

UFOS VS. MARINES

DO YOU BELIEVE IN UFOS?



BY ROY "SHADOW" STAFFORD

His name was Ray Watkins, and he was a helluva nice guy and smart as they come. He got his Double "E" degree through the NESEP Program. Ray had just asked me the question that was sure to come up sooner or later in any Ready Room in the Fleet. I knew Ray was a mathematician as well and mused a bit before answering. "Ray," I said, "I know the mathematical odds are that there has to be some form of life out there in the galaxies. I just don't believe they reside in this solar system." Ray had a twinkle in his eye and said, "I think you're wrong."

The Marine was just minding his own business, going low and fast, when the aliens appeared. (Photo by Ted Carlson/fotodynamics.net)

"TARGETS, 3 O'CLOCK—TWO OF THEM!" I EASED THE PRESSURE ON THE STICK, AND AS I LOOKED OUT, THERE THEY WERE: TWO RED PULSATING LIGHTS. I'D NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT!



The distinctively sharper camera nose on the RF-4 gave it a speed advantage over its brethren. (Photo by Ted Carlson/ fotodynamics.net)

By this stage of my young life, I was already aware of the fabled New Mexico sightings, the many alien-abduction claims, and even a few unexplained sightings by supposed professionals, but then, as now, I was a skeptic, to say the least. I didn't believe in psychics, soothsayers, demons, or witchcraft, and I sure as hell didn't believe in UFOs. My conversation with Ray was one of those I hoped didn't go any further. It is hard to reason with a true believer. Ray was smart enough to know that and dropped it.

In those days, my recreational reading went from John le Carré to Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour to James Michener; I was always a fan of history and historical fiction. Ray was heavy into Isaac Asimov and other science-fiction writers of the day. To my way of thinking, both pursuits—in their own way—were educational. One (Ray's) was just on a higher plane, if you will.

I didn't think much about it for a year or so. I was driving U.S. Marine Corps RF-4s and usually flew with Larry Shreve in my back seat, but often, I'd fly with the other guys as well. I always enjoyed flying with Ray; he knew the radar well and was calm and professional in every aspect. He was just a neat all-around guy.

Low, Fast, and in the Dark

As luck would have it, we deployed to Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Arizona, for an intense workup and training period. I loved it; we flew around the clock and had cross-countries, to boot. It didn't get any better for a young naval aviator.

One of the more demanding missions for a photo reconnaissance team was a low-level night photo-flash mission. On the surface, it may seem easy, but until you tried it, you couldn't believe how difficult it could be.

The way the mission was supposed to be flown was as follows: You had a target; the idea was to fly over the target and set off the photo-flash flares. The camera systems had a sensor that opened the lens when the photo flash went off, and if you hit it right, you'd find the target in the photos when developed. You should know we were usually about 1,000 feet above ground level, doing 520 knots, minimum. (It makes it a little more exciting.) Remember, this is at night—total darkness, no moon. You also had to rely on the "terrain following/terrain avoidance" radar if you were in uneven terrain (read: mountains). The radar was a critical component in the mission in that

you also used it for your setup and could use it as a marker for heading if a good return could be achieved. We usually used about a 10-mile run into the target. The photo flares were awesome, putting out about 8 million candlepower and one hell of a boom for those on the ground. (I used to love the RF-8s throwing them out to open the Miramar Air Show.) I believe our launcher held about 15 of those babies.

On this particular night, Ray and I were teamed up for just such a mission, and the conditions were ideal. There was absolutely no moon, and a high overcast was there to shut out any starlight—about as tactical as it gets in peacetime.

One of the great things about Yuma was the proximity to all the target areas. On this night, we were assigned Inky Barley or Kiddie Baggage east of El Centro, California (I can't remember which). As we planned the mission, Ray decided to use the little desert town of Brawley as our target IP (initial point). We planned to take off and skirt the border toward Calexico and then turn in toward Brawley. This served two purposes:

The CH-53 Sea Stallion is a great load lifter but not much of a threat to a Phantom. Still...in the dark... (Photo by Ted Carlson/ fotodynamics.net)



THEY WERE BIG, ROUND PULSATING BALLS, AND THEY WERE MOVING IN A MANNER THAT WAS... WELL, IT WAS ALMOST ALIEN!

First, it provided a good radar fix, and second, if the radar went down, it would serve as a good visual IP. As luck would have it, it was wintertime and it got dark early. If all went well, we'd fly the mission and still be on the ground in time to hit the "Dirty Shirt" bar at the "O" Club for a couple of cool ones before it closed.

What the...!!

We suited up, performed our preflight in the dark, and mounted up. Everything was routine until right after wheels in the well, when the radar went out. A challenging mission now just got a lot tougher. Without the radar, I had to rely strictly on time and heading from the IP. We were still at 500+ knots and still at about a thousand feet; terrain avoidance would be on time and the heading as well. We set up for our first run, and both of us became "heavy breathers" on hot mike. I hit the IP and Ray punched the clock as we neared the target (we hoped).

