

A Times Mirror Magazine

Popular Science

Secret Air Base

The government
doesn't want
you to know

what's going on at Groom Lake,
Nevada. Officially, the facility that
developed the U-2 & SR-71
Blackbird spy planes doesn't
exist. In fact, it continues to expand,

and now the Air Force wants to grab 4,000
acres of public land to keep curious civilians away. Are
there shadowy projects underway that citizens have a
right to know about?



MARCH 1994
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Searching
for the
SECRETS
of
GROOM
LAKE

The Air Force wants to close off 4,000 hill-top acres of public land overlooking a remote, secret air base. So what's really going on there?

BY STUART F. BROWN

From the top of White Sides Mountain in southwestern Nevada, hikers with powerful binoculars peer down at a vast, dry lake bed 12 miles away. At one end of the lake stands a complex of hangars, barracks, and antennas, clustered next to the world's longest paved runway. Something big goes on down there, and at night the base lights up like Broadway.

According to Federal Aviation Administration pilots' charts and U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps, this air base doesn't exist. It's only a

STUART F. BROWN



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This 10-minute exposure begun at midnight shows Groom Lake illuminated by moonlight last spring, when heavy rains had partially flooded the lake bed. Red and blue runway lights are visible in front of the brilliantly lit hangars. The Nevada map below indicates the facility's location.

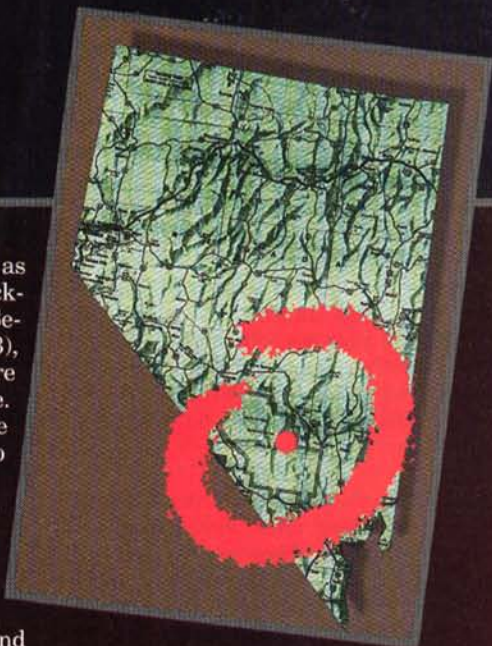
featureless dry expanse called Groom Lake, in the remote Emigrant Valley between jagged mountain ranges situated some 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

The place has many nicknames: Dreamland, The Ranch, The Box, Wattertown Strip, The Pig Farm. Old government maps list it as Area 51. Officially, the only way the base can be described within the armed forces is as "a remote test facility"; even civilians working for military contractors are forbidden to mention the fact that it's in Nevada.

Despite this information blackout, Groom Lake has become a magnet for hundreds of people curious about un-

acknowledged flying objects, such as the alleged hypersonic spyplane nicknamed Aurora ("Out of the Black: Secret Mach 6 Spyplane," March '93), and other sky gazers who seek more exotic craft: UFOs from outer space. One unofficial observer of the scene even publishes a "viewer's guide" to the area.

Enough is enough, the Air Force has decided. It wants to shut down the vantage points of the "watchers" keeping an eye on Groom Lake from adjacent public lands administered by the federal Bureau of Land Management. Last September, Air Force Secretary Sheila Widnall requested control over nearly 4,000



acres of BLM land. Widnall cited the need for the "safe and secure operation of the activities on the Nellis Range Complex," a military reservation that covers much of southern Nevada and includes the secret base.

POPULAR SCIENCE recently wrote to Widnall, requesting permission to visit Groom Lake. We proposed to give the public a reasonable overview of the defense research the government conducts there, without jeopardizing the security of sensitive technologies. Air Force Colonel Douglas J. Kennett at the Pentagon responded: "While we may all agree the Cold War is over, I think we can also agree that this nation must continue to maintain tight security on certain military projects."

