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Secret Projects, UFOs, and the Myth of the Forbidden Desert

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This book is a journalistic factual account of historical events, declassified programs, and publicly documented claims. Disputed statements and events that have not been conclusively established are identified according to the available evidence.

Prologue

Beyond the Last Warning Sign

Some places are mysterious because no one knows what happens there. Area 51 is different. We know a surprising amount. We know which aircraft were tested there. We know the names of pilots and engineers. We know the cover names, the accidents, the technical problems, and even details of how aircraft components were transported into the desert. Declassified documents describe programs that ranked among the United States' most closely guarded secrets for decades. Historians have reconstructed when particular aircraft arrived, when they first took off, and why Groom Lake was chosen in the first place. Yet we still do not know everything.

That is what sets Area 51 apart from so many other legends of the twentieth century. It was not a myth that somehow became attached to a secret military base. The base was real. The extraordinary aircraft were real. So were the extreme isolation, the cover names, and the men who died there. The study of foreign technology, including Soviet fighter aircraft, would also become part of the site's history. There was no need to

invent the fantastic. It was already there. At first, though, it did not involve spaceships.

In the spring of 1955, a small group of men went looking for a place where the United States could test an aircraft that, ideally, no one would see. Among them were the CIA's Richard Bissell, Air Force officer Osmund Ritland, and Clarence "Kelly" Johnson, the legendary chief engineer of Lockheed's Skunk Works. On April 12, they flew over Nevada.

Below them lay a landscape that seemed almost purpose-built for their needs: desert, mountains, military-controlled territory, and a dry lake called Groom Lake. Along its edge they spotted an old airstrip. They had found their site. There was only one problem. It was not theirs.

Contrary to their initial assumption, Groom Lake was not part of the Atomic Energy Commission's nearby nuclear test site. The way this problem was resolved says much about the project's importance. The CIA asked for the land it needed to be added to the government-controlled area. President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the plan. Around Groom Lake, an isolated complex began to take shape. It would eventually become famous under an unremarkable map designation: Area 51.

What they intended to develop there was almost absurd by the standards of its time: an aircraft capable of flying so high that American planners hoped Soviet interceptors and air defenses would be unable to reach it. Its cameras would photograph military installations from the stratosphere. Other equipment could collect electromagnetic signals. The U-2 was therefore more than an airplane. It was an airborne intelligence platform. Later missions would provide crucial information about Soviet missile installations, among other targets.

Before it could fly over the Soviet Union, however, it had to be tested somewhere. That somewhere was Groom Lake. Kelly Johnson knew it would be difficult to persuade highly skilled men to take jobs whose attractions consisted of heat, dust, isolation, and an obligation never to explain what they actually did. So he turned to marketing. The desolate testing ground became Paradise Ranch. Employees became “ranch hands.”

It was dark humor with a practical purpose: a welcoming name for a place that, as far as possible, was not supposed to exist officially. Paradise Ranch was only one of its names, however. Groom Lake.

Watertown. Watertown Strip. The Ranch. Later, Dreamland.

And finally, the designation that would become synonymous with government secrets around the world: Area 51. The concealment went much deeper than the name of the place. A historical CIA film about the U-2's development uses terms that now sound like something out of a spy novel. The aircraft was an "article." Pilots were "drivers." Groom Lake itself was "homeplate." The film even claimed that security at Watertown was tighter than it had been on the Manhattan Project. An airplane became an object, a pilot became a driver, and a secret base became homeplate. Language was part of the camouflage. Even the commute was secret.

The first U-2s were built in Burbank, California. But flying a top-secret reconnaissance aircraft across the American West to Nevada before it had even been tested was hardly an option. Instead, the aircraft were disassembled. A heavy C-124 transport carried the components to Watertown, where they were reassembled.

A daily air service eventually connected Burbank with the desert, carrying personnel and freight. Secret commuter flights would later become a defining

feature of life around Groom Lake. Secrecy came at a price. On November 17, 1955, a transport aircraft was flying from Burbank to Watertown. Bad weather covered Nevada. The aircraft struck Mount Charleston, northwest of Las Vegas. Fourteen men working on the secret project died.

