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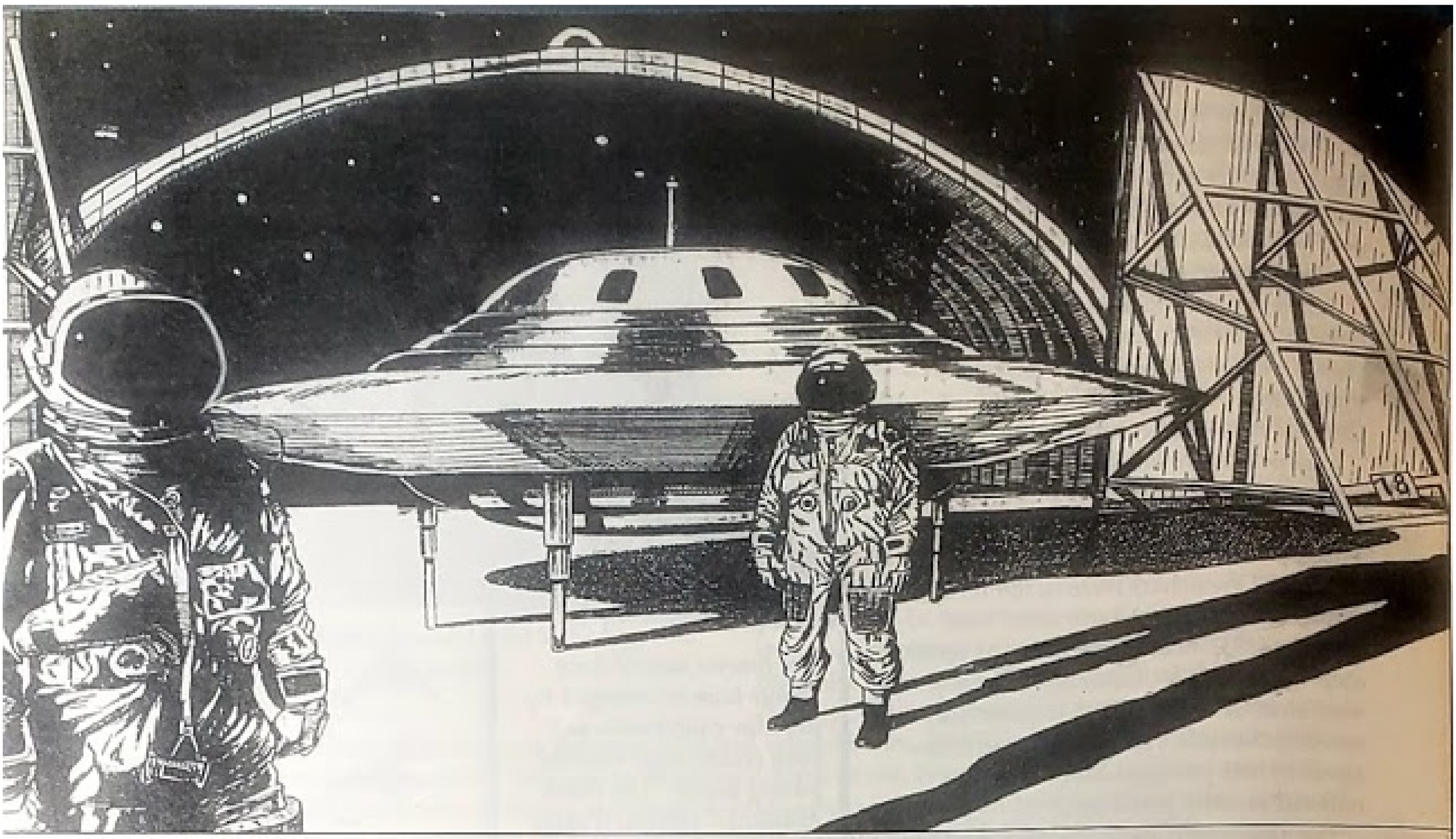
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DEEP FILES

Trans-"X"Communiqué: Letter to a UFO Recruit

by Greg Halifax

WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ IS LARGELY UNVERIFIED . . . . .
But that doesn't mean it's not true. It's the type of UFO information that would typically be deeply buried, then carefully studied and compartmentalized by a small faction within the intelligence community, as suits any sensitive black operation. As such, straightforward corroboration is difficult at best. But ***UFO Magazine*** *has the advantage of more than a decade's worth of collected bits of information and broadbased facts on which to construct some fair extrapolations. Drawn from a range of sources, the following incident reflects upon one of the blackest of American covert operations that deal directly with the UFO phenomenon.*

They recruited him when he was fresh from a not-too-harrowing assignment in the Middle East. This was one area of the globe, at least, where the CIA had little trouble justifying its existence.

