



Famous Socorro 'UFO Landing' a Student Prank?

The famous Socorro "UFO landing" case of April 24, 1964, has been proclaimed by leading UFOlogists, such as Jacques Vallee and the late J. Allen Hynek, as among the best ever recorded. Policeman Lonnie Zamora allegedly witnessed two humanoids standing outside a landed craft, which then flew away with a loud roar. The object's landing pads allegedly left behind four indentations in the ground, and nearby vegetation was scorched and burning. Could this classic UFO incident have been a hoax perpetrated by students at the New Mexico Institute of Technology? That's exactly what UFOlogist Anthony Bragalia, who usually argues the pro side of UFO discussions, claims.

Recently, Bragalia has been promoting the idea that the development of nitinol, the so-called "memory metal," was reverse engineered from alien material found at the supposed Roswell crash. However, skeptics point out the inconclusive nature of the links he cites as evidence and the fact that the military was contracting similar metallurgical research well before the Roswell events in 1947. (For more about this, see Tim Printy's SunLite #3 at <http://home.comcast.net/~tprinty/UFOSUNlite.htm>.)

In a September 23, 2009, blog, Bragalia wrote, "The Socorro UFO Hoax Exposed! (Famous 1964 sighting was a college prank)." The principal support for this conclusion was found in a scribbled reply to a letter by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling to Stirling Colgate, a noted physicist who also served as president of New Mexico

Tech. The 1968 letter recently discovered in Pauling's papers has Pauling asking Colgate, purely as an aside from other matters, about the famous UFO incident that occurred in Socorro, just a short distance from his campus. Colgate's brief and enigmatic reply was, "I have a good indication of the student who engineered the hoax. Student has left. Cheers, Stirling" (Bragalia 2009).

Surely, it seems, if anyone would be in a position to know for certain about a supposed student hoax at New Mexico Tech, it would be this science professor and university president. Pauling died in 1994, but Colgate is not only still living but also enjoying a very active retirement at New Mexico Tech, still carrying out research programs in physics. In a brief reply to Bragalia, Colgate acknowledged that he still "knows" the incident was a hoax but said little else. Unfortunately, Colgate seems annoyed by all the attention he has received from

UFOlogists of all stripes and is no longer saying anything to anyone about it. Researchers, including Dave Thomas of New Mexicans for Science and Reason (NMSR), are pursuing the claim of a possible student hoax through the New Mexico Tech alumni community.

How such a hoax might be pulled off has, unfortunately, never been fully explained. Frank T. Etscorn, a former psychology professor at New Mexico Tech, told Bragalia that one of his students during the 1980s researched the alleged hoax and located one of the participants, who acknowledged his role but would neither elaborate on the hoax

Robert Sheaffer's "Psychic Vibrations" column has appeared in the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER for the past thirty years, and he is author of UFO Sightings: The Evidence (Prometheus 1998). His Web site is at www.debunker.com.

nor allow his name to be used. It was also discovered that a rear-projection device was stolen from the college on the day of the Zamora UFO incident. However, it is not likely that a rear-projection device would have been of any use in creating an illusion in the desert in full sunlight. Dave Collis, who entered New Mexico Tech as a freshman in 1965, told Bragalia that he was told in confidence by an unnamed professor that “the UFO sighting by the town cop was a hoax done by Techie students.”

There is a rich and long tradition of

explain to Klass that the town was seeking to attract tourists to strengthen its economy. Klass also noted the curious lack of symmetry in the “pad prints” supposedly left behind, illustrating how unsuitable such an unstable design would be for any craft. Klass concluded that the incident was a hoax to put Socorro on the map, a collusion probably involving Zamora, the mayor, and a few others (Klass 1968). If that is the case, Socorro has not been nearly as successful at milking UFO notoriety as another New Mexico town named Roswell.

