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## LETTERS

### KECKSBURG CONTROVERSY

*To the editor:*

In Leslie Kean's article about Kecksburg ("Forty Years of Secrecy: NASA, the Military, and the 1965 Kecksburg Crash," *IUR* 30:1), she boasts that in 2003 there were "two exciting developments" which "demolish" the two skeptical explanations: a meteor or a Soviet satellite.

The satellite explanation, specifically Cosmos 96, has actually been a central explanation offered by the promoters of a mysterious crash recovery, such as Stan Gordon, since the 1980s. It's strange that this failed explanation has suddenly been declared a "preferred explanation" of the skeptics.

As for the meteor explanation, Kean never discussed it at all, except to dismiss without explanation the "amateur photographs," some of which were taken by a professional Michigan newspaper photographer, and the many 1965 eyewitness reports.

Most curious is her dismissing, without discussion, the explanation of astronomers who analyzed photographs, eyewitness reports, and a seismometer recording, published four decades ago in a peer-reviewed science journal.

Kean uses nothing more than the claimed eyewitness accounts decades later of tree damage seen in the dark at a site a half mile from the real search on another farm, but published by mistake in a local newspaper. For decades, as "new" witnesses surfaced with their strange accounts, this remained the only published location for the event. Furthermore, if you pick two trees, of course you get a "path" between them. But how many other trees were examined for damage in this heavily eroded, reforested area?

Kean ignored a lot in her article. Like Kecksburg mystery mongers before her, she makes much of an excited 1965 radio report by the late John Murphy, but curiously ignores the part where he said the only military people he actually saw at the site were in the back seat of a police car. These were obviously the three USAF men mentioned in the Project Blue Book file in the National Archives.

Also, Kean doesn't inform her readers of another tidbit John Murphy reported in the program, which was rebroadcast on WJM radio on the 1995 anniversary of the incident. He reported that the military present were from the "Army 662nd Radar Squadron." So, a week after the incident Murphy was still confused about the true identity of the military unit involved. This Air Force unit was located on the Army facility at Oakdale. Confusion about this is why, in 1965 and later, some people think the Army was there.

Kean disingenuously says that her investigation has established that personnel from this Army facility were present, but doesn't inform her readers that this is where the USAF 662nd Squadron radar site was located. She prefers instead to promote a continued mystery about Army "stubbornness" because they can't come up with non-existent

documents.

Of course, as Kean writes, John Murphy thought he saw "Army" and "Air Force" uniforms at the police barracks back in Greensburg. He probably couldn't tell the difference between the winter blues worn by the Lieutenant and the OD fatigues, festooned with Air Defense patches, worn by the EMs. The details of the report that this newsman made, in his own lifetime, support the official version of events.

The most interesting revelation in Kean's article was that her group's investigation managed to locate several members of the USAF 662nd Radar Squadron who participated in the events of that night. Guess what they reported? Their 40-year-old memories also support the official version.

Until the long-published photographs are discussed for the support or refutation they offer to the a crash theory, the real Kecksburg crashed saucer cover-up of pictures and documents proving the true nature of the December 9, 1965, fireball will continue.

Readers shouldn't get too excited about these new developments, as they don't really offer anything new. The old farmers out there still chuckle when they talk about "Murphy's UFO": the burning pile of brush at the Norvelt Golf Course construction site, where the intrepid newsman first thought he had his "War of the Worlds."

*Robert R. Young  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania*

*The author responds:*

Anyone familiar with the basic strategy of UFO debunkers is aware that their first rule is to deny any evidence that contradicts their position. In the Kecksburg case, scores of people, including representatives of the press, attest to the presence of military personnel at the search location, and a number of witnesses describe standing within a few feet of the object, half embedded in a gully. Nevertheless, amateur astronomer Robert Young is so smitten with his belief that the incident was merely a meteor flyover that he is forced to insist that every witness who recalls details not matching this scenario is either wrong, unreliable or lying. When Young was asked for his opinion by *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Ralph Vigoda in 2000, he explained away the entire Kecksburg case as nothing more than "urban rumor." A rumor, even though scores of witnesses have given independent, first-hand testimony to what they saw? And the incident occurred in a remote, rural location. It appears that Young is not always careful about his choice of words.

