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USAF and the UFOs

By John T. Correll

THE Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) era began with a bang on the afternoon of June 24, 1947, in the Cascade mountain range of Washington state. Private pilot Kenneth Arnold, bound for Yakima in his light airplane, was approaching Mount Rainier when nine disk-shaped objects, flying in formation, shot by in front of him.

The disks resembled “saucers skipping across water,” Arnold said, flashing in the sun as they flitted between the high peaks. He timed them as they sped from Mount Rainier to Mount Adams and estimated that they were moving at 1,700 mph.

When Arnold landed, he told friends at the airport what he had seen. Word spread rapidly and “before the night was over, I was receiving telephone calls from all parts of the world,” he said. In



the next six weeks, 850 additional sightings of flying disks were reported, no doubt inspired by Arnold's story, which received prominent play in newspapers.

In the spring 1948 issue of *Fate*, a magazine devoted to the paranormal, Arnold called the disks "flying saucers." He is often credited with coining the term, but the term had appeared previously. "RAAF Captures Flying Saucer in Roswell Region," proclaimed the front page headline of the Roswell, N.M., *Daily Record* for July 8, 1947, just two weeks after Arnold's sighting in the Cascades. "RAAF" was Roswell Army Airfield, and the "flying saucer" was wreckage from a crash in the desert 75 miles north of the base.

There was a flurry of interest, but it faded quickly when the Air Force announced the debris was from a high-altitude weather balloon experiment.

The story would lie dormant for 30 years before rising again to become the most famous UFO incident of them all.

The Air Force, to its lasting regret, got in on the ground floor of the UFO phenomenon. The Pentagon, worried that what Arnold saw might be some kind of secret Soviet reconnaissance craft, directed the Air Technical Intelligence Center at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, to investigate.

The scientific consensus was that Arnold had seen an inversion of refracted light—commonly known as a mirage—but the frenzy was not to be contained.

The Air Force was stuck. Previously, no government agency had been in charge of such things and none now wanted to take it off USAF's hands. The Air Force effort to collect and evaluate flying saucer data began in 1947 as Project Sign, evolved into Project

Grudge and then Project Twinkle before settling down as Project Blue Book in 1952. Capt. Edward J. Ruppelt, the first director of Blue Book, introduced the term "Unidentified Flying Object" as more accurate than "flying saucer." An astronomer named J. Allen Hynek joined the program as a technical consultant. Hynek would go on to become a famous figure in the world of UFOs.

In 1952, there were 1,225 sightings to investigate. By then, two notions had taken hold. UFO buffs, suspicious of the Air Force, were convinced that UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin and that the government was lying about them. Several books appeared, notably *Flying Saucers From Outer Space* (1953) by Donald E. Keyhoe, a retired Marine Corps major and the soon to be leader of NICAP, the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena. UFO



Anthropomorphic dummies such as these were used in high-altitude balloon crash testing over White Sands Proving Ground, west of Roswell.

stories were regular fare not only in the sensationalist tabloids but also in the mainstream news media.

Airmen From Outer Space

Twice in the middle 1950s, the government convened outside panels to review sightings and investigations. The panels agreed that no threat to national security from UFOs was uncovered, and there was no indication of technology that transcended current scientific knowledge. It did not help when the Central Intelligence Agency insisted one of the panel reports be classified, lest it reveal names and positions of CIA representatives who attended some of the meetings.

“UFOlogy” moved into the new regime of abductions in 1961 when Betty and Barney Hill of Portsmouth, N.H., were—according to their later hypnotic regression—taken aboard a UFO and examined. However, for all of the saucer sightings, no one had yet seen an actual alien. This first happened in April 1964, when a police officer in Socorro, N.M., chased a flame in the sky to a mesa south of town where an egg-shaped craft landed and two strange figures got out. The craft roared away as he approached but the landing gear left indentations in the ground.

Among those studying the evidence from Socorro was Philip J. Klass, a senior editor of *Aviation Week*. Based on the wedge-shaped depressions left on the mesa, Klass built a scale model

with a kitchen scouring pad and four knitting needles. It demonstrated that each landing leg would have had to be of a different length, each extending out and down at a different angle, with the craft perched awkwardly above. In addition to his duties at the magazine, Klass wrote four books on UFOs, explaining that many sightings could be explained by plasmas, ball lightning, coronas, and saucer-shaped clouds.

In 1966, 87 students at Hillsdale College in Michigan saw UFOs in flight from their dormitory windows. Michigan Rep. Gerald R. Ford demanded a “full-blown” investigation by the House Armed Services

Committee. Being the House minority leader, Ford got his investigation but it lasted only an hour and 20 minutes, long enough to take statements from the Secretary of the Air Force and Blue Book officials.

