation south of Groom Lake in Nevada.

The ideas of both secret planes and flying saucers strike deep chords in the collective unconscious. They may be the demons and the angels of our time. The two groups merge almost seamlessly into each other. Descriptions of sightings sound similar: "there was a very, very low rumble, like air rushing through a big tube" or "the lights had a diamond shaped pattern and the object turned rapidly and dashed away."

"They really are unidentified flying objects," says Tim Weiner a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter who dissected the black budget and described secret aircraft in his definitive book *Blank Check*. "Sent by a mysterious alien civilization - the Pentagon."

The best places to monitor are in the west: Tonopah, Nevada, where

the Stealth fighter was based; Holloman AFB, New Mexico; Edwards Air Force Base in California; plant 42 in Palmdale, California run by Lockheed; the mysteriously shaped radar cross section test facilities at Tejon Ranch, California, and Groom Lake, the holy of stealth holies.

In addition to the TR3A, which hunts in concert with the F-117 and seems to be a reconnaissance and laser designator craft, the plane that draws the most speculation is called Aurora. Its real name, if the craft does indeed exist, is not known. But many reconnaissance programs have been given names related to the dawn. In 1986, a censor's slip left a line billed "Aurora" unblackened in the public version of the Pentagon budget. That is the name most often given the new spy plane, although another Pentagon designation is "Senior Citizen." Some say Aurora flies without a pilot - like the remote-controlled drones that plied the skies during the Gulf War, but pumped to supersonic performance. Some say there's a bomber too, perhaps a whole family of strange birds.

There's one stalkers call "The Mother Ship," that looks like a Concorde with stubby front fins, or canards, similar to the XB-70 of the '60s. Others are nicknamed Honey Dripper and Goldie.

No one knows for sure how many real planes these sightings represent. "It is useful to consider mystery aircraft not simply as an engineering product, but also as a sociological and epistemological phenomenon," reads an oddly unscientific sentence in "Mystery Aircraft," a 1992 report by The Federation of American Scientists. That report concluded that it was highly likely that these craft exist, but unprovable. There is, the American Federation of Scientists says, "a signal to noise ratio" problem in dealing with secret aircraft. Or as Douglass puts it in Texas Panhandle vernacular, "it's tough to pick the pepper out of the shit."

There are all kinds of monitors. Monitoring Times, for which Douglass writes a column called "Federal File," speaks to an audience of some 40,000 people, of widely differing interests. Some listen to locomotive engineers, others to ships at sea.

Although military monitoring has been called "ham radio cubed" or "super ham" and the scoops monitors provide are often described in the press as "ham radio reports," Douglass says the monitoring culture is misunderstood. "Hams say, 'you can only listen?' They look down on monitors," Douglass explains.

Monitoring culture is more closely related to the nation's brief infatuation in the mid '70s with CB Radio. Motorists listened to CB to find out what the police were doing; many then graduated to police scanners that let them listen to the police directly. Douglass played around with CB until "the idiots all got on."

Douglass grew up in Idaho, where he came to love airplanes after going to local air shows. His work at the Amarillo Globe Times,

where he used police scanners to track stories, made him curious.

He began to wonder what else was in the air. "It was like the old George Carlin bit," he says, "what's on beyond the edge of the dial, after the knob stops? What are they hiding out there?"

Douglass began feeding information to The Associated Press, then to NBC-TV. His first coup came in 1986, when he picked up transmissions from a Soviet nuclear sub with a critical nuclear reactor problem. In an early sign of detente, US Navy ships rushed to the scene to help out. The Pentagon denied the story, but when an AP reporter brought in Douglass's tape - on which a sailor screams: "It's sinking! It's going down! Radiation counters are going up!" - the military finally admitted what was going on. Television cameras were present when American ships rescued the Soviet crew.

Douglass heard the troops assembling to invade Grenada, then Panama. During the Gulf War, he fed shortwave reports of Scud launchings from troops in Saudi Arabia to network reporters before their Israeli bureaus heard the sirens.

In 1989 Douglass picked up communications between "Joshua control" and an aircraft calling itself "Gaspiper." He realized it was flying close by. He ran out of his house, slapping film into his Canon AE-1. He could hear the rumbling sound of the engine, even feel it in his chest, but all he saw of the craft itself was "a silver glint of light, a metallic shape." Even with a 400-mm telephoto lens he managed to photograph only the plane's contrail with the Aurora's purportedly characteristic "donut on a rope" shape, suggesting an advanced pulse-jet engine. Aviation Week ran the photographs.

Later, he talked by phone with a pulse-jet engine expert he knows at a military contractor. The engineer played chords on a synthesizer over the phone, striking lower and lower frequencies until Douglass found the one he had heard. "Damn," the engineer said, recognizing that his rivals had perfected the advanced jet engine, "they've done it."

Black planes raise dark issues. Critics say now that the Cold War is over and now that satellites (run by the folks over at the National Reconnaissance Office, whose very name cannot legally be spoken by government officials) can see through clouds there is no real need for these planes. Some question the stealthiness of any "top secret" plane that amateurs can pick up on a Realistic Pro-2006 scanner from Radio Shack.