For their families, the loss carried an additional burden: the men had worked on a program that could scarcely be discussed. Even in its earliest years, Area 51 was not simply a place of technological triumph. It was also a place where people died for projects whose true significance would not become public for decades. And the U-2 itself was far from a forgiving aircraft.

It had been designed uncompromisingly for altitude and range. Weight was cut wherever possible. Its unusual landing gear consisted essentially of main wheels arranged in tandem beneath the fuselage. Additional supports beneath the wings, known as pogos, fell away during takeoff. This made the aircraft efficient, but demanding to handle.

On August 1, 1955, Lockheed test pilot Tony LeVier was supposed to carry out nothing more than a high-speed taxi test. At about 70 knots, something happened that surprised even him. The U-2 flew. LeVier had not intended to take off. Suddenly, he was airborne above

the dry lake. The problem was no longer getting the aircraft into the air, but getting it back onto the ground. The featureless lakebed made it difficult to judge his height. On his first attempt, he touched down, bounced, and had to try again.

Thus, the flying career of one of the Cold War's most important spy planes began with a flight that was never meant to happen. Official flight testing followed a few days later. But Groom Lake's work was far from done. The U-2 was only the beginning.

As Soviet air defenses improved, the United States needed a successor. The resulting A-12 OXCART program called for an aircraft capable of flying at more than three times the speed of sound and reaching altitudes of approximately 90,000 feet. Engineers faced problems at the very limits of what was then technically possible: working with titanium, developing fuels and lubricants, navigation, life support, engines, and reducing the aircraft's radar signature. Once again, the work led to Groom Lake.

By 1959, more than two years before the first A-12 arrived, a dedicated radar test facility had already been established at the site. The reason mattered enormously. The next generation of American reconnaissance aircraft would need to do more than

fly higher and faster. It would have to be harder for enemy radar to detect.

Area 51 was beginning to evolve from a remote flight-test field into a laboratory for a new kind of warfare. Other programs followed: stealth, foreign radar systems, and eventually something that features far less often in popular stories about Area 51 than extraterrestrials do—actual Soviet MiG fighters.

During the Cold War, the United States acquired Soviet aircraft through various channels. Some were secretly examined and flown in the Groom Lake area. American pilots could learn how a potential enemy's aircraft really behaved, not from intelligence estimates, but from the cockpit. Declassified documents establish this role of the site, along with its importance to later stealth programs.

That is one reason the familiar question "What are they hiding at Area 51?" is too simple. A better question is: What have they hidden there over the decades? We now know that the answer changed repeatedly. In 1955, one of the great secrets was the U-2. In the early 1960s, it was the A-12. Later came other aircraft, radar techniques, stealth technologies, and foreign weapons systems.

What is being tested there today may not become known until people who have yet to be born are old enough to learn about it. This is the central paradox of Area 51. History has vindicated the skeptics: many sightings were caused by secret projects of entirely terrestrial origin.

Yet the same history has also vindicated those who distrusted official accounts: the government really was concealing extraordinary things. They were simply different things from the ones it was accused of hiding. That tension runs through the entire history of Groom Lake.

It helps explain why the claims of a man named Bob Lazar found such fertile ground in the late 1980s. It explains why people still gather at the boundaries of the restricted area. And it explains the difficulty that confronts every new denial.

At Area 51, things were denied, concealed, or protected by cover terminology that could, decades later, be documented. That does not mean alien spacecraft are parked there. It means something far more interesting: Area 51 has taught us that something need not be imaginary simply because a government refuses to discuss it.

But a claim does not become true merely because a government remains silent. This book occupies the ground between those two statements.

Part I

The Real Area 51

Chapter 1

The Place That Was Not Supposed to Exist

To understand Area 51, set the aliens aside for a moment. Bob Lazar, too. Forget flying saucers, crashed spaceships, and secret hangars. Go back to a time when America's greatest fear came not from outer space, but from Moscow.

In the early 1950s, the United States faced a fundamental problem: it did not know enough about what was happening behind the Iron Curtain. How many long-range bombers did the Soviet Union actually possess? How far had its missile program advanced? Where were its strategic installations? Which targets would have to be attacked in a war? And perhaps most important of all, was Moscow preparing an attack?

