

THE KIRTLAND AIRFIELD UFO

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In the first part of his article *Twenty-one Years of UFO Reports* which was published in our January/February issue for 1970, Dr. J. Allen Hynek wrote briefly about this incident. Here, in the last of the illustrative cases which Dr. McDonald prepared to support his address to the AAAS Symposium at Boston, Mass., on December 27, 1969, a closer look is taken at an incident which was unknown to the public until it was presented as a case history in the Condon Report. Dr. McDonald, Professor of Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Arizona, Tucson, is highly critical of the Condon Commission's handling of their investigation of the case.

AT Kirtland Air Force Base, on November 4, 1957, two CAA control tower operators observed a lighted egg-shaped object descend to, and cross obliquely, the runway area. The object hovered near the ground for tens of seconds, then climbed at unprecedented speed into the overcast. On radar, it was then followed south some miles, where it orbited a number of minutes before returning to the airfield to follow an Air Force aircraft outbound from Kirtland, Albuquerque.

Introduction

This case, discussed in the Condon Report (on p. 141) is an example of a UFO report which had lain in Bluebook files for years, not known to anyone outside Air Force circles.

Immediately upon reading it, I became quite curious about it; more candidly, I became quite suspicious about it. For, as you will note on reading it for yourself, it purports to explain an incident in terms of an hypothesis with some glaringly improbable assumptions, and makes a key assertion that is hard to regard as factual. Let me quote from the first descriptive paragraph:

"Observers in the CAA (now FAA) control tower saw an unidentified dark object with a white light underneath, about the 'shape of an automobile on end', that crossed the field at about 1,500 ft. and circled as if to come in for a landing on the E-W runway. This unidentified object appeared to reverse direction at low altitude, while out of sight of the observers behind some buildings, and climbed suddenly to about 200-300 ft., heading away from the field on a 120° course. Then it went into a steep climb and disappeared into the overcast".

The Condon Report next notes that: "The Air Force view is that this UFO was a small, powerful private aircraft, flying without flight plan, that became confused and attempted a landing at the wrong airport. The pilot apparently realised his error when he saw a brightly-lit restricted area, which was at the point where the object reversed direction. . .".

The Report next remarks very briefly that the radar blip from this object was described by the operator as a "perfectly normal aircraft return", that the radar track "showed no characteristics that would have been beyond the capabilities of the more

powerful private aircraft available at the time," and the conclusion arrived at in the Condon Report, without further discussion, is that: "There seems to be no reason to doubt the accuracy of this analysis".

Some Suspect Features of the Condon Report's Explanation

It seemed to me that there were several reasons "to doubt the accuracy of this analysis". First, let me point out that the first line or two of the account in the Condon Report contains information that the incident took place with "light rain over the airfield", late in the evening (2245-2304 MST), which I found to be correct, on checking meteorological records. Thus the reader is asked to accept the picture of a pilot coming into an unfamiliar airfield at night and under rain conditions, and doing a 180° turn at so low an altitude that it could subsequently *climb suddenly* to about 200-300 feet and we are asked to accept the picture of this highly hazardous low-altitude nighttime turn being executed so sharply that it occurred "while out of sight of the observers behind some buildings".

Now these are not casual bystanders doing the observing, but CAA controllers in a tower designed and located to afford full view of all aircraft operations occurring in or near its airfield. Hence my reaction to all of this was a reaction of doubt. Pilots don't live too long who execute strange and dangerous manoeuvres of the type implied in this explanation. And CAA towers are not located in such a manner that "buildings" obscure so large a block of airfield-air-space as to permit aircraft to do 180° turns while hidden from tower view behind them (at night, in a rain!).

Search for the Principal Witnesses

The foregoing points put such strong *a priori* doubt upon the "private aircraft" explanation advanced in the Condon Report that I began an independent check on this case, just as I have been checking several dozen other Condon Report cases in the months since publication of the Report. Here, as in all other cases in the Report, there are no witness-names given to facilitate independent check, but by beginning my inquiries through the FAA, I

soon got in touch with the two CAA tower observers, both of whom are still with FAA, one in Oklahoma, one in California.

