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Lonnie Zamora incident

The **Lonnie Zamora incident** was an alleged UFO close encounter which occurred on Friday, April 24, 1964, at about 5:50 p.m., on the outskirts of Socorro, New Mexico. Several primary witnesses emerged to report their version of the event, which included the craft's approach, conspicuous flame, and alleged physical evidence left behind immediately afterward. Lonnie Zamora, a Socorro police officer who was on duty at the time, claimed to have come closest to the object and provided the most prolonged and comprehensive account. Some physical trace evidence left behind—burned vegetation and soil, ground landing impressions, and metal scrapings on a broken rock in one of the impressions—was subsequently observed and analyzed by investigators for the military, law enforcement, and civilian UFO groups.



Location of Socorro in the Middle Rio Grande Basin, New Mexico

The event and its body of evidence is sometimes deemed one of the best documented and most perplexing UFO reports. It was immediately investigated by the U.S. Army, U.S. Air Force, and FBI, and received considerable coverage in the mass media. It was one of the cases that helped persuade astronomer J. Allen Hynek, one of the primary investigators for the Air Force, that some UFO reports represented an intriguing mystery. After extensive investigation, the Air Force's Project Blue Book was unable to come up with a conventional explanation and listed the case as an "unknown".

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Sighting

Alone in his patrol car, Sergeant Lonnie Zamora was chasing a speeding car due south of Socorro, New Mexico, on April 24, 1964, at about 5:45 p.m.,^[4] when he "heard a roar and saw a flame in the sky to southwest some distance away — possibly a 1/2 mile or a mile." Thinking a local dynamite shack might have exploded, Zamora broke off the chase and went to investigate.

Though Zamora says he did not pay much attention to the flame, that the sun was "to west and did not help vision", and he was wearing green sunglasses over prescription glasses. In interviews with Air Force investigators for Project Blue Book he goes to some lengths to describe the long, narrow, funnel-shaped "bluish orange" flame. He thought there might be some dust at the bottom, and attributed it to the windy day. The weather was "Clear, sunny sky otherwise — just a few clouds scattered over area."

He describes the noise as a roar, not a blast, that changed from high frequency to low frequency that lasted possibly 10 seconds and stopped. He explains that his car windows were down. Zamora notes no other possible witnesses except possibly the car in front, which he estimates might have heard the noise but not seen the flame because it would be behind the brow of the hill from their viewpoint.

Zamora struggled to get his car up the steep hill. Successful on the third attempt, he noted no further noise. For the next 10–15 seconds he proceeded west. It was then that he noticed a shiny object, "to south about 150 to 200 yards", that at first he took to be an "overturned white car ... up on radiator or on trunk", with two people standing close to it, one of whom seemed to notice him with some surprise and gave a start. The shiny object was "like aluminum — it was whitish against the mesa background, but not chrome", and shaped like a letter "O". Having stopped for a couple of seconds, Zamora approached in his car meaning to help.

Zamora only caught a brief sight of the two people in white coveralls beside the "car". He

Lonnie Zamora	
Born	Lonnie Zamora <div>7 September 1933</div> Magdalena, New Mexico
Died	2 November 2009 <div>(aged 76)^{[1][2][3]}</div>
Occupation	Police officer

recalls nothing special about them. "I don't recall noting any particular shape or possibly any hats, or headgear. These persons appeared normal in shape — but possibly they were small adults or large kids."