In 1969, Gov. Jimmy Carter of Georgia, preparing for a speech in the small town of Leary, saw a “self-luminous” object in the western sky. He reported the elevation angle and other details of his sighting to NICAP. What he had seen was the planet Venus, which that day was in precisely the position Carter specified. Over time, more than 10 percent of the sightings investigated by Blue Book were generated by stars, planets, meteors, and other bright celestial bodies.

Aircraft and balloons also accounted for substantial numbers of UFO sightings. According to Klass, an elderly woman who said she saw three flying saucers in formation was asked to describe their appearance. “They looked just like jet fighter planes,” she said.

The Air Force finally figured out a way—or so it thought—to get rid of the UFO albatross. In 1966, it engaged the University of Colorado to conduct an independent investigation, led by noted physicist Edward U. Condon. “Our general conclusion is that nothing has come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that has added to scientific knowledge,” Condon reported in 1968. “Careful consideration of the record as it is available to us leads us to conclude that further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.” The

National Academy of Sciences endorsed the Condon report, but UFO true believers denounced it.

In December 1969, the Air Force announced with barely concealed relief the end of Project Blue Book. Of the 12,618 sightings reported since 1947, only 701 were categorized as “unidentified,” and most of those were cases where the available information was not sufficient for analysis. The records of Blue Book were shipped off and archived.

Nevertheless, the Air Force continued to draw sporadic fire on the UFO issue. In 1974, a UFOlogist accused the Air Force of keeping two saucers and 12 alien bodies from a saucer crash in New Mexico in Hangar 18 at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

However, there is no Hangar 18 at the base. Reporters were invited to tour Building 18, which housed the Aero Propulsion Laboratory, but no UFOs or aliens. Concurrently, Sen. Barry Goldwater complained that the Air Force had denied him access to a “Blue Room” at Wright-Patterson where UFO artifacts were supposedly stored.

Meanwhile, Hynek, a regular spokesman for Project Blue Book since its inception, crossed over to the other side, declaring his conviction that “the UFO phenomenon is real.” He founded the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), which purchased the NICAP archives when that organization folded. Hynek served as a consultant to the 1977 Steven Spielberg movie, “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” The title came from Hynek’s taxonomy of encounters, indicating a sighting that included creatures or crew on the UFO (Hynek had a bit part in the film).

Roswell Resurgent

The Roswell crash in 1947 had been forgotten. It did not appear on a list of the most important UFO cases published by NICAP in 1966. Three decades after the fact, however, the story would be resurrected and developed into the best-known UFO incident of all time.

In July 1947, W. W. Brazel had found “a large area of bright wreckage” on his ranch and reported it to the county sheriff in Roswell, who passed the information to Maj. Jesse Marcel, an intelligence officer at the airfield. Marcel and an assistant drove to the ranch and picked up the wreckage, which Marcel took to Eighth Air Force headquarters at Fort Worth, Tex., for examination.

Meanwhile, the base public information officer, Lt. Walter G. Haut, delivered a press release to the local newspapers and

radio stations, saying the base had gained possession of a “flying disk.” Only two weeks had elapsed since Kenneth Arnold’s saucer sighting in the Cascades. The Associated Press picked up the Roswell story and inquiries poured in from all over the world.

At Eighth Air Force, weather officer Irving Newton identified the debris as parts of a high-altitude balloon and a metallic target that helped radar track the balloon assembly in flight. Photos were taken and announcements made. The news media lost interest and the case lay dormant for 31 years.

In 1978, UFO researcher Stanton Friedman discovered Jesse Marcel in Houma, La., where he had retired and was running a radio-TV repair shop. Marcel said that in 1947, he had been ordered not to talk about the true nature of the debris, which he described as “nothing from this Earth.” In the photographs, phony wreckage was substituted for the actual materials. Among the items not revealed, he said, were wooden beams “with some sort of hieroglyphics on them that nobody could decipher.”

Marcel’s revelations were reported in an article in the *National Enquirer* tabloid in 1978 and achieved warp speed with the 1980 publication of *The Roswell Incident* by Charles Berlitz and William Moore. Berlitz and Moore also recounted UFO crashes elsewhere in the New Mexico desert in 1947 where dead aliens were seen at the crash sites. The witnesses, stumbling upon the scene of the mishap by chance, were chased away by military personnel before they got a close look. (With only one exception, the “witnesses” were repeating accounts they had heard from others.) The aliens were hairless, had pale complexions, wore one-piece silver-gray suits, and had only four fingers on each hand. They were only about four feet tall.

The Roswell story gathered momentum in books, articles, TV specials, and movies. One of the strangest segments was the “Majestic 12” episode in 1984-1985. Filmmaker Jaime Shandera received in the mail two rolls of film from an anonymous sender. They held images of two documents from 1947 and 1952 in which the White House appointed 12 individuals (the “Majestic 12”) to guard the secrets of Roswell. Shandera and a colleague “discovered” a third document, dated in 1954 and confirming the first two, in the National Archives.

