

1947

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The Maury Island affair has been called "the dirtiest hoax in UFO history" by the late Captain Ed Ruppelt, former head of Project Blue Book. As Ruppelt tells it, Fred Crisman and Harold Dahl, the principals in the case, confessed to the Air Force that they made up the story about their UFO encounter and subsequent harassment. But Kenneth Arnold has always had his doubts about the alleged retractions, partly because some very strange things happened to him while he was investigating the case for Fate. It seems likely that we will never know exactly what did or did not occur at Maury Island. But we do know that, real or imagined, the episode marked the first appearance of a "man in black" in a modern-day flying-saucer story. We also know—paranoia buffs please take note—that Crisman's name would later figure in assassination conspiracy lore, where he has been accused (on the basis of some pretty flimsy evidence) of being one of the murderers of President Kennedy.

The Maury Island Episode by Kenneth Arnold

One of the weirdest things I have ever encountered happened on Maury Island, a practically uninhabited bit of land off the coast of Tacoma, Washington. The whole incident is covered in detail in *The Coming of the Saucers*, the book I wrote with Ray Palmer. Earlier in this conference I mentioned a sighting that lasted approximately three minutes. The Maury Island experience lasted at least six days, and considering related incidents, I could add a couple of months to that. Under extremely unusual circumstances, which were set in motion in the last part of July 1947 and continued into early August, two Air Force

intelligence officers were killed. Other occurrences related to the Maury Island incident have not been explained to this day.

When Ray Palmer asked me to go to Maury Island, he didn't seem to be real cranked up about whatever had happened there. He simply wrote that two harbor patrolmen in Tacoma had had an unusual experience: Harold A. Dahl and Fred L. Crisman claimed that they had seen a group of flying saucers and had in their possession some fragments that came from one of them. Palmer thought I might look into this on one of my routine trips to the area. However, I was intensely interested and decided to make a special trip.

About 5:30 A.M., just a little after dawn on the morning of July 29, 1947, I took off from my cow pasture near Mountain View Drive in Boise, Idaho. In those days I rarely filed a flight plan and no one but my wife, Doris, knew that I was actually going. I was always flying in and out of my place and nobody paid much attention.

I had enough gasoline to get to LaGrande, Oregon, and I intended to gas up there. When I took off the air was beautiful, clear and smooth as silk. Flying the same course I had taken to Chehalis and Seattle many times, I was over LaGrande in about an hour. As I was letting down into LaGrande valley, I saw far off on my left and a little lower than my plane an Empire Airlines (now Air West) Boeing transport. It was an old plane but faster than mine. Suddenly, as I continued to lose altitude, I was confronted by a flock of what looked like ducks. I knew they weren't ducks because they were brassy-colored and large—at least three feet across or possibly four or five. There were a couple of dozen of them, possibly more, and they were bunched and coming right at me. Eventually they swerved away—and because they had the flight characteristics of the first flying saucers I decided to take after them. When I dived into the cluster, these things, whatever they were, soared away as if I were standing still.

I landed at LaGrande, gassed my plane, then questioned the Boeing transport crew as to whether anyone had seen the "birds." Apparently no one had, because the Empire plane was below them whereas mine was at greater

altitude. (Later I talked to some farmers who had seen this cluster going over at high speed—so I wasn't seeing things.)

I took off again and got into Chehalis late in the afternoon. I hadn't fully made up my mind whether to stay overnight there or to go on to Tacoma. I should say at this point that I had never met Ray Palmer but he had sent me a few hundred dollars to cover expenses, so after talking to my friends at Chehalis airport I decided at the last minute to go on to Tacoma and start doing what Palmer had sent me to do. I took off just before dusk and soon landed at Barry's Airport down on the mud flats in Tacoma.