Concurrently, I initiated a number of inquiries concerning the existence of any structures back in 1957 that could have hidden an aircraft from tower view in the matter suggested by the Report. What I ultimately learned constitutes only one example of many that back up the statement I have been making recently to many professional groups: **The National Academy of Sciences is going to be in a most awkward position when the full picture of the inadequacies of the Condon Report is recognised; for I believe it will become all too obvious that the Academy placed its weighty stamp on this dismal report without even a semblance of rigorous checking of its contents.**

The two tower controllers, R. M. Kaser and E. G. Brink, with whom I have had a total of five telephone interviews in the course of clarifying the case, explained to me that the object was so unlike an aircraft and exhibited performance characteristics so unlike those of any aircraft flying then or now that the "private aircraft" explanation was quite amusing. Neither had heard of the Air Force explanation, neither had heard of the Condon Project concurrence therein, and, most disturbing of all, neither had ever heard of the Condon Project: **No one on the Condon Project ever contacted these two men.** A half-million-dollar Project, a Report filled with expensive trivia and matters shedding essentially no light on the heart of the UFO puzzle, and no Project investigator even bothers to hunt down the two key witnesses in this case, so casually closed by easy acceptance of the Bluebook "aircraft" explanation.

Failure to locate those two men as part of the investigation of this case is all the more difficult to understand because CAA tower operators involved as witnesses of a UFO incident while actually on duty would seem to constitute just the type of witnesses one should most earnestly seek out in attempts to clarify the UFO puzzle. In various sections of the Condon Report, witness-shortcomings (lack of experience, lack of familiarity with observing things in the sky, basic lack of credibility, etc.) are lamented, yet here, where the backgrounds of the witnesses and the observing circumstances are highly favourable to getting reliable testimony, the Colorado group did not bother to locate the witnesses.

This is not an isolated example. Even in cases which were conceded to be Unexplained, such as the June 23, 1955 Mohawk Airlines multiple-witness sighting near Utica, N.Y. (p. 143 in Report), or the Jackson, Alabama, November 14, 1956 airline case, both conceded to be unexplained, I found on interviewing key witnesses as part of my cross-check on the Condon Report, that no one from Colorado had ever talked to the witnesses. In still other important instances, only a fraction of the available witnesses were queried in preparing the Condon Report. Suggestions that the Report was based on intensive investigatory work simply are not correct.

Information Gained from Witness-Interviews

When I contacted Kaser and Brink, they told me I was the first person to query them on the case since their interrogation by an Air Force captain from Colorado Springs, who had come to interview them at Kirtland just after the incident. Subsequently, I secured the Bluebook case-file on this sighting, and ascertained that a Capt. Patrick O. Shere, from Ent AFB did the interrogation on November 8, 1957, just four days after the sighting.

The accounts I secured in 1969 from Kaser and Brink matched impressively the information I found in Shere's 1957 report in the Bluebook case-file. There were a few recollective discrepancies of distance or time estimates in the witness accounts given in 1969, as compared with their 1957 statements to the Air Force, but the agreements were far more significant than the small number of mis-matches.

In contrast to the somewhat vague impressions I gained (and other readers would surely also gain) from reading the Condon Report version, here is what is in the Bluebook case-file and what they told me directly.

The object came down in a rather steep dive at the east end of Runway 26, left the flight line, crossed runways, taxiways and unpaved areas at about a 30-degree angle, and proceeded southwestward towards the CAA tower at an altitude they estimated at a few tens of feet above ground. Quickly getting 7X binoculars on it, they established that it had no wings, tail, or fuselage, was elongated in the vertical direction, and exhibited a somewhat egg-shaped form (Kaser). It appeared to be perhaps 15-20 ft. in vertical dimension, about the size of an automobile on end, and had a single white light in its base. Both men were emphatic in stressing to me that **it in no way resembled an aircraft.**

It came towards them until it reached a B-58 service pad near the northeast corner of Area D (Drumhead Area, a restricted area lying south of the E-W runway at Kirtland). That spot lay about 3,000 ft. ENE of the tower, near an old machine-gun calibration bunker still present at Kirtland AFB. There it proceeded to stop completely, hover just above the ground **in full view** for a time that Kaser estimated at about 20 seconds, that Brink suggested to me was more like a minute, and that the contemporary Air Force interrogation implied as being rather more than a minute. Next they said it started moving again, still at very low altitude, still at modest speed, until it again reached the eastern boundary of the field. At that point, the object climbed at an extremely rapid rate (which Kaser said was far faster than that of such modern jets as the T-38).

The Bluebook report expresses the witness's estimate of the climb rate as 45,000 ft./min., which is almost certainly a too-literal conversion from Mach 1. My phone-interview notes include a quote of Brink's statement to me that . . . "there was no doubt in my mind that no aircraft I knew of then, or ever operating since then, would compare with it".

Both men were emphatic in stating to me that at no time was this object hidden by any buildings. I confirmed through the Albuquerque FAA office that Area D has never had anything but chain-link fence around it, and that no buildings other than scattered one-storey metal buildings ever existed either inside or outside Area D in that sector. The bunker is only about 15-20 feet high, judging from my own recent observations and photos of it from the air. The Bluebook interrogation report contains no statements hinting that the object was ever hidden from view by any structures (although the Bluebook file contains the usual number of internally inconsistent and confusingly presented details).