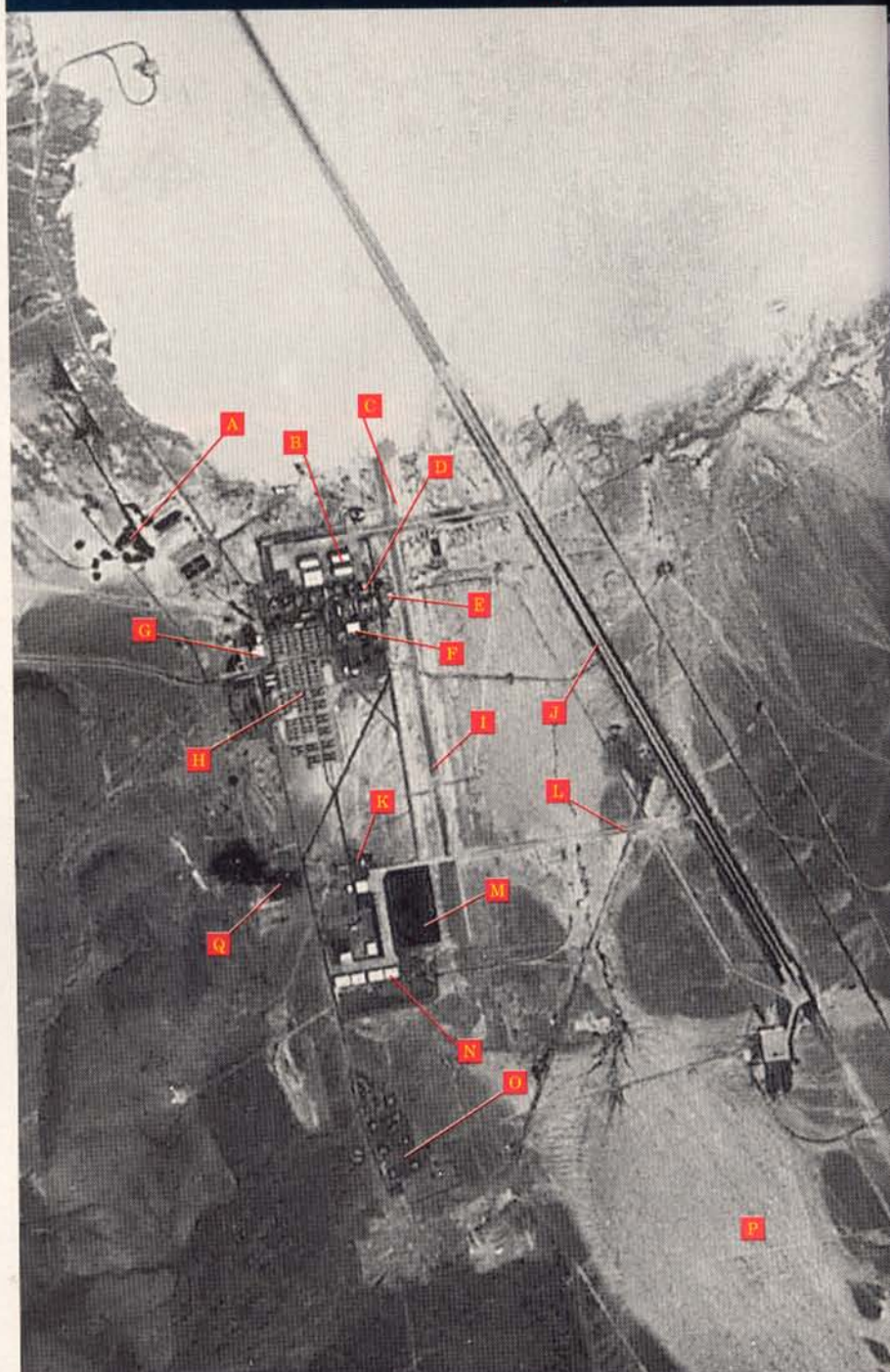
Representative Robert S. Walker, vice chairman of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, has a different view: "We now have a reshaped world. When we had a super-power confrontation, it made sense to run the programs the way we ran them. Now, we ought to reexamine how we handle 'black' programs. It makes little sense to withhold technology from public entrepreneurship, if in fact it allows us to leapfrog the rest of the world."

A congressional source with the highest level of security clearance, who has visited Groom Lake several times, believes that a mysterious technology development effort has been underway for years. "This is not part of the official program of the U.S. government," although aircraft are being tested and flown at government ranges, according to the source. "I think this is some sort of intelligence operation, or there could be foreign money involved.... It's expensive, and is immune to the oversight process. This defrauds the American government and people. You go to jail for that."

The tract of land the Air Force wants is shaped like a voting district carved into an improbable checkerboard by gerrymandering politicians. Its patchwork outline results from the military's wish to grab the hilltops without approaching a 5,000-acre threshold that would require an attention-getting congressional hearing. The final decision will be made following a public hearing to be held early this year.

In spite of a formidable ring of security extending onto public land well beyond the perimeters of the base, determined and technologically savvy campers continue to visit the area. One group of watchers who dog the site call themselves the Dreamland Interceptors. They come from many walks of life, but share three key atti-

