

It's No Secret - Area 51 was Never Classified

By Peter W. Merlin

The U-2 prototype (Article 341) as it appeared early in its career epitomized the concept of elegant simplicity. The biggest secret about Area 51 is that it was never secret.

It's true. The "base that doesn't exist" has always been public knowledge. Construction of the airfield at Groom Lake, Nevada was announced by the government, and its existence has been repeatedly acknowledged by official sources. It has appeared on numerous unclassified maps produced by government agencies and contractors. Test Site insiders, government officials, military personnel, and the general public have, however, unknowingly conspired to perpetuate the myth that the existence of the base is a closely guarded secret.

Birth of a "Secret" Base

The origin of the Groom Lake test facility can be traced to the Central Intelligence Agency's Project AQUATONE that encompassed the development of the Lockheed U-2. Capable of flying at high altitude while carrying sophisticated cameras and sensors, the U-2 was equipped with a single jet engine and long, tapered straight wings. The CIA did not want to test fly the new aircraft at Edwards AFB or Palmdale (A.F. Plant 42) in California. For security reasons, a more remote site was required. At the request of U-2 designer Clarence L. "Kelly" Johnson of the Lockheed Skunk Works, project pilot Tony LeVier scouted numerous locations around the southwestern United States for a new test site.

Richard M. Bissell Jr., director of the AQUATONE program, reviewed fifty potential sites with his Air Force liaison, Col. Osmond J. "Ozzie" Ritland. None of the sites seemed to meet the stringent security requirements of the program. Ritland, however, recalled "a little X-shaped field" in southern Nevada that he had flown over many times during his involvement with nuclear weapons tests. The airstrip, called Nellis Auxiliary Field No.1, was located just off the eastern side of Groom Dry Lake, about 100 miles north of Las Vegas. It was also just outside the Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) nuclear proving

ground at Yucca Flat.

In April 1955, LeVier, Johnson, Bissell, and Ritland flew to Nevada on a two-day survey of the most promising lakebeds. After examining Groom Lake, it was obvious that this was an ideal location for the test site. It offered excellent flying weather and unparalleled remoteness. The abandoned airfield that Ritland had remembered was overgrown and unusable, but the lakebed was a different story. Bissell later described the hard-packed playa as "a perfect natural landing field ... as smooth as a billiard table without anything being done to it."

Kelly Johnson had originally balked at the choice of Groom Lake because it was farther from Burbank than he would have liked, and because of its proximity to the Nevada Proving Ground (later renamed Nevada Test Site). Johnson was understandably concerned about conducting a flight test program adjacent to an active nuclear test site. In fact, Groom Lake lay directly in the primary "downwind" path of radioactive fallout from aboveground shots.

Johnson ultimately accepted Ritland's recommendation because AEC security restrictions would help shield the operation from public view. Bissell secured a Presidential action adding the Groom Lake area to the AEC proving ground.

During the last week of April, Johnson met with CIA officials in Washington, D.C. and discussed progress on the base and the AQUATONE program. His proposal to name the base "Paradise Ranch" was accepted. It was an ironic choice that, he later admitted, was "a dirty trick to lure workers to the program." The U-2 became known as "The Angel from Paradise Ranch." The base itself was usually just called "The Ranch" by those who worked there.

In May, LeVier, Johnson, and Skunk Works foreman Dorsey Kammerer returned to Groom Lake. Using a compass and surveying equipment, they laid out a 5,000-foot, north-south runway on the southwest corner of the lakebed. They also staked out a general area for buildings and then flew back to Burbank.

On 18 May 1955, Seth R. Woodruff Jr., Manager of the AEC Las Vegas Field Office, announced that he had "instructed the Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Co., Inc. [REECo] to begin preliminary work on a small, satellite Nevada Test Site installation." He noted that work was already underway at the location "a few miles northeast of Yucca Flat and within the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range." Woodruff said that the installation would include "a runway, dormitories, and a few other buildings for housing equipment." The facility was described as "essentially temporary." The press release was distributed to 18 media outlets in Nevada and Utah including a dozen newspapers, four radio stations, and two television stations. This was, in effect, Area 51's birth announcement.