Satellite reconnaissance as we know it today did not yet exist. Human agents could provide only fragments of the picture. Conventional reconnaissance aircraft risked being shot down and provoking a political crisis. Washington needed eyes over the Soviet Union, at an altitude where no one could reach them.

That need produced AQUATONE, the secret CIA program that gave rise to the U-2. The Air Force used OILSTONE as the designation for its related involvement. Under Kelly Johnson, Lockheed's Skunk Works was to build an aircraft tailored radically to a single task: fly as high as possible and collect intelligence from there. Choosing the test site was therefore no minor consideration.

A secret aircraft could remain secret only if no one watched its test flights. On April 12, 1955, Bissell, Ritland, and Johnson boarded a small Beechcraft with Lockheed's test pilot and flew over Nevada. The region had already been shaped by America's atomic program. At the neighboring Nevada Proving Ground, the Atomic Energy Commission had tested nuclear weapons. This offered more than remoteness.

Nuclear testing had created a landscape that was already controlled, monitored, and largely inaccessible to the public. Existing security arrangements could be used. Supplies for Watertown could be routed through AEC channels. Even the area's radioactive history provided an additional psychological barrier. A CIA film about the project later explicitly noted that the visible aftermath of earlier nuclear tests discouraged

curious visitors. Area 51 had not been built at some arbitrary point in the desert.

It took shape beside one of America's most secretive and dangerous government complexes because that complex offered ideal cover. This was no coincidence. It was an infrastructure of secrecy. Groom Lake's isolation, however, was only part of its appeal.

The dry salt lake itself was a gift to aircraft designers. Its vast, largely level surface offered something whose value in testing experimental machines is difficult to overstate: room. A great deal of room. A pilot who ran into trouble in an unproven aircraft did not have to rely solely on a narrow paved runway. That was especially valuable for an aircraft like the U-2.

The U-2 was not an ordinary airplane that simply flew higher than others. It was a radical engineering compromise. Its exceptionally long wings looked more like those of a glider than a military reconnaissance aircraft. Weight was the enemy. Johnson's designers removed everything that was not essential to the mission. The aircraft's performance came directly from its extreme specialization. Yet specialization almost always brings vulnerabilities.

The U-2 could reach altitudes that were extraordinary in the mid-1950s. Up there, however, it entered an

aerodynamic regime in which the margin between “too slow” and “too fast” was alarmingly narrow. Pilots came to know that region as coffin corner.

Too little speed risked a stall. Too much could also produce dangerous aerodynamic effects. As altitude increased, those limits drew closer together. The pilot might be operating within a band only a few knots wide. A mistake did not have to be large. It only had to happen at the wrong moment.

Testing such an aircraft at a site whose dry lakebed amounted to an enormous natural emergency landing area was invaluable. The lake offered another advantage as well. From the outside, Groom Lake looked like almost nothing at all. That was precisely the point.

A Town for Men with No Workplace

In political memoirs, secrecy often sounds abstract. Files are classified. Documents are redacted. Employees sign nondisclosure agreements. At Groom Lake, secrecy had to be lived. People had to sleep, eat, and shower. Aircraft needed maintenance. Fuel had to be stored, spare parts obtained, runways built, fires put out, injuries treated, communications established, and garbage removed.

All of this had to support a project about which participants were supposed to know as little as possible beyond their own narrowly defined responsibilities. From the outset, Area 51 was more than an airfield. It was an experiment in organization.

Kelly Johnson understood early on that secrecy works only if the people expected to maintain it can work under reasonably tolerable conditions. The first conditions were anything but comfortable. Accommodations had to be provided, services established, and infrastructure expanded. The site gradually changed from an abandoned strip of desert into a small, secret settlement. A remarkable parallel world emerged.

A man could tell his family in California that he was leaving for work, board an airplane, and a few hours later stand in a place whose purpose he was not allowed to explain at home. His family might know which company employed him. They might know his work mattered. Exactly what he did was another question.

This social dimension of secrecy is often overlooked in popular accounts of Area 51. Secrets are not made of concrete hangars and barbed wire. They depend on

people who keep quiet. The larger a secret program becomes, the harder that silence is to maintain.