The Buildup of a

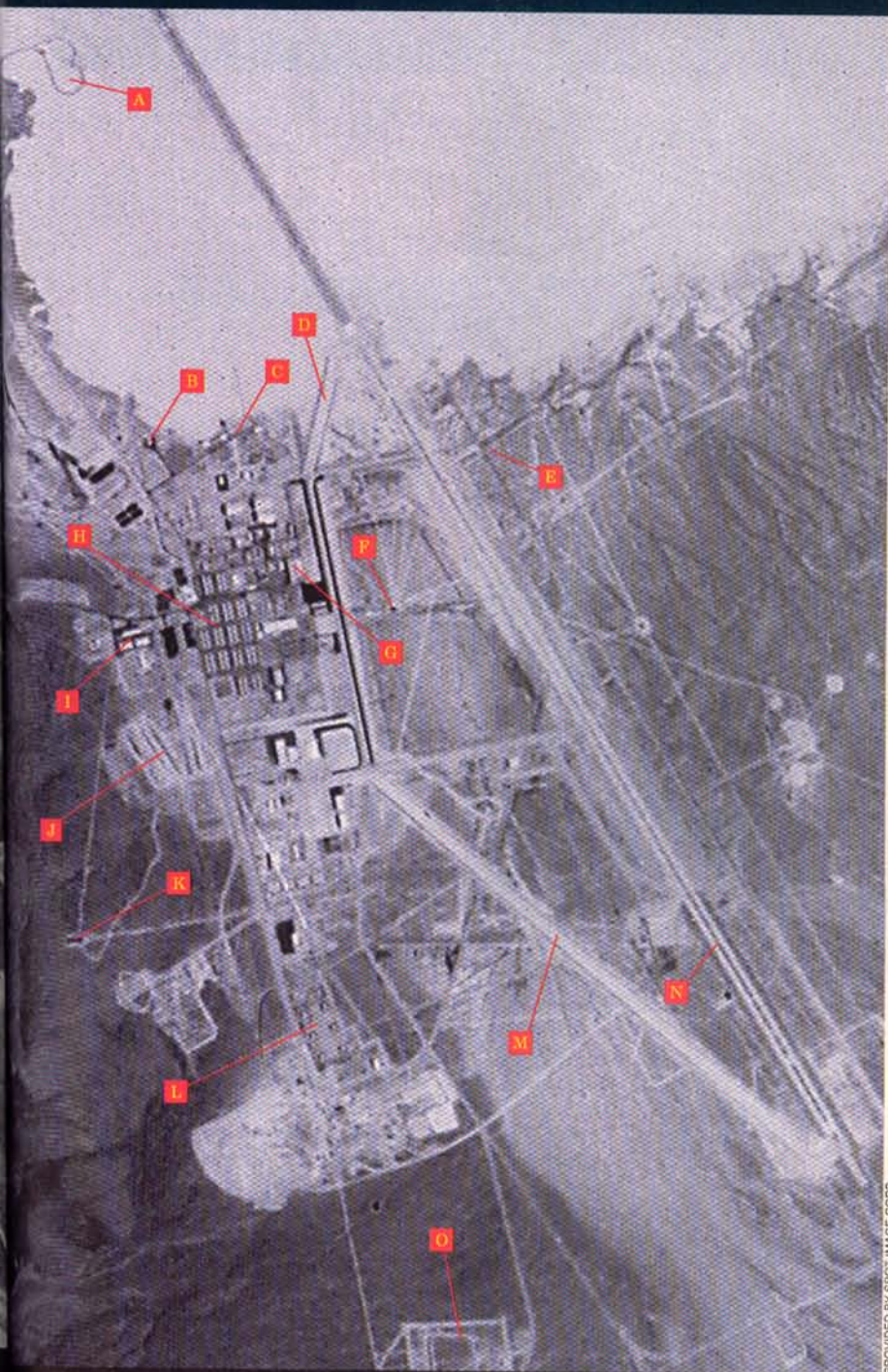


1968 U.S. Geological Survey photo

An aircraft flying at medium altitude took this photo of the Groom Lake base on August 28, 1968. Hangars are visible for U-2 and A-12 Blackbird spyplanes that were tested and operated from the facility. The original U-2 runway was built in 1955. The long main runway extending onto the dry lake bed was a later addition.

A: Old base golf course. B: Hangars for A-12 Blackbirds and Russian MiGs. C: B-52H bomber/D-21 drone mating area. D: U-2 hangars. E: Old control tower. F: Dining hall. G: Base barroom. H: Base housing. I: Original U-2 flight test runway. J: Main runway. K: Hangar for T-38 chase planes and experimental Northrop "Shamu" stealth jamming plane. L: "Scoot and hide" folding covers to protect secret aircraft from aerial observation. M: Aircraft parking area for Lockheed transports. N: A-12 Blackbird hangars. O: Fuel tank farm. P: A-12 Blackbird #125 crash site. Q: Clouds of smoke from burning dump area.

Secret Air Base



1988

Russian satellite photo

A Russian spy satellite took this commercially available photo of Groom Lake on July 17, 1988. Changes apparent over 20 years include new taxiways and extension of the main runway's paved surface to 18,000 feet. It has since been lengthened to 27,000 feet to accommodate high-speed test aircraft.

A: Aircraft radar cross-section test area. B: Base security building. C: Stealth evaluation radar complex. D: Taxiway. E: Crash site of F-117A #785, the first production aircraft, on its first flight. F: Control tower. G: Flight operations center. H: Modernized base housing. I: Heavy-construction equipment garages. J: Waste incineration trenches. K: Cryogenic liquid methane or hydrogen fuel storage. L: Fuel tank farm. M: Taxiway. N: 18,000-foot paved runway; current paved length is 27,000 feet. O: Highly secured compound; purpose unknown.

tudes: military aircraft—particularly secret ones—are fascinating; more knowledge about what tax money buys is better than less; and cheap aluminum lawn chairs are essential equipment when you're spending a day or two perched on sharp rocks.

I joined an Interceptor mission to Groom Lake last March. The squad included off-duty California police officers, a former test pilot, a model-airplane designer, a political activist, and Jim Goodall, a veteran chaser of secret, or "black," airplanes. Unfazed by authoritarian bluster, Goodall has established a long track record along the perimeter fences of desert air bases. He was one of the first to snap photos of the then-secret Lockheed F-117A stealth attack planes when they were covertly operating from the Tonopah Test Range about 80 miles northwest of Groom Lake.

