

the Philippines, according to Saunders and Harkins. The first reported fatality due to a UFO occurred on 7 January 1948 when Capt. Thomas Mantell, leading a formation of four F-51s, was asked by the control tower at Godman Airfield, Kentucky, to investigate a UFO. Mantell reported he spotted the unknown object and was climbing to 20,000 feet. Seeing nothing unusual themselves, the other pilots remained behind. None of the aircraft was equipped with oxygen, but Mantell still felt compelled to give chase. Later that day a search party found Mantell's body in his plane's wreckage. The Air Force, under pressure for an explanation, hastily concluded that Captain Mantell died due to lack of oxygen while chasing the planet Venus. The Air Force was never able to convince the press that Mantell's UFO was Venus. According to David Shea's dissertation *The UFO Phenomenon: A Study in Public Relations*, when the case was reopened in 1952, new evidence indicated that Mantell was probably chasing one of the 100-foot "sky hook" balloons being secretly flown in 1948 by the Navy.

From a public affairs viewpoint, the Air Force mishandling of the Mantell incident established the model it was to follow in numerous subsequent cases: quick identification and explanation, regardless of the thoroughness of the investigation. This approach stemmed from the Air Force's dogged insistence on being able to identify the source of all UFO reports. In those early days, any explanation of a sensational case seemed more preferable to the Air Force than simply saying, "We don't know at this point, the case is under investigation." But the "quick identification" approach was to get the Air Force in hot water time and time again.

By the late summer of 1948, with additional puzzling UFO reports coming in weekly, ATIC was being pressured by the Pentagon for an explanation. The late Capt. Edward J. Ruppelt, the ATIC UFO project officer from March 1951 to September 1953, recalled in his book that shortly after the DC-3 was "buzzed" near Montgomery, the ATIC decided to make an "...Estimate of the Situation. The situation was the UFOs; the estimate was that they were interplanetary!" According to Ruppelt, the TOP SECRET estimate reached the late Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, then Chief of Staff, "before it was batted back down. The general wouldn't buy interplanetary vehicles. The report lacked proof." Ruppelt says that then an ATIC group went to the Pentagon to "bolster their position" but was unsuccessful, as "the Chief of Staff just couldn't be convinced."

By the end of 1948, the Air Force interest in the interplanetary theory was cooling

off. During the year Project SIGN investigated 122 sightings and was able to identify all but 7. With a little bit of luck maybe the UFOs would just go away. In February 1949, Project SIGN prepared its final report. Classified SECRET until 1961, the document, in the *BLUE BOOK Project Files*, recommended that "future activity on this project should be carried on at minimum level...."

Project GRUDGE

In keeping with the conclusions of Project SIGN, in 1949 the UFO activity at ATIC was downgraded from a special project to a general function in the intelligence operation. Displaying a lack of public relations savvy, the Air Force also changed the name of its UFO project from SIGN to GRUDGE. The switch was allegedly due to a compromise in the classified code word. Whether or not a security violation was the actual reason for changing names, GRUDGE reflected the new Air Force attitude toward the subject. All UFO reports were now evaluated on the premise that they were misidentifications of natural phenomena and the Air Force set out to explain them away. The public relations statements on specific UFO cases bore little resemblance to the facts of the case. If a sighting contained some of the elements possibly attributable to an aircraft or a balloon, it automatically became that object in the press release. Captain Ruppelt, responding several years later to the accusation that these brush-offs were part of an intentional smoke-screen to cover up facts by adding confusion, wrote, "This is not true; there was merely a lack of coordination. But had the Air Force tried to throw up a screen of confusion they couldn't have done a better job." Public confidence in the Air Force's ability or unwillingness to cope with the problem was ebbing as early as 1949.

Attempting to maintain its image, the Air Force enlisted the aid of Sidney Shalett of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Shalett's articles of 30 April and 7 May 1949 were so biased against the possibility of alien spacecraft that it was painfully obvious that this is what the Air Force wanted people to believe. No one who was anyone in the Air Force, according to Shalett, believed in flying saucers. Unfortunately, from an Air Force point of view, Shalett's articles had a boomerang effect. The piece smacked of Air Force propaganda and the public now began to wonder whether the Air Force was really trying to hide something. The *Post* articles were typical of the public affairs approach adopted by the Air Force in the early days: tell the world that the Air Force had solved 95

percent of the sightings; don't talk about the remaining five percent; stress the hoaxes and crackpot reports. It's regrettable that the Air Force took this approach, because it really had nothing to hide, except perhaps its understandable inability to successfully identify the source of every UFO report. The Air Force was convinced that UFOs posed no threat to national security and were not spacecraft of this or another world and was preparing to close the book on flying saucers.

Ironically, as the Air Force was phasing out its UFO operation, it was stepping up its security. Several writers, including a retired Marine Corps Major, Donald Keyhoe, asked for Air Force cooperation in preparing magazine articles. But the Air Force had enough. Even though Keyhoe went to Brig. Gen. Sory Smith, then Air Force Deputy Director of Information, it was no dice. The Air Force was not divulging any more than it already had, which was precious little. Construing the response to mean the tightest type of security, Keyhoe used this to bolster his claim that UFOs were interplanetary spacecraft. His January 1950 *True* article, "The Flying Saucers Are Real," was later expanded into a best-selling novel of the same name. Keyhoe's thesis was that the Air Force was keeping the answer to the UFO riddle secret until the country could be prepared.

The nation's press gave Keyhoe's article a big play, but on 27 December 1949, the Air Force had announced that Project GRUDGE was being terminated. Hereafter, UFO matters would be handled through normal intelligence channels.

Everything was amazingly quiet on the ATIC front until 10 September 1951—the date of the Monmouth Incident. At Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, a student operator was demonstrating a radar set to a group of visiting Army officers when he spotted an object apparently flying faster than a jet. About a half-hour later, the pilot of a T-33 flying at 20,000 feet spotted what appeared to be a dull silver, disk-like object far below him. As he started down for the chase, the object sped out to sea and vanished. Later in the day, the radar operator got a fix on another object and reported that it was traveling slowly at 93,000 feet. The Monmouth Incident continued with additional radar sightings the next day. Air Force Director of Intelligence Maj. Gen. C. P. Cabell, puzzled by these strange reports, ordered ATIC specialists to the scene, requesting a personal briefing at the Pentagon upon completion of the investigation. On the morning of 15 September 1951, ATIC investigators Lt. J. Cummings and Lt. Col. N. R. Rosen Garten were in the Pentagon at a meeting presided over by General Cabell. Unable to explain the sightings to