The first thing I had to do was get a room for the night, and that was a feat in itself during those post-World War II years. I spent an hour calling motels and hotels and found nothing available. Finally, out of desperation, I called the Winthrop Hotel, the largest hotel in town. I assumed it was jammed—but to my astonishment the clerk said, "Yes, Mr. Arnold, we have a reservation for you." Hardly believing my ears, I decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. If another "Kenneth Arnold" showed up to claim the room, maybe he would share it with me.

After I cleaned up I found Harold Dahl's name in the telephone book and called him. I told him who I was, that I had heard about his experience on June 21, and that I wanted to see him. He was very reluctant to talk to me—but I pressed on. I told him the press was killing me and any other pilot who reported strange flying craft. If he had any fragments of these, any physical evidence, I sure would like to know about it.

He replied, "I'd just as soon not talk about it. Why don't you go back home?"

"Now, wait a minute," I said. "I made a trip clear from Boise, Idaho. My name is Kenneth Arnold. I'm the unfortunate guy who reported these phenomena over Mount Rainier and the Cascades and it's kind of an embarrassment now. If you've got any fragments that we can prove came from one of these strange craft, I'd sure like to get a piece of it."

I talked on and on until finally he said, "Well, okay,

I'll talk a little bit to you but I think you'd better forget it." And he promised to come down to the hotel.

From his voice I pictured Dahl as slim, slight of stature, and meek-natured. When he arrived at the hotel he turned out to be a great big burly lumberjack type, about six-feet-six and weighing probably 230 pounds. But he was a very nice fellow, soft-spoken and sincere.

In our preliminary small talk I explained my mission and he told me he was the captain of a patrol boat that went into the bay off Tacoma to salvage logs and anything else that fell off ships. This harbor patrol has a dual purpose: to keep the harbor clean and to encourage ship owners to keep things battened down. Finally Dahl began to talk about what had happened on June 21.

With his son, their dog, and two crewmen, Dahl had been patrolling near Maury Island in a rather rough sea. When he happened to look up he saw six large doughnut-shaped craft about two thousand feet up. One craft was in the center and five others of the same type were closely circling the center one. He described portholes on the outer edges of the craft and said that around their center holes were windows like observation windows. He said, "I got a good look at them." They were slowly descending and the outer five seemed to be trying to help the center craft, which was losing altitude. When it was about two hundred feet from the water, the other five slightly higher he could tell that they were quite large—about one hundred feet across—and he thought they were some kind of balloon. One of the five left the formation and drew near the one Dahl thought was crippled. He said, "I think it actually touched the center craft." Then he heard a dull thud and all of a sudden, from the center of the crippled craft, some substance came pouring out. It looked like thousands of newspapers falling all over the beach and all over his boat.

The substance proved to be a very lightweight white metal, but along with it there was a rain of what looked like lava rock. This was heavy; it damaged the wheelhouse. A piece hit and killed the dog and Dahl's son was hit in the arm and injured severely. Dahl and the two crewmen beached the boat with the idea of getting under some

thing that would protect them from the stuff raining out of the craft. He estimated about twenty tons of it fell. As suddenly as it started, the fall stopped, and the craft resumed their formation—five in a circle around the center one—and all six simply rose into the sky and disappeared in the west over the sea.

The men lost no time getting back into the boat and returning to harbor. After taking his son to the hospital for first aid, Dahl reported to Fred Crisman, his superior officer. When Dahl related his experience with the doughnut-shaped craft, Crisman bawled him out for "seeing things." However, Dahl had physical proof: the damage to his boat and fragments of the material.

Crisman was furious when he learned the boat had been damaged. He said, "Well, when you're drunk you usually hit rocks and we have to patch the bottom, but it looks to me like you tried to sink this boat from the top down."

Dahl also told me that every patrol boat carries a camera and he had taken four or five photographs of the doughnut-shaped craft. I was anxious to see these but he never produced them. He told me, however, that when the film was developed it "showed these strange aircraft, but the negatives were covered with spots similar to a negative that has been close to an X-ray room before it has been exposed, except that the spots printed white instead of black as in the usual case."

