Book Catalog

Introduction

WouId Your Government Lie to You?

**"Is there anything else to which you would wish
to draw my attention?"
"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."
"The dog did nothing in the night-time."
"That was the curious incident."**

- Conan Doyle, *Silver Blaze*

On March 6, 1990, one of the United States Air Force's (USAF) sleek, matteblack Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird spyplanes, serial number 6417972, shattered the official air speed record from Los Angeles to Washington's Dulles airport. There, a brief snowdusted ceremony marked the end of the SR-71's operational career, as the record-breaking aircraft was handed over to the National Air and Space Museum.

Officially, the SR-71 was being retired to save the $200-$300 million a year that it cost to operate the fleet. Some reporters were told that the SR71 had been declared redundant because spy satellites had improved so much that the aircraft was no longer needed.

But there was something badly wrong with the picture: not only was the Air Force, from chief of staff Gen. Lawrence Welch on down, declining opposition to end its most glamorous manned-aircraft mission, but it also was discouraging congressional attempts to revive it. Never in its history had the Air Force - owned and operated by the pilot community - walked away from a manned mission, however mundane, without a fight.

The money was also an issue; $300 million is a lot to most of us, but it is chickenfeed to the Pentagon. Specifically, it is well under 7 percent of what the Pentagon spends each year on reconnaissance satellites. If the SR-71s served no other purpose than that of an emergency backup, in case of an unlucky string of satellite and launcher failures, they would be cheap insurance.

The missing piece in this puzzle, and a number of others, is a spyplane called Aurora. The outside world uses that name because a censor's slip let it appear below the SR-71 and the U-2 in the 1985 Pentagon budget request, attached to a budget line that called for production funds in 1987. Even if that was the project's real name - which is not certain - it was almost certainly changed after being compromised in such a manner.

The plane's real name has been kept secret, and so is the fact that it exists. The project is what is technicalIy known as an unacknowledged Special Access Program (SAP). More often, such projects are called "black programs."

The Pentagon's "black world," within which such programs are conducted, is not a separate, secret military force. It is more like a loose underground network, distributed throughout the services and other Pentagon agencies. Its size can be gauged from the Pentagon's unclassified budget documents, which include correct total and summary figures but which conceal individual programs by mentioning them only by codename or by lumping them together under generic, meaningless titles.

In the Pentagon's budget request for fiscal year 1993, the black budget - expenditures masked in this way - amounted to a staggering $16 billion for research, development, and production of secret programs. That constitutes 17 percent of the Pentagon's entire budget for R&D and production, and exceeds those budgets of most Western nations.

To see the black world in action, you can trek through the Nevada desert to a mountainside overlooking the dry Groom Lake. From several miles away - as close as you can get without entering restricted government lands - you can see through the persistent haze a large flight-test center. It resembles Edwards Air Force Base, California, with a sprawling collection of hangars of many different sizes and styles, scattered by the edge of a six-mile runway.

Officially, the Groom Lake complex - also known as Area 51 - does not exist. Even a Lockheed paper published last year on the early days of the U-2, which refers to tests at Groom that were completed thirty - five years ago, can describe it only as "a remote location."

Comparing today's Groom Lake with ground-level photos taken in the late 1970s, it is apparent that many of the largest buildings were added in the following decade. The site is very active: always visible in recent photos are a flotilla of Boeing 737s that bring people to Groom from the places where they live, and where their friends and families think they work - such as Palmdale, Burbank, or Edwards in California, or Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada.

The cost and inconvenience of such an operation is immense, and there is only one possible reason for it: to provide a secret testing place for aircraft that are obviously different from those the public is aware of.

Groom Lake has another unusual feature: a lake-bed runway that is six miles long, or twice as long as the longest normal runways in the United States. Going back to the basics, the length of a runway is determined either by the distance an aircraft requires to accelerate to flying speed, or the distance that the aircraft needs to decelerate after landing. That distance is proportional to the speed at which liftoff takes place; usually, ultralong runways mean aircraft with very high minimum flying speeds, and - as is the case at Edwards - these are usually aircraft that are optimized for very high maximum speeds. Almost 19,000 feet of the runway is paved for routine operations.

But the Air Force denies that Aurora, or any high-speed project, is among the secrets that it hides in the Nevada desert. Questioned about Aurora in the fall of 1992, former US Air Force Secretary Donald B. Rice cast doubt on "the kind of descriptions laid out in some of those articles [which] would take an aircraft of such proportions and capabilities that there wouldn't be a snowball's chance in you know where of hiding it."

Maybe, but the Air Force has done it before.

Air Force security cut its teeth on the Lockheed U-2 spyplane, the first US aircraft to be kept secret at the time it entered service. There were, however, some problems. The U-2 used daylight cameras and therefore operated in the daytime. In its original form, it could not be refueled in flight, and had to be based in allied nations on the periphery of the Soviet Union in order to reach its targets.

The U-2 attracted attention from the moment it arrived at Royal Air Force (RAF) Lakenheath in England. In an uncanny foreshadowing of the Aurora story, a sketch of "the mysterious stranger" made by a British spotter appeared in the London-based magazine *Flight*.

The USAF finally acknowledged that the aircraft was a Lockheed U-2, and released pictures of one of the models in fake National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) markings to bolster the story that it was engaged in high-altitude atmospheric research. But it did not take much intelligence to wonder why such an aircraft should be kept secret,or why it should have a designation in the Utility category - previously used for the chunky, 200 mile per hour (mph) de Havilland Canada Otter transport.