Another member of the band was John Andrews, who designs spyplane models as product developer at Testor Corp. (see photo). Andrews created a surprisingly accurate model of the Lockheed U-2 spyplane in the late 1950s when it was unknown to the public, and again made waves in 1986 with his F-19 stealth plane, the best-selling plastic model kit in history. Although the F-117A turned out to look different from Andrews' model, the science behind the model's design was sound. The F-19 caused alarm in the secret airplane world because its radar cross section was found to be quite small.

Ben Rich, retired president of Lockheed's Skunk Works, which built several of the aircraft Goodall and Andrews pursue, views the pair as patriotic gadflies. "The government security people hate those guys. But I admire them. They're persistent. They dig. And they sit on top of the mountain. I think they're the Ross Perots of the airplane world," he says.

Unpacking our camping gear below the mountain, we notice two unmarked, beige security vehicles parked half a mile away in either direction. The drivers observe us with binoculars, moving to keep us in view. We peer back through our binoculars, watching them watch us.

"The sheriff will be here in about 45 minutes," Goodall announces. "The security guys will have called on the radio by now." Etiquette calls for chatting with the sheriff before we head up the hill. He is required to respond to the call, and there's no point in making him waste time climbing or waiting for us to come back down. In the meantime, we savor the air show provided by thundering F-15s, F-16s, B-

PROVIDED BY SPOT IMAGE CORP.

Grabbing The High Ground

The tract of land the Air Force wants under military control (red) is a patchwork that includes all the high ground near Groom Lake.

GROOM LAKE AIR BASE

CRISIS CORNER

FREEDOM RIDGE

WHITE SIDES

SUPPLEMENTAL HILLS

IAN WORRPOLE



Model designer John Andrews of Testor Corp. believes the code name Aurora denotes not one secret spyplane, but a system comprised of two or more aircraft. Andrews' Mach-3 SR-75 Penetrator model is based on sightings of an unidentified plane that may have three roles: reconnaissance missions over lightly defended areas; the airborne sensing of radioactive weapons materials; and as a mothership that launches small satellites or a delta-shaped hypersonic daughtercraft from its back. The piggybacked XR-7 Thunderdart model represents a hypersonic spyplane that uses both jet and pulse-detonation-wave engines to reach a speed of Mach 7.

52s, and other planes flying low-level training missions through the empty valleys nearby. At one point, Russian Sukhoi Su-22 and MiG-23 fighters streak overhead.

Soon, a Lincoln County sheriff rolls up in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. He politely advises us to steer clear of cattle grazing on the open range, park at least 100 yards from watering troughs, be careful with campfires, and refrain from taking pictures of "the air base over there."

Then the sheriff leaves, and we begin hiking to the peak of White Sides, 1,868 feet

above the valley floor, where a dusting of snow lies on the dark sides of the rocks. In the thinning air at 6,089 feet above sea level, the steep trek induces a lot of huffing and puffing.

Leading us is Glenn Campbell, a former computer programmer who lives in the nearby hamlet of Rachel (population about 100; one store, one bar, no post office). Campbell has become an activist pushing for the return of military lands to public use and has created a lobbying group called the White Sides Defense

Committee. He publishes a wryly amusing document called *Area 51 Viewer's Guide*, which contains tips for visitors, maps of back roads, and descriptions of flying objects likely to be seen. Campbell's guide has readers on both sides of the security fence, and as far away as Washington, D.C.

Also hiking with us is a tall, silver-haired man who has the Matterhorn on his list of mountain-climbing credits. I labor to keep up with Bob Gilliland, to hear his reaction upon reaching the summit. Finally, we arrive: "There's the place I almost killed myself a couple of times," says the former Lockheed test pilot, gazing down at the lake bed where, in 1962, he flew the then-secret predecessor to the SR-71 Blackbird. He tells chilling tales about engine flameouts and other near-catastrophes that occurred while engineers struggled to perfect the Mach 3.2 spyplane. Gilliland hasn't been to Groom Lake in a long time. They don't have alumni reunions here.

We deploy our lawn chairs and unpack the kits we've brought to Nevada's "birdwatching" country: binoculars, spotting scopes, tripods, broadband radio-frequency scanners, night-vision equipment, walkie-talkies, maps and compasses, tape recorders, and drab-colored clothing.

As the setting sun creates a pinkish

glow along the ridgeline behind the base, the temperature drops rapidly. Crazy kangaroo mice appear, bouncing around searching for crumbs, but our MREs (military-issue, meals ready-to-eat) come in unchewable pouches. Where there are mice, there are usually snakes—perhaps rattlesnakes—but at this time of year they should be hibernating, we tell ourselves. Out come the sweaters, gloves, and sleeping bags. And out come the stars—more and more stars shining in the crystal-indigo sky—and with them the lights on the hangars and alongside the big runway at Dreamland.

At Groom Lake, most of what the base needs—people, supplies, and the hardware being tested—arrives the expensive way, by air. Large experimental aircraft are partially disassembled so they can be delivered in big transport planes.

