

In The Black, Part II: The Black Manta

Before we get on with our look at the history of black projects and their relationship with radio monitoring, it's interesting to note that since the last column, the wizards at Lockheed Martin have unveiled a new stealth aircraft that no one even speculated existed. Like I pointed out in Part I, *if they don't want you to know about a project, you won't.*

It's called MINION, and it's a stealth UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) and has the lowest radar cross-section yet, much lower than even the F-22 Raptor. Minion can be configured for recon or strike and launched from the ground or another carrier aircraft. The weapons bay can carry four 220-pound bombs, precision guidance, small diameter bombs, spy sensors, electronic jammers, or even a high-powered microwave weapon.

Close Encounter At Roswell

I'll never forget my first encounter with the "Black Manta." It happened a few years back in New Mexico while a few buddies and I were doing some "on scene" military monitoring at an annual military exercise known as Roving Sands.

Unfortunately, they stopped throwing this military war-game, which had become a great gathering for stealth chasers and military monitoring hobbyists. Since it didn't take place confined inside some off-limits piece of military airspace in Nevada but in the civilian skies over Roswell, New Mexico, Roving Sands became an annual exercise and opportunity to watch and monitor the U.S. military flex its muscles.

One night during the exercise, just outside of the Roswell Industrial Airfield, I had set up my video camera and spent the greater part of the evening photographing B-1B bombers taking off for a night strike on the White Sands Missile Range. I also monitored them passing traffic to "RED

FORCE Ops" via SANDS CONTROL, on 11.243 MHz (USB) on my trusty portable DX-440.

Although the bulk of Roving Sands communications took place on UHF, I discovered the B-1s using 11.243 MHz to report "BLUE FORCE" resistance (over the White Sands Missile Range) back to the command post (CP) at Roswell. It was a great channel to be glued to because it gave us a good overall look at how the war games were going, whereas the pilot-to-pilot chatter on UHF was just plain confusing.

It was just after dark when my father-in-law, Elwood, spotted a triangular-shape flying low on the horizon, approaching Roswell from the west. I would speculate that it was a flying wing-type aircraft about half the size of the B-2, with a slightly different shape. The aircraft moved very slowly and silently as it loitered, obviously watching the B-1s depart on their assigned missions. Although it was after dusk I was able to shoot a few seconds of video of the craft.

It is a fuzzy image at best on video and doesn't reproduce well in print, but with the help of some computer enhancement we can make out the general Manta shape of the aircraft. Later, after returning home, I produced an artist's impression on my computer.

I was impressed by the aircraft's agility and speed (and lack thereof). At first it moved very slowly—slower than any conventional aircraft, more like an airship—but then it dipped a wing, made a knife edge turn and sped away at jet speed!

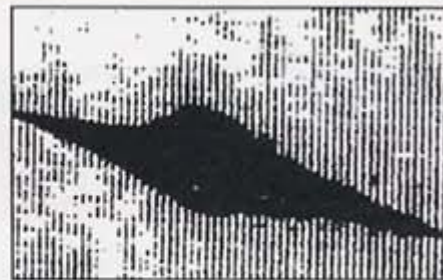
On departure, I overheard a B-1 pilot remarking, matter of factly on 11.243-MHz USB, "There goes one of Roswell's famous flying saucers!"

They way he said it, it sounded like the pilot didn't know he was transmitting and his microphone may have been set on VOX. Someone remarked on the same frequency, "Sands 44, take the UFO chatter to Uniform!"

I scanned my ferreted-out UHF frequencies but never monitored any further comments about the saucer-shaped visitor.

Manta History

The first civilian sighting of the TR-3A may have occurred in 1986. Several members of the radical environmental group Green Peace trespassed into the Nevada Test Range to protest nuclear testing. The protesters hiked in and camped in an area not far from the Air Force's super-secret



Enhanced video still showing the flying black triangle shot near Roswell, New Mexico, during Operation Roving Sands in 1995.

flight test center at Groom Lake. The Green Peace group's hair stood on end as they watched in awe as a strange black triangular-shaped aircraft flew slowly and silently over them.

Since then, Manta-shaped aircraft have been seen operating with multiple F-117s near Edwards Air Force Base, California, and a daylight spotting of the aircraft was seen near Tehachapi, California. Other sightings of this mysterious aircraft were reported by troops returning from Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War.

In 1993, I received a video in the mail, taken by two Los Angeles police officers who were visiting the Groom Lake area. The video shows a mysterious triangle-shaped aircraft flying in and over the mountains ringing Area 51. Was it the TR-3A?