Having some military background, Sedge Masters wasn't too surprised when he was called back for another briefing about the new foreign technology assignment overseen from Wright Patterson Air Force Base. What he'd heard at the first briefing didn't exactly fire his professional instincts. The task sounded less than challenging. He was assured that more information would be coming his way, and that much of it would change his mind about the degree of intrigue his new assignment would hold.

Clearances intact, Masters arrived on the base in short order. He was issued a security badge and escorted by an airman to an unmarked building. Once inside, he was escorted by the airman into a room where his security badge was taken from him and a different one given to him in its place. A different airman with a uniform that Masters had not seen before, armed with an M-16 and a sidearm, escorted him into a private room. That man left, and in less than two

minutes, another armed and uniformed man entered. He said nothing; Masters was used to this routine. When the soldier had positioned himself in front of the door, Masters turned around to a table on which lay a thick packet of papers. One more glance at the impassive soldier, and Masters began to read.

The letter on top carried a number on the first page, but no date or letterhead.

Dear Mr. Masters,

Consider this a deeper introduction to your present assignment. As you were told in last week's special briefing, you were selected for the program less for your wide intelligence background and technical skills than for the results of your psychological profile, both the one you took when you first joined the agency and the one administered earlier this year. Necessarily limited to technical experts and professionals in only a handful of military, scientific and medical disciplines, the program nevertheless cannot sacrifice its dependence on absolute secrecy and the personality traits that go with that exceptionally crucial need. I and my colleagues want to congratulate you on nearly half a lifetime of unwavering circumspection in regard to the restricted information to which you have been privy, from the the long lists of classified technology to the panoply of trade craft which you have successfully and courageously practiced in many areas of the globe.

What you'll be doing with us should be regarded as a complete change not only in your understanding of conventional tradecraft, but in the very attitudes and habits that you have come to accept as SOP in your work. We're dealing with something that falls well outside the normal boundaries of classical espionage and counter-espionage as practiced since the advent of World War II, and yet has always been included within the classified mission statements of the various agencies and military branches comprising the intelligence community since before the formation of the Agency in 1947. The program has been carried on since then, albeit without acknowledgment or broad dissemination within the community itself, for reasons which will be obvious as you read the material below.

It must be emphasized that a good deal of the information set forth below is of the highest significance to the national security and cannot be divulged, even to those of your associates and colleagues in the community in whom you repose implicit confidence, without authorization being given to you to. We will discuss more about the established protocol for this in the days ahead. For now, refer to the attached



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Appendix A, in which you'll find details on the use and application of code words, the protocols of formal introductions and parameters of discussion derived therefrom. Any breaches of the conditions or the protocol therein will be dealt with as a security crime, even if committed inadvertently, with the severest consequences to you and any recipient of the information contained in the communication, regardless of whether the recipient solicited the information.

During the years preceding World War II, informal contacts made by Americans touring in Europe—tasked to do so by then-attorney William Donovan (who was later the head of the OSS in World War II)—revealed that there had been a number of sightings of unusual aerial phenomena and craft over European skies, particularly in the vicinity of German military facilities. It was considered of extreme importance by Donovan and his friend President Franklin D. Roosevelt that the nature of these sightings be explored, as it was assumed that they might be evidence of advanced weapons being developed by the Nazi government. Those gentlemen and other Allied leaders likewise assumed that we would shortly be at war with Germany.

At the time, little could be confirmed about the reports of unidentifieds. The persons offering the reports were not professional espionage agents, and in any case found it difficult to elicit

much information which could be of use in assessing the nature of the sightings. Military intelligence made modest efforts to flesh out these ephemeral reports, but little information was developed. In retrospect, the most ominous of the reports claimed that a downed saucer-like craft of indeterminate origin was recovered by Wehrmacht troops in the days immediately preceding Germany's invasion of Poland.