Zamora drove towards the scene, radioing his dispatcher to say he would be out of his car "checking the car in the arroyo." He stopped his car, got out, and attended to the radio microphone, which he had dropped, then he started to approach the object. According to Zamora,

“ Hardly turned around from car, when heard roar (was not exactly a blast), very loud roar — at that close was real loud. Not like a jet — knows what jets sound like. Started low frequency quickly, then roar rose in frequency (higher tone) and in loudness — from loud to very loud. At same time as roar saw flame. Flame was under the object. Object was starting to go straight up — slowly up. Object slowly rose straight up. Flame was light blue and at bottom was sort of orange color. From this angle, saw the side of object (not end, as first noted). Difficult to describe flame. Thought, from roar, it might blow up. Flame might have come from underside of object, at middle, possibly a four feet area — very rough guess. Cannot describe flame further except blue and orange. No smoke, except dust in immediate area.^[5] ”

Keeping the object in view he ran behind his car, bumping his leg on the rear fender and dropping his glasses, and continued running northwards away from the object, which was still near the ground. He now gives a more detailed description of the object. "Oval in shape ... smooth — no windows or doors ... Noted red lettering of some type. Insignia was about 2½' high and about 2' wide I guess. Was in middle of object ... Object still like aluminum-white." He also noted that the object was still on the ground when the roar started.

Zamora describes how the object took off:

“ After fell by car and glasses fell off, kept running to north, with car between me and object. Glanced back couple of times. Noted object to rise to about level of car, about 20 to 25 feet guess — took I guess about six seconds when object started to rise and I glanced back. I ran I guess about halfway to where I ducked down — about fifty feet from the car is where I ducked down, just over edge of hill. I guess I had run about 25 feet when I glanced back and saw the object level with the car and it appeared about directly over the place where it rose from.

I was still running and I jumped just over the hill — I stopped because I did not hear the roar. I was scared of the roar, and I had planned to continue running down the hill. I turned around toward the object and at same time put my head toward ground, covering my face with my arms. Being that there was no roar, I looked up, and I saw the object going away from me. It did not come any closer to me. It appeared to go in straight line and at same height — ”

possibly 10 to 15 feet from ground, and it cleared the dynamite shack by about three feet. Shack about eight feet high. Object was travelling very fast. It seemed to rise up, and take off immediately across country.

Zamora went back to his car and contacted the Sheriff's office by radio:

“ I picked up my glasses (I left the sun glasses on ground), got into the car, and radioed to Nep Lopez, radio operator, to "look out of the window, to see if you could see an object." He asked what is it? I answered "It looks like a balloon." I don't know if he saw it. If Nep looked out of his window, which faces north, he couldn't have seen it. I did not tell him at the moment which window to look out of. ”

He watched the object fly away, swiftly but silently and without flame:

“ As I was calling Nep, I could still see the object. The object seemed to lift up slowly, and to "get small" in the distance very fast. It seemed to just clear the Box Canyon or Six Mile Canyon Mountain. It disappeared as it went over the mountain. It had no flame whatsoever as it was traveling over the ground, and no smoke or noise. ”

Zamora inspected the area and was soon joined by a colleague, Sergeant Chavez, who did not see the object:

“ Gave directions to Nep Lopez at radio and to Sergeant M.S. Chavez to get there. Went down to where the object had been and I noted the brush was burning in several places. At that time I heard Sgt. Chavez (N.M. State Police at Socorro) calling me on radio for my location, and I returned to my car, told him he was looking at me. Then Sgt. Chavez came up, asked me what the trouble was, because I was sweating and he told me I was white, very pale. I asked the Sgt. to see what I saw, and that was the burning brush. Then Sgt. Chavez and I went to the spot, and Sgt. Chavez pointed out the tracks. ”

Zamora says that he had noticed that the object had what looked like legs:

“ When I first saw the object (when I thought it might be a car) I saw what appeared to be four legs of some type from the object to the ground. At the time, I didn't pay much attention to what it was — I thought it was an accident — I saw the two persons. I didn't pay any attention to the four "legs?" The four "legs" were at the bottom of the object, slanted outwards to the ground. The object might have been about three and a half feet from the ground at that time. I just glanced at it. ”

Zamora tries to account for the disappearance of the two people:

“ Can't tell how long [I] saw object second time (the "close" time), possibly 20 seconds — just a guess — from time got out of car, glanced at object, ran from object, jumped over edge of hill, then got back to car and radio as object disappeared. As my mic fell as I got out of car, at scene area, I heard about ”

two or three loud "thumps," like someone possibly hammering or shutting a door or doors hard. These "thumps" were possibly a second or less apart. This was just before the roar. The persons were not seen when I drove to the scene area. Just before Sgt. Chavez got to scene, I got my pen and drew a picture of the insignia on the object.