For many, the issue is cost: A covert program costs two to three times as much as an overt one. Others wonder about duplication of research efforts on the black and "white" sides of aviation. The technology of Aurora and other airplanes is close to that for the National Aerospace Plane, or X-30 - Ronald Reagan's Orient Express - a dreamed supersonic airliner. Is the same work being done

twice? Or is the \$600 million budget line for the NASP, as one European Space Agency scientist has claimed, simply a cover for Aurora?

And many suspect that the stealthiness of these airplanes has less to do with escaping detection by enemy radar than with escaping detection by the public, the press, and Congress. Some experts estimate that black-budget aviation programs are the largest single item in the whole Defense Department budget and that keeping them out of the public eye protects them from congressional budget cutters.

Those who doubt the usefulness of what the monitors do should consider a phone call Douglass got not long ago from the father of a dead B-1B pilot. The airplane had crashed into a mountainside, and the Air Force blamed the pilot. Investigators came to the father's house, asking him if his son was a homosexual or a drug abuser. Congress was considering further funding for the B-1B and Douglass, after hearing of the crash, checked his scanner tape from the night before. It clearly recorded the pilot complaining of problems with the plane's autopilot. When the news came out, the military brass denied that any "amateur ham radio operator" could have such information.

But Douglass had the tape and was able to tell the father the truth. He can't answer all the big questions, but he could answer that one.

SIDEBAR

A Visit to Dreamland

They call it "Dreamland," the Shangri-la, the Forbidden Temple of black aircraft. The Groom Lake secret base in central Nevada, a.k.a. Area 51, is set amid a bomb range as big as Switzerland and is off limits to visitors. Here the U-2 first flew, and the SR-71 Blackbird and the F-117 Stealth fighter - all in secret. Only a few grainy pictures of the place exist; it is illegal to photograph - or even to sketch. Fighter jocks in the area call it "The Box" and if they stray into it they are interrogated, harangued, and grounded.

Groom Lake is tough for military monitors. Most radio transmissions are encrypted - a costly and difficult process rarely undertaken by the military. But there are a couple of places from which to actually see the Groom base. This spring, secret plane and UFO buff Glenn Campbell, a military monitor and author of the Area 51 Viewer's Guide, discovered the closest and most accessible viewpoint. He named it "Freedom Ridge" and was delighted when he heard the local guards using that name on their radios.

The first Lockheed engineers who brought the U-2 here in 1954

wryly named the place Paradise Ranch. But sometimes in the early '60s the name "Dreamland" began to appear on military maps. Today, it is omitted completely, and Landsat offers no satellite photographs of the area, although the Russians will sell you one for about \$5,000.

In 1984 the military went to the Bureau of Land Management and had large tracts of land around the base declared part of the Nellis Bomb and Gunnery Range. The perimeter is marked by signs along roads warning "use of deadly force authorized." But two high points that allow a glimpse of the base to intrepid hikers remain accessible. Last October, the military filed papers to take over those points too. In protest, two dozen stealth chasers, monitors, and UFO buffs climbed to the top of Freedom Ridge for a final glimpse before the shades came down.

I joined them, driving up from Las Vegas past the B-1s landing and taking off at Nellis Air Force Base. The desert seemed like low-res detail on a flight simulator game: RISC landscape. I came to the little town of Alamo, then through a pass in the hills, when suddenly a white stick of gravel road appeared, heading off to Groom. Cars send up dust streamers on this road, as they rise steadily up it, mile after visible mile.

Hiking up to Freedom Ridge, we dodged the brambly and fragrant sage and the fuzzy, Muppetlike Joshua trees, we crossed rocks that seem inscribed in some alien cuneiform. We walked a few feet from the perimeter of the base, marked by orange sign posts running across the high desert. On the other side of this barrier were strange looking silver balls the size of basketballs on poles, said to be motion detectors or other sensors. Some claim these can sniff the difference between a human and a wandering wild burro or rocky mountain sheep - the place is a de facto wildlife preserve. At sunrise, helicopters sweep along the border and semi-private Wackenhut guards, known locally as "Wackendudes," keep an eye on intruders and call the local sheriff if need be.

This day, a few Wackendudes appeared, then retreated. The base unfolded beneath us as we reached the crest - the long white dry lake, a line of buildings, fuel tanks, an old bus, satellite dishes, a big hanger said to be for the Mother Ship, and a seven-mile runway.

The only black birds we saw that day were ravens - eight or a dozen hovering near sunset in the thermals at the edge of the rocks, spiralling in formation. As night fell, the lights came on in the base below, where personnel were probably watching the World Series more intently than they watched the few people, high above Dreamland, watching them. - PP

Douglass used seven seconds of blurry video, a frame grabber, and

graphic enhancement software to produce this estimate of what the still-secret TR3A Black Manta might look like.

Want more information on monitoring?

Intercepts
6303 Cornell
Amarillo, TX 79109

Complete Guide to Military Monitoring Universal Electronics Inc.
4555 Groves Rd., #13
Columbus, OH 43232

Area 51 Viewer's Guide
HCR Box 38, Rachel, NV 89001

Monitors BBS
+1 (806) 359 6477

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