I COULD TELL YOU BUT THEN YOU WOULD HAVE TO BE DESTROYED BY ME

EMBLEMS FROM THE PENTAGON'S BLACK WORLD

TREVOR PAGLEN

"A glimpse of the Pentagon's dark world through a revealing lens – patches – the kind worn on military uniforms."
–William Broad, *The New York Times*

Praise for Trevor Paglen and I COULD TELL YOU …

“A fascinating set of shoulder patches designed for the Pentagon’s Black Ops programs.”

—Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*

“A glimpse of [the Pentagon’s] dark world through a revealing lens—patches—the kind worn on military uniforms … The book offers not only clues into the nature of the secret programs, but also a glimpse of zealous male bonding among the presumed elite of the military-industrial complex. The patches often feel like fraternity pranks gone ballistic.”

—William Broad, *The New York Times*

“A fresh approach to secret government. It shows that these secret programs have their own culture, vocabulary and even sense of humor.”

—Steven Aftergood, The Federation of American Scientists

“Gives readers a peek into the shadows … Department of Defense spokesman Bob Mehal told *Newsweek* that it ‘would not be prudent to comment on what patches did or did not represent classified units.’ That’s OK. Some mysteries are more fun when they stay unsolved.”

—Karen Pinchin, *Newsweek*

“An impressive collection.”

—Justin Rood, ABC News

“An art book that presents peculiar shoulder patches created for the weird and top secret programs funded by the Pentagon’s black budget … an achievement.”

—Timothy Buckwalter, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“I was fascinated… [Paglen] has assembled about 40 colorful patch insignia from secret, military ‘black’ programs that are hardly ever discussed in public. He has plenty of regalia from the real denizens of Area 51.”

—Alex Beam, *The Boston Globe*

“Some of the worst crimes in the American landscape are hiding in plain sight, and nobody has ever pursued them more thoroughly or explained them more chillingly and engagingly than Trevor Paglen. What he is doing is important, fascinating, and groundbreaking.”

—Rebecca Solnit, author of *Wanderlust*

“The iconography of the United States military. Not the mainstream military, with its bars and ribbons and medals, but the secret or ‘black projects’ world, which may or may not involve contacting aliens, building undetectable spy aircraft, and experimenting with explosives that could make atomic bombs look like firecrackers. Here, mysterious characters and cryptic symbols hint at intrigue much deeper than rank, company, and unit.”

—UTNE Reader

“Of course, issuing patches for a covert operation sounds like a joke … but truth be told, these days everything is branded. Military symbols are frequently replete with heraldic imagery—some rooted in history, others based on contemporary popular arts that feature comic characters—but these enigmatic dark-op images, in some cases probably designed by the participants themselves, are more personal, and also more disturbing, than most.”

—Steven Heller, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Trevor Paglen gets into the black heart of America’s black sites. There is no better guide to this great American mystery. What goes on inside these bases will determine the future of warfare—and who we are—for the rest of the century.”

—Robert Baer, former case officer at the CIA and author of *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA’s War on Terrorism*

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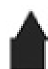

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Acknowledgements
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Boeing–McDonnell Douglas' "Bird of Prey" advanced technology demonstrator was first flown in 1996. Its existence was declassified in 2002. *Credit: USAF*

INTRODUCTION

I began taking patches and military iconography seriously a number of years ago while visiting California's Antelope Valley in the westernmost region of the Mojave Desert. The Antelope Valley is the nerve center of the United States' military aviation industry and home to the Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards Air Force Base. Made famous by the film *The Right Stuff*, Edwards is where Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier in 1947, where Pete Knight pushed the experimental X-15 rocket plane towards Mach 7 twenty years later, and where the space shuttle *Columbia* landed after its first space flight in 1981. The Flight Test Center's motto *Ad Inexplorata* (Into the Unknown) speaks to the history of experimental aviation research that defines the region. On that particular day, I was visiting Peter Merlin, an "aerospace archaeologist" with a penchant for tracking down historic aircraft crash sites and a knowledgeable researcher of military aviation history. One of Merlin's particular areas of expertise is the history of "black" (i.e. secret) aviation projects, which is why I had traveled to the Antelope Valley to meet him.

As we sat in his living room, Merlin told me about the history of what people in defense circles call the "black world" of classified projects, and recounted stories of the brief glimpses he'd seen of it. He told me about the time he'd spent standing on a ridgeline in the middle of the Nevada desert looking down on the Air Force's secret base near Groom Lake. He told me rumors and anecdotes about a $300 million CIA-Air Force plane that never got off the ground, about a mysterious "classified demonstrator" flown in the mid 1980s, and about a secret plane called the YF-113G that flew in the early 1990s. The bits of arcana he had picked up in his work were as dizzying in their incompleteness as they were fascinating.