Witnesses, investigation and publicity

Within hours, word of Zamora's encounter had reached the news: many people had heard the radio traffic, including a few reporters. Within days, reporters from the Associated Press and United Press International were in Socorro. Members of civilian UFO study group APRO were on the scene within two days, as were officers representing the U.S. Air Force's Project Blue Book. NICAP investigators appeared the following Tuesday. The first NICAP investigator was Ray Stanford, who would later write a detailed book account of his investigation.



Illustration of the craft and figures clothed in white, based on Zamora's interview with Walter Shrode, a day or so after his sighting.^[6]

Other witnesses

Several independent witnesses reported either an "egg"-shaped craft or a bluish flame at roughly the same time and in the same area – some of them within minutes of Zamora's encounter, before word of it had spread.

Stanford wrote about a number of corroborating witnesses in his book, including two tourists named Paul Kies and Larry Kratzer, who were approaching Socorro in their car from the southwest, less than a mile from the landing site. They apparently witnessed either the landing or takeoff and reported seeing the flame and brownish dust being kicked up. Their story was reported in the Dubuque, Iowa *Telegraph-Herald* a few days later after their return.

A family of five tourists from Colorado headed north also saw the oval object as it approached Socorro at a very low altitude, going east to west just south of town. It passed directly over their car only a few feet above it. After the encounter, the tourists stopped for gas in Socorro. Their identity was never discovered, but the story was learned from the service station operator, Opal Grinder, who reported the incident at the time^[7] and later signed an affidavit in 1967. According to Grinder, the husband told him "Your aircraft sure fly low around here!" and that the object almost took the roof off their car. The man thought it was in trouble since it came down west of the highway instead of the nearby airport to the south. He saw the police car headed up the hill towards it, and he thought to render

assistance.^{[8]:16}

According to Stanford, another witness called an Albuquerque television station around 5:30 p.m. to report an oval object at low altitude traveling slowly south towards Socorro.^{[8]:82} This report was also brought up by KSRC Socorro radio newsman Walter Shrode when he interviewed Zamora on the radio the next day. Zamora said he hadn't heard of the report. Shrode thought this was likely the same object that Zamora encountered only 20 minutes later and helped corroborate his report.^{[6][9]} Several other stories appeared in New Mexico newspapers in succeeding days of other sightings of oval-shaped objects, including another landing case with burned soil near La Madera in northern N.M.^[10] Also similar to the Socorro incident, the FBI report on the La Madera case further noted the witness reporting a blue-white flame associated with the object, four rectangular, V-shaped landing marks, and several circular marks about 4 inches in diameter.^[11]

Stanford also noted that there were a large number of aural witnesses to the object's loud roar during takeoff and landing. One member of the Socorro sheriff's office told him that "hundreds of persons" on the south side of town had heard it. Stanford said he personally spoke to two women who heard the roar just before 6 p.m. They said that there were two distinct roars, maybe a minute or so apart.^{[8]:85–87}

In addition to these witnesses, Stanford said three other people called the police dispatcher immediately after the incident, before it was publicized, reporting a bright flame. In October 2009, Stanford said that Chavez, the first policeman to provide backup for Zamora, had privately told fellow police officers that he too had seen the object rapidly departing to the west over the mountains as he approached the site.^[12] In interviews, Zamora said that Chavez arrived within about two minutes after he radioed him for backup: "...the object was still about a couple of moments up there when he arrived"^[6] and "If he (Chavez) had just paid attention he would seen it (flying off towards the mountains)."^[13] However, in public statements, Chavez maintained that he arrived too late to see the object. When Chavez first arrived at Zamora's position where the object had departed, he also noted that burnt bushes were still smoldering and Zamora appeared to be in a state of shock.