That was Dahl's story. When he finished he said, "Ever since I had this experience I've had the darnedest toughest luck. My boat won't start, we've had sickness—it's just one thing after another." He lost a \$3500 boom of logs when the tide tore loose his moorings. Somehow he associated all his bad luck with his sighting of the strange craft.

I told Dahl I wanted to meet Fred Crisman, and the next morning they came to the hotel together. Fred Crisman was a short, stocky fellow, dark-complexioned, with a happy-go-lucky, cheerful nature. Fairly bubbling over, he seemed to want to dominate the conversation. He had gone over to the island and picked up I don't know how many cardboard boxes full of slag or whatever it was and

some of the white metal. He sounded tickled to death when he said he had his garage practically full of it. He forgave the damage to Dahl's boat because he had to believe his story. There were still pieces of the lavalike rock on the boat.

Finally I said to Dahl, "Captain E. J. Smith is a friend of mine at United Airlines. If he's in Seattle I'd like to ask him to come and hear your story." Dahl agreed, a little hesitantly, and Crisman thought it was a great idea.

By mere chance Smithy had the day off, I learned when I reached him by telephone in Seattle. I said I would pick him up. I went down to the airport, jumped into my airplane and flew up to Seattle. Smithy was waiting for me at the terminal. Before the return flight we had a cup of coffee—but it's important to note that we didn't talk to anyone except each other, especially not to newsmen.

I took Smithy out to my puddle-jumper, feeling a little odd. At the time he was flying DC-6s between Seattle and Chicago, and he had logged a lot of flying time. However, he made no obviously disparaging remarks about my rattle-trap airplane, but he chuckled at my 105 mph airspeed.

On the way back to Tacoma I told Smithy about the trouble I was having with a certain newsman. Despite the care I had taken to reveal neither my identity nor my reason for being in Tacoma, a physically handicapped reporter (whose name I later learned was Paul Lance) kept trying to see me. I couldn't figure out how he knew who I was or why he was so desperate to talk to me.

Later, after Smithy had become my roommate at the Winthrop Hotel and had listened to Crisman's and Dahl's stories, we began to get telephone calls from Ted Morello, United Press bureau chief in Tacoma. On a number of occasions the conversation went like this:

Morello: "Say, there's somebody calling us here and telling me everything that's happening up there in your hotel room. You're in 502 at the Winthrop?"

Arnold: "Yes."

Morello: "You have Captain E. J. Smith with you?"

Arnold: "Yes."

After a few such calls it was clear that he was getting accurate reports from our room. We suspected Dahl or

Crisman of leaking information until Morello quoted conversations Smithy and I had had when we were alone.

Smithy and I began to think we needed help from someone higher up. Soon after my first report of flying discs, I had been visited by two representatives from A-2 Military Intelligence, Fourth Air Force. They were Lieutenant Frank M. Brown and Captain William Davidson. After a long discussion of my original observation, Brown and Davidson, as they were preparing to leave, quietly but firmly impressed on me that if anything unusual came to my attention or if I needed help in any way, I was to phone or wire them collect at Hamilton Field, California, at any time of the day or night.

I told Smithy about this and he said immediately, "Ken, I think you ought to give Davidson and Brown a call."

That is precisely what I did. When I got through to Lieutenant Brown at Hamilton Field I told him where we were and then said, "There are two harbor patrolmen up here who say they have some fragments that came from a flying saucer or a circular aircraft and we think that it deserves some investigation.

"Now, maybe I'm jumping the gun—" I apologized a little, thinking maybe they'll come up here in a bomber and spend all that money and gasoline and there may be something wrong with the whole affair. I didn't know what I might be getting them into.

Anyway, within less than an hour Brown called from McChord Field to say they had landed and would come to the hotel. A few minutes later a call came from this Morello of United Press. He knew everything that had happened, that the B-25 Brown and Davidson had flown into McChord Field was carrying the latest, most sophisticated military equipment and it was under armed guard. "When our reporter can't get to a thing like that," Morello said, "we know there's something going on." He also said he was still getting the mysterious phone calls reporting on our activities.