Security did a better job next time. The U-2's intended replacement was Lockheed's giant CL-400, codenamed Suntan. The Mach 2.5 aircraft was powered by totally new air-turboramjet (ATR) engines burning liquid hydrogen. Pratt & Whitney carved a completely new facility out of the Florida Everglades to build and test the engine, and Lockheed virtually completed the first four aircraft before Suntan was canceled due to technical snags in 1958.

Not one word leaked out about Suntan until twenty years later, when Lockheed started talking about liquid hydrogen as a future aircraft fuel.

Suntan, which had been sponsored by the USAF, was replaced by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) project for a kerosene-fueled Mach 3 aircraft, called Gusto. After Lockheed was selected to build the aircraft, in September 1959, Gusto was renamed Oxcart.

Lockheed's initial design was called the A-11, and featured a pencilslim forward fuselage. As design work progressed, the drawings were modified to reduce radar reflectivity: in particular, broad chines were added to the fuselage. With these changes, the aircraft that flew in April 1962 was called the A-12.

Secrecy was paramount, and Groom Lake - which had been temporarily abandoned after the U-2 was declassified - was rebuilt into a fully equipped base that would support not only the A-12 flight-tests but also the CIA's twelve operational aircraft. The A-12 was designed to be inherently more secure than the U-2 because it could refuel in flight and was therefore much less restricted in its use of bases.

There were some close calls. On an early test flight, an A-12 was refueling from a tanker when a commercial jet cruised by, only a few thousand feet away. Government officials met the flight when it landed, briefly detained the passengers, and warned them to say nothing about anything they might have seen. On another occasion, a couple in a light aircraft got lost and landed at the first suitable field‹ which happened to be Groom Lake. "We scared the hell out of them and sent them on their way," recalls a former Lockheed engineer.

In May 1963, one of the A-12s crashed near Wendover, Utah. The wreckage was cleaned up, witnesses were asked to sign security agreements, and the press was told that an F-105 had crashed.

Nevertheless, the plane's existence was an almost complete surprise when President Lyndon Johnson announced its existence in February 1964. The news sparked off a flurry of speculation, but many years passed before it was realized that Johnson's statement was - to use the elegant expression once used in court by a British civil servant - "economical with the truth."

Johnson called the plane the A-11, although the A-11 had never been built, and said that "the A-11 aircraft now at Edwards AFB are undergoing extensive tests to determine their capabilities as long-range interceptors."

In fact, the USAF had ordered a development of the A-12, called the YF-12, as an interceptor, and two of them were undergoing tests at Groom. But there were no A-11s, or A-12s, or YF-12s at Edwards and never had been. In order to keep the vcrifiable facts consistent with the president's statement, the YF-12s were rushed to Edwards and - since the plan view of the aircraft was still secret - immediately placed into hangars. They were still so hot from their supersonic dash that they triggered the sprinklers in the hangar, drenching the reception committee.

The Air Force had also ordered thirty examples of the RS-71, a reconnaissancestrike airplane, developed from the YF-12, designed to assess damage after a nuclear attack and to destroy with nuclear weapons any targets that had escaped the first attack. In December 1964, Johnson revealed the existence of the aircraft, but called it the SR-71 Blackbird. Allegedly, it was a misreading, but the official designation of the aircraft was changed to SR (strategic reconnaissance) and the fact that the aircraft could have been developed easily to carry weapons was not alluded to until the early 1980s.

But the CIA's A-12s remained secret, despite the fact that by 1965 there were 1,800 people working at Groom Lake. By the end of that year the aircraft was declared ready for operation. In May 1967, A-12s were deployed to Kadena Air Base, in Okinawa, to conduct regular flights over North Vietnam and some over North Korea. They continued to do so until mid-1968, when the CIA A-12 unit was deactivated, the aircraft were placed in secure storage at Palmdale and the

mission was assumed - for reasons of economy - by the USAF's SR-71s.

Although the A-12s had been flying regularly out of Kadena, their existence went unnoticed. So did that of a companion program to the A-12.

This was the D-21 ramjet-powered reconnaissance drone, designed to be launched at Mach 3 from the back of an A12, and with the almost unbelievable range of more than 10,000 miles at Mach 3.8. The D-21 became operational in 1970, but was retired in 1972 for political and technical reasons after $2 billion had been spent.

A few years later, some of the D21s were photographed in open storage at DavisMonthan AFB, Arizona, but the Air Force released scant details of them and implied that they were developed as test vehicles or target drones. The D-21s were later placed in a secure area, and their existence went unreported outside the trade press.

The A-12s were kept indoors at Palmdale, California, for ten years. The USAF had lost several SR-71s in the early years of the program, and it was felt that the A-12s might be needed as spares. In April 1982, twenty years after the first flight, the existence of the A-12 was declassified. The D-21 was revealed at the same time, but nothing was said about its capabilities, and its development history is still officially classified.

Before April 1982, the existence of the A-12 had been intentionally concealed for twenty-three years, despite flying operational missions out of nonsecure bases, through a combination of security, cover stories, and misleading information. The ultimate irony is that the security measures had little effect on their intended target. The Soviet Union's intelligence services were well aware that the A-12 existed as early as 1960, MiG chief designer Belyakov revealed in a 1991 book; the MiG-25 Mach 3 fighter was designed to counter the A12, not - as CIA leaks suggested in the late 1970s - the already moribund XB-70.

And now, it is Aurora that does not exist.

[Parent]

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