Civilian listeners using scanners to monitor military radio frequencies have learned that the flights shuttling workers to the base identify themselves by the callname Janet. We watch several planes come and go, including a C-130 Hercules transport and a twin-engine military Beechcraft.

Every weekday, ten to 12 Janet flights make the round-trip. They are Boeing 737 airliners departing from special, secure terminals operated by defense contractor EG&G Corp. at McCarran Airport in Las Vegas and in Palmdale, Calif. The only marking the white-painted planes bear is a broad, red stripe running the length of the fuselage. Observers who count these daily shuttles calculate that 1,500 to 2,500 people work at the base. Shuttle flights cease on weekends, presumably so employees can spend time at home.

At jetliner speeds, Groom Lake is only about half an hour from Las Vegas, so the Janet flights don't climb high. They approach the Dreamland runway from the southwest in a long, slow descent lasting several minutes. At night, the landing lights of the 737s seem to hang almost motionless in the sky, causing excitement among UFO seekers (see "Area 51: Home of the Aliens?").

Secret aircraft tend to depart northward from Groom Lake. Depending on their performance characteristics, they may climb several thousand feet before even crossing the base perimeter. We watch a dark, fighter-sized airplane take off to the north. The black shape resembles an F-117A, but we can't be sure. Painting an airplane black and flying it at night is a simple and effective way to make it extreme-

Area 51 - Home Of The Aliens?

In 1989, a man named Bob Lazar appeared in a broadcast on Las Vegas television station KLAS, claiming to be a physicist hired by the government to reverse-engineer the propulsion systems of saucer-shaped alien spacecraft.

The saucers, he maintained, were kept in a secret complex called S-4 at Papoose Lake, a dry lake bed located a few miles south of Groom Lake. Lazar's claims, as well as many details of his background, have proved impossible to confirm. But their dissemination through the UFO-enthusiast grapevine transformed Area 51 into a mecca for saucer seekers. They can be seen congregating, with their motor homes and lawn chairs, next to Nevada Route 375 at an icon called "The Black Mailbox." This ordinary mailbox belongs to the rancher who leases grazing rights in the valley.

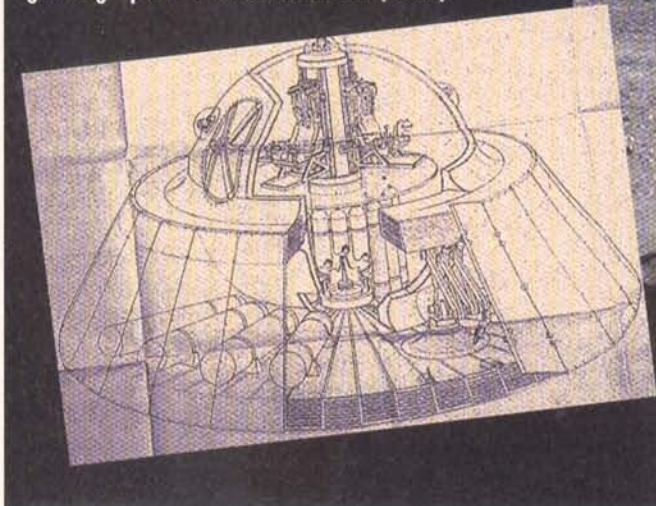
Many UFO watchers have kept vigils there for an aerial phenomenon called "Old Faithful"—and gone home satisfied. Old Faithful is a bright, barely moving light observed low in the sky for several minutes at about 4:45 a.m. on weekdays.

Last March, three chilly airplane watchers with binoculars atop White Sides Mountain at this magic hour were tracking a 737 airliner approaching Groom Lake, as a fourth member of their group thawed out in his truck below. Parked on a knoll, he was next to a vanload of UFO seekers. They were led by tour operator Sean Morton, whose leaflet describes him as "the world's foremost UFO researcher."

Morton donned a horned Viking helmet and from time to time pointed to the sky, exclaiming: "Look at that one!" The airplane watcher trained his binoculars in the same direction, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Later, Morton's group became excited by what they perceived as an entire formation of UFOs; the airplane watcher's lenses revealed only stars. Finally, as the morning's first 737 made its gentle approach toward Groom Lake at 4:45, the UFO enthusiasts rejoiced at Old Faithful's appearance. Everyone had seen exactly what they hoped for.—S.F.B.

On a lonely stretch of Nevada Route 375, "The Black Mailbox" (right) is to UFO enthusiasts what the slab-like monolith in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* is to science-fiction fans. It also contains a local rancher's mail.

UFO believers include a few people who claim to have seen an aircraft called the Alien Reproduction Vehicle, a flying saucer the U.S. military allegedly developed by reverse-engineering captured extraterrestrial craft (below).



STUART F. BROWN

ly hard to see—or photograph. Turn off the running lights and it virtually disappears, particularly when there's no moonlight.

On an earlier visit, Goodall heard an unforgettably loud, deep rumbling sound. Perhaps it was a pulsed-combustion propulsion system powering a hypersonic aircraft? Campbell has heard the same noise, as have other Rachel residents. For Goodall, the Holy

Grail is getting a picture of such a craft.