Mr. Young is entitled to defend the Air Force position if he wants, but I would be interested to know how many of the key Kecksburg witnesses he has personally interviewed, if any. Has he spoken to Robert Gatty and Ernie Hoffman, reporters who were on the scene and were clearly capable of determining the Army presence? Or to Jerry Betters, Bill Bulebush, or James Romansky, whose independent reports

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of close encounters with the object on the ground corroborate each others' descriptions?

For many years, Young has doled out all manner of distortions and factual inaccuracies about the Kecksburg case to defend his one-pointed opinion. Take this rather amusing statement, for example, as reported in the same *Philadelphia Inquirer* piece:

“And to those who say the object floated, slowed down or changed direction, there’s this explanation: People were watching the bright vapor trail, which was likely buffeted by winds.”

This defies logic when one examines the detailed descriptions by witnesses, such as Randy Overly of the acorn-shaped object a few hundred feet above the ground. The many others from Westmoreland County who reported the incident described either a fireball, or a physical object, sometimes with a fiery tail. The notion of “vapor buffeted by the wind” as an explanation for the object’s turns rivals any number of the more absurd explanations offered by desperate debunkers over the years.

Another example can be found at the beginning of Young’s letter, where he declares that the Cosmos 96 argument was not used by skeptics, but was promoted by Stan Gordon (who has been investigating the case for 40 years). Young must be aware that the leading skeptic on the Kecksburg case, James Oberg, has actually been the loudest voice claiming that it was either the Cosmos 96 capsule or other debris from the failed Soviet probe that landed in Kecksburg. Oberg has been interviewed for numerous documentaries stating that this is what the witnesses saw—case closed. (Recently, however, it seems Oberg’s position has changed due to Nicholas Johnson’s findings; see more below.) Gordon, on the other hand, simply offered this explanation as one of many possibilities in an unsolved case.

These nit-picky, often irrelevant misstatements are characteristic of Young’s repeated diatribes debunking the Kecksburg case. (His convoluted statement that I have used only accounts of “tree damage seen in the dark” one-half mile from the “real search” to determine the location is another example; we know where the correct site is due to three witnesses, unknown to each other, who escorted Stan Gordon there independently, as described in my piece. The tree damage was observed in broad daylight the day after the incident by witness John Hayes, and was photographed by Gordon years later.)

What’s important to address here is the bottom line. There are three basic positions that have been put forward to explain the Kecksburg incident: (1) A meteor, meaning that nothing came down; (2) a man-made object so sensitive that its retrieval was covered up; (3) an object of unknown origin retrieved by the military and also covered up.

The first option, which Young believes to be true, requires that its proponents dismiss out of hand the testimony of dozens of eyewitnesses and some media coverage. My *IUR* article went into detail about the credibility of the Kecksburg witnesses and the large number of corroborating

reports. However, in working with Stan Gordon for the last few years, I have learned that the *majority* of the witnesses he has spoken with over four decades have not gone public, and that there is actually a great deal more information in support of options two and three than Young or anyone else is aware of, some of it from highly sensitive sources. This is a statement I don’t like to make because promises of confidentiality preclude its verification. Young’s assertions, however, beg the question.

As waves of witnesses came forward at different times, Gordon was careful to withhold certain details about the case to use as checks for witness authenticity. There is absolutely no way that any serious investigator can dismiss the abundance of evidence showing the likelihood that *something* did indeed come down in Kecksburg on December 9, 1965.