Multiple policemen arrived soon after to help investigate, including Ted Jordan and James Luckie. All noted fresh burning at the site. Luckie and Chavez were quoted in the Socorro newspaper saying that clumps of grass and burned greasewood bushes were "still hot" when they arrived.^[14] Chavez was also quoted saying that dry grass was still "smoldering"^[15] as were the greasewood plants.^[16] Jordan later filled out a sworn statement saying, "When I arrived, greasewood branches were still smoking."^{[8]:160} Zamora was likewise quoted about the green bush "burned bare by exhaust heat" and that it was "still smoking several minutes after the craft's departure."^[17] The FBI report written by the agent on the scene within two hours similarly reported that all first responders noted "four irregularly shaped smoldering areas."^[18]

Chavez was again quoted in an Air Force report written two days later about smoking brush. "[Chavez] then went to the area where the craft or thing was supposedly sighted and found four fresh indentations in the ground and several charred or burned bushes. Smoke appeared to come from the bush and he assumed it was burning, however no coals were visible and the charred portions of the bush were cold to the touch."

Chavez was further reported securing the area and scouring the ground looking for the presence of other human activity. He could find no other tire tracks besides Zamora's and was "adamant" that there was no other "track activity" (footprints or other marks) in the area. In addition, Chavez was also quoted in the report saying that the indentations appeared to be new: "He stated that the marks were definitely 'fresh', and the dirt showed evidence of 'dew' or moisture."^[19]

Similarly, several policemen later told Stanford that whatever had produced the rectangular, wedge-shaped landing traces appeared to have penetrated into the moist subsoil, as the bottoms of the traces were moist for several hours, suggesting that the traces were freshly made. Hynek also commented on the freshness of the soil impressions in a letter to astronomer Donald Menzel: "I have the word of nine witnesses who saw the marks within hours of the incident, who tell me the center of the marks were moist as though the topsoil had been freshly pushed aside."^[20]

The FBI investigator also observed that the rectangular marks "seemed to have been made by an object going into the earth at an angle from a center line" pushing "some earth to the far side." Also observed were "three circular marks in the earth which were small, approximately four inches in diameter and penetrated in the sandy earth approximately one-eighth of an inch."^[21] Speculation in Stanford's book was that these were ladder indentations for the crew to exit and enter the craft.

Air Force investigation

The evening of the encounter, Army Captain Richard T. Holder (then the senior officer at White Sands, as the higher-ranking officers had gone home for the weekend) and FBI agent Arthur Byrnes, Jr. together interviewed Zamora. However, for reasons that remain unclear, the FBI asked that their presence at the scene be kept quiet.^{[22]:213} Zamora speculated that the object was some kind of newly developed craft being tested at White Sands Missile Range or at nearby Holloman Air Force Base. Holder shot down this idea, and was later quoted in a Socorro newspaper as saying that there was in military custody "no object that would compare to the object described ... There was no known firing mission in progress at the time of the occurrence that would produce the conditions reported."

After interviewing Zamora, Holder and several military police officers went to the scene. Using flashlights, they cordoned off the site, took measurements and took samples of the

sand and the scorched bushes. The claim of "fused sand" being recovered from the landing site was for some time unsubstantiated; even Hynek said he had not heard such rumors during his investigations.^{[22]:218}

The next morning, a Sunday, Holder took a telephone call from a Colonel at the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As a young Captain, Holder was surprised and nervous to be speaking to such an important, high-ranking officer. At the Colonel's command, Holder gave a report of his investigation over a secure scrambled line. Even years later, Holder would wonder^[23] about such important U.S. military officials, "why in the world were they so interested?"