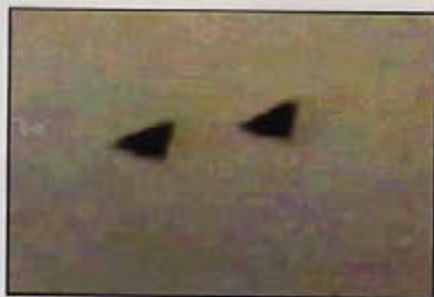
Only military insiders know for sure.

Again, while attending Roving Sands in 1997, I shot daylight video of two triangle-shaped aircraft flying in tight formation near the CHISUM VOR. Although similar to my first sighting, these triangles were faster and much louder.

First Published Reports

The first time the American public heard the designation TR-3A was in October 1990. There's still some doubt, however, if this is the true designation for the aircraft. The TR in "TR-3A" is thought to stand for "Tactical Reconnaissance," and the 3A is supposedly the number designation assigned by the Department of Defense. The Lockheed spy-plane U-2 evolved into a tactical reconnaissance aircraft, designated TR-1. The TR-3A is thought to be the next generation aircraft of this type.

However, if an insider overheard people talking about the TIER-3 UAV, he might have thought they were saying TR-3. Was the TR-3A in reality an early prototype of the Dark Star Tier 3 recon drone?



Still image pulled off the video the author shot of two flying triangles near the Chisum VOR, just outside of Roswell, New Mexico, in 1997. The "nose" of the aircraft is pointed (and moving) toward the photographer (up and to the right) and not away.

No one knows (or is admitting to) there ever being an aircraft designated TR-2 but some speculate that that designation was reserved for a joint American/European tactical reconnaissance aircraft, called the "EGRET."

Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine was the first to report the TR-3A designation. The source of the TR-3A information was J. Jones, author of the book *Stealth Technology, The Art of Black Magic*. Not much is known about J. Jones other than that he is an aviation insider and has access to information that the general public does not.

J. Jones's book was one of the first to publish inside information on the development of the F-117A and the B-2 bomber. The book is well researched, and it's clear that the author knows what he's talking about. He seems to be a credible source of information on the TR-3A; however, to this day, the Air Force continues to deny its existence.

It is interesting to note that in Phil Patton's book *Dreamland—Travels Inside the Secret World of Roswell and Area 51*, Patton notes that on a recent trip to Edwards Air Force Base looking for information to be included in his book, he found in the Edwards AFB history archives a folder titled "TR-3A Manta." To his dismay there was nothing contained in the file. My question is why create an official file for an aircraft that doesn't really exist?

Because of its tactical designation, it is thought that the TR-3A's mission is to find hard-to-locate targets, such as missile silos and command bunkers, and illuminate the targets with a laser, enabling the F-117A to destroy them with laser-guided smart bombs. Because of its excellent stealth qualities, the TR-3A can loi-

ter undetected at high altitude over enemy territory, reconnoitering an area for F-117s to attack.

Working together, TR-3As and F-117s can have a devastating effect on an enemy's command and communications facilities, enabling conventional bombers and fighters to hit other targets with little opposition. Many stealth watchers have noticed F-117 pilots wearing patches bearing the term "Team Stealth," possibly hinting that F-117s and TR-3As work as a team to destroy high-value targets. The TR-3A could also be used in conjunction with other military aircraft, such as B-1s or B-52s.

The TR-3A mystery deepened when something secret crashed at the RAF's Boscombe Down Air Base on September 23, 1996. It was sharp-eared military radio monitoring enthusiasts who were the first to realize something strange was up, or should I say *down*, the object having crashed on landing at Boscombe Down.

Security forces scrambled to cover the aircraft with a tarpaulin, but even that couldn't disguise the unique shape of the mystery aircraft from the prying eyes of military aircraft enthusiasts who had monitored the incident on their airband radios and then flocked to the perimeter fence to have a look. Quickly the aircraft was tucked away in a remote hangar on the base. Later it was transported out on a USAF military transport.

Interestingly enough, days later I monitored the HF radio communications of a C-5A placing a phone patch through Kirtland Air Force Base to Edwards Air Force Base, arranging security for the aircraft debris they were ferrying. To quote, "The aircraft requires Constant Watch and Operations should be notified that the 'leading edges' of the recovered aircraft have also been found and are arriving via another transport just hours behind."