**The assumption that the incident was a student
hoax instead of one perpetrated by publicity-seeking
town leaders changes Zamora from an
“active participant” to “victim of the hoax,”
which frankly seems more plausible.**

elaborate hoaxes pulled off by clever college students, and some of them remain unsolved after many years. (For a look at some of the classics, see *If at All Possible, Involve a Cow: The Book of College Pranks* by Neil Steinberg and *Nightwork: A History of Hacks and Pranks at MIT* by T.F. Peterson.) The suggestion has plausibility, especially in light of information that Lonnie Zamora had worked in the machine shop at New Mexico Tech before becoming a policeman and that there was antagonism between Zamora and at least some students, as often occurs between high-spirited college students and conservative local law enforcement.

The late Philip J. Klass, a noted UFO skeptic, visited Socorro in 1966 and interviewed Zamora and others who had first-hand knowledge of the incident. Klass was puzzled by how little interest there was among the scientists at New Mexico Tech in what might be the first genuine alien encounter in recorded history, occurring literally in their backyard. Klass wrote, “When I pressed one member of the community to explain this apparent indifference, he suggested that I ‘nose around a bit,’” and he went on to

Claims have been made about other witnesses who allegedly saw the UFO at the same time as Zamora, but an unpublished paper by Klass shows why these claims are not plausible. (I have placed this and several others of Klass’s previously unavailable UFO “White Papers” on my Web site; see www.debunker.com/historical/historical.html.) For decades, Zamora had been unwilling to discuss the incident any further. Lonnie Zamora died November 2, 2009, and had not given any interviews in many years. Undoubtedly he had already said everything he had to say about the incident.

Over the years, other theories have been put forth to explain the Zamora UFO incident. Apparently there was a flight test of the Lunar Surveyor using a helicopter near Socorro that day, raising the possibility that Zamora witnessed this test and misperceived it (Thomas n.d.). Engineer Larry Robinson suggested that Zamora saw an early propane-powered hot air balloon, at that time a relatively new technology unfamiliar to most people (Robinson n.d.). British UFOlogist James Easton wrote, “during this period, classified CIA hot-air balloon

test flights were being launched from a site on the banks of the Rio Grande, north of Albuquerque—the ‘Albuquerque Flights.’” These flights involved Raven Industries of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Easton further wrote that, amazingly, his 2003 Freedom of Information request for more information about these balloon flights was denied by the CIA on the grounds that the information was still classified (Easton 2003).

The assumption that the incident was a student hoax instead of one perpetrated by publicity-seeking town leaders changes Zamora from an “active participant” to “victim of the hoax,” which frankly seems more plausible. However, while we might suppose that two students wearing white overalls may have made some marks in the ground and released a helium balloon when Zamora arrived, it is difficult to see how they removed themselves from the scene before Officer Chavez arrived minutes later. If any reader has first-hand knowledge concerning this incident, I’d very much like to hear about it.

A splendid example of a major student hoax of more recent vintage was the video of a supposed glowing-hot “meteorite” crashing in Latvia in October 2009, belching flame and smoke (search for “meteorite in Latvia” on YouTube). While initial news reports were supportive of the claim, experts soon began noticing problems. The supposed “crater” was discovered to have been dug by shovels, and meteorites are no longer hot enough to glow by the time they land. The bad acting in the video as the students “discovered” the meteorite did not help anything. Still, the hoax kept people guessing for a short time (see <http://tinyurl.com/yjev5hd>).

* * *

“Mystery As Spiral Blue Light Display Hovers above Norway,” proclaimed the Drudge Report. “A MYSTERIOUS giant spiral of light that dominated the sky over Norway this morning has stunned experts—who believe the space spectacle is an entirely new astral phenomenon,” exclaimed the British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*. Dozens of other news publications and Web sites ran similarly breathtaking stories. All across Norway on the morning of December 9,

people heading to work saw a bright “star” rising in the sky, spiraling out an amazing pinwheel of white light. A blue tail seemed to point back to Earth. The well-known British UFOlogist Nick Pope told *The Sun*, “A meteor or a fireball would simply travel in a straight line but for something to spiral in this way appears to go against the laws of physics. . . . It’s ironic that something like this should happen the very week after the MoD [British Ministry of Defence] terminated its UFO project. It just goes to show how wrong that decision was.” For about a day, the media flogged it as a great mystery.

