

Born-again Blackbird

Should the SR-71 be brought back? The debate continues.

RAMON LOPEZ/WASHINGTON DC

The supersonic Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird is no longer a museum piece: no more is it a relic of the Cold War, gathering dust. The renaissance of the US Air Force spy plane, which flies at altitudes above 85,000ft (26,000m), is a result of Congressional concern about the Pentagon's ability to undertake reconnaissance missions.

Supporters of the SR-71 say that the aircraft was sorely missed during the 1991 Gulf War and believe that it should be returned to service until unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), such as the high-altitude Tier III Minus, due to have its first flight in August, prove themselves.

Neither the USAF, nor the Pentagon, wants to see the titanium-alloy Mach 3 SR-71, which was mothballed in 1990, back in service. Despite this, Congress has ordered the Pentagon to re-activate a handful of SR-71s and gave the USAF a \$100 million down payment from 1995's budget to resurrect and fly the aircraft this year. This amount was what the USAF and Lockheed said was needed to re-activate aircraft and fly 12 to 15 missions over a 30-day period.

ENDANGERED

Although the SR-71 re-activation process began in late 1994, the Blackbird became an endangered species again earlier this year when the House of Representatives voted to fund part of the Pentagon's fiscal year 1995 "readiness supplemental", by taking back \$80 million, unspent from the \$100 million earmarked for SR-71 re-activation. The US Senate decided to fund the programme fully, thus setting up a showdown in a House-Senate conference.

As *Flight International* went to press, the conference was still in session, but informed sources believe that the SR-71 will survive. Lockheed and the USAF say that the re-activation work can be completed for about \$47 million, and a budget cut seems likely.

In mid-January, an SR-71A, which NASA had in storage at Edwards AFB, had a 5 min,



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wheels-down, low-level, flight to Lockheed's Skunk Works at nearby Palmdale. At the controls were NASA pilot Stephen Ishmael and flight test engineer Marta Bohn-Meyer. Lockheed and the USAF had hoped to conduct the flight on 22 December, the 30th anniversary of the Blackbird's first flight.

REFURBISHMENT

This aircraft, and a Blackbird mothballed at Palmdale, are undergoing refurbishment. Company officials say that both the airframes and engines are in remarkably good condition. The USAF has \$700 million in aircraft spares, including 26 Pratt & Whitney J-58 replacement engines to work with.

One SR-71A is expected to be flying on 1 May and mission-capable by 30 June, the second by 30 September. An SR-71B will be shared by the USAF and NASA. Meanwhile, Lockheed has offered to refurbish a third SR-71A stored at Palmdale for \$4 million, and aircrew training has begun.

The sensors carried on the SR-71s will be those in use at the time of de-activation: new, upgraded Loral Advanced Synthetic Aperture Radar System (ASARS I); ITEK wide-angle optical bar camera; and McDonnell Douglas technical objective camera. The AIL electronic-intelligence system may go back into the aircraft in 1996, but the SR-71s will get new real-time datalinks made by Unisys.

The USAF had no trouble finding three pilots and three reconnaissance system operators — all SR-71 veterans — to climb back into the Blackbird cockpit. Justin "Jay"

Murphy, Lockheed's project manager, calls the SR-71 "...a wonderful and unique aircraft which pilots love to fly". Having logged 480h at the controls of an SR-71 before retiring from the USAF (the high-time pilot had logged 1,020 flight hours), Murphy belongs to an exclusive fraternity of aviators.

The SR-71 re-activation "is an emotional event for a lot of us who flew the aircraft. It has a rare mystique; few aircraft catch the public's attention like the Blackbird," says Murphy.

He believes that the SR-71 was "...an aircraft before its time, and is still a premier aircraft today. This aircraft should not be in museums."

Despite wishful thinking, Murphy will not get the chance to climb back into the SR-71 cockpit. Says the Lockheed official: "I volunteered, but they said I was too old." □

Fastest and highest

The USAF operated the SR-71, the world's fastest and highest flying production aircraft, for 24 years. Of the 31 built, 20 survived to the end of the programme, with 14 released for display in aviation museums. Three were put in storage at Lockheed's Air Force Plant 42 Site 2 at Palmdale, California. Two SR-71As and one SR-71B trainer (NASA 831 or S/N 17956), plus the SR-71 cockpit simulator, were loaned to NASA's Dryden Flight Research Center at Edwards AFB, California, for research projects.