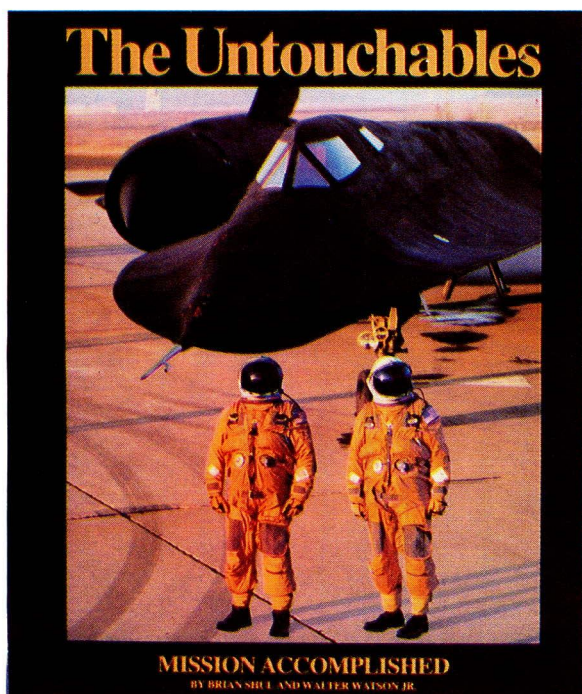


BOOK REVIEWS / BOEKBESPREKINGS



THE UNTOUCHABLES; MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Brian Shul and Walter Watson Jr.
1993

Mach 1 Inc - Chico, California
Illustrated, 215 pages
ISBN 0929823-12-5
\$43.00

In 1962, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that the United States had completed the building of a new supersonic jet - the SR-71. The aircraft was capable of reaching speeds and altitudes that were previously unheard of, and to many aeroplane enthusiasts, she became the ultimate flying machine.

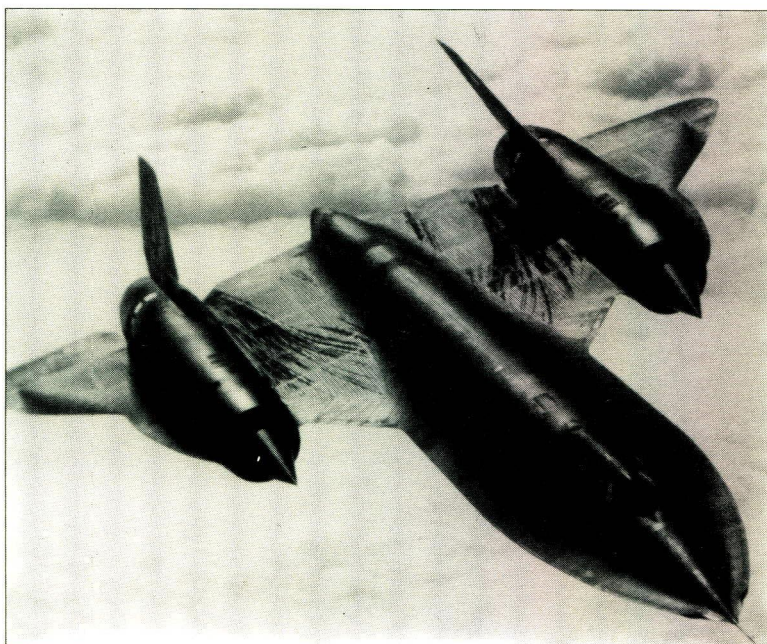
The SR-71 (nicknamed the "Sled") was destined to be a unique experiment in terms of design and concept. The plane fulfilled a reconnaissance role in the United States Air Force over a period of almost three decades, until the SR-71 programme was terminated in 1990. The secret of the SR-71's successes lay in her superior speed (she was easily capable of reaching speeds beyond Mach 3), as well as the high calibre of the crews and maintenance teams behind the plane. *The Untouchables* is a tribute to this remarkable machine, notwithstanding the fact that it

has as much to do with people as it does with aeroplanes.

