

Alien Armada!

50 Years Ago, Unidentified Flying Objects From Way Beyond the Beltway Seized the Capital's Imagination

By Peter Carlson

Washington Post Staff Writer

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In the control tower at Washington National Airport, Ed Nugent saw seven pale violet blips on his radar screen. What were they? Not planes -- at least not any planes that were supposed to be there.

He summoned his boss, Harry G. Barnes, the head of National's air traffic controllers. "Here's a fleet of flying saucers for you," Nugent said, half-joking.

Upstairs, in the tower's glass-enclosed top floor, controller Joe Zacko saw a strange blip streaking across his radar screen. It wasn't a bird. It wasn't a plane. What was it? He looked out the window and spotted a bright light hovering in the sky. He turned to his partner, Howard Cocklin, who was sitting three feet away.

"Look at that bright light," Zacko said. "If you believe in flying saucers, that could sure be one."

And then the light took off, zooming away at an incredible speed.

"Did you see that?" Cocklin remembers saying. "What the hell was that?"

It was Saturday night, July 19, 1952 -- 50 years ago this weekend -- one of the most famous dates in the bizarre history of UFOs. Before the night was over, a pilot reported seeing unexplained objects, radar at two local Air Force bases -- Andrews and Bolling -- picked up the UFOs, and two Air Force F-94 jets streaked over Washington, searching for flying saucers.

Then, a week later, it happened all over again -- more UFOs on the radar screen, more jets scrambled over Washington. Across America, the story of jets chasing UFOs over the White House knocked the Korean War and the presidential campaign off the front pages of newspapers.

"'Saucer' Outran Jet, Pilot Reveals," read the banner headline in The Washington Post.

"JETS CHASE D.C. SKY GHOSTS," screamed the New York Daily News.

"AERIAL WHATZITS BUZZ D.C. AGAIN!" shouted the Washington Daily News.

As rumors spread, President Truman demanded to know what was flying over his house. Soon the federal government was fighting the UFOs with the most powerful weapons in the Washington arsenal -- bureaucracy, obfuscation and gobbledygook.

That seemed to work. The UFOs never returned.

At least, not that we know of.

As Big as Life

In a way, this whole strange episode began with Marilyn Monroe.

The actress appeared on the cover of Life magazine's April 7, 1952, issue, looking sultry in a diaphanous, low-cut dress, her eyelids drooping seductively. It was the kind of cover that attracts attention. And just above Monroe's left shoulder was a cover line touting a different story: "There Is a Case for Interplanetary Saucers."

The article was titled "Have We Visitors From Outer Space?" It reviewed 10 recent UFO sightings and concluded that they could not be written off as hallucinations, hoaxes or earthly aircraft. An unnamed Air Force intelligence officer was quoted saying, "The higher you go in the Air Force, the more seriously they take the flying saucers."

The story ended with a series of questions that sound like something Rod Serling might intone at the end of a "Twilight Zone" episode:

"Who, or what, is aboard? Where do they come from? Why are they here? What are the intentions of the beings who control them?"

It wasn't the first media account of UFOs -- there had been lots of publicity since several well-known sightings in 1947, including one in Roswell, N.M. - but the Life article marked the first time that a trusted, mainstream magazine had given credence to the theory that UFOs might be alien spacecraft.

The Life story was big news, covered in more than 350 newspapers across America. Soon, the number of UFO sightings reported to the Air Force skyrocketed -- from 23 in March, before Life's article appeared, to 82 in April, 79 in May, 148 in June.

Were these increases due to saucers swarming over America? Or did Life's story make Americans more likely to report strange things they saw in the sky?

By mid-July, Capt. Edward J. Ruppelt -- the head of Project Blue Book, the Air Force's official UFO study team -- was getting 40 reports of UFO sightings a day. Many were bogus but some came from pilots and other respectable citizens, and Ruppelt took them seriously.

Then -- a few days before the first sightings at National Airport -- Ruppelt interviewed a government scientist who made a startling prediction that Ruppelt recorded in his 1956 memoir, "The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects."

"Within the next few days," the unidentified scientist said, banging his hand on his desk for emphasis, "you're going to have the granddaddy of all UFO sightings. The sighting will occur in Washington or New York -- probably Washington."