The rush of events focused the attention of the military and the OSS on other matters of more pressing concern, although it had been resolved to look into these reports again at the war's conclusion. The need to follow up on these matters was underscored by the appearance of the so-called "Foo Fighters" which shadowed military aircraft of all combatants during the war in both the European and Pacific theaters. Naturally, each side assumed that the devices were new weapons of the other side (see attached Appendix B for censored press reports and military intelligence reports pertaining to the Foo Fighter phenomenon and the apparently related phenomena which were the subject of Project Twinkle [referenced therein]).

It soon became clear that these craft were from some planet or solar system other than our own, as they were occupied by two kinds of beings which clearly were not of earthly origin.

At the conclusion of World War II, it became apparent that the German Nazi regime had been developing a number of advanced missile and aircraft designs, a few of which, such as the jet fighters and the flying wings, had been developed in parallel (though somewhat belatedly) in the United States and United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it was clear that extensive technological intelligence gathering would be necessary to determine the full extent of German technological advances in these and other areas. This effort was both impelled and hampered by worsening relations between the Western Allies and the USSR, initially played out in occupied Germany where most of the investigative work was being pursued. With the beginning of the Cold War, virtually all access to German investigation sites in the Soviet zone of occupation was denied to Allied intelligence and military personnel.

And there the matter might have rested, but for the Project Twinkle phenomenon's occurrence and the sighting by private pilot Kenneth Arnold in summer of 1947. (See Appendix B).

Before there could be a full assessment of the implications of these events, in July 1947 two craft were recovered from the desert near the Roswell Army Air Corps bomber base. One of the craft was a deltoid wing "lifting body" which had suffered a rupture to the crew compartment and some impact distortion, but which was otherwise intact. The other craft had completely disintegrated either before or upon impact. Although there were working hypotheses that these craft were either (1) secret Soviet surveillance craft designed to spy upon the many advanced technical and military facilities in that region, (2) craft from some "other dimension," the details of which were and remain unspecified by the proponents of this hypothesis, or (3) craft from our own future exploring the past through an unknown temporal travel mechanism, it soon became clear that these craft were from some planet or solar system other than our own, as they were occupied by two kinds of beings which clearly were not of earthly origin.

The occupants of the deltoid craft were largely intact after the crash. When the special recovery team established for this purpose located the crash, two of the occupants of the deltoid craft were still alive, although one was badly injured and would later die upon being taken to the Roswell Air Corps base. The other survivor was alive and remained so for almost 30 days after the crash. It was able to walk and seemed to understand that it was a captive among intelligent beings like itself. All efforts at communication with the survivor were inconclusive and largely unsuccessful.

The three other occupants were dead when the recovery team found them. The general appearance of these creatures was as reported in the recently published, somewhat fanciful "investigative" books on the subject which have received a certain amount of popular acceptance and which resulted in the recent 50th anniversary celebration of this event. (Popular attention to this event remains strong.)

The occupants of the second craft were not found for several more days, as their bodies had been ejected in what appeared to be safety pods similar in purpose to those later employed in such high performance aircraft as the B-58 Hustler and XB-70 supersonic bombers. These creatures were longer in dimension than the ones of the deltoid craft, and their bodies were dispersed over a much wider area due to the disintegration of their craft. All were dead when found, with their bodies much deteriorated from prolonged exposure to the elements and some having been partially eaten by coyotes and other creatures, all

of the latter of which were found dead near the alien corpses. Analysis of the animal remains and the alien bodies led to the conclusion that the animals died from poisoning caused by ingestion of chemicals in the alien flesh. It appeared that the second group of aliens could not survive if exposed to the Earth's atmosphere. The need to remove all evidence of the event from the two crash sites limited the amount of crash reconstruction which could be accomplished by the recovery team, with the consequence that it has never been made clear what exactly caused the crash.

Unfortunately, the large number of civilian and military personnel who witnessed physical evidence at the crash sites and back at the Roswell base created a significant security hazard which was dealt with by intimidation and bribery of the witnesses to the extent that those means proved effective. Until unofficial investigators, journalists, writers, and others began renewing investigation of the subject in the early 1980s, these techniques were largely successful in keeping the truth of the Roswell event from the public, as well as its ominous implications.