After spending the better part of an afternoon chatting, Merlin motioned for me to follow him upstairs and into his office. There, I found myself surrounded by the refuse, leftovers, and bits of debris that a half-century of secret aircraft projects had left behind. He'd recovered metal shards from shattered stealth fighters by locating the remote sites where they had crashed, and found the in-flight recorder from an A-12 spy plane in a local junkyard. There were mugs, pins, and other memorabilia preserved in frames, glass-enclosed shelves, and well-kept vitrines. "I trust evidence," Merlin said. "People can lie. Evidence doesn't." He handed me a thick folder stuffed with documents. "Here's the Standard Operating Procedure for Area 51," the operations manual for a secret Air Force Base, "most people just assume that everything is classified so they don't take the time to look," he said. Indeed, a few months later, I would obtain my own copy from the ever-helpful staff at the National Archives. "And this," he told me as he opened a notebook filled

with scanned images of military patches, “is called ‘patch intel.’ ”

I’d seen some of the images he had reproduced in his notebooks before, lining the walls of test pilot watering holes, on the living room walls of other people I’d talked to, and on the pages of in-house military history publications. They were a part of the military’s everyday culture. I’d always found the skulls, lightning bolts, and dragons that adorned these patches to be fairly unremarkable, but Merlin saw something in them that I hadn’t noticed—the symbols they contained were far from random. The lightning bolts, he told me, meant specific things in specific contexts; the numbers of stars on an image might represent a unit number or an operating location; the symbols on a patch could be clues to the purpose of a hidden program or a cover story designed to divert attention away from a program. These symbols, Merlin explained to me, were a language. If you could begin to learn its grammar, you could get a glimpse into the secret world itself.

And so I began to collect. When I toured interesting military bases, I took note of the symbols that its personnel wore. I started making sketches of interesting images I’d seen. As I amassed more interviews with military and intelligence-types, I always made a point of asking about patches or other memorabilia that they might have in their possession. If I saw something noteworthy adorning the wall of a bar or the home of a retired NCO, I would ask to take a photo. In many cases, people freely gave me a copy of what they had lying around. I began writing to Freedom of Information Act officers and base historians at different military installations, requesting images associated with obscure programs. Sometimes, this actually produced results. I began to amass more and more images and started to learn how to separate the diamonds from the rough. I had acquired a collector’s obsession.

PATCHES

If we, rather arbitrarily, picked a date to begin the story of how patches and icons enveloped so much contemporary military culture, we might choose the summer of 1862.

That summer, so the story goes, the Army of the Potomac’s Third Corps commander, General Philip Kearny, came across a group of Union officers lounging under a tree by the road side. Assuming that the wayward men were stragglers from his own command, Kearny, who was a strict disciplinarian, launched into an explosion of expletives and invectives directed at the officers. The men stood at attention, patiently waiting until the commander’s vocal chords gave out. When Kearny finished, one of the men raised his hand and meekly suggested that Kearny had possibly made a mistake: the officers didn’t belong in Kearny’s brigade after all. Realizing his error, Kearny is said to have instantly turned into a model gentleman: “Pardon me; I will take steps to know how to recognize my own men hereafter.” Kearny proceeded to order his men to place a piece of red cloth on the front of their caps, so that they

might be distinguished from other officers. The enlisted men under his command followed.

The piece of red cloth became known as the “Kearny patch,” and, with it, the modern system of unit insignias was born. In less than a year, Major General Joseph Hooker had ordered the entire eastern army to wear distinctive patches: the First Corps would wear a circle, the Second Corps a trefoil, the Eleventh Corps a crescent, and the Twelfth Corps a star.

As the war spread, so did the system of insignia. The patches began to take on special meanings. When the Twelfth Corps went to Chattanooga to aid the Fifteenth Corps, an Irish soldier from the latter division joined some of the newly-arrived men around the fire. Noticing that the men all wore stars on their uniforms, the Irishman asked if the men were all brigadier-generals. The men from the Twelfth replied that the star was their corps badge, and that everyone wore them. “What is your badge?” they asked. “Forty rounds in the cartridge box, and twenty in the pocket,” the Irishman replied. Soon thereafter, the Fifteenth Corps adopted a cartridge box and forty rounds as its symbol.