Groom Lake therefore developed a principle that would become characteristic of American black projects: compartmentalization. Not everyone needed to know everything. A mechanic needed to know his aircraft. A radar specialist needed to understand his measurements. A cook needed to prepare meals. The cook did not need the U-2's technical specifications.

Even an engineer did not necessarily have to know about every intelligence operation in which the aircraft he worked on would eventually be used. The secret was divided up. Each person received a piece. Only a few saw the whole picture.

This principle matters when we come to examine the most spectacular claims about Area 51. One of the most familiar arguments against large secret programs is that thousands of people could never keep something like that secret. That is a fair objection if thousands of people know the same secret. Modern classified programs are organized differently for precisely that reason.

Thousands of people can work on a project without thousands of people knowing what the overall project actually is.

Names for the Invisible

Language, too, was compartmentalized. Groom Lake acquired several designations, some used simultaneously or in different contexts. Watertown was one of the early names. Why Watertown? For years, it was linked to CIA Director Allen Dulles and Watertown, New York. The explanation now published by the CIA is more prosaic: when rainwater from the surrounding mountains flooded the dry Groom Lake, project officials referred to the “Watertown Strip.” This detail illustrates how easily plausible but mistaken explanations can take root around a secret location. Paradise Ranch, or simply The Ranch, served a different purpose.

Kelly Johnson wanted to make the location sound more appealing to employees. A hot, isolated desert base became, in words at least, a ranch in paradise. It was almost absurd. That was part of why it worked. Other names appeared later. “Dreamland” was introduced as a radio call sign for the area only in the late 1960s, replacing “Yuletide.” Aviation enthusiasts would eventually make the name familiar far beyond its original use. Then there was Area 51.

The name most famous today had a remarkably mundane origin. The site stood in a landscape divided

into numbered areas for administrative and mapping purposes. There was no mystical 51, no secret code for alien technology. It was a number. Such ordinariness is typical of classified programs. The most spectacular projects often carry the dullest labels. Yet this is where one of the story's most fascinating developments begins. An administrative designation became a brand.

Today, a movie poster needs only the number 51, a warning sign, and a desert landscape for millions of people to understand the reference. Few military facilities anywhere in the world have comparable cultural recognition. The Pentagon symbolizes American military power. Fort Knox means gold.

Area 51 stands for what we are supposedly not being told. That reputation came later, however. In the 1950s, the goal was exactly the opposite. No one was supposed to take an interest in Groom Lake.

Chapter 2

The Airplane That Produced UFOs

One of the great ironies of Area 51's history is that an aircraft designed to avoid being seen helped generate UFO reports. The U-2 flew high. Very high. Its exact capabilities were classified, but its operating altitude was far above the levels at which ordinary airliners of the time flew.

For an observer on the ground, this could create a strange effect. While darkness was falling below, an object flying at great altitude could still be in sunlight. It could therefore shine brightly against a darkening sky.

Anyone looking up in the mid-1950s also had a very different sense of what technology could do from someone looking up today. A modern airliner at high altitude is unremarkable. Contrails are an everyday sight. Satellites cross the sky as points of light. The International Space Station can be seen with the naked eye. In 1955, this visual world was still new.

An object flying at extreme altitude could therefore genuinely be unidentified without being extraterrestrial. This is where the story becomes

complicated. CIA historians later wrote that U-2 flights, followed by OXCART flights, could account for a substantial share of UFO reports from that period. One official historical account even cited a figure of more than half of the reports during certain periods. That claim has been repeated frequently ever since. It deserves careful handling.

It does not mean that “more than half of all UFO sightings were U-2s.” It comes from a retrospective intelligence assessment and concerns reporting patterns and the role of secret high-altitude programs. It does not allow every individual sighting to be matched conclusively to a flight. Even so, the connection is striking. The government developed secret aircraft. People saw unusual things. They reported them. The Air Force investigated UFO reports.

Those within the system who knew what might have been observed could not disclose the real explanation. This created a paradox: keeping a true explanation secret made a false explanation more believable.

Project Blue Book and the Secret Behind the Secret

For years, the U.S. Air Force investigated UFO reports through various programs. The best known was Project Blue Book. To the public, this suggested that the government was trying to determine what was in the