



The A-12 and Why Are They So Cool?

Most people, when shown a picture of an A-12 identify it as an SR-71", if there was any recognition at all on their part. But they would be wrong. Few are able to note the differences between the two craft at any distance, but the differences are significant.

The A-12 was born in absolute secrecy at the end of the 1950s to replace the U-2 which had become vulnerable to Soviet SAM defenses. Fifteen Lockheed A-12s were built.

Officially, the program was known as Oxcart, a misnomer if ever there was one. Since no self-respecting pilot wanted to fly something as un-sexy as an "Oxcart", Lockheed unofficially dubbed them "Cygnus", named after the constellation of Cygnus the swan.



Cygnus patch of the A-12 program

The choice of venue in which to test fly this state-of-the-art plane was simple. The CIA was already in place at Groom Lake, Nevada where it test flew the U-2. The first A-12 lifted off from Groom on April 26, 1962. This is absolutely amazing technology at the time that even today is still the fastest plane ever deployed for combat. Of the 15 A-12s that were built, 9 remain, scattered in museums across the country.

An SR-71 was nothing to sneeze at. It flew close to the same speed and height as the A-12, and seated two instead of the A-12's single, overworked occupant. But it just didn't have the same charisma as its sneaky black older brother. The SR-71 was publicly announced in late 1964, prior to its first flight. The A-12s had already been zipping around for two years! And although much remained classified about the SR-71, it was still very much in the public eye.

The A-12 program was just the opposite, hiding out at Groom Lake (with occasional overseas postings) until the program was finally closed down in June of 1968. The

burdens of running both the A-12 and SR-71 programs were just proving too costly. Besides, the Air Force wasn't too pleased that the CIA was in the spy plane business and wanted to keep all that Mach 3 stuff to themselves. But even though the project was shut down in 1968, the surviving A-12s were put in secret storage, and the project remained classified until 1981!



A-12 #60-6924 at the Blackbird Airpark in Palmdale, California



A-12 and SR-71(background), nose to nose. Note extra window behind canopy on SR-71

The following is a comparison gleaned from the exhibit placards for both the A-12 and SR-71A on static display at the Blackbird Airpark in Palmdale, California. There's been continual discussion among many aircraft fans as to just how fast or how high these things could go. If "official" inquiries are made, the answer is often "That information is still classified". Yet this data, quietly displayed on a street corner in Palmdale, is pretty close to the truth. After all, who's going to argue with Lockheed? Even so, certain atmospheric conditions could allow either of these craft to exceed their listed parameters slightly.

Lockheed A-12 vs. SR-71A: Spec Comparison

	A-12	SR-71A
Maximum Speed	Mach 3.35 at 85,000' (Estimated)	Mach 3.2 at 85,000' (Estimated)
Maximum Operational Ceiling	95,000'	85,000'
Maximum Unrefueled Range	2,500 miles	3,250 miles
Wing Span	55.6 ft.	55.6 ft.
Wing Area	1,795 sq. ft.	1,795 sq. ft.
Length	98.75 ft.	103.8 ft.
Empty Weight	60,000 lbs.	67,500lbs.

Gross Takeoff Weight	120,000 lbs.	152,000 lbs.
Sensor Payload	2,500 lbs.	3,500 lbs.

The numbers show that the A-12 was a little faster and could climb a little higher than the SR-71. It was, after all, a significantly lighter aircraft. Of course, the A-12 couldn't carry as much fuel, and its sensor payload was less, but an A-12 was spared the need for a 2-man crew. Overall, the two craft are more alike than they are different.



Give in to the dark side" ...Any plane that looks like Darth Vader HAS to be cool!

So, a summary of why A-12s are so cool:

- They could outperform an SR-71
- Their "nest" was Groom Lake (and anything from Groom is cool!)
- They were owned and operated by Spook Central, the CIA
- They were a secret until 1981
- Their design and fabrication was nothing short of genius (They came **before** the SR-71s)
- The only people who've flown in A-12s are **CIA pilots**. Congressmen (yuk!) have been given rides in SR-71s
- The two A-12 crash sites on public land have been found by the public, but remain shrouded in secrecy

[Declassified Memorandum: Comparison of SR-71 and A-12 Aircraft from 1967](#)

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