

1998

Dark-Eagles: A History of Top Secret U.S. Aircraft Programs

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Recommended Citation

Halyburton, Porter (1998) "Dark-Eagles: A History of Top Secret U.S. Aircraft Programs," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 51 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss1/22>

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with the dynamics of the military, it is a study of modern peacekeeping operations. In the end, Bolger succeeds in showing that “demilitarized” zones usually are not, and that “peacekeeping” operations are anything but. What he does not provide, however, is the scholarly analysis that his Ph.D. in history might have led readers to expect.

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Peebles, Curtis. *Dark Eagles: A History of Top Secret U.S. Aircraft Programs*. Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1995. 344pp. \$17.95

Through extensive research from a variety of sources, Curtis Peebles gives the reader a fascinating and informative look into the top secret world of “black aircraft.” He chronicles a dozen or so projects that produced such exotic planes as the SR-71 and the F-117, which were developed and first flown largely without public knowledge. The reason for all the secrecy was, of course, to keep foreign countries from knowing the extent of U.S. technological developments.

The beginning of the “black” projects came in September 1941, with the decision to build the first operational jet fighter, the XP59A, using the British Whittle engine. Wartime security demands by the British and American governments wrapped the project in the kind of secrecy and deception that was to be a model for later such projects. The Bell P-59 Airacomet was not successful as a fighter, but the Lockheed

P-80 was. The Shooting Star’s secret birthplace was the “Skunk Works,” the experimental design facility created by Clarence “Kelly” Johnson, Lockheed’s legendary chief designer. The Skunk Works, together with the secret test facility at Groom Lake, Nevada (nicknamed “the Ranch,” and also known as “Area 51”), produced a number of black aircraft that caught the public’s fancy once they were revealed, such as the U-2, SR-71, and F-117. Not all aircraft have made it to the production stage; those that did not are, therefore, less well known. Several of these, such as the D-21 Tagboard, were high-altitude unmanned reconnaissance drones. One of the more interesting current developmental efforts is to develop an “eternal” drone aircraft that will be able to stay aloft for months at a time using auxiliary solar power. Peebles predicts that such an aircraft, the Helios-SRA (Solar Rechargeable Aircraft), could become operational by 1998.

Curtis Peebles, a writer best known as an avid UFO debunker and the author of *Watch the Skies! A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth*, devotes most of *Dark Eagles* to the development of these and other projects, as well as to their operational history. The promotional material on the back cover claims, “Peebles dug out the facts through FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] requests, complemented with interviews of the people who designed and flew these revolutionary aircraft.” However, the forty pages of endnotes reveal that very little information really came from these sources; the vast majority was taken from more authoritative authors whose books and articles

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are well known to anyone who has read much in this field.

Throughout Peebles' narrative, he makes a strong case that the U.S. government and the companies involved have done a masterful job of keeping the very existence of each of the black airplanes a secret for many years. Isolated, inaccessible, and restricted facilities, small and compartmented groups, deception, and public denial were effective in maintaining secrecy. However, at the end of the book Peebles takes the other side of this argument, throwing down the gauntlet at the feet of UFO believers. He strongly doubts the existence of Aurora, the rumored hypersonic spy plane, because it is intertwined with the issue of UFOs and rumors of captured alien flying saucers. The only person who publicly claims to have seen Aurora also claims to have seen nine alien saucers, together with their crews, at a super-secret facility at Groom Lake. Peebles apparently feels compelled to discount the Aurora claim in order to avoid giving credibility to the alien saucer story. However, about the only "evidence" he offers for the nonexistence of Aurora is that the U.S. government continues to deny it, which is exactly what we would expect if we are convinced by the previous accounts in this book.

Peebles launches into full-debunk mode when discussing Aurora, but his credibility is hampered by his heavy reliance on an unidentified "private source" and various notoriously unreliable e-mail messages evidently downloaded from an America On-Line discussion group. However, in the end he switches sides again and makes a case that the secret projects continue. Thus he concludes that they "represent

technological breakthroughs that will gain for the United States an advantage over an enemy in any potential future conflict. The secrecy surrounding these projects is necessary. They must be hidden, they must be guarded by extraordinary means, as would any treasure." Perhaps Aurora is one of these.

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Martin, Tyrone G. *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides*. Revised edition. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997. 440pp. \$35

In 1980, when the first version of this book appeared, reviewers called it the definitive study of the U.S. Navy's most famous ship, written by a man who was its fifty-eighth commanding officer between 1974 and 1978. Seventeen years after the first edition, as *Constitution* set sail in Boston harbor for the first time since 1881, the Naval Institute has published a revised and expanded version of the book.

The new book is attractively designed and larger than the original. Unlike other writers about the ship, Martin has been evenhanded in examining *Constitution's* two-hundred-year career, giving a full examination of it during and after the War of 1812, as well as of the events leading up to it. The author has thoroughly tested his previous work in the light of some significant new evidence. In particular, he has been able to give a more detailed description of the preparation and building of the ship and has revised his accounts of its three most famous battles in the War of 1812.