

HOW SLOW CAN THE SR-71 GO...

By Brian [Shul](#)

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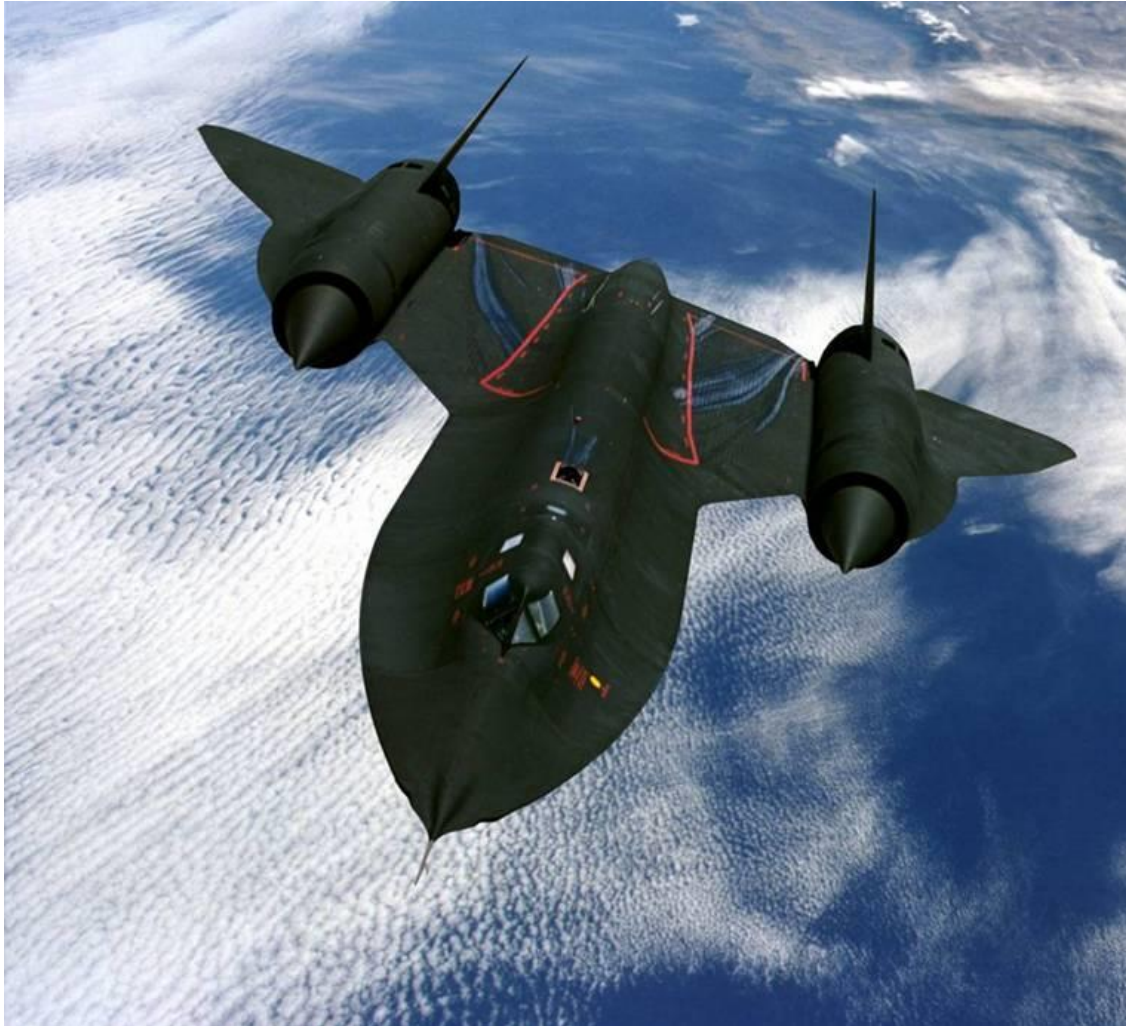
**As a former SR-71 pilot and keynote speaker, the question I'm most often asked is :
' How FAST would that SR-71 fly ? ' I can be assured of hearing that question several times at any event I attend.**

It's an interesting question, given the aircraft's proclivity for speed. However, there's really no single number to give . . as the turbo ramjet would always give you a little MORE speed.

If you wanted it.

It was common to see 35 miles per minute. But we typically flew a programmed Mach number. But because we never wanted to harm the plane in any way, we never let it ' run out ' to any limits of temperature or airspeed.

Thus, each SR-71 pilot had his own individual ' high ' speed that he saw at some point during our missions.



I saw my highest speed over Libya when [Khadafy](#) fired two missiles my way. And max speed was definitely necessary.

Let's just say that the Blackbird truly loved speed . . and it effortlessly took us to high Mach numbers . . we had not previously seen.

So it was with great surprise, when at the end of one of my presentations . . someone asked : ' What was the slowest you ever flew the Blackbird ? '

This was a first. After giving it some thought, I was reminded of a story that I had never shared before, and relayed : I was flying the SR-71 out of [RAF Mildenhall](#), England , with my back

seater, Walt Watson.

We were returning from a mission over Europe and the Iron Curtain when we received a radio transmission from home base.

