

## **Stealthy Maneuver: The CIA Captures An A-12 Blackbird**

*Spy Plane Was on Display In an Air Guard Museum; Minnesota Is Up in Arms*

By Jonathan Karp

The Central Intelligence Agency is closing in on a high-value landscaping target: a 1960s spy plane called the A-12 Blackbird.

The CIA plans to mount the once-secret, 102-foot-long supersonic plane on a pole at its Langley, Va., headquarters in time for the agency's 60th anniversary in September. The jet chosen for the mission is a particularly well-preserved specimen that has been at the Minnesota Air Guard Museum, next to the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport, since 1991.

Even though a moving crew began the 10-day process of dismantling the spy plane this week, volunteers who painstakingly restored it at their own expense are continuing to oppose what they consider a hijacking. Their pleas for mercy, backed by the governor and entire Minnesota congressional delegation, have fallen on deaf ears.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, so until they drag it away with me screaming, we have a chance," said James Goodall, an aviation buff and retired Minnesota National Guardsman who salvaged the plane and led efforts to preserve it.

The A-12 Blackbird, retired in 1968, was the forerunner to the better-known SR-71 Blackbird. The stealthy A-12 is one of the fastest aircraft ever made, capable of flying at more than three times the speed of sound and at the edge of space. The plane originated as part of a CIA program code-named "Oxcart." Of the 15 A-12s built by Lockheed Martin Corp.'s famed Skunk Works advanced projects unit, nine remain. One is on display at an Air Force base, and the others are at museums around the country.

Mr. Goodall and his supporters don't question the right of the Air Force, which controls these decommissioned warplanes, to reclaim an A-12 and lend it to the CIA as an oversize lawn ornament inside the agency compound. Instead, their two-month dogfight has been aimed at getting the Air Force to justify removing the Minnesota museum's crown jewel while three A-12s sit in Alabama, including one that has been neglected since suffering hurricane damage. Another is parked on the USS Intrepid aircraft carrier, a floating Manhattan museum that will be closed until late next year because of renovation work across the Hudson River.

The CIA, whose headquarters isn't open to the public, had no role in selecting which plane it would receive. The Air Force says the Minnesota Air National Guard doesn't have a historical connection to the A-12, and though the Minnesotans have taken good care of their A-12, the volunteer-run museum doesn't meet the Air Force's current legal requirements for its museums. For one thing, it doesn't have a salaried director. After reviewing all nine A-12s, "The only one that didn't have a legitimate rationale for its location was Minnesota's," said Terry Aitken, senior curator at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force.

That logic outrages Mr. Goodall, 61 years old, who spent 20 years in the Minnesota Air National Guard and his entire adult life smitten with the A-12. He says he became an "airplane nut" at age 5 when he saw a squadron of B-36 bombers flying over San Francisco Bay. He first glimpsed a Blackbird as an 18-year-old Air Force recruit at Edwards Air Force Base in California. It was March 10, 1964, and "it affected me forever," he says.

Over the years, Mr. Goodall became an expert, writing five books on the supersonic plane. He built a rapport with Ben Rich, who developed the Blackbird for Lockheed and eventually ran Skunk Works. Mr. Goodall says he got a tip from Mr. Rich in 1989 that the Blackbird program would be canceled. "If anyone can scrounge one, you can," he says the late Mr. Rich told him.

At the time, Mr. Goodall was the staff historian for the 133rd Airlift Wing of the Minnesota Air National Guard. He hatched a scheme to rescue an A-12 from the scrapheap in Palmdale, Calif. In 1990, Minnesota's congressional delegation backed the Air Guard museum's request, citing the fact that companies in Minnesota supplied key Blackbird components and that some Blackbird pilots hailed from the state.

The Air Force was happy to unload the A-12 to avoid a costly process of destroying the asbestos-packed plane. Once the Air Force museum agreed to the loan, Mr. Goodall arranged for two massive cargo planes from the New York Air National Guard to haul the Blackbird in pieces from California. He persuaded a local hotel to put up the flight and moving crews free of charge for 10 days. "The Air Force estimated the move would cost \$500,000. I got it done for \$27,000. That makes me the deal-of-the-century guy," Mr. Goodall says.

Back in St. Paul, he marshaled volunteers and corporate donations for restoration work. He then spent years -- and thousands of his own dollars, he says -- scrounging for cockpit instruments, at one point swapping a prized ejection seat from his private collection to get a supersonic speedometer known as a Mach meter.

All was well until last November, when the museum got a letter from Mr. Aitken, the Air Force museum curator, invoking a provision of the loan agreement that allows the Air Force to reclaim its plane by giving 60 days' notice. The only reason Mr. Aitken cited for the decision was the need to "satisfy current exhibit requirements."

Distressed local Air Guard commanders appealed to save the A-12, calling it a "labor of love." Mr. Aitken replied that the plane didn't conform to the air park's primary mission, which is to commemorate the state guard wing's history, and said it would be better suited at the CIA. Mr. Goodall, who is now retired in Seattle but returns to the Twin Cities occasionally to visit his beloved Blackbird, energized the opposition movement by urging guardsmen and the museum's civilian nonprofit foundation to enlist Minnesota and national politicians. He also mobilized support from former A-12 pilots.

Mr. Goodall's plea: If the Air Force wants a plane to commemorate the CIA's pioneering past, it should take one that actually flew in combat. Minnesota's plane never saw action. The A-12 in Birmingham, Ala., on the other hand, photographed North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile sites in 1967, later sustained flak damage, and flew over North Korea on a spy mission in 1968 after the North Koreans captured the USS Pueblo, claiming the Navy ship had strayed into its territorial waters.

Some Minnesotans are upset that the Air Force gave short notice and didn't offer to discuss its A-12 plans. "This is a museum, a community, not a war game," said Mark Ness, vice chairman of the museum foundation and a retired Air National Guard brigadier general. Mr. Goodall knew the odds were long. The Air Force has plucked other planes despite local resistance, including a B-36 bomber taken from Fort Worth, Texas, and the celebrated World War II B-17, the Memphis Belle, from its namesake city in Tennessee.

Even as another joint appeal from Minnesota's congressional delegation was delivered to the Air Force secretary Friday, the Air Force museum told guardsmen in Minneapolis-St. Paul to prepare for the movers.

The Minnesota museum's supporters have retained a former state supreme court justice as their lawyer, but as the moving crew continued to unbolt the A-12's wings yesterday, they had yet to decide whether to seek a court injunction against the move. Mr. Goodall, who refers to the plane as "my A-12," has made his own unilateral sortie. He has removed some cockpit instruments he had donated. "No one will see them anyway if the plane is on a pole," he says. "I'll be damned if the CIA...will get their hands on these."