Among the Majestic 12 was Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal. In the interpretation of some UFOlogists, For-

restal’s suicide in 1949 was a cover story and “the reason for his murder was that he was no longer trusted by those within the security services who had control over the captured saucer,” according to Rupert Matthews in his 2009 book, *Roswell: Uncovering the Secrets of Area 51 and the Fatal UFO Crash*.

The Majestic 12 story had several weaknesses. The typewriter used for the 1947 document was a Smith Corona model that did not exist until 1962. Formats and date styles were wrong for the period. The National Archives acknowledged the third document was in its files but did not know how it got there. The document did not have a register number and it bore a National Security Council marking that did not come into use until the Nixon Administration.

The Undertaker’s Story

In the summer of 1947, Glenn Dennis was an apprentice mortician at Ballard Funeral Home in Roswell, which had a contract with the air base for mortuary and ambulance services. In 1989, he told his story to Friedman, the same researcher who found Jesse Marcel in Louisiana. Friedman was referred to Dennis by Walter Haut, who had put out the Roswell flying saucer press release in 1947 and who said he was “a friend of many, many years” of Dennis.

Dennis recalled a night in July 1947 when he accidentally got close to an autopsy in progress at the Roswell base hospital. Before he could learn much of what was going on, a redheaded captain (or, in some versions told by Dennis, a redheaded colonel) had him ejected from the building, but not before he encountered a nurse friend who was visibly upset. She had entered a room to get supplies and saw two doctors she didn’t know conducting an autopsy on three small, black, mangled bodies, one of them with an exceptionally large head. The nurse disappeared from Roswell within a day. Dennis was unable to get in touch with her despite attempts to help by the chief nurse, Capt. “Slatts” Wilson, who was known to them both. He remembered “Slatts” as unusually tall, 6 feet 1 inch or taller. The missing nurse became part of the UFO canon.

In 1991, Glenn Dennis, Walter Haut, and a third

partner opened the International UFO Museum in Roswell. Haut was the first head of the museum. He and his wife had car tags that read, “Mr. UFO” and “Mrs. UFO.”

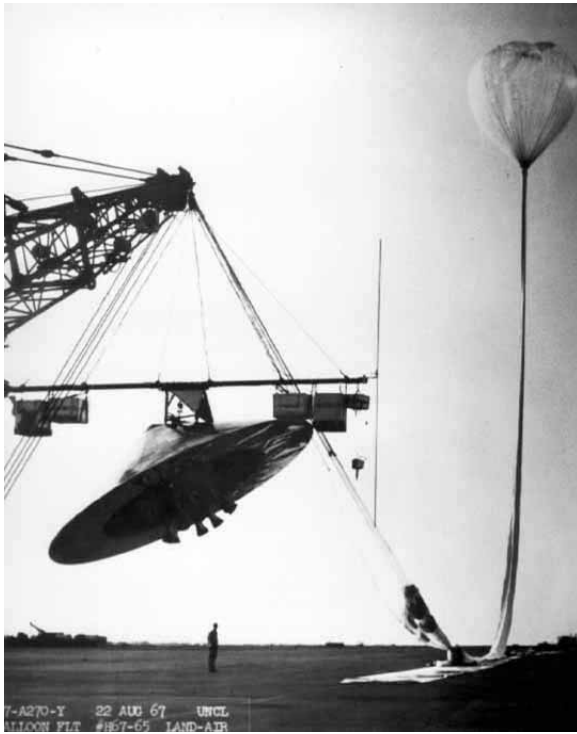
Although it was not apparent at the time, matters were approaching resolution. In 1993, Rep. Steven Schiff of New Mexico made inquiries about the Roswell incident. Careless handling of his questions by the Pentagon prompted him to conclude he was getting the run-around so he called for an investigation by the GAO (then the General Accounting Office, since renamed Government Accountability Office). Since the GAO reported to Schiff’s Government Operations Committee, he got swift attention.

The Air Force heard about the investigation from the newspapers and decided to move on its own. This time, USAF pulled out all the stops, digging deep into old records and hunting down persons, long retired, who had taken part in events of many years ago. This led to lengthy reports (one of them almost 1,000 pages long) in 1994 and 1997, filled with extraordinary details and photographs of the incidents in and around Roswell.

The wreckage at the Brazel ranch in July 1947 was the remains of a 60-foot-long train of 23 weather balloons and a cluster of metallic targets to enable tracking by radar. It was launched the previous month from Alamogordo Army

Maj. Jesse Marcel displays the debris found northwest of Roswell in 1947. USAF says the debris is from a standard radar target used in Project Mogul.