Few civilian visitors to the area would dare cross a fence line monitored by solar-powered video cameras and studded with signs warning: *Use Of Deadly Force Authorized*. Shadowing the perimeter, however, is a perfectly legal activity that drives the Pentagon nuts.

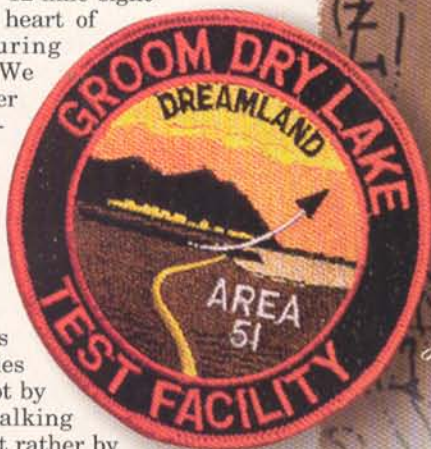
The military attempted to secure this secret base when it seized 89,000

A Dreamland Inte

In the group portrait at lower right, notice the 15-mile treeless expanse of the arid valley in the background. This area of public land is under continuous surveillance by security patrols, making it extremely difficult to get any-

acres from the BLM in 1984, an action that caused political friction in Nevada. Later, Congress approved this move on national-security grounds. However, the enlarged perimeter failed to include two peaks: White Sides, and another that Glenn Campbell—and now even the security guards—calls Freedom Ridge.

Both peaks command an excellent view of the base. Did foreign agents peer along the 12-mile sightlines into the heart of blackness during the 1980s? We may well never know. However, the arrow-straight line forming the facility's eastern border suggests that the restricted area's 1984 boundaries were drawn not by a surveyor walking the terrain, but rather by a desk-bound bureaucrat.



Groom Lake's role as a secret air base began in 1954, when the CIA gave Lockheed a contract to develop a spyplane that could fly higher than any aircraft yet built. The Soviet Union was to be the U-2's primary target. Lockheed test pilot Tony LeVier, who had made the first flight in the hot F-104 fighter from which the U-2 was derived, was dispatched in a twin-prop company plane to find a location where tests of the slender-winged craft could be kept hidden.

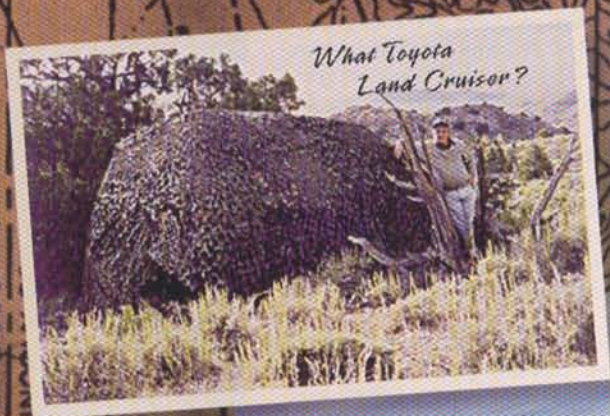
Situated between isolated desert mountain ranges and near the Atomic Energy Commission's nuclear bomb testing area, the barren, flat expanse of Groom Lake seemed perfect. For security reasons, the AEC, which later became the Department of Energy, handled the construction of a runway, hangars, and other buildings needed for the U-2.

Flight testing of the Air Force SR-71 spyplane and its predecessor, the CIA's A-12, was conducted there in 1962. Covertly obtained Soviet fighters were also hidden and flight-tested there. And about 10 years ago, the F-117A first flew at Groom Lake.

Big defense spending during the Reagan administration brought in new activity. During the 1980s, an even faster replacement for the SR-71 appears to have begun flying out of Groom Lake—various reports have dubbed it Aurora, Senior Citizen, or Senior Smart—despite what the Air

[Continued on page 84]

(ILLUSTRATION) TOM WHITE; (INSIGNIA) JOHN B. CARNETT; (TOYOTA, WATCHERS, GROUP PORTRAIT, INN SIGN) STUART F. BROWN; (VIDEO CAMERA, WARNING SIGN) GLENN CAMPBELL; (SIGN) JAMES C. GOODALL; (LAWN CHAIRS) JILL REED



What Toyota Land Cruiser?

Jim Goodall's unofficial insignia.

Lawn chairs are essential equipment.



A Russian Sukhoi Su-22 flies by.

