

In The Black

By Steve Douglass



Hidden deep inside the desert test ranges of Nevada, secret aircraft reside in closely-guarded hangars. They only take to the skies on the darkest, moonless nights. Like the bats they resemble, these "black project" aircraft return to their lairs long before dawn, safe from the light of day and the prying eyes of spy satellites, aviation journalists and American taxpayers.

But every once in awhile, the Pentagon lifts the cloak of secrecy and trots out one of its' secret black-world aviation successes, for all the world to marvel at. The most recent of America's covert military aviation wunder-planes to be unveiled is Boeing's [Bird of Prey](#) a super-stealthy one-of-a-kind prototype that may have lead to even stealthier (and even more secret) black project aircraft.

Stealthchasers (those aviation buffs and journalist who skulk around secret test bases trying to catch a glimpse of the latest, skunky bat-plane) have been chasing rumors for years that a secret aircraft project known as the Bird Of Prey was flying through the desert night skies. They knew it was based at Nellis, Air Force Base, just north on Las Vegas. They knew about the secret hangar on the northeast side of Nellis where it was stashed during the day. They new it was being test flown over the Area 51 ranges at night by a secret unit known as "DET 30". They were even able obtain the classified squadron patch worn by the elite pilots who flew the Bird of Prey, (featuring the head of a bald-eagle intersected by a silver sword decorated with an oddly-stylized hilt) but they were never able to obtain a photograph.

Over the next few years there were rumors and rumbles that some day soon the Pentagon was going to come clean about the Bird Of Prey, and just when it seemed that an announcement was imminent, the aircraft and any information about it would vanish like vapor back into the black world from which it sprang.

Then suddenly last October (with only 24 hour warning) Boeing announced that the Bird of Prey (also known as BOP) was being revealed and unveiled in a ceremony at their St. Louis Plant.

The Stealthchasers were ecstatic. Finally they would have the pleasure of saying "I told you it existed."

Speculation ran wild about what the aircraft actually looked like. Was it one of those flying-black triangles that had been spotted flying over Groom Lake? Or was it The TR-3A "Black Manta" a super-silent battlefield recon aircraft sighted by Gulf War I veterans flying over Iraq? Or even possibly, could it be Aurora?, the holy-grail of secret aircraft, an almost mythical Mach-8 methane belching spyplane that triggers seismic sensors with its monster sonic booms and scares sheep and shepherds in Scotland, on a takeoffs (and approaches) to its' secret forward deployment base at Machrihanish?

Little did the stealthies know that the answer was staring them in the face. Only after the first officially released photos of the Bird of Prey were posted on the Internet did it become clear. The shape of the hilt on the Bird Of Prey patch matched exactly the aircraft's planform.

But as excited as the stealthies were about the acknowledgment of the Bird of Prey, they knew it was only a "one-of" and couldn't possibly account for all the sightings and the billions of dollars being poured into black projects.

For BOP was just another technology demonstrator, much like the boxy but stealthy Tacit Blue, a battlefield reconnaissance "proof of concept" vehicle built to prove to the Pentagon weapons procurers that it could be done. BOP is another example of gee-whiz American technology that could have lead to faster, stealthier and more lethal warplanes guaranteed to win the next big war or persuade an enemy not to start one.

So just what is out there? What's the buzz on black airplanes?
Let's start by looking at the fabled Aurora.

The hubbub about Aurora began in 1985 when budget watchers noticed in a Department of Defense Budget document, (under a line labeled as Strategic Reconnaissance) the DOD allocating \$80. million in FY 1981, and \$2.272 Billion (in FY1987) for a project called "Aurora". Since the Air Force had also recently announced that they were retiring their supersonic spyplane the SR-71 Blackbird, conclusions were that Aurora was the aircraft that would replace it.

But it wasn't just budget items that hinted at Aurora's existence. Soon after sighting reports of an incredibly-fast triangular shaped aircraft began to appear in the aviation press, some from credible aircraft spotters, like North Sea oil platform worker, Chris Gibson.