Watertown and the U-2

CIA, Air Force, and Lockheed personnel began arriving in July 1955, and the test site soon acquired a new name. During the 1950s, the site appeared in all official

documents as Watertown. According to some accounts, the site was named after Watertown, New York, the birthplace of CIA Director Allen Dulles. To this day, Watertown is listed as a member of Alamo Township in Lincoln County, Nevada.

In October 1955, a reporter from the Las Vegas Review-Journal requested a progress report on the Watertown project. On 17 October, Col. Alfred D. Starbird at AEC Headquarters issued a statement through Kenner F. Hertford of the Albuquerque Operations Office.

"Construction at the Nevada Test Site installation a few miles north of Yucca Flat which was announced last spring is continuing. Data secured to date has indicated a need for limited additional facilities and modifications of the existing installation. The additional work which will not be completed until sometime in 1956 is being done by the Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company, Incorporated, under the direction of the Atomic Energy Commission's Las Vegas branch office."

On 17 November, a C-54M transporting AQUATONE project personnel from Burbank to Watertown crashed near the top of Mt. Charleston, about 20 miles west of Las Vegas. Nine civilians and five military personnel were killed. There were no survivors. The accident was front-page news for several days in Las Vegas and Los Angeles. Officials told reporters that the plane was destined for the airfield at Indian Springs, but the commanding officer at Indian Springs told Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter Dennis Schiek that the C-54 was not expected there. Schiek speculated that it might have been heading to "Groom Lake, a top secret base ... some 115 miles northwest" of Las Vegas. "Spokesmen at the secret base confirmed the plane was missing, but said no further information could be given," Schiek added. Another article, two days later, stated unequivocally that the C-54 was "bound for the super-secret 'proving grounds within the proving grounds' - Groom Dry Lake."

In December, the Air Force completed the accident investigation. The unclassified report confirmed that the C-54 was "on a scheduled transport mission" to "Watertown Airstrip in the Nevada Proving Ground area." The report noted that in accordance with standard operating procedure, the aircraft and crew were "under the operational control of the Commander, Watertown Airstrip." Of all the numerous reports, statements, and supporting documents, only the Rescue Mission Report was classified SECRET.

At the direction of the CIA, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) drafted a press release regarding the U-2. It was part of an elaborate and flimsy cover story to conceal the airplane's actual mission: strategic reconnaissance. On 7 May 1956, NACA Director Dr. Hugh L. Dryden issued a statement announcing a program in which U-2 aircraft would conduct high-altitude weather research for the NACA with Air Force support while operating "from Watertown Strip, Nevada." The statement added that "USAF facilities overseas will be used as the program gets underway, to enable gathering research information necessary to reflect accurately conditions along the high-altitude air routes of tomorrow in many parts of the world."

On 19 December 1956, Robert J. Ericson was flying a U-2A at 35,000 feet when he suffered an oxygen failure. Ericson was forced to bail out over the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona. Air Force officials told reporters that the U-2 was "a civilian plane owned by the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics" and was engaged in "high-altitude research." The U-2 "was flying from Watertown Strip in Nevada," according to a spokesman at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque.

In 1956, the U-2 prototype (known as Article 341) was modified for a series of anti-radar tests called Project RAINBOW in which Lockheed technicians attempted to reduce the RCS of the U-2 using radar-absorbent materials. Another U-2, Article 344, was strung with piano wire of varying dipole lengths between the nose and wings of the aircraft to reduce the radar signature. These methods created extra drag with a resultant penalty in range and altitude. The U-2 aircraft modified under Project RAINBOW were known as "dirty birds."

During a RAINBOW test flight on 4 April 1957, Article 341 crashed, killing Lockheed test pilot Robert L. Sieker. Several days later, aerial searchers from Civil Air Patrol reported that the wreckage of the U-2 had been located in a valley west of Pioche, Nevada. News stories reported that "Lockheed said its mission was secret research on high-altitude turbulence."