The writers of *The Untouchables* are uniquely qualified to deal with this topic. Brian Shul was an SR-71 pilot for a number of years and has produced this book in conjunction with his Reconnaissance Systems Officer and partner, Walter Watson. Shul also authored *Sled Driver - Flying the World's Fastest Jet* which could be viewed as a forerunner to *The Untouchables*; although the second is not really a sequel and can be read quite comfortably without any former knowledge of the subject under discussion.

The book fulfils two aims. Firstly it is the story of how the world's fastest aircraft was designed, built and maintained and secondly, it is an account of the bombing of Libya in 1986, by USAF F111's in retaliation against Libyan sponsored terrorist attacks against personnel of the U.S. Armed Forces. The SR-71 was used during and after the raids for reconnaissance purposes. These sorties are vividly described in *The Untouchables*.

The text is flowing and uncomplicated, due to the fact that the book is written in the present tense and in a rather colloquial form. One is afforded a rare glimpse of the atmosphere inside a warplane as Shul and Watson raise the tempo to a scorching pitch. A bonus is that we are able to experience the flight in an SR-71 from both the front and back seats.



The second dimension to the book sets it apart from the usual fighter-pilot genre. Information gleaned from a mass of interviews held with engineers and technicians, who were, at various stages closely involved with the SR-71 programme provides the background to the formation and creation of the SR-71. *The Untouchables* relates the story of how the plane was built and maintained, affording a compelling insight into aero-technology. The uncomplicated styles of the writers means that even those who do not possess much knowledge in this field will find this portion of the book tremendously interesting. Of particular note are the manifold problems experienced by the USAF and Lockheed during the building of the plane, and the often ingenious solutions which the engineers devised to deal with this array of totally unfamiliar obstacles.

The Untouchables, a fascinating coffee-table type book, will enjoy the pride of place in many collections. This is primarily attributable to the book's classy appearance. The dust cover is a flawless, classic black while the hardcover of the book itself is in a material finishing with gold lettering. The glossy pages are complemented with excellent colour photographs and interesting backgrounds. It should be stressed that this is a superbly illustrated book containing many superb colour photographs which match the text exceptionally well. Unfortunately the book is not indexed, although it does possess a useful glossary.

The Untouchables comes highly recommended to anyone who has ever been interested in aeroplanes, military aviation or aeronautical engineering. It should be pointed out that *The Untouchables* cannot be regarded as an historical work (nor was this the intention of the writers or the publisher). However, it obviously contains information which is of historical value both in terms of text and pictures. The aim of the book is to immortalise the SR-71 and the people behind it, and to this extent the writers are largely successful. *The Untouchables* is light, absorbing reading and will appeal to a large section of the reading public.

This publication is not available at most bookstores. However, those who are interested in obtaining a copy may contact the publishers at the following address :

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THE HISTORY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN FORCES IN FRANCE

John Buchan

1992 (originally published in 1920)

The Imperial War Museum (in association with
 The Battery Press, Nashville)

illustrated, 404 pages

ISBN 0-901-627-89-5 (hardback)

£27-00

With the exception of a few dissertations and theses, the most important works dealing with South Africa's role in the First World War are official histories. In addition to the work now under review - undertaken at the request of General Smuts and described by Buchan's biographer as a 'war debt' which he (Buchan) had to discharge - three other books detailing South Africa's role in various First World War campaigns, have appeared. J.G.W. Leipoldt's history entitled *The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918* appeared anonymously in 1924; while J.J. Collyer's works on the German South West and East African campaigns were published in 1937 and 1939 respectively. All of these were official histories, the last three being published by the General Staff in Pretoria.

In addition to these 'official histories', a number of books on 'the Great War' have made their appearance since the opening of the First World War archives in 1948. These include Peter Digby's *Pyramids and Poppies; The 1st SA Infantry Brigade in Libya, France and Flanders 1915-1919* (1993) - the solitary work dealing with this brigade since the first appearance of Buchan's work in 1920. To date Buchan and Digby comprise the only monographs on this topic.

John Buchan (1875-1940), first Baron Tweedsmuir of Elsfield, statesman, author and publisher, initially earned the respect of generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts when, as a mem-