The aeroshell of a NASA Voyager, shown here being prepared for a high-altitude test flight. Space probes, such as this one, suggest a “flying saucer” shape common among UFO sightings.

Airfield (now Holloman AFB, N.M.) as part of the “Project Mogul” program to develop a capability for high-altitude monitoring of Soviet nuclear tests. The objective of this particular flight was to perfect the handling and use of large balloon trains.

Big Balloons and Bald Aliens

The USAF report included statements from the two scientists who launched the balloon train and photos of it on the ground and in the air. There were also statements from the assistant who accompanied Jesse Marcel to the crash site and from the weather officer who identified the debris at Eighth Air Force headquarters, as well as photos of Marcel and others with samples of the wreckage.

The “hieroglyphics” were easily explained. The radar targets were produced by a firm that also made toys. The manufacturer used some in-stock plastic tape on which were pink and purple geometric designs and flower and heart symbols.

Reports of the short four-fingered aliens at the other crash sites may have sprung from events glimpsed at a distance in the 1950s, not in 1947 as the witnesses said. The “dead aliens” resembled anthropomorphic “Sierra

Sam” crash test dummies used in high-altitude balloon drops over White Sands Proving Ground west of Roswell. As seen in the photos in the USAF reports, the dummies were hairless, chalky pale, wore silvery one-piece suits, and were often shortened by loss of arms, legs, and fingers from landing damage.

Former undertaker Dennis may likewise have time-shifted and jumbled events that he did not understand, perhaps combining bits and pieces of unrelated things that happened over a spread of 12 years or so. In 1956, a KC-97 aircraft crashed near Walker (formerly Roswell AAF) AFB, N.M. The autopsy of three of the casualties was performed at Ballard

Funeral Home where Dennis worked, not at the base, and was performed by two out-of-town specialists. The bodies were badly burned, black and mangled, and shortened by the loss of lower extremities. The hospital commander at the time was a redheaded colonel, Lee Ferrell.

In 1959, two pilots were injured in a balloon gondola accident northwest of Roswell and were treated at the Walker Air Force Base hospital. The “alien” with the big head may have been Capt. Dan D. Fulgham, whose head was so swelled by hematoma that he could not open his eyes and his wife did not immediately recognize his face. The team leader on the scene was Capt. Joseph W. Kittinger Jr., who had red hair.

The Air Force accounted for all of the nurses who had been at Roswell. “Slatts” Wilson may have been another composite. The only nurse known as “Slatts” was Capt. (later Lt. Col.) Lucille Slattery, who did not arrive until after the July 1947 crash and who was 5 feet 3 inches, not 6 feet 1 inch or taller. There was a nurse Wilson, but her first name was Idabelle and she had never heard of Dennis or the events he reported.

The only nurse who left Roswell on short notice went to San Antonio for special medical treatment, which led to her eventual medical retirement. She

was not removed because of something she had seen.

In 1996, Glenn Dennis succeeded Walter Haut as head of the International UFO Museum in Roswell. The current director is Haut’s daughter, Julie Shuster. The museum attracts about 150,000 visitors a year, and a second UFO museum has opened in town. Lamp posts, street signs, and shops display an alien motif with bubble heads and big eyes. The annual UFO festival over the July 4 weekend is one of New Mexico’s premier tourist attractions.

Suspicious about Roswell never die. In 2007, when running for the Democratic nomination for the presidency, New Mexico Governor (and former Secretary of Energy) Bill Richardson promised, if elected, he would work on reopening the files on a case that had never been adequately explained.

UFO country in the southwestern United States includes the Air Force’s fabled Area 51, a classified development area on the shore of the Groom Lake salt flat in Nevada. UFOlogists claim the crashed saucer from Roswell was taken there and the Air Force uses the site to reverse engineer UFOs and hold meetings with extraterrestrials. UFO sightings have been reported around the perimeter.

Among the aircraft tested at Groom Lake were the SR-71 Blackbird, the F-117 stealth fighter, and the B-2 stealth bomber, which looks something like a saucer if seen from certain angles. The UFO reports “made it easier to conceal what we were doing,” says one Area 51 old-timer. “We were the UFOs.”

Polls find more than half of the adult American population believes the government is concealing information about UFOs. Almost half of the public believes that aliens have visited the Earth.

Last year, seven former Air Force officers, including the former deputy base commander from RAF Bentwaters in England, held a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington to tell about UFO visits to Air Force bases. They said that in 1967, UFOs disabled ICBMs at Malmstrom AFB, Mont. Their program was mostly a pastiche of stories that had been told before.

Nobody paid them much attention. Perhaps, in the context of the world today, there are more disturbing and important things to worry about than UFOs. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, “The Poltava Debacle,” appeared in the March issue.