'Falling Stars Without Tails'

The blips first appeared on radar screens at National at 11:40 that Saturday night -- seven unidentified targets about 15 miles southeast of the city.

It was a clear, hot, humid night with very little air traffic, and the controllers at National watched the strange blips amble across their screens. They'd cruise at a leisurely rate of about 100 to 130 miles per hour, then abruptly zoom off in an extraordinary burst of speed.

"They acted like a bunch of small kids out playing," Barnes, the head controller, wrote a few days later in a piece for a New York newspaper. "It was helter-skelter, as if directed by some innate curiosity. At times, they moved as a group or cluster, at other times as individuals."

Barnes called his counterparts at Andrews and Bolling to ask if they saw anything unusual on their radar screens. They did. They were getting blips in the same places.

At Andrews, controller William Brady looked out the control tower window and saw what looked like "an orange ball of fire, trailing a tail." It was, he later told Air Force investigators, "unlike anything I had ever seen before."

At National, Cocklin looked out his window and saw what he recalls as a "whitish blue light" that emanated from a solid object that was "round with no distinguishing marks such as wings or a nose or a tail." It looked, he says, "like a saucer."

Sometime after 1 a.m., National's control tower radioed Capital Air Flight 807, from Washington to Detroit, and asked the pilot if he saw any unusual objects. Captain S.C. "Casey" Pierman, a pilot with 17 years of experience, radioed back: "There's one -- and there it goes."

For the next 14 minutes, as he flew between Herndon and Martinsburg, W.Va., Pierman saw six bright lights that streaked across the sky at tremendous speed. "They were," he said, "like falling stars without tails."

Watching the radar blips flying over the Capitol and the White House, Barnes called the Air Force to report unidentified aircraft in restricted air space. But it was very late on a Saturday night and the Air Force bureaucracy responded sluggishly. By the time F-94 interceptor jets left New Castle Air Force Base in Delaware -- the runways at Andrews were closed for repairs -- it was after 3 a.m.

When the F-94s soared over Washington, the strange blips disappeared from the radar screens at National. The F-94 pilots cruised around the area for a while but saw nothing. When they headed back to New Castle, the blips reappeared.

The controllers watched the UFOs flit across their screens until dawn, then disappear.

Trying to Clear the Air

Nobody bothered to call Ruppelt about the sightings. When he flew to Washington a couple of days later on unrelated Project Blue Book business, he learned about them by reading newspapers at the airport.

"Radar Spots Air Mystery Objects Here," read the headline on the front page of The Washington Post.

"Air Force 'Saucer' Expert Will Probe Sightings Here," said the Washington Daily News.

Ruppelt asked his colleagues who the expert was. You are, they told him.

At the Pentagon, Ruppelt found the Air Force brass deeply concerned about one particular aspect of the sightings: What should they tell the press?

Nobody had any idea what -- if anything -- had been in the air over Washington on July 19, but the newspapers were demanding answers. Reporters, Ruppelt wrote, "were now beginning to put on a squeeze by threatening to call congressmen -- and nothing chills blood faster in the military."

Ruppelt volunteered to stay overnight to interview the controllers at National and Andrews, then report what he learned to the press. But Ruppelt got entangled in the thicket of military bureaucracy.

He called the Pentagon's transportation section to get a car so he could

travel to the various airports. Only colonels and generals can get cars, he was told. He called two generals, but it was after 4 p.m. and they were gone for the day.

He went to the finance office to get permission to rent a car. Take a bus, the woman there told him. It takes a lot of buses to go from the Pentagon to National to Andrews, he replied. Take a cab, she said, and pay for it out of your per diem. But his per diem was \$9, he said, and he had to pay for food and lodging.

The woman then informed Ruppelt that his orders were to fly back to Ohio that night, and unless he got those orders amended, he'd technically be AWOL. He asked to talk to her boss. He'd left at 4:30 to avoid traffic, she said, and now it was 5 and she was leaving, too.

Ruppelt gave up. "I decided that if flying saucers were buzzing Pennsylvania Avenue, I couldn't care less," he wrote. "I caught the next airliner to Dayton."

