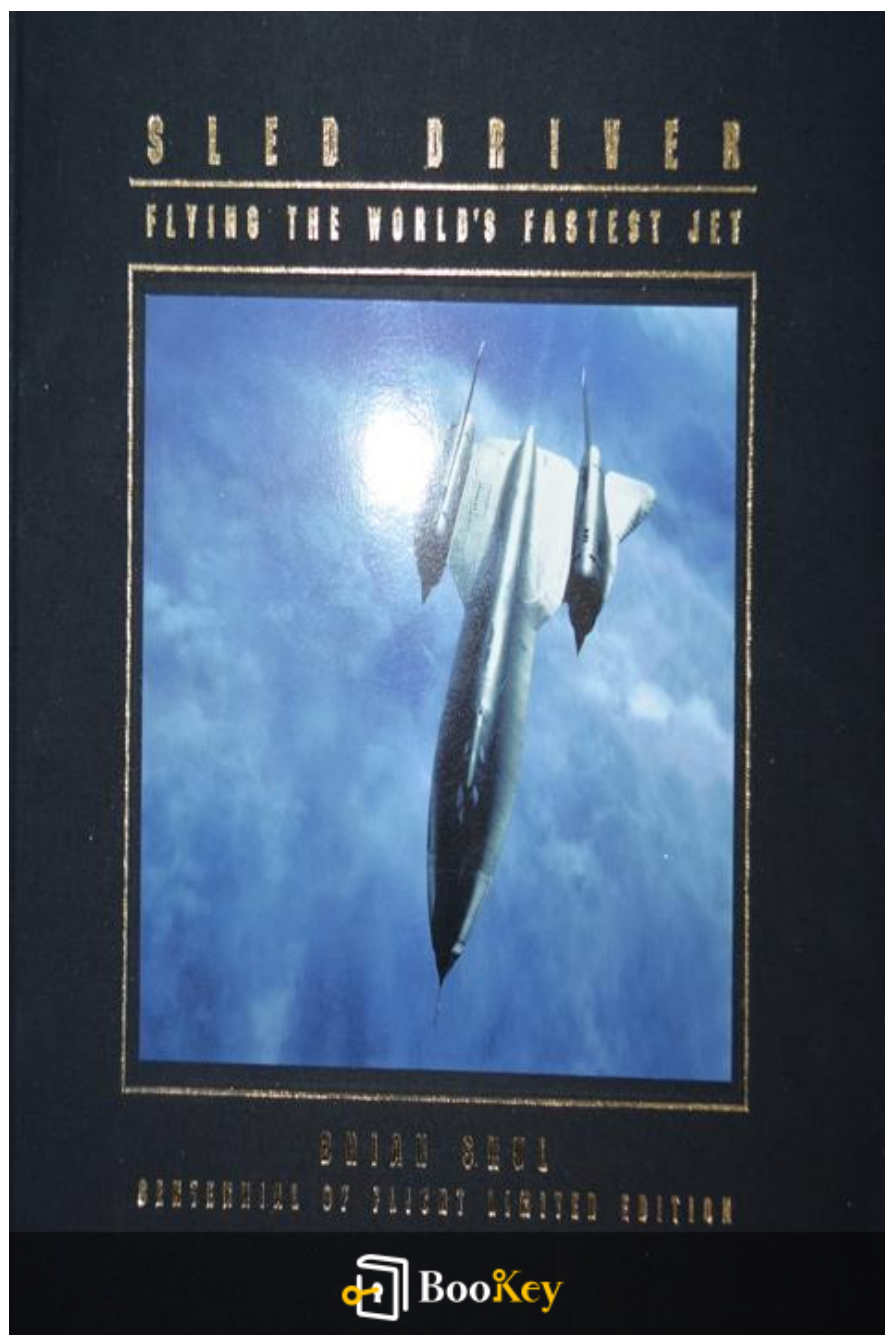


Sled Driver PDF (Limited Copy)

Brian Shul



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Sled Driver Summary

Experiencing the Thrill of the Legendary SR-71 Blackbird.

Written by New York Central Park Page Turners Books Club

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About the book

"Sled Driver" serves as an enthralling gateway into the world of the SR-71 Blackbird, a groundbreaking reconnaissance aircraft that has gained almost legendary status since its debut in 1966. The narrative is presented through the first-person perspective of Major Brian Shul, a seasoned pilot who flew the Blackbird and offers a unique insider's account of both its engineering marvel and the human experience behind the controls.