As we scooted across Denmark in three minutes, we learned a small [RAF](#) base in the Eng-[lish](#) countryside had requested a ' fly-past ' in a Blackbird SR-71.

The Commander of air cadets there was a former Blackbird pilot . . thought it would be a motivating moment for the young lads to see the mighty SR-71 perform a low approach.

No problem, we were happy to do it.

After a quick aerial refueling over the North Sea, we proceeded to find the small airfield.

In the back seat, Walter had a myriad of sophisticated navigation equipment and he began to vector me toward the air field.



Descending at subsonic, we found ourselves zooming above a densely-wooded area . . in slight English haze.

Like most former WWII British airfields, the one we were looking for had a small tower and little surrounding infrastructure. Walter told me we were close. And that I should be able to see the field.

But as far as I could see in the haze . . I saw nothing but trees. We got a little lower. And I pulled the throttles back . . from our 325 knot cruise.

With the gear up . . anything under 275 knots . . was just uncomfortable. Walt said we were practically over the field. Looking hard . . there was nothing in my windscreen.

I banked the jet and started a gentle circling maneuver. . hoping to pick up anything that looked like a field.

Meanwhile, below, the Commander had taken the Cadets up on the control tower's cat walk . . . to get a prime view of the fly by.

It was a quiet, still day with no wind and partial gray overcast. Walter continued to give me indications that the field should be below us. But in the overcast and haze, I couldn't see it.

But the longer we continued to circle and peer out . . . the slower we got. With our power pulled way back, the awaiting cadets had silence.

I must have had good instructors in my flying career . . . as something told me I needed to cross-check the gauges.

As I noticed the airspeed indicator edge below 160 KNOTS . . . my heart slammed up in my throat . . . as my adrenalin-filled hand . . . slammed both throttles forward to detent max-imum . . . then instantly clicking on their after-burners.

At this point we weren't . . . really flying.

We were falling in a shallow bank.

Just at the moment both afterburners lit with a thunderous roar of flame [and what a joyous feeling for everyone] as the Blackbird on the edge of a power stall . . . fell into full view of the shocked faces . . . on the Control Tower's . . . outside walkway.

Shattering the serene quiet . . . the boys had [107] ONE **HUNDED** AND SEVEN FEET . . . of fire-breathing titanium . . . directly in front their open mouths . . . as we leveled the SR-71's massive wings . . . in' FULL AFTER BURNERS . . . closely brushing by tightly-packed students . . . in an UNLIMITED CATEGORY . . . aerobatic pass.

We proceeded back to **Mildenhall** without incident . . . But not saying a word to one another.

For the next . . fourteen . . minutes.

After landing . . our Commander was there to meet us . . and we were both certain he'd ' grab off ' our pilot wings.

Instead, he heartily shook our hands . . said the Base Commander told him it was the greatest SR-71 fly-past . . he had ever seen in his lifetime. Especially after surprising all of them with that . . incredibly precise . . FINAL maneuver . .

HE WAS . . ONLY ABLE TO DESCRIBE IT . . AS :

B-R-E-A-T-H T-A-K-I-N-G !

Some of the cadet's hats actually were blown off.

And the overwhelming thrill of the massive Blackbird . . with its full afterburners . . roaring by . . immediately in front of their eyes and ears . . to become THE acid-etched image . . for everyone's lifetime.

Walt and I both understood the concept of ' breathtaking ' very well that morning.

Later sheepishly reporting . . the Cadets up on the Control Tower seemed . . just excited . . to see our low approach.

As we retired to the equipment room to change from our ' space suits ' we just sat there . . not having spoken one word to one another . . since . . ' the pass.'

Finally, Walter looked at me and told me :

' Hey . . I saw one hundred fifty-six knots.

What did you see ? '

Trying . . to find my voice . . I stammered : '

One hundred and fifty-two knots.'

We sat in silence for a moment. Then Walt said : ' Don't ever do that to me again ! '

And I never did.

A year later, Walter and I were having lunch in the [Mildenhall](#) Officer's club, and over- heard an officer loudly talking to some cadets about an SR-71 Blackbird ' fly-past ' that he'd seen one day.

Of course, by now the story included kids falling off the tower and screaming as the SR-71 Black-bird's exhaust . . had singed their hair and eyebrows . . and caused some of them to soil their uniform pants.

Noticing our [HABU](#) Blackbird patches . . as we stood there trapped and holding our lunch trays, the instructor turned and asked we'd verify to the cadets . . that such a ' thing ' had indeed . . occurred in the immediate proximity of the Base Control Tower.

Walt just shrugged his shoulders . . and said : ' Probably just a routine low approach . . in that airplane . . they're pretty impressive.'

Impressive !

Indeed.

Little did I realize that LOW SPEED experience . . would then become . . one of the most popular and most requested stories.

It's ironic that people were also now became interested in . . how S-[L](#)-[O](#)-[W](#) . . the world's fastest jet aircraft could fly before . . falling . . out of the sky.

Regardless of your airspeed it's always a good idea to keep up your instrument cross- check. But . . keep your Mach up . .

Also.

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[abridged]