Nonetheless, thousands in four states did see a brilliant fireball minutes before anything happened in Kecksburg. At the time this was assumed to be a meteor, yet today scientists disagree as to the nature of that fireball, and how it actually behaved.

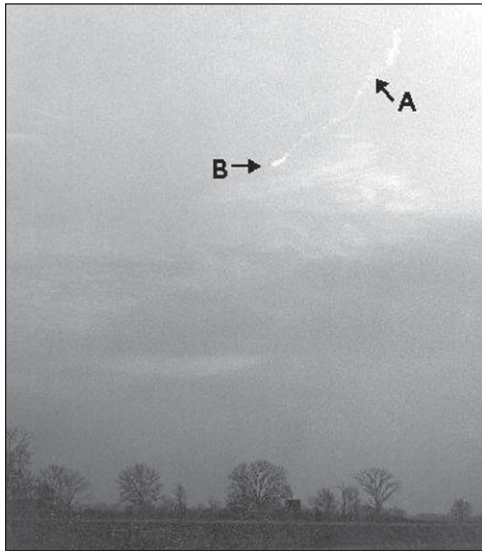
Over the years, Young’s argument has hinged on a 1967 paper by astronomers Von Del Chamberlain and David J. Krause published in the *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*. “The Fireball of December 9, 1965—Part I” provides the authors’ calculation of the trajectory of the fireball, which they state was a meteor.

In the paper, Chamberlain and Krause used triangulation of two photographs, taken a few miles apart in Michigan, to purportedly show that the trajectory for the fireball was such that it would have been at a right angle to a trajectory bringing the object into the Kecksburg area. The astronomers collected 66 standardized forms completed by eyewitnesses, including the accounts of the two photographers. Based on these reports, they estimated the event lasted only about four seconds and resulted in the explosion of the meteorite over the western end of Lake Erie near Detroit. (Interestingly, the authors note, “several observers reported that some material apparently continued beyond, along the original trajectory.”) The paper stated that the event occurred at 4:43 p.m. EST, based on nearby seismographic records of a shock wave produced by the fireball.

Although this study includes three interesting images of the fireball’s smoke trail, Young does not seem to be aware of the meticulous work of scientist David Rudiak exposing the problems plaguing the study. Rudiak provided a brief summary of his findings for me in a recent email (greater detail and helpful illustrations are on his website, [www.roswellproof.com/Keckburg\\_triangulation\\_error.html](http://www.roswellproof.com/Keckburg_triangulation_error.html)).

1. The *JRASC* article assumes absolute precision in measuring triangulation angles to two “points” in the fireball trail. This is unscientific methodology, as there is always some error in any measurement, and there is no error analysis in the article.

2. The two triangulation “points” should actually be large, fuzzy areas with boundaries determined by the possible



*One photo from the JRASC paper used to triangulate the trajectory of the December 9, 1965, fireball. The photo was taken about 20 miles north of Detroit and shows the smoke trail just after the fireball disappeared following an explosion, shown by the puff of smoke at Point B.*

measurement errors. Instead of one line between two precise points, the paper should have presented a broad range of possible trajectories within the range of these error regions.

3. Small angle errors in determining directions to the two smoke trail points of only  $\pm 0.6^\circ$  (or  $1.2^\circ$  overall) would be sufficient to change the trajectory by nearly  $90^\circ$  from the one suggested, allowing for a trajectory towards Kecksburg.

4. Errors are *easy* to make when measuring in the field. Sources of such potential errors could have been: getting compass directions slightly wrong; not precisely locating one or both photo locations to within inches (smoke trail directions can only be determined relative to nearby objects, such as trees, so precise location of photo sites is vital); a small scaling error in one or both photos; trail drift due to wind, since the two photos were taken half a minute to a minute apart, shifting the smoke trail points between photos and thus changing the apparent trajectory. (In fact, scrutiny of the three included photos shows clear evidence of such high winds.)