On 1 May 1957, the AEC issued an information booklet called "Background Information on Nevada Nuclear Tests" to news media covering the Operation Plumbbob atomic test series. It noted that during 1955, "construction of a small facility at Watertown, in the Groom Lake area at the northeast corner of the Test Site, was announced. The area has been joined to the air closure space over the Test Site in which unauthorized aircraft may not fly, but it has not been made a part of the Test Site." Under the heading of "Watertown Project" it also reiterated earlier statements about the facility and included the NACA cover story. Specifically, it said that "U-2 jet aircraft with special characteristics for flight at exceptionally high altitudes have been flown from the Watertown strip with logistical and technical support by the Air Weather Service of the U.S. Air Force to make weather observations at heights that cannot be attained by most aircraft." So, this official government document not only mentioned Watertown by name, it also gave its location and described the U-2 operation. Only the "weather research" cover story was bogus and only just barely. Although the U-2's primary mission was reconnaissance, the airplane was actually used to collect weather data during training flights.

The early part of the Plumbbob nuclear test series at the Nevada Test Site caused some interruptions in activities at Watertown. Because the airstrip was downwind of the nuclear proving ground, Watertown personnel were required to evacuate the base prior to each detonation. The AEC closely monitored radiation levels in the Groom Lake area and tried to ensure that expected fallout from any given shot would be limited so as to permit re-entry of personnel within a few weeks. Air sample logs for Watertown were unclassified and the information was compiled in a database with sample data from various locations around Nevada and neighboring states.

The Groom Lake base had always been intended as a temporary facility. As testing

began to wind down and CIA pilot classes completed training, Watertown became a virtual ghost town. By mid-June 1957, the U-2 test operation had moved to Edwards AFB North Base and operational U-2 aircraft were assigned to the 4028th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron at Laughlin AFB in Del Rio, Texas. The Watertown facility was put into caretaker status.

Meanwhile U-2 aircraft at CIA detachments overseas prepared to deploy airplanes equipped with RAINBOW anti-radar materials. To obscure the true purpose of these configurations, the CIA provided the NACA with a cover story to release. Using the unclassified nickname THERMOS in place of the RAINBOW code name, the cover story stated that the airplanes were being used in "a data-gathering program designed to measure ... certain physical phenomena which could be affected by nuclear explosions." According to the statement: "Early experimental tests of this nature were conducted at Watertown, Nevada, in order that initial studies and early flight tests might benefit from the advice, guidance, and facilities of the Nevada Test Site of the AEC."

Watertown was back in the news the following month. On 28 July 1957, a civilian pilot was detained when he made an emergency landing at the Watertown airstrip. Edward K. Current Jr. had been on a cross-country training flight when he became lost, ran low on fuel, and decided to land at Groom Lake. Current, a Douglas Aircraft Company employee, was held overnight and questioned. The following day the Nevada Test Organization's Office of Test Information issued a press release describing the incident in detail, adding: "Nevada Test Organization security officials reported the incident to the Civil Aeronautics Board, which administers the air closure over the Test Site."

In August, the NACA released its second report on results of weather research using the U-2. The first had been issued in March, with no mention of the Groom Lake base. The second report noted that data "were obtained from 24 flights during operations from Watertown Strip, Nevada, between May 1956 and March 1957 with about one-half of these flights being made during the three-month winter season from December 1956 to February 1957." The NACA research memorandums were unclassified.

On 20 June 1958, 38,400 acres of land encompassing the Watertown base was officially withdrawn from public access under Public Land Order 1662. This rectangular addition to the Nevada Test Site was designated "Area 51." It is interesting to note that the boundaries encompassing Area 51 left nearly the entire northern half of the lakebed outside the perimeter. Part of the lakebed fell within the Nellis Bombing and Gunnery Range, but that still left one-and-a-half square miles of the playa on public land. It was easily accessible by unpaved roads from Tikaboo Valley and was frequently used by miners with claims in the Groom Mountains and by local ranchers looking for errant cattle.

Area 51, OXCART, and the Roadrunners

It may seem odd that the seizure of over 30,000 acres of land would take place as the need for a facility at Groom Lake was at an apparent end. Perhaps it was simply bureaucratic inertia. The wheels had been set in motion years earlier. At any rate, it

turned out to be a worthwhile effort.

