

THE SOUTHWESTERN LIGHTS

Part One

by Brad Sparks and Jerome Clark

On December 5, 1948, a clear Sunday night, the pilot and copilot of an Air Force C-47 en route from Denver to Phoenix saw something that would set in motion one of the strangest series of events in UFO history. But the man who first witnessed the phenomenon, Capt. William Goade, had no inkling of what was to come in the days and weeks to follow. In fact, initially he was not even sure he had seen anything out of the ordinary.

At 9:05 p.m. Goade spotted a bright green flash just west of Las Vegas, New Mexico. He assumed it was a meteor and forgot about it. He remembered it, however, when he saw the same thing 22 minutes later as his C-47 passed some 20 miles northeast of Albuquerque. This time he and his copilot, Maj. Roger Carter, got a good—if brief—look at it.

Goade, who saw it longer, watched an intense green light rise from the east slope of Sandia Park a few miles away. The object was following a parabolic curve. Goade, a combat veteran, thought this was the weirdest "flare" he had ever seen. Carter, who had it in view for no more than one or two seconds, saw it as a motionless greenish-blue light growing in intensity, then suddenly fading.

The two men talked about the sighting for a few minutes and decided to report it to the control tower at Kirtland Air Force Base, Albuquerque. Control personnel were sufficiently impressed with the account that an hour and a half later, when a Pioneer Airlines flight landed in Albuquerque, they asked crew members if they had seen anything unusual near Las Vegas, New Mexico.

The pilot and copilot reported they had seen it as they were heading west toward Las Vegas at about 9:35—a bright green light which the pilot initially took to be a meteor. But now he wasn't so sure—it seemed to have been too close to the ground.

A little later the airline captain phoned Kirtland tower to supply more details. He said he had been hesitant to report the sighting

because such matters "generally are not accepted." The pale green light had come straight at him, he said, and he had swerved the plane to avoid hitting it. The light and its pale green trail curved downward and vanished after a few seconds.

The next day, when Kirtland's security officer called the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFCSI) to report the incidents, Lt. Col. Doyle Rees, commander of the 17th District AFCSI office based at Kirtland, ordered his agents to investigate. AFCSI was responsible for all investigations of espionage, sabotage and criminal activity within the Air Force. The fireballs might represent sabotage activity.

On December 8 they talked with the New Mexico State Police, the U.S. Forest Service, the Civil Aeronautics Administration aircraft controllers and private operators at the airport in Las Vegas, and the Las Vegas police chief. None of them knew anything about the green "flare" incidents.

The AFCSI men asked the local agencies to contact them if they heard of any such incidents in the future. They impressed upon CAA personnel the "highly classified" nature of such information. Determined to keep publicity about their investigation to a minimum, they did not even contact the local newspaper for information.

This accomplished, AFCSI agents Capt. Melvin Neef and John Stahl checked out the terrain where the sightings had been made. At 6:33 that evening they were airborne about 20 miles east of Las Vegas when, incredibly enough, they saw a green fireball. The object, considerably brighter than a meteor or a flare, suddenly burst into view and flashed toward and just above them to the left at their 11 o'clock position. It seemed to hold an almost flat trajectory parallel to the earth for about two seconds, then suddenly dropped downward and turned into a trail of reddish-orange sparks which vanished in less than a second.

AFCSI began to take the green-fireball reports very seriously.

As word of the incidents got out, witnesses came forward to describe their own experiences. The first of these was Army Col. William Hayes, who was stationed at Kirtland. Hayes had seen mysterious fireballs on three occasions, most recently on November 23. In each case the colonel had been driving near Vaughn, New Mexico, at about 10:00 p.m. and had observed an extremely bright white basketball-sized object coming straight down. Each time it exploded silently into fiery red fragments which extinguished before touching the ground.

On the afternoon of December 9 AFCSI agent Neef interviewed Dr. Lincoln La Paz, director of the Institute of Meteoritics at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Neef described all of the sightings, including his own, to the mathematician-astronomer, who held a Top Secret clearance. La Paz said the objects in question did not sound at all like meteors and should be investigated thoroughly.

To be sure, La Paz later reviewed his records of the Geminid meteor shower, which was prominent at that time of year, but could find no record of any green color associated with it. He had personally witnessed 414 Geminid meteors since 1915 and not one had been green.

La Paz knew of three other unexplained fireball cases from 1948, including one near the Hanford nuclear facility in Washington state and another near Memphis, the opposite end of Tennessee from the vital Oak Ridge uranium enrichment facility.

Early that evening (December 9) agent Stahl flew over the site of his observation the night before but saw nothing unusual.

On Saturday, the 11th, Col. Rees called a conference to discuss the situation. AFCSI