The book opens with an overview of the SR-71's unique capabilities, including its ability to fly at unparalleled altitudes of 80,000 feet and speeds of up to 2,000 miles per hour. Shul recounts the rigorous simulator training pilots had to undergo, highlighting the intense pressure and meticulous preparation required to handle the complexities of this advanced aircraft. He describes the necessity of wearing a space suit, which is designed to protect pilots in the event of depressurization at high altitudes, further emphasizing the challenging nature of their missions.

As the narrative unfolds, Shul shares gripping stories from his many airborne missions, often flying over hostile territories, where skillful piloting and quick decision-making were paramount. These missions not only served military intelligence purposes but also showcased the SR-71's remarkable speed and altitude advantages over enemy defenses. Shul also reflects on the adrenaline-fueled excitement of showcasing the Blackbird at diverse

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airshows, where the aircraft would steal the spotlight due to its unparalleled performance and design.

The book combines technical details about the aircraft's mechanics and operational strategies with personal anecdotes, allowing readers to appreciate the human element intertwined with the technology. Stunning photographs throughout the text enhance the storytelling, providing visual context to the awe and innovation represented by the SR-71.

Ultimately, "Sled Driver" captures the essence of the Blackbird's legacy, encapsulating not only the extraordinary capabilities of the aircraft but also the passion, bravery, and dedication of those who flew it, making it a compelling read for aviation enthusiasts and history buffs alike.

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About the author

In the chapters of Brian Shul's memoir, we delve into the life of a remarkable individual whose experiences shaped a distinguished career in aviation. Shul, a retired United States Air Force pilot, discovered his passion for flying in his youth in a small Californian town. This early fascination laid the groundwork for an adventurous and often perilous journey.

His career took flight as a fighter pilot during the Vietnam War, where Shul faced not only the chaos of combat but also personal adversity. He sustained serious injuries that threatened to sideline him permanently. However, his determination and love for aviation saw him triumph over these challenges, allowing him to continue pursuing his dream.

The narrative culminates in his experiences with the SR-71 Blackbird, an iconic aircraft renowned for its speed and altitude capabilities. Through "Sled Driver," Shul shares insights into the complexities of flying this technological marvel, blending thrilling anecdotes with detailed explanations of its aerodynamics and innovative engineering. His storytelling is enhanced by stunning photography, capturing both the beauty and intensity of flight.

Ultimately, Shul's work not only highlights the thrill of aviation but also serves as an homage to the courageous men and women who dare to push the limits of what is possible in the skies. His journey from a small-town

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dreamer to an esteemed aviator is a powerful testament to resilience, inspiring a new generation of aviation enthusiasts.

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Chapter 1 Summary: First Meeting

Chapter I: First Meeting

Model Memories

The author begins by reflecting on his childhood fascination with aviation, specifically his experience building plastic models. As a boy, he created a model of the SR-71 Blackbird, an aircraft he found less appealing compared to sleek fighter jets. Years later, however, his perspective shifted dramatically. While serving as a Tactical Air Command pilot at the Cleveland National Airshow, he witnessed the SR-71 in flight. Its captivating low pass showcased its remarkable design and speed, igniting a newfound awe in him for the aircraft.

The Interview Process

Eager to join the elite ranks of SR-71 pilots, the author enters a rigorous selection process at the 9th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing. This demanding week-long interview at Beale Air Force Base tests candidates through various evaluations, including physical exams, simulator training, and interactions with squadron members. A pivotal moment for the author occurs when he finally encounters the SR-71 in person, an experience that deeply

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resonates with him.

Day Four Insights

On the fourth day, he steps into the hangar and is immediately struck by the imposing presence of the SR-71. The sleek black aircraft, with its unconventional surface, symbolizes cutting-edge engineering designed for remarkable speed and altitude. This firsthand experience fosters a profound respect and a keen desire within him to command such a phenomenal machine.

Excitement of Launch

As launch preparations unfold, the author is captivated by the intricate choreography of engineering and teamwork. Observing the chaos of engine starts, reminiscent of a rocket launch, fills him with a sense of excitement. When the SR-71 finally takes to the sky, the raw power and sound resonate deeply, rekindling his childhood dreams and ambitions of flight.

Simulator Experience

The most demanding aspect of the interview arrives during the simulator session. Here, the author grapples with intense pressure as he strives to impress the instructor. The experience is fraught with anxiety, culminating

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in a technical malfunction of the simulator. Initially embarrassing, this incident ultimately proves to be a cleverly designed test, gauging his composure and adaptability. Impressively, his ability to regain control earns him positive feedback from the instructor, setting the stage for his potential future as an SR-71 pilot.

