

## Aviation Ancestry - April 2013

*In Flight USA*

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**W**ith General LeMay's promise to buy Blackbird interceptors and reconnaissance aircraft, things looked bright for the Skunk Works. Even more tantalizing was the fact that an Air Force colonel let it slip to Johnson that LeMay had thought further about the matter, and that the General and his staff were now working on a proposal for the construction of twenty Blackbirds per month. Specifically, General LeMay wanted Lockheed to build ten Blackbird interceptors and ten Blackbird bombers each month.



**Thirsty SR-71 meets a KC-135Q. (Courtesy of the United States Air Force)**

**G**eneral LeMay's ambitious plans led the Skunk Works staff to believe that a major confrontation with the Soviets was imminent. This belief was reinforced when none other than Secretary Of Defense Robert McNamara paid a visit to the Skunk Works. During the visit, McNamara and his staff (which included Secretary of the Earth, as seen from inside an SR-71 that's flying at 73,000 feet. (Courtesy of the United States Air Force)



**The earth, as seen from inside an SR-71 that's flying at 73,000 feet. (Courtesy of the United States Air Force)**

Air Force Joseph Charyk) grilled Kelly Johnson and the other Lockheed engineers about the Blackbird and its various systems. After the Secretary and his party left, Kelly Johnson was ecstatic. He and the other Skunk Works believed that the visit with McNamara and his staff went so well, that, surely, more Blackbird orders were on their way.

Kelly Johnson's faith seemed to be justified; for shortly after the meeting with McNamara, a gentleman by the name of Lew Meyer paid a visit to the Skunk Works. Meyer was the Assistant Secretary of Finance for the Air Force. Besides the ten Blackbirds that Lockheed was already building for the CIA, Meyer told Johnson to expect Air Force orders for the following: ten Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft (which were to be larger, two seat versions – the second seat to be occupied by a navigator/electronics operator in his own separate cockpit), 10 Blackbird fighter-interceptors, and 25 Blackbird tactical bombers.

With hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts on the horizon, Kelly Johnson sought and received approval from Lockheed management to spend \$1 million on a new engineering building. Indeed, great things seemed to be around the corner.

But, then, strange things started to happen. Some of the generals and nearly all of the administrators involved with the decision-making about the Blackbird bombers and interceptors stopped returning Kelly Johnson's calls. Johnson and his Skunk Works staff were

understandably perplexed. Soon, though, it became apparent that McNamara's advisors were telling him that the Air Force could make do with the Convair F-106.

To a man like Kelly Johnson – who'd overseen the design of an aircraft that could cruise at Mach 3, and which could be built as an interceptor – the idea of the Air Force "sticking with" the F-106 as its primary interceptor was sheer madness. The F-106 was capable of supersonic flight for only a few minutes, due to its limited fuel capacity.

What Johnson didn't know at the time, however, was that the United States was gearing up for operations in Vietnam. Plans were being made in secret, and McNamara had already approved development of a new tactical fighter, which was called the "TFX." Ultimately, the TFX became the F-111.

The Air Force was very much interested in the F-111, because it could fly low and fast – thereby avoiding detection by enemy radar – and, therefore, theoretically ideal for supporting ground troops. In reality, quite a few F-111s were shot down over Vietnam, because enemy radar was actually able to detect and track the F-111's own terrain-following radar. On top of this, Skunk Works staff pointed out that higher-flying enemy interceptors with "look-down, shoot down" radar (which was in its infancy) would make short work of low-flying F-111s. In other words, the F-111 was obsolete right from the start, as far as the Skunk Works was concerned.

To prove the point, Kelly Johnson and the Skunk Works attempted to demonstrate the Blackbird's mind-boggling performance by having one flown from Edwards Air Force Base in California to Orlando, Fla. in May of 1962. The trip took less than an hour and a half. On that same day, another Blackbird was flown from San Diego to Savannah Beach, Ga. – the trip took 59 minutes.

But, to really prove its point to McNamara, the Skunk Works began working on "look-down, shoot down" radar and air-to-air missiles for the Blackbird. By combining an air-to-air missile that had been built by Hughes for the Navy, Westinghouse ASG-18 radar gear (also built for the Navy), with a Lockheed-built fire control system, Blackbirds cruising at 80,000 feet (and at Mach 3) were shooting down drones that were flying at 1,500 feet.

Believing that these tests proved that the F-111 was a bad choice for the Air Force, Johnson flew to Washington in order to confront Air Force Secretary Harold Brown. Calling the F-111 a "national scandal" due to its vulnerability to the "look-down, shoot-down" radar and missile combination, Johnson insisted that there was no reason to build the F-111 and force its acceptance by the Air Force.

In truth, however, the Air Force wanted the F-111. Though impressed with the Blackbird's capabilities, the Air Force wanted large quantities of tactical fighter-bombers for use in places like Vietnam. The Blackbird was simply too expensive to build and to operate under such circumstances. Plus, the possibility of a Blackbird being shot down and falling into enemy hands, was just too disturbing to contemplate. So, the fleet of Blackbird fighters and bombers was not to be.

Once again though, fate – in the form of General Curtiss LeMay – intervened. Lockheed/Skunk Works received an initial order for six reconnaissance Blackbirds (the two-cockpit version). This is the aircraft that eventually became known as the SR-71, and thirty one of them ultimately built.

Originally shrouded in secrecy, the SR-71 eventually became legendary, with its ability to fly over hostile countries with impunity. Retired from Air Force service twice (first in 1990, and then in 1997, with NASA flying the aircraft for the last time in 1999), the SR-71 can be seen only in museums, today.