The Manta's Nest

If the Manta were operational, where would it be based? The most likely candidate would be Holloman Air Force Base near Alamogordo, New Mexico, which is also the home of the F-117 Stealth. Many trips to the area seem to confirm this suspicion.

Holloman is a sprawling base on the south side of the White Sands Missile range. If Groom Lake is the cradle of cutting-edge black project technology, then White Sands is the playground. Once a covert project is developed at Dreamland,

it is often moved to White Sands (and Holloman) where it becomes an operational system. Weapons firing tests, tactics, and the training of the pilots and crews who will field the weapon are all worked out at White Sands.

Holloman has excellent RAM (Radar Absorbent Materials) applying facilities as well as permanent Lockheed Martin technical offices. Inside the White Sands Missile Range there are many remote airstrips and hangar facilities, chief among them "Northrop Strip" just five miles from Holloman, where one could secure the Manta away from prying eyes. Both the RAMS and RATSCAT facilities (used for determining the radar cross section of an aircraft) are located deep in the White Sands Range.

On one trip to Alamogordo in 1994, I monitored communications that seemed to confirm the existence of a new stealth aircraft being tested at White Sands. During the middle of one night, a lone aircraft using the callsign ZOLTAR took off from a remote strip called Stallion, located on the north side of the White Sands Missile Range.

After repeated attempts to reach Cherokee Control on 294.600, the aircraft was heard again on 13.201 MHz telling the Range Controller at WSMR that he would be doing some work on the Red Rio Range and on completion landing at Holloman. The pilot also wanted to arrange for security to be on hand when he landed to secure the aircraft as soon as possible.

Just before the aircraft landed, the security frequencies at Holloman became very active. All units were advised that the "STF" would be landing soon and all stations should report in. On approach to Holloman, ZOLTAR could be heard on 255.900 MHz (HAFB tower) requesting "all security lighting to be turned off two minutes prior to the STF's landing."

After the base was dark, the STF landed and was secured in a hangar. Then the maintenance channels became active. It seemed that the STF needed to have its "heat shield" repaired and the entire aircraft needed to be cleaned before "tomorrow's viewing."

The next morning it became apparent from security and maintenance communications that the aircraft was being readied for some sort of presentation. "VIPs" were mentioned, as were calls for the base photographer and other officers who were to be on hand for the "viewing." Shortly before the VIPs arrived, the base was

closed to all traffic and the highway leading to the base was closed by roadblocks.

It was soon easy to tell from the communications surrounding the VIPs that it was none other than the (then) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell. He had flown up from El Paso, Texas, where he had spent some time reviewing the troops at Fort Bliss. Before he went back to Washington, he made a quick side trip to Holloman (arriving in the back-seat of a T-38) to view the "STF" in a private ceremony. While he was there he was also treated to a flyby by three F-117s. The visit was over in a less than an hour, and after Powell's departure the base was reopened to normal traffic.

Late that night I monitored the security communications surrounding the departure of the STF. The base was again blacked out until the aircraft departed and returned to the remote "Stallion" base on the north edge of the White Sands Missile Range. We deduced that STF may have stood for "Stealth Tactical Fighter," but was it the TR-3A or another secret stealth aircraft prototype?

Next month we'll take a look at the Switchblade and other secret birds. Stay tuned and write in to let us know what you're hearing!

Reader's Logs

0000: STATION, Anytown, USA, summary of traffic heard in MODE at 0000 Z (Z), personal comments here. (SD)
2182.0: NLYL (USNS Loyal) working unheard station at 2208. (MC)
2370.0: ECHO FOXTROT coordinating Link tracks with FOXTROT and PAPA at 0229. (MC)
2670.0: Unidentified CG Station: 0110 USB w/Marine Information Bulletin (MIB) for South Carolina area. (RP)
3349.0: NNN0FAM, NNN0HNB, NNN0PXL US Navy MARS stations active in 4G1B South Carolina Traffic Net at 0021. (MC)
4426.0: CAMSLANT working Cutter OAK (WLB-211) at 0032. (MC)
4500.0: USAF MARS Region 2 Net with NNN0TWT, AFA2YR, AFA2SW, AFA2WP, AFA2BT, AFA2TN, AFA3XM active at 0040. (MC)
5211.0: HEADCAP 22 (CAP National Headquarters) checking in with WGY 912 (FEMA, Mt. Weather) at 0115. (MC)
5399.6: ECHO WHISKEY reporting they are receiving 7700 and 4X emergency IFF and request PAPA check their Pony at 0126. (MC)
5399.6: ECHO WHISKEY with Air Defense SITREP at 0026. AEW is TANGO and RAID 95 is airborne tanker. (MC)
5696: Appears that CAMSPAC Pt. Reyes controlling some of the CG radio sites along Gulf