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Chapter 2 Summary: In Preparation

Chapter 2 Summary

Crew Responsibilities

The SR-71, a reconnaissance aircraft renowned for its speed and altitude, operated with a specialized crew consisting of a pilot and a Rear Seat Officer (RSO). The pilot focused on flying the aircraft, while the RSO was tasked with navigation, sensor operations, and managing electronic systems. Their ability to collaborate effectively was vital for mission success, as they developed a strong bond built on respect and shared experiences throughout their rigorous training and operational challenges.

Training Dynamics

Training for the SR-71 spanned nearly eleven months, with an intense focus on simulation exercises. These sessions were crucial for preparing the crew to respond efficiently to potential in-flight malfunctions. While demanding, the simulator experiences encouraged the crew to enhance their communication skills and foster a deeper understanding of their respective roles. Given the high-stress environment of their missions, effective communication became essential to navigate potential crises and improve

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overall performance.

Operational Knowledge

The training regimen also included comprehensive theoretical coursework that provided insight into the SR-71's complex systems and unique characteristics. Crews learned about various factors, including the specialized fuel properties and how the aircraft's materials would expand during high-speed flight, which were critical to understanding the aircraft's operational limits and performance.

Engine Significance

A key component of the SR-71's extraordinary capabilities was its Pratt & Whitney J-58 engines. These robust engines enabled high-speed and high-altitude operations, made from advanced materials such as platinum and gold to withstand extreme conditions. Observing the powerful engine runs left a lasting impression on the crew, highlighting the aircraft's remarkable capabilities and the exhilarating experience of piloting the Blackbird at the edge of the atmosphere.

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Chapter 3 Summary: Training Flights

Chapter 3 Summary: Training Flights

Introduction to the SR-71 B

Pilot training for the SR-71 Blackbird begins with the SR-71 B model, which features a rear cockpit designed for instructor pilots (IPs). While it lacks the thrill of the A model, the B model is crucial for teaching essential aerial refueling techniques—vital for the aircraft's operational success. During VIP orientation flights, the main crew often feels sidelined despite their intensive training, leading to a sense of frustration.

Preflight Preparations

As the training progresses, the focus shifts to actual flight operations. Pilots prepare meticulously by studying maps, assessing weather, and planning meals through the Physiological Support Division (PSD). This preparation includes dietary recommendations aimed at minimizing discomfort caused by altitude-related pressure changes.

Suiting Up for Flight

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Before every flight, pilots don specialized space suits, which are designed to safeguard them in the event of cabin depressurization. The suit-check process ensures that all connections are secure, despite the limited mobility it imposes. Mastery of proper suiting techniques is crucial not only for comfort but also for overall safety during flights.

The Launch Sequence

With the cockpit meticulously prepared and pre-flight checks completed, the crew begins the taxiing process. The SR-71's powerful engines are strikingly apparent during engine starts, which invariably draw a crowd of intrigued onlookers eager to witness the aircraft's capabilities.

Aerial Refueling Challenges

Aerial refueling plays a crucial role in the SR-71's missions, demanding a high level of skill from the crew due to visibility challenges and the precise flying position required. Unlike typical fighter jet refuels, the SR-71's large fuel load necessitates a more extended refueling process, emphasizing the importance of precision and teamwork between the pilot and the Reconnaissance Systems Operator (RSO).

Acceleration and Supersonic Flight

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Once refueling is complete, the SR-71 accelerates to supersonic speeds using a specific maneuver that requires acute attention to numerous cockpit systems. At these higher speeds, the aircraft operates more efficiently, and pilots maintain control by continuously monitoring critical parameters such as engine temperatures and overall aircraft stability.

Navigating High Altitude

Operating at altitudes exceeding 75,000 feet reveals breathtaking views of the night sky and the Milky Way, creating rare and profound moments for the crew amidst their operational responsibilities. Despite the beauty surrounding them, the cockpit atmosphere and aircraft systems demand their focus, reminding them of the importance of the mission at hand.

Descent and Recovery

Strategically planning the descent from high altitudes is essential, particularly when coordinating with tanker aircraft. Pilots must shift their focus, managing speed and descent angles without the help of traditional drag devices. Landing practice highlights the high fuel consumption of the jet at lower altitudes, emphasizing the complexities involved in each operation.