As it became apparent that the U-2 would soon be vulnerable to hostile missiles, the CIA sought a successor that could fly higher and faster and be less visible to radar. Once again, Lockheed was selected to build a new reconnaissance aircraft. The CIA ironically named the project OXCART. Lockheed's new airplane was designated A-12, with the "A" standing for "Archangel." It was a sleek, powerful-looking aircraft with a long tapered forward fuselage with blended chines. A rounded delta wing supported two turbo-ramjet engines capable of boosting the aircraft to Mach 3.2 at altitudes in excess of 80,000 feet. Twin, inwardly canted tails, a sawtooth internal structure in the leading edges, and special composite materials contributed to a low overall radar signature. The airframe was constructed primarily of titanium.

The Lockheed Skunk Works team built a full-scale mock-up of the A-12 during the spring of 1959 for radar cross-section (RCS) tests to be performed by Edgerton, Germeshausen & Grier (EG&G). On 10 September, EG&G agreed to move its radar test facility to Groom Lake for security reasons. A special pylon was constructed on a paved loop road on the west side of the lakebed. The A-12 mock-up was moved from Burbank to Groom Lake on a specially designed trailer truck. On 17 November, an AEC spokesman announced: "Sheet metal workers needed at the Groom Lake Project 51 in the Nevada Test Site are constructing a butler-type building." The spokesman said that the building would be used to "house data reduction equipment for use by Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier in an Air Force program."

The announcement was made because of publicity generated by a labor dispute. The sheet metal workers union was upset because the contract had been negotiated without being let for bid. REECo, primary contractor for the AEC, "obtained a court order to force the union to provide half a dozen sheet metal workers for the top-secret project, then agreed to arbitration of the dispute prior to an injunction hearing in district court." An article in the Las Vegas Review Journal noted that Groom Lake "is ideally suited to secret projects because experimental aircraft can take off and land without detection from any outside point."

A secret test base was needed for the new triple-sonic A-12 spyplane, but the old Watertown airstrip was not suitable and the infrastructure for such a program was not available at Groom Lake. A new airbase would have to be built at great expense. At first, the CIA did not consider this a viable option. Ten U.S. Air Force bases programmed for closure were considered as possible alternatives, but none provided the required security and annual operating costs for most were prohibitive. Groom Lake was ultimately selected although it lacked personnel accommodations, fuel storage, and an adequate runway. Lockheed made an estimate of requirements for monthly fuel consumption, hangars, maintenance facilities, housing, and runway specifications. The CIA then produced a plan for construction and engineering.

The stage was now set to make Area 51 a permanent facility. On 15 January 1960, the N.T.S. Bulletin, an unclassified newsletter for Test Site workers published new Area 51 telephone numbers on the front page. The announcement included contact numbers for the Base Commander's Office, Security Office, and REECo. Base construction began

in earnest on 1 September 1960 and continued on a double shift schedule until 1 June 1964.

The essential facilities at "the Area" were completed by August 1961. New hangars and housing units were erected. Facilities in the main cantonment area included workshops, buildings for storage and administration, a commissary, control tower, and fire stations. By early 1962 a fuel tank farm was ready for use. Recreational facilities included a gymnasium, movie theatre, nine-hole golf course, and a softball diamond. The Area 51 softball team was called the 8-Ballers. The Bulletin Board, an unclassified newsletter published by REECo for NTS employees regularly posted articles about Test Site sporting events. Throughout the 1960s, headlines such as "Area 51 Wins Slow-Pitch Tournament" were common and many of the players were listed by name.

The prototype A-12 made its first flight in April 1962. Unlike the U-2, there was no official acknowledgment of the program and no cover story. As far as the public was concerned, the airplane did not exist. All 15 A-12 aircraft were initially based at Groom Lake, although some later deployed to Japan to perform reconnaissance flights over Southeast Asia. Lockheed pilots conducted most of the test work while CIA aircraft were operated by the 1129th Special Activities Squadron (Roadrunners).

Operational A-12 pilots built up hours while conducting flight tests. On 24 May 1963, the OXCART program suffered the first loss of an A-12. Ken Collins was forced to bail out when his airplane pitched and entered an inverted spin during a subsonic engine test sortie. The A-12 impacted south of Wendover, a town on the Utah-Nevada border. To preserve the secrecy of the OXCART program the CIA arranged for Air Force officials to tell the press that a Republic F-105 had crashed. The ruse worked. It effectively protected both the OXCART program and its connection to Area 51 from exposure.