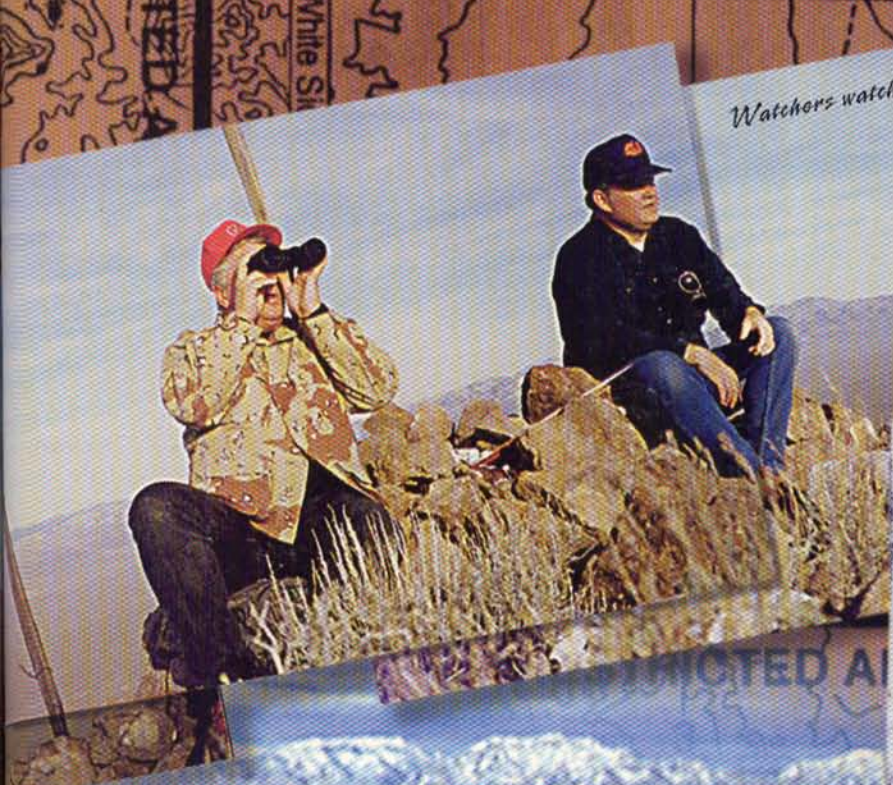


Tiny Rachel, Nevada's watering hole is the Little A' Le' Inn.

Reptor's Scrapbook

A remotely controlled surveillance camera.

where near the perimeter of the secret base without being detected. Ideas that have been considered: Ride a mountain bike while steering clear of the existing dirt roads; ride a horse; or walk all the way. Most visitors just drive across and acquire shadow companions in beige trucks and camouflage clothing.



Watchers watching.

WARNING

Restricted Area

It is unlawful to enter this area without permission of the Installation Commander.
Sec. 21, Internal Security Act of 1950; 50 U.S.C. 797

While on this Installation all personnel and the property under their control are subject to search.

Use of deadly force authorized.

Along White Sides Mountain are, from left to right, the author, Jim Goodall, Tom Luttrell, Glenn Campbell, Bob Gilliland, and John Andrews.

Seriously unfriendly signs.



Secrets of Groom Lake

(Continued from page 59)

Force says to the contrary. Perhaps this program actually belongs to the CIA or the National Reconnaissance Office, making Air Force denials truthful in the narrowest sense of the word.

An arms-control analyst, who insists on remaining anonymous, says he has examined a classified, late-1991 Landsat image of Groom Lake that shows three large, white triangles sitting near the main runway. "They are about the size of 747 airliners and remind me of the XB-70 bomber prototype from the 1960s," he says. Landsat is a U.S. satellite, so sensitive items may not always be hidden when it passes overhead.

Other secret projects likely to have been tested in recent years at Groom Lake include stealthy vertical-landing aircraft designed to covertly transport small groups of special-forces troops inside foreign territory. Many of the dozens of remotely piloted vehicles currently in use or under development by the military have probably been flown at the base too. And expansion of the base itself continues as well. Aerial photos taken in 1968 and 1988 reveal the addition of many structures alongside the big runway.

Recent years have brought even more growth. Construction of a parallel runway estimated to be 15,000 feet long was begun around 1989 to permit continued flight testing when winter flooding makes the main runway's northern half unusable. A new tank farm stores cryogenic liquid methane or hydrogen fuels used by hypersonic aircraft.

Research by Jim Goodall indicates the probable use of two vast new buildings. A high-ceilinged hangar, perhaps several stories tall, is equipped with gantry cranes for the mating and de-mating of the Aurora mothership and daughtership spy-planes. And a second large building is used for the final assembly of various classified aircraft.

Last June, Goodall and Campbell selected an observation point on BLM land that was under the runway's climb-out path. It's a boring place to be—unless something "black" departs from Groom Lake flying north.

The two campers could hear the clattering of its rotors for a few minutes before the helicopter appeared. A Sikorsky HH-60G Blackhawk with Air Force markings on its dark-green camouflage paint scheme, the craft was soon flying a search pattern. Goodall and Campbell scrambled for the only cover available—a scrubby desert tree. The Blackhawk descend-

ed, its downwash raising a hurricane of dust and gravel. Then its landing skids crunched through the upper branches, reducing the tree's height by half.

Campbell took snapshots. "I was looking through the helicopter's floor window right at the pilot," he says. Away climbed the Blackhawk. A sheriff later talked Campbell into surrendering his film, which remains in government hands.

Goodall filed complaints: to the Secretary of Defense, senators, congressmen, and safety officials at Nellis Air Force Base—the closest identifiable place to which a letter can be addressed. Their replies discounted his assertion that the frightening incident could have resulted in the destruction of everything—helicopter, crew, the two campers, and what was left of the tree.

A typical response, written from the Pentagon by Air Force Colonel Leslie M. Dula, stated: "Helicopter operations to protect and verify the security of the Nellis Range may appear abnormal to people not familiar with such operations, but the actions of the crew were not life-threatening nor risk endangering [sic]."

