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Foreword

On February 3, 1964, Lockheed test pilot James D. Eastham reached a speed of nearly Mach 3.3 at an altitude of 83,000 feet during the test flight of a new aircraft. This was a world's record for a jet-powered aircraft. For ten minutes, the plane held this speed. This epic flight was the culmination of five years of effort, frustration, and, finally, success. There was not one word about this singular achievement in that evening's newspapers. There was no mention of the event on the television news. No articles were published about the flight in the technical press. As far as the larger world knew, it had never happened. This was because the airplane did not officially exist.

For the past five decades, some of the most significant advances in aerospace technology were made by airplanes that the larger world knew nothing about. Since 1941, the United States has produced a series of "Black" airplanes-planes developed, tested, and operated in deep secrecy. Years, even a decade or more, would pass before their existence was made public. Some remain secret still.

The impact of these Dark Eagles has been profound. The first introduced America to the jet age. The next revolutionized the way intelligence was gathered. Another pushed aviation technology to its farthest limits. A series of unmanned reconnaissance drones would venture to places too dangerous for conventional aircraft. One group would change U.S. aerial combat techniques and training. The latest series would fundamentally alter the role of airpower and strategic bombing, leading the way to the Coalition victory in the Gulf War. Each would do things most engineers thought impossible.

The names given to these Dark Eagles were meant to conceal- "Aquatone," "Oxcart," "Tagboard," "Have Blue," "YF-110," "YF-113," "F-117A," "HALSOL," "Amber," and "GNAT-750." There was no hint of the wonders that lay behind those bland titles. Similarly, the place where 50 many of these planes would make their first flights was called "The Ranch," "Area 51," "Red Square," or the sinister and evocative "Dreamland." The true name of this place was never spoken, never mentioned, not even in classified documents.

The Dark Eagles would first come to public attention in the 1980s. The secret reality and public speculation would combine into a dark mixture to form a shadow called Aurora.

It is only now, with the passage of the years and the end of the Cold War, that the story can be told of these

remarkable aircraft, the people who designed and flew them, and the secret place where they were tested. Their story is the history of our time.

To understand how it came to be, we must first return to the beginnings of the Black airplane program - to a place under a blue desert sky, in the midst of a terrible war - and to an airplane that was one of America's most closely guarded secrets.

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