In August 1963, an interceptor variant of the A-12, called the YF-12A, made its first flight at Area 51. Its existence was announced seven months later, but the public was told that the YF-12 was operating from Edwards AFB. Subsequently, two YF-12A airplanes were moved from Area 51 to Edwards to support that statement and ultimately provide a plausible cover for any sightings of OXCART aircraft flying over the western deserts.

On 22 December 1964, two new members of the A-12 family made their first flights. At Area 51, the M-21 "mothership" made its first mated flight carrying a D-21 drone. The flight took place in complete secrecy. The SR-71A, however, completed its maiden flight in full view of the public during a short hop from Palmdale to Edwards. The SR-71 would also serve as a cover for OXCART. It was, in fact, a better one than the YF-12 because it more closely resembled the A-12.

On 5 January 1967, tragedy struck the OXCART program. While returning to Area 51 from a routine training flight, Walt Ray's A-12 ran out of fuel and crashed 70 miles short of Groom Lake. Ray ejected, but failed to separate from his seat, and was killed. Air Force spokesmen told the news media that "an experimental model" of the SR-71 had crashed on a flight originating from Edwards.

Several A-12 airplanes were deployed from Area 51 to Kadana, Japan, for Operation Black Shield reconnaissance flights over Southeast Asia in 1967. The surviving airframes were retired in June 1968 and placed in storage at a Lockheed facility in Palmdale. The A-12 remained unknown to the public for 12 more years while the YF-12A and SR-71 became some of the most famous airplanes in the world.

Following the end of the OXCART program, project officer John Parangoski (writing pseudonymously as Thomas P. McIninch) wrote "The OXCART Story" for Studies In Intelligence, a classified CIA internal publication. In May 1971, an official at Air Force Headquarters sent a letter to the Director of the National Reconnaissance Office (an organization so secret that even its name was classified). He wrote: "I cannot concur with the CIA intention to publish subject story in a collateral security channel which will obviously be disseminated outside of NRO agencies." The official was particularly concerned that "the article exposes the existence of Area 51, ADP covert methodology, and names of individuals with extensive backgrounds in covert reconnaissance."

Certainly, covert methodology and names of intelligence personnel ("sources and methods," in intelligence community parlance) are sensitive issues. The existence of Area 51, however, was already widely known and publicly acknowledged. Ultimately, "The OXCART Story" was withheld from publication until the summer of 1982. By then, the existence of the A-12 had been declassified. A version of the article, with many names and all references to Area 51 deleted, was released to the public several years later.

Putting Area 51 on the Map

Over the years, Area 51 has appeared on numerous unclassified maps and documents. Some of these have been produced for internal use and others for the general public and news media. The existence and location of Area 51 were no secret and, following the 1958 land acquisition by the AEC, the new area was added to maps of the Nevada Test Site.

An unclassified NTS road map, produced by Holmes & Narver, Inc., was updated in January 1961 to include mileage between various points. One notation read: "10.3 MILES TO AREA 51" and was followed by the words "GROOM LAKE."

In December 1962, President John F. Kennedy visited the Nevada Test Site. While he was there, he toured the area where nuclear propulsion systems were being developed for spacecraft. An unclassified map of the Test Site titled "Visit of the President to the Nuclear Rocket Development Station, Nevada - December 8, 1962" shows Groom Lake and Watertown. The Area 51 boundary is shown (but not labeled) as an extension of the Test Site. There is, as yet, no evidence to indicate that Kennedy actually visited Area 51.

One map of the Nevada Test site produced in December 1967 by REECo shows the western edge of Area 51. The Area number is clearly marked and man-made features are shown in detail. The airfield and the dry lakebed, unfortunately, fall outside the edge of the map.

In 1969, the University of California Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory published a report on Archeological Investigations at the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada Test Site and Nuclear Rocket Development Station. It included two maps of the Test Site. One of these included the western edge of Area 51, clearly labeled, with an arrow pointing toward Groom Lake. A second map omitted the Area 51 boundary, but showed the historic route of the "Forty-niners" across Groom Lake and through the Test Site region en route to Death Valley.