I asked both men whether they alerted anyone else while the foregoing events were taking place. They both indicated that the object was of such unprecedented nature that it wasn't until it shot up into the overcast that they got on the phone to get the CAA Radar Approach Control (RAPCON) unit to look for a fast target to the east. Kaser recalled that a CPN-18 surveillance radar was in use at that RAPCON unit at that time, a point confirmed to me in subsequent correspondence with the present chief of the Albuquerque Airport Traffic Control Tower, Mr. Robert L. Behrens, who also provided other helpful information. Unfortunately, no one who was in the Albuquerque/Kirtland RAPCON unit in 1957 is now available, and the person whom Kaser thought was actually on the CPN-18 that night is now deceased.

Thus I have only Kaser and Brink's recollections of the radar-plotting of the unknown, plus the less than precise information in the November 6, 1957 TWX to Bluebook. Capt. Shere did not, evidently, take the trouble to secure any information from radar personnel.

As seen on the RAPCON CPN-18, the unknown target was still moving in an easterly direction when the alert call came from the tower. It then turned southward, and as Kaser recalled, moved south at very high speed, though nothing is said about speed in the Kirtland TWX of November 6, 1957. It proceeded a number of miles south towards the vicinity of the Albuquerque Low Frequency Range Station, orbited there for a number of minutes, came back north to near Kirtland, took up a trail position about a half-mile behind an Air Force C-46 just then leaving Kirtland, and moved offscope with the C-46.

The November 8, 1957 report from Commander, 34th Air Div. to ADC and to the Air Technical Intelligence Command closed with the rather reasonable comment: "Sighting and descriptions conform to no known criteria for identification of UFOs". The followup report of November 13, 1957, prepared by Air Intelligence personnel from Ent AFB, contains a number of relevant comments on the experience of the two witnesses (23 years of tower control work between them as of that date), and on their intelligence, closing with the remarks: "In the opinion of the interviewer, both sources (witnesses) are considered completely competent and reliable".

Critique of the Evaluation in the Condon Report

The Kirtland AFB case is a rather good (though not isolated) instance of the general point I feel obliged to make on the basis of my continuing check of the Condon Report: in it we have not been given anything superior to the generally casual and often incompetent level of case-analysis that marked Bluebook's handling of the UFO problem in past years.

In the Bluebook files, this case is carried as "Possible Aircraft". Study of the 21-page case-file reveals that this is based solely on passing comment made by Capt. Shere in closing his summary letter of November 8: "The opinion of the preparing officer is that this object may possibly have been an unidentified aircraft, possibly confused by the runways at Kirtland AFB. The reasons for this opinion are (a) the observers are considered competent and reliable sources, and in the opinion of this interviewer actually saw an object they could not identify, (b) the object was tracked on a radar scope by a competent operator, (c) the object does not meet identification criteria for any other phenomena".

The stunning *non sequitur* of that final conclusion might serve as an epitome of 22 years of Air Force response to unexplainable objects in our airspace. But when one then turns to the Condon Report's analysis and evaluation, a Report that was identified to the public and the scientific community as *the definitive study of UFOs*, no visible improvement is found. Ignoring almost everything of interest in the case-file except that a lighted airborne object came down near Kirtland airfield and left, the Condon Report covers this whole intriguing case in two short paragraphs, cites the Air Force view, embellishes it a bit by speaking of the lost aircraft as "powerful" (presumably to account for its observed Mach 1 climb-out) and suggesting that it was "flying without flight plan" (this explains why it was wandering across runways and taxiways at night, in rain, at an altitude of a few tens of feet), and the Report then closes off the case with a terse conclusion: "There seems to be no reason to doubt the accuracy of this analysis".

Two telephone calls to the two principal witnesses would have confronted the Colorado investigators with emphatic testimony, supporting the contents (though not the conclusions) of the Bluebook file, and that would have rendered the suggested "powerful private aircraft" explanation untenable. By not contacting the witnesses and by overlooking most of the salient features of the reported observations, this UFO report has been left safely in the "explained" category where Bluebook put it.

One has here a sample of the low scientific level of investigative and evaluative work that will be so apparent to any who take the trouble to study carefully and thoroughly the Condon Report on UFOs. AAAS members are urged to study it carefully for themselves and to decide whether it would be scientifically advisable to accept it as the final word on the 22-year-long puzzle of the UFO problem. I submit that it is most inadvisable.