Post-Flight Reflections

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After landing, a deep sense of relief and camaraderie envelops the crew, amplified by the fatigue that accompanies successful flights. Each mission reinforces the bond between the pilot and the RSO, encapsulating the unique challenges and experiences associated with flying the SR-71.

In summary, this chapter provides an in-depth look at the rigorous training procedures, significant technical challenges, and profound experiences faced by pilots as they skillfully navigate the complexities of flying the SR-71 Blackbird, fostering both personal growth and professional camaraderie.

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Chapter 4: Going Operational

CHAPTER IV: Going Operational

In the aftermath of completing rigorous training, the crew of the SR-71 was prepared to embark on operational sorties from key locations such as Beale Air Force Base in California, Okinawa, and England. Each mission demanded extensive preparation, with the squadron typically consisting of 10 to 15 mission-ready crews frequently deployed for months at a time. This heightened operational tempo strained family relationships, as crew members often faced secrecy surrounding their missions. Okinawa served as the initial deployment spot due to its simpler sorties and more favorable weather, where the local term "Habu," referring to a venomous snake, became synonymous with the SR-71.

After completing their inaugural mission, crew members proudly received their HABU patches, symbolizing their successful entry into operational sorties. Following their time in Okinawa, crews transitioned to more complex European missions that required precision maneuvers and meticulous route adherence due to the multiple borders and potential threats they faced. Intelligence gathering was the primary focus of these missions, and pilots operated under intense pressure to safeguard their aircraft from possible capture by enemy forces.



Behind the scenes, hundreds of support personnel played crucial roles in ensuring successful operations, from maintenance and mission planning to fueling the aircraft. Ground crews diligently conducted extensive safety checks and preparations, often dealing with hazardous materials with precision, demonstrating a united effort that supported the mission's success.

Weather conditions posed significant challenges in both Okinawa and England, where unpredictability complicated operational flights compared to the training environment at Beale. Pilots faced difficulties navigating various weather extremes, including turbulence and potential icing, all while putting their faith in the aircraft's capabilities.

During flights, the bond between pilots and Reconnaissance System Operators (RSOs) was essential for managing the stress of operations. Teamwork and humor became vital coping mechanisms, as illustrated by lighthearted incidents — such as dealing with a misplaced straw — which added levity to tension-filled moments.

Routine encounters with potential threats, such as surface-to-air missiles or hostile aircraft, were a constant concern. However, the SR-71's remarkable speed enabled pilots to easily evade any aggressive interceptions, instilling a sense of pride among the crew as they soared through the skies in a decades-old aircraft.



Personal reflections added depth to the narrative, highlighting the transformative journey of a pilot who shifted from being a patient in a hospital on Okinawa to commanding the SR-71. Returning to past combat zones sparked poignant memories and an emotional connection to the

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Chapter 5 Summary: Companion Trainer

Chapter V: Companion Trainer

This chapter delves into the integral role of Beale Air Force Base and its versatile aircraft, particularly the T-38. Located in California, Beale is home to a variety of aircraft, including the cutting-edge U-2 and SR-71 reconnaissance planes, KC-135 tankers, and T-38s. Among these, the T-38 serves a dual purpose as both a companion trainer for pilots and a chase aircraft for the SR-71, enriching the training experience for aircrew members.

The T-38 is particularly valued for training U-2 and SR-71 crews, as well as tanker copilots, ensuring they maintain vital skills in night and instrument flying without the complexities of wearing a space suit. Its transparent cockpit design and straightforward instrumentation make it user-friendly, while the absence of combat threats provides a safe training environment. Moreover, the T-38's agility allows pilots to engage in exciting maneuvers that are outside the capabilities of the larger, more powerful SR-71.

An interesting aspect of the T-38's function at Beale is its role in Pace Chase missions, where it acts as a chase aircraft for the SR-71 during high-speed flights. This involves not only assisting pilots in emergencies but also



closely coordinating with Air Traffic Controllers. While some missions focus on practical training scenarios, the thrill of flying in formation with the SR-71 makes these sorties memorable. The Pace Chase missions provide pilots with a unique perspective, enabling them to appreciate the stark contrast in size and performance between the agile T-38 and the sleek, high-flying SR-71, known for its swift acceleration.

The excitement of participating in these Pace Chase flights is palpable among the Beale pilots, who eagerly volunteer for them. The chance to see the extraordinary SR-71 in action—gliding gracefully above while flying alongside the more nimble T-38—is not only a point of pride but also a source of fascination, highlighting the exceptional capabilities of both Aircraft and enriching the training atmosphere at Beale Air Force Base.