A Return Engagement

About 10 o'clock Saturday night, July 26, Ruppelt was at home in Dayton when a reporter called to say that UFOs were back in the sky over Washington.

What, the reporter asked, did the Air Force plan to do about it?

"I have no idea what the Air Force is doing," Ruppelt replied. "In all probability, it's doing nothing."

He hung up, then called the Pentagon and learned that he was right: The Air Force was doing nothing. He made more calls, dispatching two officers -- Maj

Dewey Fournet and Lt. John Holcomb, a radar expert -- to National's control tower to see what was happening.

Fournet and Holcomb arrived to find National's controllers tracking a dozen unexplained blips. An Air Force B-25 happened to be passing through the area, so the controllers asked it to check out some of the radar targets. The B-25 went to one site and spotted nothing except a tourist boat cruising the Potomac.

Perhaps, the controllers surmised, a temperature inversion -- a layer of hot air between two layers of colder air in the sky -- had bent the radar beam, causing it to mistake objects on the ground for things in the air. Temperature inversions were common in Washington on hot days, and the controllers were familiar with the phenomenon.

But Fournet and Holcomb were convinced that some of the radar blips were solid metal objects, not inversion-induced mirages. Radar operators at Andrews saw them, too. And civilian planes flying into Washington reported seeing strange glowing objects in places where the radar was getting blips.

The controllers called for interceptors, and about 11 p.m. the Air Force dispatched F-94s to search the sky over Washington. When the first jets arrived, the blips disappeared from National's radar screens and the F-94 pilots saw nothing unusual. But when they returned to New Castle, the blips returned to the radar screens.

About 1:30 a.m., the jets soared back over Washington. This time, pilots saw several strange lights. One pilot gave chase but he couldn't catch the streaking light.

"I tried to make contact with the bogies below 1,000 feet," pilot William Patterson told investigators. "I was at my maximum speed but . . . I ceased chasing them because I saw no chance of overtaking them."

Trading on Hot Air

On Monday morning, the story of UFOs outrunning fighter planes was splashed across front pages all over America. In Iowa, the headline in the Cedar Rapids Gazette read like something out of a sci-fi flick: "SAUCERS SWARM OVER CAPITAL."

"We have no evidence they are flying saucers," an unidentified Air Force source told reporters. "Conversely we have no evidence they are not flying saucers. We don't know what they are."

In the absence of hard information, the Washington Daily News printed a roundup of rumors. The "most persistent rumor" was that the saucers were American aircraft secretly produced by Boeing "at some remote site." An "absolutely weird" rumor was that the saucers were alien aircraft that had crashed and then been repaired and flown by the Air Force.

That Monday, the Air Force tried to reassure the nation by promising to keep jet fighters poised to chase the saucers at a moment's notice. But that statement didn't reassure Robert L. Farnsworth, president of the United States Rocket Society, who warned President Truman not to attack the UFOs.

"Should they be extra-terrestrial, such actions might result in the gravest consequences, as well as possibly alienating us from beings of far superior powers," Farnsworth telegraphed Truman. "Friendly contact should be sought as long as possible."

Truman was as baffled as everyone else. He asked his Air Force aide, Brig.

Gen. Robert B. Landry, to find out what the UFOs were. On Tuesday morning, Landry called Ruppelt, who'd flown back to the Pentagon. Ruppelt said the sightings might be weather-related mirages but he didn't really know.

Nobody knew, not even Maj. Gen. John Samford, the Air Force's director of intelligence. But Samford called a press conference at the Pentagon at 4 o'clock Tuesday afternoon. It was the largest Pentagon press conference since World War II, Ruppelt wrote, and Samford's performance proved to be a brilliant demonstration of the art of bureaucratic balderdash.

He arrived in Room 3E-869 precisely at 4, accompanied by Ruppelt and several other officials. He opened with a rambling monologue on the history of UFOs, which, he noted, dated "to biblical times." He mentioned UFO sightings in 1846 but never got around to the UFO sightings of 1952.

When reporters asked about the Washington sightings, Samford told a story about radar picking up a flock of ducks in Japan in 1950. When they asked if radar at National and Andrews had seen the same blips simultaneously, he speculated about the definition of the word "simultaneously." When they asked if the UFOs could be material objects, he mused about the definition of the word "material." When they asked if the F-94 pilot who chased the strange light was a qualified observer, he wondered about the meaning of the word "qualified."