Throughout the 1970s, the Atomic Energy Commission (later, Department of Energy) handed out maps of the NTS with public relations brochures and press releases. These maps showed how the Test Site was divided into numbered areas and included details of all the major facilities. The western half of Area 51 and west edge of Groom Lake were included, both clearly labeled. The main base and runways were just outside the edge of the map.

In March 1977, the U.S. Geological Survey published a report on Lithologic Logs of Selected Exploratory and Emplacement Drill Holes in Areas 2 and 8, Nevada Test Site. The unclassified report included an Index Map of the NTS., but without internal details.

A large, undated map of the Test Site fails to include the Area 51 boundary. There is, however, a road heading northeast that is labeled "Groom Lake AREA 51."

By September 1978, Area 51 had disappeared from maps of the NTS produced by the Department of Energy (DoE). The maps were nearly identical to earlier editions, but with updated information. Although the western edge of Groom Lake was still visible and labeled, the boundary of Area 51 and its number had been removed.

Ironically, a of the Pahrnagat Range quadrangle was produced by the Bureau of Land Management in 1978 showing more detail than any previous map. Area 51 was shown as an extension of the NTS boundaries. None of the areas within the NTS were defined or labeled, but roads and airfields were identified. The roads and runways at Groom Lake were illustrated in detail and the main runway was labeled "LANDING STRIP." Beyond the NTS boundaries, the land was shaded different colors to denote the Nellis Air Force Range (NAFR), public lands, and private holdings. The northeastern part of Groom Lake was still public land, accessible to anyone willing to drive the unpaved road from Tikaboo Valley.

The Department of Defense and the Air Force were apparently not consistently shy about the location of the Groom Lake facility during the 1990s. Around 1991, officials at Nellis AFB produced a set of photomaps of the entire NAFR using satellite images. The Groom Lake facility was plainly visible, in all its glory, at the center of the range.

Although most air navigation charts for the Nellis Range showed the dry lakebed, most did not include the airfield at Groom Lake. An exception can be found in . Produced by the Defense Mapping Agency in March 1992 (using data collected in 1990), this chart features an airfield symbol at the southern end of Groom Lake. It shows the runway pattern but does not include the airfield name, elevation, or runway length.

In November 1977, the first Lockheed HAVE BLUE low-observables ("stealth") technology demonstrator was delivered to Groom Lake. It was the first airplane specifically designed to be virtually invisible to radar. The single-seat jet looked like a faceted arrowhead with two inwardly canted tail fins. Its boxy, angular fuselage and wings contributed to its low radar cross-section or "stealth" characteristics. Two HAVE BLUE demonstrators were built. They were so secret that every time a HAVE BLUE was rolled out of its hangar, uncleared personnel at the base were sequestered to prevent them from seeing the aircraft. Both airplanes were lost in non-fatal accidents.

In March 1978, DoE Information Officer David F. Miller received an information request from Bob Stoldal, news director for KLAS-TV. Stoldal was seeking information about alleged "serious security leaks" regarding a classified airplane being operated on the Nellis Range. One of these "leaks" was the information that "Area 51 was a secret Air Force installation that has been hiding behind the NTS for years." Miller told Stoldal that "any information about Area 51 would have to come from the Pentagon." Stoldal proceeded with his "expos

of Area 51, claiming later that "informed sources" told him that a tape of his broadcast was studied by the government and that his phone had been tapped.

On 17 January 1981, the Lockheed test site at Groom Lake accepted delivery of the first SENIOR TREND Full Scale Development prototype (later designated YF-117A). Like the HAVE BLUE, it resembled a faceted arrowhead, except that the tails were canted outward in a "V" shape. The YF-117A made its maiden flight on 18 June 1981. Every YF-117A and production F-117A made its first flights from Groom Lake. The operational airplanes were later deployed to Tonopah Test Range. Air Force officials denied the airplane's existence until November 1988, but rumors of "stealth fighters" at Groom Lake and Tonopah persisted in the popular press.