In 1989, while working as an oil drilling engineer, Gibson spotted what may have been Aurora flying in formation with several F-111s behind a refueling tanker. Gibson's report is all the more credible because he is a longtime member of the Royal Observer Corps and considered an expert on aircraft recognition. Gibson made a sketch of the unidentified aircraft and sent it to aviation researcher Bill Sweetman. Bill published the report in Jane's.

Soon after the North Sea sighting, civilian air Scottish air traffic controllers began tracking incredibly high-speed-blips on their scopes which would disappear near a joint American/Scottish Air Force special operations base at Machrihanish. Citizens in the area also reported great thunderous rolling booms echoing across the Mull of Kyntrre. Other high speed blips were tracked on radar screens near a rumored secret CIA base at Alice Springs Australia

In 1991, a series of booms called "skyquakes" began rocking cities in southern California. Dr. Jim Mori of the California Institute of Technology analyzed the booms and said "The booms came in twos, indicating a pair of aircraft on slightly different flight paths. The frequency and shape of each sonic wave differed from the Space Shuttle and indicated that a high-flying aircraft (about the size of an SR-71) flying at hypersonic speeds greater than MACH 3 and above 100,000 feet) across California and into Nevada. At the time the only SR-71s were on lease to NASA and on the nights the skyquakes were recorded none were flying. "

More sightings of high-speed black triangular aircraft proliferated from desert residents in southern California near aircraft military contractor facilities in Palmdale and Antelope Valley. Near a RCS facility in Helendale, California a huge aircraft resembling the 1960s North American/Rockwell X-B70 supersonic-bomber-prototype was spotted by a seasoned black aircraft enthusiast. He described the aircraft as having a flat tail section perfect for carrying and launching a parasitic aircraft from.

Then the "Pulser" sightings began. First over Washington state, then Colorado and finally Texas. This author was able to capture the first photographs of the strange "donuts on a rope" contrail this aircraft left behind.

Alerted by a sound I can only describe as the sky being unzipped, the Pulser (as it was dubbed by the aviation press) sped across the sky faster than any aircraft I have seen to date. By the time I was able to grab my camera and take a few shots, the craft was long gone only leaving behind it's unique signature contrail.

When the ripping noise were described and the contrail photos were shown to aviation engineers, they came to the conclusion that it was evidence of an experimental propulsion system known as a "pulse detonation wave engine" and could be capable of propelling a small craft up to Mach 24. A propulsion engineer at (then) General Dynamics remarked to me on the telephone, "Those bastards at the Skunkworks have done it. They've beat us to the punch."

At the not-so-secret black project test center known as Area 51, new, improved (and huge) hangar facilities were built. In just a few short years the size of the secret base more than tripled. Satellite photos revealed a sprawling complex with a super-long runway, perfect for landing and launching high-speed aircraft, but despite attempts of the stealthies to lift the veil of secrecy nothing but denials were ever issued by the Pentagon.

Stealthies and aviation experts hypothesized that the Pulser most likely could be lifted up to high altitude and then launched from a larger aircraft such as the XB-70 look-alike "mothership" seen near Helendale, mirroring how the D-21 drone was launched from the back of the SR-71.

John Andrews, the first stealthie (affectionately known as "Spy Emeritus) a designer for the Testors model company who was responsible for the first U-2 and stealth fighter models quizzed aerodynamic engineers and eyewitness on what this mother/daughter pair of secret aircraft would look like. Soon Testors released a pair of model kits dubbed the SR-75 Penetrator and XR-7 Thunderdart. Now considered collectors items, these models may have thrilled black project buffs but they greatly annoyed Pentagon insiders.

