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Jack Anderson

A Super Flying and Spying Machine

One of America's most spectacular spies of the 1980s will be a high-flying machine called the TR1. Like the super-snoopers before it, the TR1 is a product of the legendary Lockheed aircraft plant, nicknamed "The Skunk Works."

In his secret annual report to Congress, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger wrote glowingly: "A new era in tactical reconnaissance began with the production of the first of 35 TR1 aircraft in June 1981."

What is this wonderful flying machine that has so impressed the defense secretary? My associate, Dale Van Atta, has obtained several secret Pentagon reports that detail the astonishing capabilities of this newest spy-in-the-sky.

The TR1 is essentially a bigger and better U2, the CIA spy plane that had its cover embarrassingly blown when the Soviets shot down Francis Gary Powers back in May 1960. The TR1's wingspan is 104 feet; its length, 63 feet. Though it cruises at a relatively plodding 430 miles an hour, it will have "Stealth" technology to foil enemy radar.

What really excites the Pentagon is the TR1's payload capacity. It can carry more than a ton of sophisticated sensors for more than 3,000 miles at an altitude of 70,000 feet.

The TR1, Weinberger says in his report, will "be able to survey the battlefield out to 100 nautical miles, spotlight specific targets out to 60 nautical miles, and provide limited moving target indicator capability."

The one-man plane will give the theater commander "24-hour, all-weather coverage of the battlefield," Weinberger writes. By this he is referring to tactical reconnaissance for a conventional war—in Europe, say—rather than the strategic reconnaissance provided by the U2 and another Lockheed plane, the SR71.

Unlike the U2, which specialized in wide-angle photography, the TR1 will also have "ears" to detect and target enemy radar and other electromagnetic emitters.

Actually, the TR1 is merely the centerpiece, the most glittering jewel, in a Defense Department program with the acronym TIARA—for Tactical Intelligence-Related Activities.

Besides the new TR1, TIARA calls for modernization of five other aircraft, including the remarkable SR71, nicknamed the "Blackbird."

Believed to be the world's fastest and highest-flying plane, the SR71 reaches more than three times the speed of sound at 80,000 feet or more.

Obviously, the Blackbird is hard to shoot down, or, as a Pentagon report puts it, the SR71 "is the most survivable U.S. platform for manned overflight of highly defended areas." In fact, since it began flying over Cuba, Vietnam, China and elsewhere in the 1960s, the SR71 has survived more than 900 attempts to shoot it down. Only one such attempt, by a North Korean missile team in August 1981, was ever made public.

The Blackbird can see and hear with its sensors at night and in all kinds of weather.

In one way or another, the design and capabilities of the U2, the SR71 and the TR1 can all be traced back to the brain of one of aviation's superstars, Clarence "Kelly" Johnson, who will be 73 next month. Johnson, Lockheed's former chief designer, still dabbles in the field. The U2s, in fact, were known in Burbank and Langley as "Kelly's Angels"—a tribute to the thousands of superb photographs of the Soviet Union they brought back from the heavens.

It should be noted that, notwithstanding

Weinberger's delight with his sparkling TIARA, not everyone in the intelligence community thinks the new TR1 is such hot stuff, or that the improved U2 and SR71 will satisfy the military's needs in the future.

According to one top-secret review of tactical intelligence requirements, the United States should be aiming for "the development of a long-endurance (up to two days), high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft."

The secret report added this warning:

"The TR1 program should not be seen as a substitute for a new reconnaissance aircraft, inasmuch as TR1 is essentially a slight upgrade of the obsolete U2. In the same area, the [Pentagon] should review the feasibility of a follow-up on SR71 type aircraft, perhaps developed to fly in the hypersonic (Mach-5 or above) range as an atmospheric skimmer. This system should also be examined for its potential use against ballistic missiles."

But beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Cap Weinberger is obviously dazzled by the TR1.