A "stealth" technology demonstrator built by Northrop came to Groom Lake in 1982. Codenamed TACIT BLUE, it provided important data that aided in the development of the B-2 advanced technology bomber, AGM-137 Tri-Service Standoff Attack Missile, and the PAVE MOVER program (which led to development of the E-8 Joint-STARS aircraft). TACIT BLUE was the first aircraft to demonstrate a low RCS using curved surfaces. TACIT BLUE made a total of 135 sorties, with a final flight on 14 February 1985. The airplane remained a closely guarded secret for many years. Rumors of a secret Northrop stealth plane at Area 51, nicknamed "Shamu" because of its whale-like appearance, persisted until it was unveiled by the Air Force in 1996.

In March 1984 Lt. Gen. Robert M. Bond, Vice Commander of Air Force Systems Command, visited Groom Lake for two orientation flights in a YF-117A. Bond returned the following month for a similar orientation in a Russian-built MiG-23 fighter, one of a number of foreign aircraft tested at Groom.

On 26 April, he was killed while making his second flight in the swing-wing MiG-23. Bond apparently lost control and crashed on the Nevada Test Site. Because Air Force officials told the press only that it was a "specially modified test aircraft" and refused to identify the type, there was speculation that it could have been the rumored "stealth" airplane. Spokesmen confirmed that it had crashed within the boundaries of the NTS. Phil Pattee, writing for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, noted that a "portion of the site, known as Area 51, is used for top-secret military tests."

The Groom Lake facility has continued to serve as a haven for stealthy test aircraft. These have included such vehicles as the Lockheed SENIOR PROM stealthy cruise missile, Northrop AGM-137 Tri-Service Standoff Attack Missile (TSSAM), McDonnell Douglas/Boeing Bird of Prey manned technology demonstrator, and various unmanned air vehicles. All operational low-observable U.S. aircraft, including the F-117A, B-2, and F/A-22A, verify their RCS measurements on the range at Groom Lake.

Taking Area 51 Off the Map

Beginning in 1979, the Air Force "began actively discouraging, and at times preventing, any public or private entry to the Groom Range," according to an archeological reconnaissance report written by Ronald Reno and Lonnie Pippin for the Desert Research Institute in 1986. Air Force personnel claimed it was "in the interest of public safety and national defense." This was about the time the Air Force took control of the Groom Lake facility from the CIA. Not only were hunters and hikers excluded from the mountains north of Groom Lake, but also citizens with mining claims in the area. In 1981, the Air Force discreetly requested that 89,600 acres of land encompassing the range be legally withdrawn from public use. The process of approving this request took several years. It also resulted in a battle between the government, citizens, and various special interest groups (such as the Sierra Club). In the end, the government won.

By March 1984, according to Gary Paine in an article for Nevada Historical Society Quarterly, "government security units prohibited travel and controlled access along the Groom Lake road." It was no longer possible to visit the northeastern corner of the lakebed. In August 1984, the Groom Mountains withdrawal was approved subject to an environmental impact statement (EIS) and public hearings. Congress officially authorized the withdrawal in 1987, and the following year President Ronald Reagan signed legislation making the Groom Mountains part of the Nellis Air Force Range until 2003. None of the documentation (EIS, archeological surveys, etc.) mentioned Area 51 or the Groom Lake test facility.

The Groom Lake base received more unwanted publicity in 1994 as a number of former workers from the site sued the government. They claimed that their health had been damaged by inhaling toxic fumes from the burning of waste materials in open trenches near the main base. For four months after the suit was filed, the government denied the existence of the base itself. Finally, the government admitted that there was "an operating location at Groom Lake," but refused to provide a legal name for it on the basis of "national security" concerns.

Air Force secretary Sheila Widnall declared that the facility "has no actual operating name per se." This was partially true. Since the Air Force had taken control of the facility in 1979 they had not used the name "Area 51," but instead simply referred to the operating location as Detachment 3 of the Air Force Flight Test Center (DET 3, AFFTC), a remote arm of its parent unit at Edwards AFB. Attorney Jonathan Turley tried on behalf of the plaintiffs to get the government to provide a legal name for the site, but was stymied at every turn. Ironically, the answer may have been available the whole time. The DoE published Development of the Town Database: Estimates of Exposure Rates and Times of Fallout Arrival Near the Nevada Test Site in September 1994. It lists Watertown as a member of Alamo Township in Lincoln County and gives specific geographic coordinates.