Brown and Davidson got to our hotel room about 4:30 P.M. on July 31. Harold Dahl had not been keen about my calling in the military intelligence men and didn't

want to meet them. He had said, "Crisman can tell them my story." And for two and a half hours Crisman did just that, occasionally handing Brown or Davidson one of the twenty-five or thirty pieces of "physical evidence" lying on the hotel-room floor.

Afterward we discussed all the phases of this peculiar business—the mysterious telephone informant, Ted Morello, Paul Lance and his persistence. Then Crisman decided to go home to get a box of the fragments which the officers could take back to Hamilton Field.

In the meantime, Smithy and I told them we had not been out to Maury Island but we had seen Dahl's damaged boat. It was dilapidated and it had some damage, but it wasn't damaged as badly as Fred Crisman had led us to believe. We thought then that somebody might be pulling our leg and that's why we needed the military. If Dahl and Crisman are lying, they ought to be railroaded. If they aren't lying, they had better explain some things.

For example, it was 11:30 P.M. and Brown and Davidson were anxious to leave, but here was Crisman going to get a box of fragments. There were fragments all over the place—on the dresser, the windowsill, and the rug. In fact one of the white fragments in the room had what looked like a square rivet in it. The material looked to me like aluminum but I didn't believe that square rivets were used in building aircraft. We were discussing this and the peculiar pieces of lava rock when suddenly Brown and Davidson seemed to lose interest. They *had* to get back to Hamilton Field. I protested. Why not wait until morning? No, they had to go.

They may have had orders or possibly they didn't want to strand their flight engineer and a hitchhiker, who were waiting aboard their plane. They telephoned McChord Field for a command car to come and pick them up; then Smithy and I accompanied them to the lobby, where we stood talking during the wait for the car.

The army vehicle and Fred Crisman's Ford roadster pulled up at the same time. Crisman had a large carton in the trunk of his car; we assumed it was the fragments. Captain Davidson helped him unload the box and transfer it to the trunk of the command car.

In our last few moments together I had the strong impression that Brown and Davidson thought Smithy and I were the victims of a silly hoax. Although they took Crisman's box of fragments they seemed totally uninterested. We said our good-byes and they left.

Smithy and I had just returned to our room when the phone rang. It was Ted Morello, calling to tell us that his mysterious informant had told him what had taken place in our room; his voice took on a pleading tone when he said, "Look, there's something going on that's mighty serious. I'm concerned for your safety. I think you two had better get out of town." We neither denied nor confirmed anything Morello said, but it was puzzling that his informant's information was so accurate. We had long since searched the room for bugs, finding nothing, and now we began to wonder if someone with a receiver somewhere outside the hotel was picking up our conversation. Anyway, the Maury Island incident was now in the hands of military intelligence. We would be going home the next day.

We arose the next morning, August 1, about nine o'clock, and twenty minutes later, I think, it was Morello who called. He said, "You know the two military intelligence officers who visited you? Well, they're dead. Their plane caught fire about twenty minutes after takeoff."

I was stunned. I handed the phone to Smithy and rushed down to get a newspaper. The headline read, "Sabotage suspected in crash of B-25 bomber. Lieutenant Brown and Captain Davidson found in the crash."

I felt as if I had caused it all. If I hadn't called them they wouldn't have come and they'd probably still be alive. These thoughts pursued me relentlessly. We didn't talk much from then on, and the next time Morello called we agreed to meet with him.

He, like Paul Lance, was physically handicapped, but robust. He was about five-feet-seven and dark-complexioned. He had tape-recorded an interview with the hitchhiker on the B-25 and arranged to play it back for us in a small auditorium in the United Press building.

