

## FROM THE MARCH COVER

# Blackbird Super Plane SR71

*Part 1 of 2*

[Editor's note: I do not know who wrote this article and who was the pilot, but here it is anyway. If anyone does know, we would be glad to add it to part 2 next month.]

In April 1986, following an attack on American soldiers in a Berlin disco, President Reagan ordered the bombing of Muammar Qaddafi's terrorist camps in Libya. My duty was to fly over Libya and take photos recording the damage our F-111's had inflicted. Qaddafi had established a "line of death," a territorial marking across the Gulf of Sidra, swearing to shoot down any intruder that crossed the boundary. On the morning of

April 15, I rocketed past the line at 2,125 mph.

I was piloting the SR-71 spy plane, the world's fastest jet, accompanied by a Marine Major (Walt), the aircraft's reconnaissance systems officer (RSO). We had crossed into Libya and were approaching our final turn over the bleak desert landscape when Walt informed me that he was receiving missile launch signals. I quickly increased our speed, calculating the time it would take for the weapons—most likely SA-2 and SA-4 face-to-air missiles capable of Mach



5—to reach our altitude. I estimated that we could beat the rocket-powered missiles to the turn and stayed our course, betting our lives on the plane's performance.

After several agonizingly long seconds, we made the turn and blasted toward the Mediterranean. "You might want to pull it back," Walt suggested. It was then that I noticed I still had the throttles full forward. The plane was flying a mile every 1.6 seconds, well above our Mach 3.2 limit. It was the fastest we would ever fly. I pulled the throttles to idle

just south of Sicily, but we still overran the refueling tanker awaiting us over Gibraltar.

Scores of significant aircraft have been produced in the 100 years of flight, following the achievements of the Wright brothers, which we celebrate in December. Aircraft such as the Boeing 707, the F-86 Sabre Jet, and the P-51 Mustang are among the important machines that have flown our skies. But the SR-71, also known as the Blackbird, stands alone as a significant contributor to Cold War victory and as the fastest plane ever—and only 93 Air Force pilots ever steered the "sled," as we called our aircraft.