The lawsuit forced the government to formally acknowledge the Groom Lake facility in order to keep its secrets. On 29 September 1995, President Bill Clinton signed Presidential Determination No. 95-45, which stated in part: "I find that it is in the paramount interest of the United States to exempt the United States Air Force's operating location near Groom Lake, Nevada from any applicable requirement for the disclosure to unauthorized persons of classified information concerning that operating location."

Invasion of the Saucer Men

The secret nature of the base has bred rumor and speculation among fringe groups that believe the U.S. government is hiding captured extraterrestrial spacecraft, or even aliens (dead or alive) at the site. Such stories have been circulating since at least the late 1970s. Starting in 1989, groups of UFO believers began to camp out near the Nellis Range boundaries near Groom Lake to watch for "flying saucers."

The quirky nature of these "saucer base expeditions" caught the attention of the news media. Print and television publicity coupled with stony silence and terse denials from the Air Force guaranteed that the situation would escalate. Air Force officials elected to simply deny the existence of the facility, or refuse to comment. This fueled public speculation, spawned new rumors, and attracted more news media. Camera crews from around the world descended on the remote and forbidding Nevada desert. A cottage industry soon developed to produce all manner of Area 51 souvenirs, videos, and visitor's guides.

The DET 3 security force, comprised of Air Force and civilian contractor personnel, worked overtime watching the watchers. A few people discovered that some nearby hilltops with a bird's-eye view of the secret base had been overlooked in the Groom Range land grab. Word quickly spread. Tourists were sometimes camped on the hilltops 24 hours a day for days at a time. Flight test operations and even ground activities had to be postponed or cancelled. In April 1995, the Air Force seized 5,000 more acres of public land to prevent civilians from viewing the base.

Conventional wisdom has it that Area 51 is so secret that its existence was not acknowledged prior to 1995. Generally speaking, most people believe that everything about Groom Lake is classified. This is clearly a myth. Documentary evidence proves that the Groom Lake facility has been officially and publicly acknowledged since its inception. Ironically, the mythical secrecy of Groom Lake has done the most to expose its secrets.

In an October 1987 article for the Las Vegas Review-Journal, Christopher Beall described Area 51 as "a place with a history of dark rumors and speculation, and a name that has even now become an object of folklore." This is exactly why Area 51 has so captured the public's attention. People love mysteries. The less that is known about Area 51, the more it can be used as a blank slate for the public imagination. "It's a perfect blackboard on which to write your dreams and your fears," said Popular Science editor Stuart Brown in a 1997 interview.

The news media has exploited this aspect of the Area 51 mythos by promulgating the idea that it is an officially "non-existent" facility. Print and television reporters have shied away from historic facts in favor of reporting the more sensationalistic rumors. Hypersonic spyplanes and alien bodies attract viewers and sell magazines better than stealth cruise missiles and electronic countermeasures ever could. As the fictional reporter said in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

The CIA took the right approach at the beginning. They (through the AEC) announced construction of the facility and even revealed that it was a test site for the U-2. They provided just enough information to satisfy the public's curiosity without revealing classified operational details about the U-2's mission. Only the fact that security surrounding the U-2 belied the innocuous cover story ("weather research") created additional speculation. During the OXCART program, there was no mention of the A-12 at all. The base, however, was given a plausible reason for its continued existence and growth. It was also treated as just another area of the Test Site and therefore retained its anonymity.

The Air Force, taking charge of the facility in the 1970s, took a more heavy-handed approach. They used anonymous security guards to close off access to public land, cryptically citing "national security." They refused even to acknowledge the existence of a facility that had been public knowledge for years. Such denials fueled public speculation and caused ordinary citizens to spend inordinate amounts of time trying to learn all they could about the history of Groom Lake. Serious researchers unearthed declassified and unclassified official documents, maps, and aerial photographs. Through simple sleuthing they have managed to "connect the dots" and learn details of many Area 51 projects. Modern technology has allowed ordinary citizens access to high-resolution satellite images that reveal the facility's growth over time, providing yet more information about the "non-existent" base.

Operational details of many of the projects that have taken place at Groom Lake are still classified, with good reason. It is, however, silly to deny the existence of a facility that is so well documented and clearly visible from public land. The Air Force is asking