While the mystery-mongers were busy spreading their uninformed speculations, serious observers immediately suspected it was a Russian rocket launch. At first the Russians denied any launch, but Russia had just posted a warning for ships to stay out of that area because of a scheduled missile launch. Also, similar (albeit much less spectacular, as the rocket is not in sunlight) launch spirals had been observed before in a 2007 video of a Russian rocket spiraling out of control (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTImevaNz0g). About a day later, the Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged the failed test launch of its troubled new Bulava series intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

The recent incident over Norway occurred sometime after 8 AM local time, when the sky was still dark. Photos show twilight beginning (the sun doesn’t rise until after 9 AM in Norway during the winter). As the rocket rose higher above the ground, it entered sunlight while ground observers were still in darkness. The rocket began venting propellant while spinning, creating a spectacularly bright sunlit spiral unwinding against a dark sky. I can truly say that this is the most spectacular “UFO” that has ever been captured on photo or video, and our knowledge of what it is does not diminish its awesomeness.

* * *

As Pope noted above, on December 1 the British Ministry of Defence confirmed the closing of its so-called “UFO hotline,” where individuals could call or

e-mail to report a sighting. The Ministry received 135 reports during 2008. By closing the hotline, the Ministry expects to save the equivalent of about \$73,000 each year, a trifling sum in the context of military budgets. There was only one man working in the department that looked into UFOs, and he worked only part time. Nick Pope had previously held that position.



This picture taken on December 9, 2009, shows an unusual light phenomenon above the Norwegian city of Skjeroy. A failed Russian test launch of its Bulava ICBM was later acknowledged as the cause.

AFP PHOTO/SCANPIX/ANITA OLSEN

A spokesman for the Ministry stated, “Our resources are focused on the priority—the front line in Afghanistan. Any legitimate threat to the U.K. air space will be spotted by our 24/7 radar checks and will be dealt with by RAF fighter aircraft.” Pope told the Associated Press, “It’s a great shame. This is the end of over 50 years of research and investigation into one of the biggest mysteries of our time.” However, the MoD stated, “In over 50 years, no UFO report has revealed any evidence of a potential threat to the United Kingdom. . . . The MoD has no specific capability for identifying the nature of such sightings. There is no defence benefit in such investigation and it would be an inappropriate use of defence resources.”

In a recent column I described some other attempts to develop “rapid response” investigations of UFO sightings utilizing a hotline and other tools (see “Bigelow’s Aerospace and Saucer Emporium,” *SI*, July/August 2009). France

terminated its government UFO investigations in 2004, and the U.S. Air Force closed down its Project Bluebook in 1969. Several independent private efforts in the U.S and Mexico have been launched over the years with high expectations and fanfare, but none of them has ever resulted in getting any solid, convincing evidence of UFOs. The people of the U.K. need not be concerned

that valuable UFO information might be lost by this decision, as no group in any country has succeeded, despite a number of attempts, in catching any UFO *in flagrante delicto*, even when there was a hotline for people to call at the very moment they believed they saw an alien spaceship in the sky. □

References

- Bragalia, Anthony. 2009. The Socorro UFO hoax exposed! (Famous 1964 sighting was a college prank). The UFO Iconoclast(s) blog, September 23. Available online at <http://ufocon.blogspot.com/2009/09/socorro-hoax-exposed-famous-1964.html>.
- Easton, James. 2003. The UFO Research List forum, July 11. Available online at <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/UFORL/message/1820>.
- Klass, P.J. 1968. *UFOs—Identified*. New York: Random House.
- Robinson, Larry. n.d. Solving the 1964 Socorro NM UFO case. MidiMagic. Available online at <http://midimagic.sgc-hosting.com/how-isoco.htm>.
- Thomas, David E. n.d. A different angle on the Socorro UFO of 1964. New Mexicans for Science and Reason. Available online at www.nmsr.org/socorro.htm.