Astronomer J. Allen Hynek (Blue Book's consultant) arrived in Socorro on Tuesday, April 28. He met with Zamora and Chavez, and interviewed them about the encounter. Hynek and Air Force Major Hector Quintanilla initially thought the sighting might be explained as a test of a Lunar Excursion Module, though after some investigation, Hynek determined that this could be definitely ruled out as an explanation for what Zamora saw.^{[22]:213} In a memorandum Hynek wrote^[23] that "Zamora & Chavez were very anti-AF [Air Force]". The Air Force was suggesting that the affair was a hoax, but Zamora was "pretty sore at being regarded as a romancer" and it took over half an hour for Hynek to "thaw him out" and hear the account from the only eyewitness.

Hynek also wrote^[23] that "The AF is in a spot over Socorro"; they were also suggesting that the encounter could be attributed to Zamora having seen an unidentified military craft, though no craft could be matched to Zamora's report. Hynek agreed with many others that this explanation "won't go down" as plausible.

Hynek further wrote^[23] "I think this case may be the 'Rosetta Stone' ... There's never been a strong case with so unimpeachable a witness." Also noting his growing frustration with Blue Book, Hynek wrote, "The AF doesn't know what science is."

The fused sand

In 1968, physicist and UFO researcher James E. McDonald located Mary G. Mayes, who asserted that when she was a University of New Mexico doctoral student in radiation biology, she had been asked "to analyze plant material from the Socorro site. Afterwards, she was to turn in all records and samples, and heard no more about it."^{[22]:218}

When interviewed by McDonald, Mayes reported that she and two others had worked on studying physical evidence from the Socorro site, but she could not remember the names of the others. According to Mayes, she had examined the site the day after the event, and had gathered plant samples for analysis. Mayes later determined that the plants which had allegedly been burnt by the UFO's flames were, unusually, "completely dried out".^{[22]:219} Mayes also found no evidence of radiation, but found "two organic substances" she was

unable to identify.^{[22]:219}

Mayes also reported to McDonald an area of apparently "fused sand", where the sand had taken on a glassy appearance, near where the object had allegedly landed and then departed. The area of glassy sand was roughly triangular, measuring about 25 to 30 inches (760 mm) at its widest, though it gradually tapered down to about 1 inch wide; it seemed about a quarter of an inch thick. Mayes thought the glassy areas looked as if a "hot jet hit it."^{[22]:219}

Mayes said she would investigate to determine the other people who investigated the site, but McDonald's files give no indication she ever contacted him about the subject.^{[22]:219}

Object speed and acceleration

According to Stanford's reconstruction of the event from on-site interviews with Zamora, the time was probably no more than 20 seconds from when the object went to silent operation, rapidly accelerated towards the perlite mill at the base of the nearby mountains, and then rose rapidly, a distance of about 2 miles (3.2 km).^{[8]:34} Assuming constant acceleration, these numbers can be used to estimate the object's acceleration, average speed, and final speed. Assuming constant acceleration, the acceleration would be given by $2d/t^2$, where d is the distance of 2 miles (3.2 km) or about 3,200 meters, and t is the time of 20 seconds. The final speed would be $2d/t$ and the average speed $d/2$. This works out to a final speed of 720 miles/hour, an average speed of 360 miles/hour, and an acceleration of 16 meters/sec², or about 1.7 times Earth gravity of 9.8 meters/sec².

These high values rule out many conventional explanations, such as a helicopter or balloon. A high-performance jet aircraft or rocket propulsion could conceivably produce the acceleration and near-supersonic speed, but neither forms of propulsion are silent. The Air Force report on the incident also said that they analyzed the soil and found no evidence of chemical propellants, as might be expected from a jet or most rocket engines. Further, no contemporary craft was capable of vertical take-off and such high speeds. The oval object described by Zamora also lacked any wings or other external structures that might have provided lift.