On another night, with our headlights off and taillights disconnected so they won't flash when the brakes are applied, Jim Goodall and I pilot our Toyota Land Cruiser along the dirt roads and bumpy trails just north of the base. For a few miles, we drive within the sight lines of a security post; then we pass behind some low ridges. We head for a slope where Campbell had earlier positioned a large military camouflage net. Shrouded in the netting, our parked truck resembles another mound of greenish scrub in the partial moonlight. On foot, we lug our gear up the hill.

Campbell hikes to our campsite the next morning, and things on the summit remain peaceful until noon. Then we hear the distant whumping of a Blackhawk. Adrenaline flows. This aerial visit lasts four hours.

We watch the Blackhawk circle below us, then finally swoop down to sandblast a barren hillock about two miles distant. Peering through his binoculars, Goodall is suddenly seized with a laughing fit. "They're assaulting my old lawn chair! I left it there months ago." Security men emerge from vehicles and take possession of the area near the chair, as the helicopter widens its search pattern, sandblasting every clump of vegetation in the area.

The search expands, covering sever-

al square miles. Eventually, Campbell's car, tucked into a ditch under a gray cover, is spotted. Sheriffs note its license number.

We remain rolled up like armadillos under small, gnarled evergreens, where we weather dozens of helicopter passes undetected. Finally, the security forces give up and leave.

Definitely no secret airplanes tonight, we realize, so we decide to seek some real food and hot showers. We retreat to the Little A' Le' Inn (pronounced "alien"), the sole watering hole in the hamlet of Rachel. The bar's walls are covered with UFO memorabilia and a large Goodall photo of the secret base. "We heard someone penetrated the base perimeter," says Pat Travis, as she takes our orders.

Proprietors Pat and Joe Travis serve food and drink to a mix of cowboys, UFO buffs, and base workers. The latter are generally congenial but strictly observe their secrecy vows: "I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you," they like to say if questioned about Groom Lake.

We reflect on the day's experience. One of our suspicions has been reinforced: An electronic sensor Campbell found by a muddy roadside after spring rains almost certainly wasn't one of a kind. No wonder security trucks and helicopters seemed to appear as if on cue, day or night.

Campbell later located 10 more sensors along the dirt roads running across BLM land by using a frequency counter, an electronic device that identifies the broadcasting frequency of a radio transmitter. He also began unscrewing the antennas from the sensors, driving past them, and then replacing the antennas—thereby defeating the devices. The sensors are installed in pairs, separated by a few yards of road. Ground vibrations caused by a passing vehicle trigger 496.25-megahertz radio pulses from a transmitter wired to each pair, broadcasting the vehicle's location and direction of travel.

Two nights later, several of us venture out again. After an uneventful evening watching from Freedom Ridge, we fall asleep. At 2:00 a.m., visitors with bright flashlights arrive: a sheriff and a security guard in camouflage. When the sheriff demands to search through our bags for cameras, my companions stubbornly assert their civil liberties. The sheriff backs down when we ask to see a warrant. Because the Groom Lake base is officially unmentionable, a judge can't issue a warrant alleging infractions in the vicinity; it's an odd Catch-22 the government has concocted for itself.

We examine their identification, the sheriff takes down our names, and we say good night.

Getting back to sleep isn't easy, so I pan across the landscape with a Russian military night-vision scope, a useful gadget when you want to know if you really are alone. I flinch. Two hundred yards away, a pair of security men sit in a beige truck, watching us. They have a similar scope, I suspect, of the costlier U.S. military variety. Perhaps an infrared device as well. For some time, we observe each other in the dark. They've done a fine job of sneaking up on us. I feel caught up in a scenario that's equal parts Tom Clancy, Tom Swift, and Tom Sawyer.

The air base that isn't there is having a rough year. The Air Force plan to annex the hilltops has attracted unwanted media attention. And now Nevada Environmental Protection Division officials are investigating allegations that toxic chemicals were burned in open pits at Groom Lake during the 1980s, sickening workers. Lockheed has previously made out-of-court settlements with hundreds of people who were exposed to various chemicals while working on the F-117A program at its Burbank, Calif., plant.

Citizen curiosity about where untraceable, "black" defense dollars go is running strong. Lots of money is involved. The Defense Budget Project, a nonpartisan monitoring group in Washington, D.C., estimates that the \$84.1-billion 1994 defense budget for research, development, and procurement contains \$14.3 billion for secret programs. That approximates NASA's entire annual budget.

With the Cold War over and Russian satellite images of Groom Lake available for purchase, airplane watchers like Goodall, Campbell, and Andrews question the military's need for additional security at Groom Lake. And even if the government decides to let some light shine into its black world, chances are slim that the persistent watchers who keep heading out into the desert will hang up their binoculars.

"The military needs to be reminded that they own nothing out there, neither the airplanes nor the facility. We, the people, are the true owners. We pay for it all," Andrews argues with passion. "If the Air Force and other agencies truly need this place, then let them make their case in an open forum and explain to us the true nature of their national security concerns. We taxpayers can handle it, perhaps better than they give us credit for." ■