

THE UNEXPLAINED FILES

BOOK EIGHT

THE SECRET HISTORY OF AREA 51

**COLD WAR SPY PLANES, BLACK PROJECTS, UFO MYTHS
AND THE SECRETS OF GROOM LAKE**



DECLASSIFIED HISTORY

BLACK PROJECTS • UFO MYTHS

ALDEN M. CORVALE

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*Cold War Spy Planes, Black Projects, UFO Myths
and the Secrets of Groom Lake*

ALDEN M. CORVALE

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PREFACE

For more than seventy years, one patch of Nevada desert has attracted a level of fascination unmatched by almost any military facility on Earth. The name Area 51 evokes alien spacecraft, black aircraft, hidden hangars, armed guards and technology years ahead of the public world.

Some of that imagery is fiction. Some of it is folklore. But the documented history is astonishing enough: the U-2 spy plane, the A-12 OXCART, secret Soviet MiGs, radar exploitation, HAVE BLUE and the foundations of stealth aviation all intersect with Groom Lake or the surrounding Nevada test enterprise.

This book follows the evidence rather than demanding that every mystery end in either belief or ridicule. When a claim is documented, it is treated as documented. When it is plausible but unproven, it is labeled that way. When a famous story lacks public evidence, the story itself is still worth examining - because myths can change history even when their factual claims remain uncertain.

Area 51 is not fascinating because we know nothing about it. It is fascinating because we know enough to understand how much can be hidden in plain sight.

INTRODUCTION

THE BASE THAT BECAME A LEGEND

The phrase 'Area 51' has become larger than geography. It is shorthand for government secrecy, advanced technology and the suspicion that official explanations conceal a deeper reality. Yet the real site at Groom Lake was born from a specific problem at a specific moment in the Cold War.

The United States needed to see deep into the Soviet Union without sending conventional bombers or reconnaissance aircraft into heavily defended airspace. That requirement produced the U-2. The U-2 required secrecy. Secrecy required isolation. Groom Lake supplied the isolation, and the base that grew around it became a recurring home for technologies too sensitive to test in ordinary view.

The remarkable part is how much of the early story is now declassified. CIA histories, Air Force records, National Security Archive collections and federal documents allow us to reconstruct the transformation from a dry lakebed to one of the most famous test sites in the world. Those records also reveal an uncomfortable truth about UFO history: at least some mysterious sightings really were secret U.S. aircraft, and officials sometimes could not tell the public the truth without exposing the programs.

That does not prove the alien stories. It explains why the alien stories found such fertile ground.

PART I - BUILDING THE SECRET BASE



Area 51 began as an answer to a practical Cold War question: how could the United States develop a reconnaissance aircraft in complete secrecy while the Soviet Union was rapidly expanding its nuclear forces and air defenses? The answer required more than a clever airframe. It required a protected landscape, restricted airspace, secure transportation, new photographic systems, specialized pilots and an administrative system capable of hiding an entire technical ecosystem.

The first years at Groom Lake established patterns that would repeat for decades. A small group of government officials and contractors received access to a program whose existence was denied outside narrow channels. Engineers worked against deadlines created by geopolitical fear. Test pilots flew machines before normal operating procedures existed. Workers commuted into a world that disappeared from their public biographies when they returned home.

This structure was not unique to Area 51, but Groom Lake concentrated it. The nearby nuclear test complex already demonstrated that Nevada could host projects of exceptional sensitivity. Geography did the rest. Mountain ranges blocked casual observation. The dry lakebed provided enormous emergency landing space. Existing federal restrictions reduced the number of outsiders who could approach. Las Vegas was close enough to supply labor and logistics yet far enough away to keep the test activity separated from ordinary life.

The result was a paradox that still defines the site. Thousands of people could participate in real programs while the public knew almost nothing. That does not require a perfect conspiracy. It requires contracts, clearances, compartmentation and a credible legal penalty for disclosure. Secret programs are usually less like a room in which everyone knows everything and more like a collection of locked rooms connected by a small number of hallways.

The chapters in Part I follow the creation of that system: the strategic problem, the selection of Groom Lake, the culture of Paradise Ranch and the first U-2 flights that made the base indispensable.