Artist's rendering of the TR-3A Black Manta made by the author and based on multiple sightings.

of Mexico and Florida. 8983 Also possibly because of hurricane Isabel affecting CAMSLANT? (DS2)

5696: CAMSPAC Pt. Reyes performing safety of flight comms with CG 1502 and CG 6001 at 1100 Z. Later with CG 1501 and CG 6031. All assets appear to be East Coast so not sure if comms with CAMSPAC were because propagation bad or CAMSLANT down due to Isabel. (DS2)

5696: CG 1502 acting as relay for CG 6001 to CAMSPAC. (DS2)

5708.0: REACH 9167 with ALE initiated p/p to Charleston AFB CP reporting they are diverting there due to oil leak in #1 engine at 0057. (MC)

5732.0: PANTHER tells 17C to RTB and get a full tank of gas at 2251. (MC)

5732.0: CG 1790 p/p via SERVICE CENTER to Maintenance Shop at 0026. (MC)

6501.0: O8X working NMN CAMSLANT for p/p to Greenville, NC. (MC)

7527.0: HAMMER tells 41S and 41SK he can hear them both then SERVICE CENTER calling 41SK with no answer at 1831. (MC)

7650.0: TIZ137 (1/137th Avn Bn, OH NG, Canton OH): 1543 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)

7753.0: 2222 (possibly Algerian SONELGAZ): 0235 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)

7903.5: AT1 (FBI, Atlanta GA): 1417 USB/ALE TO SJ1 (FBI, San Juan PR). (RP)

7992.0: HFB (UK Royal Signals, Hereford, UK): 2324 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)

7969.0: HR (Hassi Rhmel, SONELGAZ net): 0339 USB/ALE sounding. Also noted sounding on 09315.0. (RP)

13224.0: RS2 (unidentified, Brazilian Navy): 2257 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)

8050.0: FR5FEM (FEMA Regional Director, Region 5 Chicago IL): 1432 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)

8224.0: O/M (SS): 0103 LSB w/unheard station. Encryption system also noted on this freq. (RP)

8337.6: TOMCAT 21 and DOLPHIN 45 in

comms with SHARK 10 (USCG Cutter) during law enforcement mission at 0114. (MC)
8337.6: STINGRAY 31 reporting to SHARK 20 that lights are coming on at Providenciales and they have comms with tower at 0050. (MC)
8912.0: JACKKNIFE working 310K to report 46 is on deck with radar problems heard at 2036. (MC)

8912.0: PING PONG tells D23 to hug the coast along Nicaragua to El Salvador to avoid WX then passes football scores at 2318. (MC)

8971.0: RED TALON 711 with SPARE GROUP 40 report to FIDDLE at 2235. (MC)

8971.0: TIGER 21 reporting SPARE GROUP 02 to GOLDENHAWK at 2046. (MC)

8983.0: CG 1706 in comms with CAMSLANT while conducting ELT search with M/V AFROSTAR at 2142. (MC)

8983.0: CAMSLANT diverting V8U to a plane crash off West Palm Beach heard at 1732. (MC)

8989.0: CANFORCE 4186 p/p via TRENTON MILITARY to Trenton Ops to check on flight plan and get WX for Gander and Shannon at 0026. (MC)

8992.0: REACH 437T p/p via Andrews HF-GCS to HILDA OPS and SAM COMMAND reporting ETA to Andrews from Guantanamo at 0122. (MC)

8996.5: O/M (SS): 0029 USB w/Y/L (SS). Familiar conversational tone. (RP)

9007.0: SENTRY 41 p/p via TRENTON MILITARY to RAYMOND 24 at Tinker AFB. Report they are RTB to Langley for broken WX radar at 2120. (MC)

9007.0: RESCUE 419 p/p via TRENTON MILITARY to RCC reporting ETA to Bagotville at 2154. (MC)

9010.0: O/M (Portuguese): 0005 USB w/aircraft 05 (O/M Portuguese). Brazilian Air Force. Some weak ALE also noted on this freq. (RP)

9065.0: KRBMNG (Arkansas NG, Robinson AAF Little Rock AK): 0114 USB/ALE sounding. (RP)