Ray said, "Stand by on my mark." This was a warning to me to close my eyes so as not to be blinded by the photo flash and lose my night vision. Actually, it was so bright that it reminded me of the EEG (electroencephalogram) test we took at Pensacola in flight training—you damn near see the blood vessels in your eyelids.

On this night, we were firing three flares in sequence in order to get target coverage. We planned for five runs. As soon as the third flare went off, I immediately went into a 3G turn to the right, turning south to set up for another run. About 30 degrees into the turn, Ray says, "Targets, 3 o'clock—two of them!" I eased the pressure on the stick, and as I looked out, there they were: two red pulsating lights. I'd never seen anything like it! They were big, round pulsating balls, and they were moving in a manner that was...well, it was almost alien! They appeared to be moving up and down, back and forth at random (airplanes can't move like that), and they also seemed stationary in relation to us. It was just plain spooky. It was the damndest thing. It was like they were following us around the track. They stayed right there at our 3 o'clock position.

Take me to your leader!
(Photo by Jay Miller)



“AIN’T NO SUCH THING AS A UFO.” WITH THAT, I TURNED TO RAY AND SAID, “HERMANO, WE’RE OUTTA HERE. TOO WEIRD AROUND THIS PLACE FOR ME.”

I’m flying the airplane, and Ray was visually “locked on” to the two targets. About halfway to the IP, he says, “They’re UFOs.” It was a matter-of-fact statement but sincere. I wasn’t convinced but had no explanation. So I decided to concentrate on my run in.

Ray was so spooked that he almost missed the time hack, but he got it together and we fired off our second volley on time. As I went into the planned 3G turn, there they were again, right at my 3 o’clock, moving in weird ways. As I turned, Ray started getting really convinced that we were witnessing the unknown. (It didn’t help that *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was a popular movie at the time.)

Ray was spooked and suggested we ripple the rest of the flares and get the hell outta there. I thought about it and said, “Screw it. Let’s do it.” This time, the run seemed longer, and I was relieved when Ray called the mark and rippled off nine flares at one

time (awesome). As I pulled off this time, I increased to about 4Gs, came up on the power, and continued the pull until the lights were finally off my nose.

Just Gotta See

Ray yelled, “What the hell are you doing?” I replied, “Ray, I’m gonna get a closer look.” He said, “What if they think we’re hostile?”

By this time, I was committed. The two red balls were now bore-sighted, still moving up and down and back and forth. Just as Ray started to say something, I screamed, “Damn!” I pulled about 5Gs, lit the burners, and rolled inverted all at the same time. “Look!”

Right below us at about 100 feet were two CH-53 Sea Stallions in loose formation. They were running lights out, except for the two large red dome lights on their rotor hubs. Sweet Peter, Mary, Joseph, and whomever. It was close!

After missing them, I came out of burner and immediately turned toward Yuma. Before we were even on the ground, Ray had it all figured out: The helos were moving so slowly that they seemed to be in the same place

all the time. The movement we witnessed was real—up and down, back and forth, as they flew formation—but at night, your eyes play tricks on you and they appeared to be in the same position (stationary) in relation to us as we went around the circuit. We also agreed to say nothing about it to the rest of the squadron in order to avert any ragging or huge fines at Kangaroo Court.

After landing, we waited around for the photos to get processed. We got it (the target) on the first run (luck) and then we headed for the Club to knock down a Corona. We’d been there about 15 to 20 minutes when four surly helo drivers came in. (You could always tell a helo driver by their dirty flight suits.) They sat down at the end of the bar and started animatedly talking to each other.

Playing with Their Heads

From two stools away, I heard “UFO” and other hushed words. I couldn’t help it—I leaned across and said, “Hey, guys. What’s up?”

Four beleaguered faces turned toward me. It looked like they’d just seen a ghost. One of them finally braved up and said, “You’re

not gonna believe it.” He then went on to say that they’d flown over from Santa Ana; once they’d cleared the mountains, they’d dropped down to about 1,500 feet and were following Interstate 8 into Yuma, just east of Brawley. They’d had the bejesus scared out of them by a huge ball of flame that missed them by no more than 20 feet. It lit the cockpit up like daylight. “It was a freaking UFO!” he said.

What they were discussing now was whether or not to turn in a report, fearing they’d be ridiculed. Without any more discussion, I sat upright, gave my best fighter-pilot stare, and said, “Ain’t no such thing as a UFO.” With that, I turned to Ray and said, “*Hermano*, we’re outta here. Too weird around this place for me.”

As we left, I muttered—loud enough for everyone to hear—“Freaking helo drivers are just plain goofy...and they wear dirty flight suits.”

It was all we could do to keep from breaking up as we walked to the BOQ (bachelor officer quarters). Ray and I had plenty of laughs about it over the years. But for about 15 minutes, at one point in time, I was starting to believe in UFOs, just like Ray. †

“So, it’s agreed. We aren’t going to tell anyone we were spooked by a couple of choppers, right?” (Photo by Ted Carlson/fotodynamics.net)

The UFOs came out of the night, with the Phantom seemingly in their sights. (Photo by Check Six/HEAT)