5. That the trajectory is likely in error is strongly supported by the photos themselves, clearly showing that the smoke trail gets thinner over time. The most likely explanation is that the object was moving sharply *away* from the camera rather than sideways, as stated in the article. (If it were actually sideways, the trail should remain constant in overall thickness since the distance to the camera would remain unchanged.) Estimating the thinning of the trail results in a trajectory at least towards Kecksburg or even more to the southeast.

6. This away-from-camera trajectory also results in a calculated angle of descent that is gradual (much like an airliner coming in for a landing) rather than the steep ( $52^\circ$ ) calculated descent angle of the article. This gradual descent

is also consistent with a Kecksburg landing over 200 miles away.

7. The Pittsburgh Airport time of 4:47 p.m. for the fireball (vs. about 4:43 p.m. in Detroit) calls into question the meteor fireball explanation. This would be too slow for a meteor, which should have traveled the distance in less than a minute.

In addition, sonic boom reports from western Pennsylvania, phoned in to various agencies, confirm the presence of the fireball over that state.

What was this fireball, which looked like a meteor, and what was its relationship to events in Kecksburg? Could there have been two separate events, a meteor and something else unrelated that came down in Kecksburg? Or could the fireball have sent off something—just before it exploded in the “puff” captured on film—that ended up grounded in Kecksburg? Or, did the fireball itself, being something other than a meteor, make a gradual descent into Kecksburg? This is part of the mystery that we will probably never solve, unless the U.S. government comes clean about the case.

What we *do know*, according to Stan Gordon’s interviews with many people in local communities who saw a fiery slow-moving object, is the very specific trajectory of something unusual descending over Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. Beginning at about 4:47 p.m., a luminous object was first seen over the greater Pittsburgh area as news media and police phones were inundated with sighting reports. (Or was this simply those pesky vapor trails buffeted by the winds?) The brilliant object then moved towards the southeast and passed over Greensburg, made a turn to the south, and headed towards the Laurelville area. After making another turn, it traveled northeast towards Kecksburg, where it turned again and descended into the woods. The news media reported that the Army and State Police cordoned off the area where the object was believed to have landed. “Nothing that happened earlier in four other states will change these facts,” Gordon points out.

New information is coming to light all the time about the Kecksburg event. Recently, Gordon obtained a newspaper article from the *Mount Pleasant Journal* published on December 17, 1965, eight days after the incident. Despite reporting that the state police captain said that nothing was found and “we’re satisfied it was meteor,” the headline reads, “Mystery Surrounds Area’s Fallen Object—Many Questions Still Unanswered.” The story states, “seven area residents reported seeing a smoldering object crash to the earth.” It goes on to say that Army personnel were supposedly among those sealing off the roads in the area, where up to 400 “curious onlookers” had gathered. “Why have U.S. Army officials hastened to the scene issued no statement on the results of their search? And why, with reported sightings from many other areas, were so many officials concentrated on the search here?” queries the article.

This story also notes, as has been confirmed by other sources, that the search for the object continued the following day (Friday). If it was determined early that morning, as

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the Air Force stated, that nothing came down and this was only a meteor, why did the search continue? “By Friday evening, the area had been thoroughly scoured by police, military authorities, scientists with Geiger counters and other volunteers,” the story states.

Young writes that the “most interesting revelation” of my story was the reports of several members of the Air Force 662nd Radar Squadron who were involved with events that night. Young states that these reports support the official position that nothing came down. Indeed, one lieutenant did say that he searched for the object and found nothing. However, in the same interview, he also contradicted what we know about the circumstances at the site from numerous news reports describing the extensive military and police presence, the cordoning off of the area, and the many civilians descending on the location. As I mentioned in my article, this lieutenant said there was no military or police presence on the roads or in the area, and no excess civilian activity. The latter observation is simply impossible, and raises numerous interesting questions that I explored in my story.

