

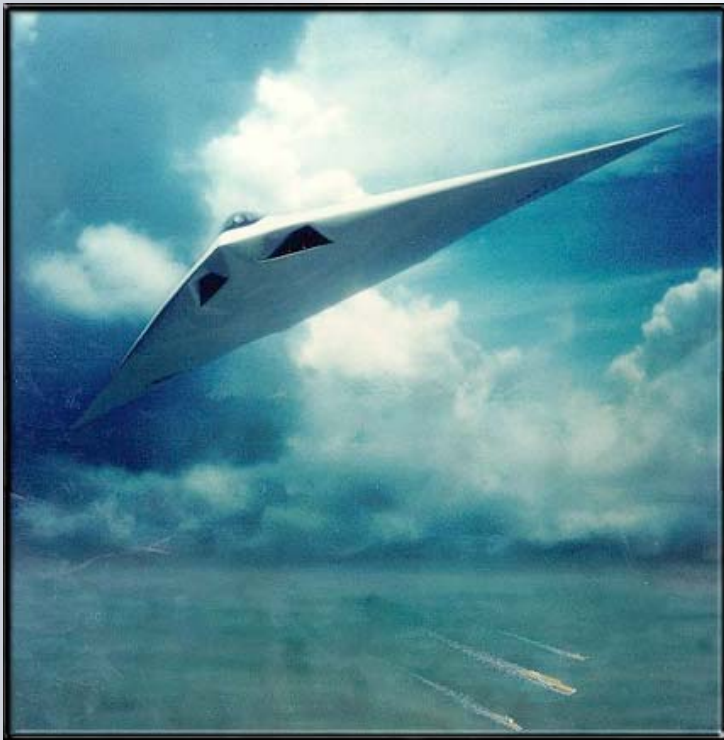
In on the Kill?

Contributing author Charles Cram

In the late 1980's, the US Navy was developing a replacement for the A-6 Intruder, A-7 Corsair II, and the F-18 Hornet known as the Advanced Tactical Aircraft (ATA). The ATA would eventually be designated the A-12 Avenger II. Designed to provide the Navy and Marine Corp with an attack aircraft having stealth capabilities comparable to the Air Force F-117, the Avenger II was naval aviation's top development priority.

By the start of the 1990's, the Avenger II program was facing numerous difficulties and was in danger of cancellation. In an attempt to garner public support for the program, the Navy planned to release to the media this artist's concept drawing of the aircraft.

At the time, however, the Avenger II was shrouded in secrecy because of its use of stealth technologies. The Navy was concerned that releasing the artist's conception would give away too much information to potential adversaries as to the capabilities of the aircraft. That's where the Foreign Technology Division (FTD) came into the story.



Artist concept drawing of Avenger II

I believe it was in 1989 or 1990 when the Navy provided FTD with a copy of the artist concept drawing that it planned to release to the public. We were asked to analyze the drawing and tell them what we could estimate concerning the capabilities of this aircraft based solely on the drawing. Technical assessment of foreign aircraft performance and capabilities was one of FTD's bread and butter capabilities (and still is for NASIC). The chance to tackle a US program was intriguing, and we accepted the Navy's challenge with gusto.

FTD formed a team of analysts to assess every aspect of the A-12. Members were selected to analyze the aircraft's flight characteristics, propulsion, flight performance, radar and avionics, weapons, and mission effectiveness. Some of the team members included:

Aircraft Technical Leader: Joe Sacksteder
Performance: Jerry Lane and Mike Raber
Radar and Avionics: Charles Cram

Over a period of approximately 2 weeks, this team produced a complete Weapons System Study for the A-12 Avenger II similar to those we produced yearly on other foreign aircraft. This study was presented to the Navy and we didn't hear from them again.

How close did we come to assessing the true characteristics and capabilities of the A-12? I guess we will never know. The report we produced disappeared into the Navy's world of Black Programs. I don't believe that we were even allowed to keep a copy of the highly classified document. There are no records of any of the analysis remaining in the NASIC engineering files. Without a written record, we can't compare our analyses with descriptions that were later released. One participant in the study did remember that our analysis indicated that the aircraft had to be significantly heavier than Navy's claims at the time. And, as I recall, one of the reasons the project was finally cancelled was a result of weight gain problems.

On 7 January 1991, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney cancelled the A-12 Avenger II. Maybe FTD's assessment was close enough to influence that decision. Maybe we actually did share in the kill.