Soon steps were made from within the Defense Department to debunk the evidence. The USAF went so far as to hire experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Lincoln Laboratories) to discredit the skyquake evidence. They analyzed one of the seismic tracings recorded from Catalina island and in a report stated that the aircraft in question was a run-of-the-mill F-14 Tomcat on a flight test mission off the California Coast. This explanation didn't fly with the aviation press because according to an earlier study released by the USAF Flight Test Center , sonic booms emitted by an aircraft flying at 50,000 feet only extend about 25 miles from the point of origin. Some of the seismic sensors recording the sonic booms were located 80 miles inland. Besides the sonic signatures weren't classic sonic-boom "N" waves but rather a series of booms, rapid rolling booms unlike those of any conventional fighter aircraft.

Then Secretary of the Air Force, Donald Rice, went so far as to issue a blanket denial in a letter to the Washington Post. He said in the letter, " Let me reiterate what I have said publicly for months. The Air Force has no such program either known as "Aurora" or by any other name. And if such a program existed elsewhere, I'd know about it. -- and I don't. Furthermore the Air Force has never created or released cover stories to protect any program like 'Aurora' I can't be more unambiguous than that. When the latest spate of 'Aurora' stories appeared I once again had my staff look into each alleged sighting to see what could be fueling the fire. Some of the reported sightings will never be explained simply because there isn't enough information to investigate." Editor's note: I have contacted many of those who reported sightings of strange aircraft (their identities well documented in the press and they were never contacted by any Air Force Investigator.

Rice went on to say, "Other accounts such as the sonic booms over California, the near collision with a commercial airliner and strange shapes loaded into Air Force aircraft. are easily explained and we have done numerous times on the record." Editors note: Freedom of Information Act requests by this author can find no such records other than denials (in a letter in 1988) than an aircraft known as "F-117 Night Hawk" existed (note how the official name of the F-117 was split into two words to substantiate the denial). No records of any sonic boom investigations (other that the bogus Lincoln Lab studies) or inquiries into the "donuts on a rope" sightings were found.

So were these denials the end of Aurora story? Not hardly. Just prior to Rice's letter to the Washington Post, sharp-eared military-radio monitoring hobbyists intercepted a radio phone-patch to the Air Force Special Projects office.

On the 12th of October, 1992 at 2310 GMT, on the Mystic Star frequency of 6.812 MHz, a General was heard talking to an aide in the Air Force's Public Affairs Office saying " We need to develop a response to inquiries. The guts of this should be we that we have looked a the technical aspects of the sightings and what the logical answers for them are. You can quote Dr. Mori and then site the Lincoln Labs physics and the FAA's efforts to debunk the other incidents. Go through three or four of the sightings, take each one on and conclude with a paragraph that says the fantasy of Aurora doesn't exist."

They went on to discuss the Chris Gibson - North Sea sighting, "Someone saw something accompanied by three F-111s. The Secretary ants us to talk to McMann and say it was an F-117."

From 1995 until 2000 the sightings all but disappeared indicating that Aurora was probably an experimental "proof of concept" vehicle that just didn't prove itself, or was a too-expensive "one-of" silver bullet system trotted out only when needed. The last good daylight-sighting of an Aurora type aircraft came in 2000, when stealthies Meinrad 'Swiss-Mountain-Bat' Erberle and Steve 'AF2' Hauser witnessed a huge triangular aircraft taking off from Area 51. Meinrad who watched the aircraft depart through image stabilized binoculars described the aircraft as having a streamlines triangular planform, two massive-slightly canted tail fins and very large twin engine exhausts.

Air Force military insiders say the real designation for Aurora was "Brilliant Buzzard" and it launched a hypersonic unmanned reconnaissance probe from its back known as "Quartz." Pilots who flew Brilliant Buzzard were known as "Q guys."

From time to time, donuts on a rope contrails are still being reported by the stealthies. Leaks indicate that the Brilliant Buzzard is kept inside the huge hangar at Area 51, in flyable storage ready to do its duty in case if a national emergency should threatens the United States. Coincidentally, in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq, journalists in Baghdad reported hearing ear-splitting roars and sonic booms that rocked the city at night, no doubt heralding the storm to come.

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