Speaking about what that pilot saw, Samford uttered a sentence that ought to have a place in the Bureaucratic Gibberish Hall of Fame: "That very likely is one that sits apart and says insufficient measurement, insufficient association with other things, insufficient association with other probabilities for it to do any more than to join that group of sightings that we still hold in front of us as saying no."

Along the way, Samford mentioned the "temperature inversion" theory -- that a layer of hot air in the sky might have caused radar to mistake things on the ground for flying objects. First, he said it was a "possibility." Later, he said it was "about a 50-50 proposition." Then he said it was a "probable" explanation.

He talked until 5:20, then the reporters dashed back to their offices to meet their deadlines. Sifting through notebooks full of gobbledygook, they seized on temperature inversion. It was an irresistible concept for newspapermen. The UFOs, they wrote, were caused by Washington's famous "hot air."

Ruppelt was amazed. Samford hadn't really explained anything, but whatever he had done, it worked.

"Somehow," Ruppelt wrote, "out of this chaotic situation came exactly the

result that was intended -- the press got off our backs."

When newspapers stopped writing about the UFOs, people stopped reporting UFOs. "Reports dropped from 50 per day to 10 a day within a week," Ruppelt noted.

And the UFOs never returned to the sky over Washington. Perhaps they'd seen enough.

The Arguments Still Fly

Sitting at his desk, wearing blue pajamas and a gray bathrobe, Philip J.

Klass holds up a government report and smiles mischievously.

"I will let you borrow it," he says, "provided that you provide one testicle as security."

The report is called "A Preliminary Study of Unidentified Targets Observed on Air Traffic Control Radars." Not many people would trade a testicle for it.

The report was issued by the Civil Aeronautics Administration in 1953, shortly after Klass began writing for Aviation Week. He's still writing for that magazine, but not often these days because he is 82 and ailing.

"The gist of the report," he says, "is that the Washington sightings were temperature inversions."

He wrote about the report in Aviation Week in 1953. That began his career as America's most prominent UFO debunker. Over the past 49 years, he's written five books on UFOs and engaged in countless debates with UFO believers. He can cite evidence and quote reports all day long, but he seems to prefer rattling off one-liners.

He says: "If there are UFOs and they want to make themselves known, land! And if they don't want to make their visits known, turn off the lights!"

He says: "If UFOs are abducting people, why do they choose only ugly people?"

If they abducted Olympic athletes, I could understand."

Bruce Maccabee isn't laughing. "One thing you have to understand: This is serious business," he says. "The skeptics like to make fun of us."

Maccabee, 60, is a civilian physicist for the Navy and a prominent UFO believer. In the '70s, he filed the Freedom of Information Act request that led to the release of the FBI's file on UFOs. The file was called "Security Matter X" -- "the real X-Files," he says.

Maccabee believes there were "solid objects" in the air over Washington 50 years ago. "And I think those solid objects were not made by us," he says. "And by us, I mean human beings."

Like Klass, Maccabee buttresses his argument with an official government report. It's called "Quantitative Aspects of Mirages" and it was issued by the Air Force in 1969.

"They proved in their own study that there wasn't enough temperature inversion to cause this effect," he says. "The Washington sightings cannot be explained as a radar mirage."

After 50 years, the debate over the Washington UFOs goes on and on.

"You have dueling experts and dueling reports," says Kevin D. Randle, author of "Invasion Washington: UFOs Over the Capitol," a new book on the 1952 sightings. "One expert says it was temperature inversion. Another says it wasn't. In that situation, you have to refer back to the air traffic controllers and the pilots who actually saw the objects."

Former controller Howard Cocklin is still convinced that he saw an object over National that night. "I saw it on the screen and out the window," he says. "It was a whitish-blue object. Not a light -- a solid form. An object.

A saucer-shaped object."

Now 83 and retired, Cocklin says he never saw anything like that saucer -- not before, not since.

"It just went away," he says, sitting in an armchair in his Fairfax living room. "Where did it go? Why don't people see these things today? Why 50 years ago?"