

## The Story of our D21: Article “#538?”

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(As prepared)

You have heard about this remarkable program, the technology, the historical context that surrounded the need for such an innovation, and what the intelligence community learned from it. Now I'd like to focus on the specific drone we have here on display, and spend just a few minutes on the life of **this** particular artifact and what makes it special.

This D-21B was “conceived of” in the late spring of 1967, when Lockheed Aircraft Corporation was authorized by the NRO's Program D to produce 19 additional drones, after the first 20 were built, of which 15 were modified to the D-21**B** model.

That means, this particular artifact was “born” sometime in early 1969 – named Article #538 in the paper registry -- at the Lockheed Skunk Works facility where the A-12, SRs and also U-2s were also built. It was born at 11k lbs. (half of which was the solid rocket propellant) and almost 42 feet long; and about 7 ft in height. It was made of Titanium and composite materials. It was fast: could fly at a max speed of mach 3.35 at an altitude of 95K feet with a range of 3500 miles.

In June, 1969 our #538 it was sent to [Beale, AFB\\*](#) – joining the other D-21Bs. But, the program was cancelled before #538 could be used on an operation.

After the D-21 program was cancelled in July 1971, our drone (along with its other 16 siblings) was moved back to California for storage before being airlifted to the Aircraft Maintenance And Regeneration Center (otherwise known as “the Boneyard”) at [Davis-Monthan AFB near Tucson, AZ](#) by early 1977.

There, it was placed in open storage covered by tarps—remember this program was still classified and literally “under wraps.” The story goes that later in the year a tarp must have blown off of the D21s just prior to a Boneyard tour for Aviation enthusiasts. The D-21 cover was then “blown” -- as photos soon appeared in magazines such as Aviation Week.

It stayed at Davis Monthan for over 15 years, until the remaining drones were transferred from AMARC control, to the US Air Force Museum Program. The museum allocated the remaining D-21s for display at various museums, and in the mid-1990s our D-21 was allocated to the museum at [Warner-Robins AFB in GA](#). It was on display and in storage here until 2017, when NRO took possession of the D-21b Article #538 from the National Museum of the US Air Force.

In July, 2017, we signed a loan agreement with the Southern Museum of Flight to have the drone restored and displayed here in [Birmingham, AL](#). As you know, in November 2018 the museum unveiled the Drone you see today.

During the restoration process, Wayne Novy and his team here at the museum uncovered internal pieces marked with the number #539. The discovery now presents a conundrum as to the true identity of this particular D-21. The official transfer documents from NMUSAF identify this drone as Article #538. Yet, the internal panels and parts raise a question if this IS really #538. We continue to work with the Beale AFB Historian who has agreed to examine similar areas for panel markings on their D-21b to help us identify which drone this really is -- #538 or #539.

This again, is a rare piece of historical hardware that is on display here – but this recent discovery of the panels highlights how we’re continually learning about our history, as new information is made available to us.