The tradition of unit insignia has been with the military ever since. There are now thousands and thousands of patches in the modern armed forces, depicting everything from a soldier’s unit, to the many programs a soldier might be charged with, to his or her role within an organization. There are patches custom-made to commemorate special events, and “Friday” patches (informal, and often more colorful, patches that airmen are allowed to wear on Fridays). Simply put, the military has patches for almost everything it does. Including, curiously, for programs, units, and activities that are officially secret.

The Civil War Era "Kearney Patch" represents one of the earliest American military patches. *Photo: T. Glen Larson*

THE BLACK WORLD

The easiest way to see the outlines of the Pentagon's black world is to download a copy of the defense budget from the Department of Defense Comptroller's web site. Buried in the RDT&E (Research Development, Test, and Evaluation) section is a very long list of peculiar line items:

PROGRAM ELEMENT #0603801F:	SPECIAL PROGRAMS	$317 MILLION
PROGRAM ELEMENT #0207248F:	SPECIAL EVALUATION PROGRAM	$530 MILLION
PROGRAM ELEMENT #0301324F:	FOREST GREEN	[NO NUMBER]
PROGRAM ELEMENT #0304111F:	SPECIAL ACTIVITIES	[NO NUMBER]
PROGRAM ELEMENT #0301555G:	CLASSIFIED PROGRAMS	[NO NUMBER]

And there are many, many more. These line items are an unclassified glimpse at the so-called "black budget," the annual expenditures for classified programs. To get a "best guess" estimate of the black budget's size, you can add up all the line items and compare that number to the budget's published total. If you do so, you'll notice a discrepancy. A big discrepancy—about $30 billion.

This black budget doesn't disappear into a vacuum—it is the lifeblood of the Pentagon's black world.

In defense jargon, the phrase "black world" denotes the collection of programs, people, and places involved in the most secret of military projects. Like the black budget, the black world is as vast as it is secret. It is not so much a world unto itself as it is a world existing alongside and interwoven with the more conventional parts of military and civilian life. Airbases such as Edwards Air Force Base in Southern California have restricted "compounds" where black projects take place. Industrial sites like Lockheed Martin's Skunk Works have cordoned off areas dedicated to classified projects. Deputy directors of various military agencies are charged with overseeing projects whose existence might be kept secret even from their commanders. Black operations are also woven into existing, visible, activities: like a classified payload aboard a rocket launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base. Or the 1990 space shuttle mission STS-36 (piloted by a former deputy chief of the Air Force's Special Projects Office), which is long rumored to have deployed a supersecret stealth satellite, codenamed MISTY, before landing at Edwards Air Force Base.

The black world also has its dedicated bases, such as the Air Force's "operating location near Groom Lake," a Nevada aircraft test site popularly known as Area 51 where the "Special Projects Flight Test Squadron" tests classified airframes. To the north of Groom Lake is the Tonopah Test Range (also known as Area 52), where a squadron of purloined Soviet MiGs once flew, piloted by a unit called the "Red Eagles" under the code name CONSTANT PEG. During the 1980s, Tonopah was also home to operational squadrons of then-classified F-117a stealth fighters, and patches identified their wearers as "Grim Reapers," "Nightstalkers," and "Goat Suckers."

It's difficult to figure out what goes on behind the restricted airspaces, the closed doors, the cover stories, and the official denials of the Pentagon's black world. It's all secret. But from time to time, the black world peeks out into the "white" world, and those paying close attention can get a fleeting glimpse.

Military radio aficionado Steve Douglass got such a glimpse in early 2004 when his scanners recorded an aircraft using the call sign "Lockheed Test 2334" telling an Albuquerque air traffic controller that it would be "going supersonic somewhere above Flight Level 60 [60,000 feet]." When the controller asked for the aircraft type, the unnamed pilot responded that "We are classified type and cannot reveal our true altitude." A few minutes later, Douglass heard the mysterious aircraft ask for clearance to descend to 30,000 feet and a flight path toward "Las Vegas with final destination somewhere in the Nellis Range," the giant Nevada military range that is home to Groom Lake and the Tonopah Test Range. "Trip home a bit slower, eh?" said the controller.

Another glimpse had come the year before when U-2 pilots flying missions over Iraq (and possibly even more "sensitive" places) started complaining

about mysterious high flying Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) operating at the same extreme altitudes as their spy planes. Too close for comfort, in the pilots' collective opinion. When defense industry journalists picked up on the sightings, Pentagon officials seemed to confirm the classified aircraft's existence, explaining that the enigmatic aircraft bore a family resemblance to another Lockheed UAV nicknamed "DarkStar."