Young may delight in the fact that this man said nothing was found, but he has chosen to disregard the rest of his interview, which involved puzzling inconsistencies with the facts, and therefore calls into question the reliability of the lieutenant’s story. The lieutenant’s official written report about his search was for some reason not included with the Project Blue Book files, and has not yet been released by the Air Force, despite my specific requests for it accompanied by an affidavit from the lieutenant.

Other discrepancies exist in the various rather convoluted stories reported to me by the 662nd officers: In one case, an officer said that he’s positive no search was conducted at all, and yet another officer told me he’s convinced that the object was a Russian satellite. Both of these statements actually *contradict* the official version, rather than support it, as Young claims. Young has chosen to select from these accounts one part of one story that fits his pre-determined belief that the incident involved only a meteor, while ignoring everything else. This selectivity is to be expected—picking the evidence to suit his position and ignoring the rest is the name of the game.

And Young’s interest in this set of witness interviews raises another question: He has chosen to accept *contradictory* reports of a few former Air Force officers with “40-year-old memories,” while rejecting dozens of *corroborating* reports from other independent witnesses. Does this make sense?

One final note: The official position that Young so staunchly defends has recently been challenged not by a mere journalist or UFO investigator, but by a U.S. government agency. NASA, which reportedly had a role in the incident but has not provided information about the case through the Freedom of Information Act, is now contradicting the Air Force findings. Unexpectedly, last December, NASA spokesperson David Steitz told the Associated Press that “the object appeared to be a Russian satellite that re-

entered the atmosphere and broke up. NASA experts studied fragments from the object but records of what they found were lost in the 1990s.” Steitz said NASA looked at the fragments and boxed them up, only to misplace all related documentation. (Steitz has declined to explain where this information came from if no documentation exists, despite my repeated requests for an answer to that question.)

So, to make things even more complicated for Mr. Young and everyone else, we now have one government agency contradicting another. NASA headquarters in Washington says it was a Russian satellite; the Air Force says it was a meteor; and to add to the chaos, space debris expert Nicholas Johnson of the NASA Johnson Space Center says it couldn’t possibly have been a Russian satellite or any man-made object at all, for that matter. And eyewitnesses on the scene say it was a strange acorn-shaped craft with illegible symbols on the outside. Which was it?

I have no idea why Young is on a mission to ridicule a large portion of the evidence on this case, without any regard to the accuracy of his statements in doing so, and why he so fanatically sticks to his particular belief about the incident. In the meantime, the fact is that we still have a real mystery on our hands, still unsolved and still under investigation.

*Leslie Kean*

## DOCUMENTARY MEMORIES

*To the editor:*

I thoroughly enjoyed the Robert Barrow article on the movie: *Unidentified Flying Objects*, which I am fortunate enough to own. My lifelong interest in UFOs was probably born when I was a 10-year-old youngster and my mother took me to see this long-ignored movie. I can still remember the sense of awe and wonder that I experienced as I gazed upon the huge movie screen above me, totally enveloped by the introductory opening title: *Unidentified Flying Objects: The True Story of Flying Saucers* (shown in the upper right-hand corner of the last *IUR* cover). It absolutely captured the attention of that 10-year-old kid, who is now almost 60, and still fascinated by the subject of UFOs, and still entertained by this grand old black-and-white flick. My thanks to Robert Barrow!

*Peter Resta  
Arnold, Maryland*

## LOOKING FOR ARNOLD

*To the editor:*

I am trying to trace the daughter of the late Kenneth Arnold. I hope to make the definitive documentary on the late Kenneth Arnold and cement his rightful place in ufological history. His daughter is Kim Arnold Purvis.

If you know where I can contact Kim Purvis, or know of anyone who might be able to help me locate her, I would be grateful. Please write to me: Philip Mantle, 49 East Leigh Drive, Tingley, Near Wakefield, West Yorkshire, WF3 1PF England. E-mail: philip@mantle8353.fsworldco.uk.

*Philip Mantle*