Winds

Contemporary New Mexico newspapers reported a low-pressure storm system moving through the state with wind gusts kicking up dust. Zamora likewise reported winds were "blowing hard" out of the south-southwest or maybe southwest, judging by the dust created as he drove up the dirt road to the scene. Hynek variously reported winds either out of the south or southwest. A recent review of historical wind data confirmed the large low-pressure system at the time with winds at all surrounding weather stations out of the south to southwest.^[24] Since the object departed to the west-southwest, the winds would further rule

out any passive flying object such as a balloon, which would have to fly into the wind.

Aftermath

In 1966 the president of the Socorro County's Chamber of Commerce, Paul Ridings, proposed developing the site to make it more accessible to tourists. Consequently stone walkways and steps were built into the arroyo from the mesa top, besides a rock walkway circling a supposed landing site, with some wooden benches. The location of these was however some quarter mile from the landing site, which was then suspected to be contaminated by radioactivity.^[25] In 2012 Socorro city officials Ravi Bhasker and Pat Salome commissioned local artist Erika Burleigh to paint a mural on a spillway facing Park Street to commemorate Zamora's UFO sighting.^[26] Zamora became so tired of the subject that he eventually avoided both ufologists and the Air Force, taking a job managing a gasoline station. He died on November 2, 2009, in Socorro from a heart attack; he was 76 years old.

Hoax claims and rebuttals

Some debunkers suggested that the affair was a hoax. Harvard astronomer Donald Menzel first suggested that Zamora had been the victim of a complex prank engineered by high school students who "planned the whole business to 'get' Zamora." (Hynek suggested this to some Socorro citizens, who discounted the idea). Years later, Menzel argued that Zamora had misidentified a dust devil.

Journalist and prominent UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass first suggested that the Zamora sighting was due to misidentified ball lightning. When this debunking was itself debunked (notably by atmospheric physicist and UFO advocate Dr. James E. McDonald), Klass switched gears and suggested the Zamora sighting was part of a scheme Zamora had invented with Socorro's then mayor, Holm Bursum, Jr., to attract tourism, claiming Bursum owned the land where Zamora's encounter occurred. Bursum didn't own the property as Klass claimed.^[27] Klass nevertheless claimed that Bursum hoped Zamora's "fabricated" UFO story would lure tourists to Socorro, and Bursum could then develop the UFO landing site into a tourist attraction. Both Bursum and Zamora consistently denied these accusations as ridiculous.

UFO skeptic Stuart Campbell dismissed Klass's hoax allegations. He has suggested that the Zamora sighting was "almost certainly" a mirage of Canopus.^[28]

Blue Book conclusion

The Air Force issued their formal report on June 8, 1964. Jerome Clark said the report was "riddled with errors", including the claim that there were no other witnesses (several

reported their sightings within minutes of Zamora's encounter), and the claim that there were no disturbances to the soil (at odds with Jordan's photos of the scene taken less than an hour after the encounter). Noting that they made no conclusion as to the object's origin (other than to rule out the extraterrestrial hypothesis), the "Air Force was continuing its investigation, and the case is still open."

However, in a secret report prepared for the CIA, Project Blue Book's director, Major Hector Quintanilla, said, "There is no doubt that Lonnie Zamora saw an object which left quite an impression on him. There is also no question about Zamora's reliability. He is a serious police officer, a pillar of his church, and a man well versed in recognizing airborne vehicles in his area. He is puzzled by what he saw and frankly, so are we. This is the best-documented case on record, and still we have been unable, in spite of thorough investigation, to find the vehicle or other stimulus that scared Zamora to the point of panic."^[29]

See also

- List of UFO sightings

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Further reading

- Brad Steiger, *Project Blue Book*, 1976, Ballantine Books, ISBN 0-345-26091-0 (contains Air Force's account with maps, Zamora's account, reports of J. Allen Hynek)

External links

- Death of a Legend (<http://www.saturdaynightuforia.com/html/articles/articlehtml/deathofalegend.html>) at Saturday Night Uforia
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