

The truth is out there

Anthony J. Marolda

Most people have heard of Area 51. The legend is that this is the place where the federal government takes retrieved alien technology and bodies to be studied and dissected. It has been glorified in many movies, such as "Independence Day," and numerous TV shows, like "The X-Files."

One of the rumors is that captured UFOs are being reverse engineered there. That is, the alien technology is being investigated to determine exactly how it works. The objective would be to use that knowledge to create a similar craft for human use. Some people have claimed to have seen UFOs maneuvering around Area 51, presumably the captured alien craft that are being tested.

The truth is that the base in Area 51 is, and has been since the late 50s, a strongly guarded government facility used for the development and testing of top-secret U.S. aerospace technology.

The location of Area 51 is in Nevada, about 80 miles northwest of Las Vegas. It is part of the vast amount of barren, moonscape-like federal land in that part of the state. On the maps, all that land is divided into numbered areas. Formerly, the most well-known areas to the public were numbers 9 to 15. These were used as the nuclear test site where, up to the 1960s, nuclear weapons were detonated in deep, underground bunkers. Area 51 is shown on the maps adjacent to the test site, and contains a dry lake

bed named Groom Lake.

In the early 1950s, the CIA established its base in Area 51. It recognized that it needed a way to gather aerial intelligence over the Soviet Union. It wanted a plane that could cruise at 70,000 feet, out of reach, they thought, of Soviet defensive missiles. The agency secretly commissioned Lockheed's now-famous Skunk Works to design and build such a craft. The Skunk Works managers were given the responsibility for finding an appropriate place on government-owned land to test their design. They, not the CIA, selected Groom Lake in Area 51 for its isolation and topographical suitability to conduct the tests. The U2's inaugural flight was in August 1957. This was the first mission at, what was to become, the Groom Lake base.

The second major project at Groom Lake was the spy plane successor to the U2. The U2 was relatively slow, and as it turned out, not safe from Soviet missile technology, even at 70,000 feet. The Lockheed Skunk Works was once again secretly commissioned to develop a solution. They came up with the ultra-sleek A-12 Blackbird. A later, better known model with the same "Blackbird" name was designated the SR-71.

The super-fast, high-flying plane took over the Soviet spy flights in 1966. The A-12 flew too high, 95,000 feet, and too fast, over Mach 3 (or more than 2300 miles per hour), for the Soviet missile systems. So no Blackbird was ever shot down. Later, however, the capabilities of

advanced, satellite based, spy technology obviated the need for these aircraft. After 1999, most of them were relegated to museums.

As the Groom Lake base in Area 51 grew with other advanced development projects, the CIA did not have a large enough staff or the expertise to physically or administratively operate the site. Instead, they contracted a Boston-area company to take responsibility for the base. That company was Edgerton, Germeshausen and Grier Inc. (E.G. &G.).

E.G.&G. was formed after World War II by a group of scientists and engineers from MIT who were heavily involved in the Manhattan Project. The firm became a major contractor to the government for the nuclear weapons program. The CIA chose E.G.&G. for Area 51 because they were already operating the Nevada test site that was adjacent to Area 51 and most of their employees were technologically sophisticated and had top secret clearances. E.G.&G. set up its special projects division, based in Las Vegas, to manage the CIA contract.

My second job as a young physicist was with E.G.&G. My responsibilities involved working in laboratories in the Boston area where we simulated the effects of a nuclear explosion on various materials. The objective was to improve the design of the warheads on ICBMs to make them more impervious to enemy interference.

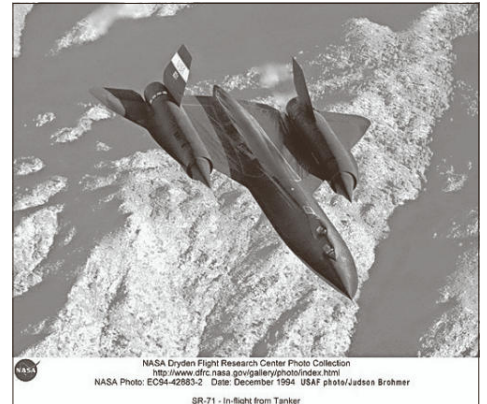
I never visited Area 51, but I did get to the special projects division headquarters and then the Nevada

test site that bordered on Area 51. I had an opportunity to visit the test site as some of my colleagues were spending a few months there preparing for an underground nuclear test.

When I arrived in Las Vegas, I checked in with the special projects division headquarters that managed Area 51. This was before the time when Area 51 became known for the popular stories about alien technologies, so I was not particularly curious about the place. Furthermore, although I had a top-secret clearance, I didn't have a need to know what was going on at the base. So, I didn't ask and they didn't tell.

But, in the last few years, many people who worked there have come out about what they did. One was Jules Kabat, who was an E.G.&G. special projects engineer, employed at Area 51 at about the time of my visit. Many years later he wrote about his two years at the secret base, apparently without violating his oath for confidentiality.

Kabat worked on the development of the A-12 Blackbird. His job, along with his colleagues, was to monitor the radar signatures of the Blackbirds as new materials and design modifications were made to improve their stealth capabilities. His office faced the main runway at Groom Lake, the official name of the Area 51 facility, so he would watch the Blackbirds' impressive take offs and landings. He did not report on seeing any signs of "alien technology" during his two years at Area



NASA photo

The SR-71 was developed at the site commonly referred to as Area 51.

51.

Several other engineers and pilots also discussed their jobs at Groom Lake. Their activities were related to the major developments in stealth aircraft. The F-117 stealth fighter was born here. As was the B-2 bomber. I saw a B-2 flying over Boston during one of the Esplanade concerts on the Fourth of July. It was easy to understand how people reacted if they saw it during its development at Groom Lake. It is a large, black wing, flying low and quietly. It was unlike any other aircraft I had ever seen. It would have been easily mistaken for a UFO if you didn't know better.

The talk of reverse-engineering alien technology may have also had its genesis in what actually happened at Groom Lake. Captured Soviet aircraft were brought there for reverse engineering and

testing. It was easy for conspiracy theorists to twist a leak of this type of activity at Area 51 to make it their own.

To this day, Area 51 remains an active Air Force base. In addition to the development of the stealth aircraft, the first lethal drones were tested there back in the mid-60s. More recent projects probably included the stealth helicopters that were used in the raid on Osama Bin Laden's home in Pakistan.

There is no evidence that the base is involved in anything "alien." Yet the rumors will likely continue as people spot test flights of the latest, most advanced, top-secret U.S. aerospace technologies. Most of these craft will not look like anything ever seen before. So, it is easy to understand how the rumors will start.

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