A search through the published biographies of Air Force test pilots reveals a different kind of peephole into the black world. In open records, we find men like Joseph Lanni, whose resumé says that he commanded a "classified flight test squadron" from 1995-1997, and flew "numerous classified prototypes," including something called the "YF-24."

And then, for a different kind of glimpse into the black world, there are the patches and symbols reproduced in this book.

WHY?

If the symbols and patches contained in this book refer to classified military programs, the existence of which is often a state secret, why do these patches exist in the first place? Why jeopardize the secrecy of these projects by attaching images to them at all—no matter how obscure or indirect those images might be? Why advertise the fact that someone might be involved in black projects, even with words like "I'd tell you but then I'd have to kill you," or "NOYFB" and the like? No doubt, the short answer is itself some sort of variation of "I'd tell you but I'd have to kill you."

We can speculate about the best answer, perhaps, by looking back to the history of unit insignia. After Kearny first commanded his officers to wear a red patch, and after General Hooker generalized the practice of wearing unit insignia, military commanders are said to have noticed the *esprit de corps* and pride that the insignias brought to the soldiers wearing them. Insignias became a way to show the rest of the world who one was affiliated with—something similar to a sports fan wearing the colors of their home team. To wear insignia is to tell the world that one is a part of something larger than oneself. In the case of a black unit, wearing insignias that identify oneself as a part of a black unit may actually help to preserve whatever secrets the unit may (or may not) hold. By wearing a patch, its wearer advertises to others around him or her that there are certain things that he or she cannot speak about. His or her membership in the secret society is contingent upon keeping those secrets. We might imagine that wearing a patch that speaks to secrets might be extra incentive for the person wearing the patch to keep silent.

Without a doubt, many members of the black world are proud of the secrets they hold, and of the clandestine work they've done in the military or intelligence industries. But others struggle with the alienation that comes along with not being able to tell friends and family what one does for a living and with having a secret life. Obtaining and maintaining a security clearance

for black projects can involve federal investigators combing through one's personal life, uncomfortable polygraph examinations, and even surveillance. A few years ago, I talked to a man who had become frustrated with life in the black world. He didn't like the secrecy, the alienation, the exhaustive and complicated security procedures, and the constant surveillance. He had begun to develop a disdain for his colleagues who seemed to relish that life. When I showed him some of the patches from this book, he was less than enthralled. "I've seen that sort of thing a lot," he said. "Those are gang colors."

The black site at Groom Lake's perimeter is protected by security guards in unmarked trucks.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

A number of disclaimers are in order. First and foremost, this is not a book of military history, and is not intended to be a comprehensive, historical, or even consistent examination of black world heraldry. Serious collectors of militaria

and historians of all varieties may find this book to be maddeningly inconsistent, incomplete—even random. The images contained in these pages are often presented without regard for their unit lineages, and without historical context. To make matters worse for the serious aficionado, I have made no distinction between images scanned from “originals” and those scanned from reproductions. Therefore, the images in this book cannot and should not be relied upon as accurate guides to military history.

Instead, readers of this book will find a collection of images that are fragmentary, torn out of context, inconclusive, unreliable, and deceptive. Readers will find, in other words, a glimpse into the black world itself.

THE PATCHES

SPECIAL PROJECTS
FLIGHT TEST SQUADRON

SPECIAL PROJECTS FLIGHT TEST SQUADRON—WIZARD

Based at the Air Force's secret base near Groom Lake, Nevada, the Special Projects Flight Test Squadron is the Air Force's only "black" flight test squadron for classified prototype aircraft and advanced concept technology demonstrators.

The squadron's mascot is a wizard. A collection of six stars (5 + 1) on the patch references the unit's operating location: the secret base known as Area 51. The lowercase Greek sigma symbol in the wizard's right hand is the engineering symbol for the unknown value of an object's radar cross section (RCS). The ideal radar signature of a stealth aircraft is zero. While no stealth aircraft has yet achieved this goal, several have come close. On the right side of the patch, the falling globe references the hollow aluminum spheres dropped from the sky to calibrate radar equipment. A sphere of a given size has a known RCS value. Lightning bolts, such as the one emanating from the wizard's staff, seem to refer to electronic warfare. The aircraft in the lower right is probably a generic symbol representing flight testing of advanced aircraft. The sword at the bottom of the image refers to a recently declassified Boeing stealth demonstrator known as the "Bird of Prey": the handle on the sword approximates the shape of the aircraft.

SPECIAL PROJECTS
FLIGHT TEST SQUADRON