The hitchhiker was Master Sergeant Elmer L. Taff, taking advantage of an opportunity to get to Hamilton

Field on an Air Force plane bound for there. Such fast free rides were customarily available for army personnel. I don't know whether Morello cued him on the box of fragments, but Taff said he had seen the pilot and copilot loading a large carton into the compartment where he as a passenger would ride, alongside the flight engineer, Technician Fourth Grade Woodrow D. Mathews.

The takeoff was smooth and uneventful, but fifteen or twenty minutes later the left engine was found to be on fire. Lieutenant Brown, the copilot, came from the cockpit and ordered the two enlisted men to jump. They obeyed, assuming that the officers would follow. Apparently there was no hope of saving the plane and it was to be ditched. Later I learned that Mathews had tried to turn on the emergency fire-fighting system and it didn't work.

The plane had been at an altitude of about eleven thousand feet and Sergeant Taff had had about eleven minutes to watch the crippled plane as he drifted to earth. He assumed that the pilot and copilot had also jumped; he believed they had time to do so. But they didn't. The plane crashed near Kelso, Washington.

Flight Engineer Mathews also watched the burning plane from the safety of his parachute sling. He said the sky around the plane was bright, and he saw something lift off the top of the aircraft. "I thought for a minute that it might be either Lieutenant Brown or Captain Davidson," he said, "but whatever the object was, it was bigger than a man. It could have been a fragment of the wing."

The military authorities roped off the whole area around the crashed plane. I can't prove it, but it seems to me nobody was allowed into an area of about 150 acres surrounding it. Of course the military had nothing to say about the carton of fragments, and when the civil air patrol learned about this strange cargo and sent men to investigate, they couldn't get near the crash site.

A third death seems somehow to have been connected with the crash. At any rate, the circumstances surrounding the death of Paul Lance were peculiar. He was the newsman who had written the story headlined, "Saboteage suspected in crash of B-25. . . ." Two weeks later he

died and the cause of his death was not clear. It was laid to meningitis, but this should have been easy to establish. However, he lay on a slab in the morgue for about thirty-six hours while the pathologists apparently hemmed and hawed.

By August 2 I was in a pretty nervous condition. I wanted to get the hell out of Tacoma. Finally, I said good-bye to Smithy, went out to the airport, cranked up my ship, and took off. I landed in Pendleton, Oregon, for gas and I didn't intend to stay a minute longer than I had to. I wanted to get home to Boise. I gave my plane full throttle and went into a steep climb to get out of the pattern quickly. (In those days, an occasional violation got by.)

I shouldn't have done it. At about two hundred feet my engine quit dead. I had had engine failure before but not this close to the ground or when I was climbing so steeply. I pointed my little plane at the ground and just about went in nose first, but I still had enough control to pull up and come in horizontally. I smashed the landing gear but that maneuver saved my life.

Why had the engine quit? When I checked it over I found, to my astonishment, that the fuel valve had been shut off. Now, nobody had been in that airplane except me. No one could have shut off that fuel valve. When I realized that unknowingly I had done something that threatened my own life I felt as if somebody or something was trying to make me crash, that somebody or something was controlling my mind.

Well, I've left out a lot of the things that occurred in those few days in Tacoma. The happening at Maury Island was extremely complicated and after thirty years it's difficult to remember the exact sequence of events and all of the minute details. However, everything I have said in this rather sketchy report is absolutely true; all of these things actually happened.

Aside from the alien craft reported by Dahl and Crisman, aside from the mystery of the rain of light white metal and the heavy lava rock, a couple of other questions still preoccupy my recollection of the Maury Island incident. Why did Brown and Davidson go down with their

ditched ship? Master Sergeant Taff particularly noticed that Brown was wearing his harness and had time to strap on his parachute. And how, after my many years of flying, could I have shut off the fuel valve, an act that might have cost my life?

The physical occurrences at Tacoma—the harbor patrolmen's stories, the damage to Dahl's boat, the vast amount of debris—are easily recorded, if not easily explained. But what happened to us on another plane—the mental plane—may be the true mystery of Maury Island.

PART TWO

The Hard Evidence

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