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Chapter 6 Summary: On Display

CHAPTER VI: On Display

In this chapter, Brian Shul shares his experiences showcasing the SR-71 Blackbird at airshows, highlighting the aircraft's ability to captivate and engage the public. The legendary SR-71, renowned for its incredible speed and altitude capabilities, serves as both a technological marvel and a point of fascination for audiences, sparking curiosity and excitement.

At airshows in England, the Blackbird drew crowds of up to 150,000 people, eager to learn about its impressive features and the skilled crew behind it. Shul vividly recounts the engaging conversations he had with attendees, many of whom speculated about the aircraft's classified capabilities. These discussions not only demonstrated the public's fascination but also allowed Shul to share his passion for aviation.

Although the SR-71 was not designed for low-altitude aerial maneuvers, even simple displays left spectators in awe. Shul describes the physically demanding task of piloting during demonstrations, where maintaining high airspeed and precision was crucial. The palpable excitement from the crowd set the Blackbird apart from other aircraft, fostering an almost electric atmosphere at the events.

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Reflecting on his own journey, Shul considers how these airshows inspired future aviators, drawing parallels between his youthful curiosity and that of the children and young adults in the audience. To them, the SR-71 was not just a plane; it was a symbol of speed, power, and beauty, igniting dreams of flying and adventure.

The narrative takes a turn when Shul details a tense moment when he and his co-pilot had to divert to an alternate airport due to an engine problem during a flight. Even in this emergency, the enthusiasm from onlookers mirrored that of a typical airshow, underscoring the public's fascination with the SR-71, regardless of the circumstances.

After landing safely, Shul and his co-pilot engaged with base personnel and facilitated tours, further entrenching the Blackbird's legendary status in aviation history. Their departure from Peterson Field was met with cheers, allowing them to perform additional aerial passes, much to the delight of the crowd, all while ensuring the aircraft remained in peak condition.

In conclusion, Shul provides a captivating portrayal of the impact and significance of flying the SR-71 Blackbird, illustrating its role not only as an advanced piece of technology but also as a bridge connecting pilots to the public's imagination and appreciation for aviation. Through this chapter, readers gain insight into how the SR-71 forged lasting connections with



those who looked up in wonder.

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Chapter 7 Summary: The Legacy

Chapter VII: The Legacy

Understanding Pilots' Affection for Planes

Pilots share an extraordinary connection with their aircraft, often viewing them as extensions of their own beings. This affection develops through shared experiences that intertwine their lives with the planes they fly, turning each into a symbol of adventure and safety. As such, the retirement of an aircraft can evoke profound emotions, marking the end of a chapter in both the aircraft's and the pilots' journeys.

The Retirement Process

The process of retiring older aircraft, such as the iconic Century Series fighters, usually culminates at the boneyard in Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. For pilots, witnessing these retirements serves as a poignant reminder of the aircraft's storied history, filled with triumphs and challenges they experienced together. Each plane holds a treasure trove of memories, making departure difficult for those who flew them.

The SR-71's Imminent Retirement

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The SR-71 Blackbird, renowned for its incredible speed and altitude capabilities, was facing retirement due to evolving financial constraints and the advent of advanced satellite surveillance technology. Though the pilots recognized that the aircraft was still formidable and capable of extraordinary feats, they grappled with the reality of its imminent end as decisions were made regarding its final resting place, with many destined for museums rather than scrap yards.

Emotional Reflections

For the pilots, the thought of the SR-71 becoming a static museum exhibit was disheartening. They understood that the rich history—the thrilling missions and the heart-pounding experiences of flying this legendary aircraft—would not be effectively communicated to visitors, who would only perceive a lifeless display lacking the essence of its storied past.

Final Flight and Farewell

The official retirement ceremony carried a somber tone, feeling more like a funeral for a vibrant entity than a celebration of its legacy. The last flight of the SR-71 became a bittersweet spectacle, embodying the close of an era that was marked by significant moments, including the infamous U-2 incident involving pilot Gary Powers. As the SR-71 rolled down the runway for its



final ascent, the aircraft manifested its legendary power and grace, soaring into the sky in a glorious farewell.

Final Roar

March 6, 1990, marks the day the SR-71 officially retired, concluding its illustrious service with a grand finale that included record-breaking speeds. This final flight to the National Air and Space Museum emphasized the aircraft's unmatched performance, leaving an indelible mark on aviation history even as it transitioned into a relic of the past.

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