The autopsies on the bodies of the creatures showed that they were of very light build and clearly not from this planet. The simplicity of their brain structures and non-communication in the face of stalwart efforts by researchers led investigators at the time to conclude that they were not the original designers and builders of the craft involved in the incident. Rather, it seemed that they were "biological robots," designed and bred for the purpose of undertaking such dangerous missions as flying through the atmosphere of an alien world. The survivor finally died when its body accumulated toxic waste products from its metabolism. There were no apparent excretory system or sexual organs. Consistent with this "biological robot" hypothesis was the complete absence of any galley or food stores aboard the craft. Of course, the possibility of there being a "mother ship" from which these craft came was also considered, as was the less likely possibility that these small craft could themselves attain transluminal speeds.

The propulsion system of the craft, of obvious priority interest to our group, was indeterminate for long after its recovery. While still subject to the laws of physics (as we imperfectly understand them), the craft's workings went far beyond our technological grasp at that time. Unfamiliar, nearly magical technology was displayed, devices that we now know as integrated circuits, fiber optics, supertenacious fibers and metals, and an unfathomable power source and drive mechanism, as well as other technology which it is not necessary to discuss in this document.

The military implications of the presence of these craft in our atmosphere and the possibility that they may have established friendly communications with our Cold War enemies were obvious and unsettling. The discovery of these craft led to an equally unsettling reexamination of the European intelligence reports referred to above, as well as the postwar investigation by Gen. Jimmy Doolittle of the "ghost rockets" of Norway (see appendix C, attached, top secret report of Gen. James Doolittle). The President was made aware of these developments and ordered

the formation of a special group of prominent scientists, Cabinet, military and intelligence officers. The popular literature bandies about the name of "Majestic 12" or "MJ-12" for this special, secret task force formed by the President. Other names by which it has been identified in the public mind through disinformation programs are "Project Saucer" and "Aquarius." While it is possible that any one or more of these was the name of the group at one time, for most of its existence the code name for the group and the extensive program which it spawned has been and still is "Zodiac," with each of its operational subdivisions known by the name of a different zodiacal sign, including Aquarius.

As the years passed, the operational involvement of high government officials in Zodiac waned to a certain degree, especially with the conclusion of the Eisenhower Administration, although most presidents were still kept informed of key overview facts as they came to light. However, it fell to the Agency's supervisors of Zodiac to determine who else in the government should have access to this very closely-held and highly compartmentalized information, to the point that, like the heads of military intelligence before World War II, they sometimes decided not to share information with certain presidents, including Nixon and Ford. All other presidents were kept reasonably well-informed, including Jimmy Carter, who went back on his pledge to reveal all of the information the government had on UFOs once he was elected president.

As of the early 1980s, the Agency exercised complete control over Zodiac, with the cooperation of the rest of the intelligence community and the military branches, particularly the Air Force and the Navy. From 1947 to the early 1980s, Zodiac recovered eleven other alien craft in various states of disrepair, from a diminutive single-seat flying wing to a rather large craft that had to be trucked into Wright Patterson by dead of night. Some craft were turned over to our government by friendly powers, most notably Denmark, which allowed the U.S. to retrieve a rather large disk that had submerged off the Danish coast. Occasionally, a live craft occupant was recovered as well.

There are ongoing efforts to discover the technological secrets of the recovered craft and to reverse engineer them or their subsystems, but so far these efforts have met with limited success. The materials technology and knowledge of physics of the builders of the craft still present considerable obstacles to matching their observed performance characteristics.

Besides the technology, the beings found with these craft are central to the Program's investigations. There seem to be at least four types of occupants, the two described above, as well as humanoids that appear to be almost human and Nordic in appearance, and small, strong, hairy ones. There may be others, but these are all that have been recovered to date. It is possible that one or more of these types represent only a sub-type of the others. There is no evidence of telepathic communication abilities of these creatures, speculation in the popular literature notwithstanding. However, there is some sort of empathetic manipulation and thought control ability as detailed below and in various attached appendices.

Details of the following incident should be carefully considered and recalled, as they will be useful to you during the first phases of your assignment. As you progress, you'll be regularly debriefed and subsequently introduced to new phases, each of which may or may not have any direct relevance to what has gone before. As such, each anecdote like the following is to be utilized strictly for the discrete phase which it introduces, unless you're instructed otherwise. Any deviation from this practice and attitude will be clearly evident and will result in your immediate termination.

By the late '60s, Zodiac had been able recruit members of an elite recovery team. Sixty-seven well-trained men were dispatched to the sites of crash landings, and had by the 1970s perfected the tasks of completely and thoroughly documenting all actions and cleaning up any debris remaining after these incidents. The efficiency, trustworthiness and expertise of these men was and is unquestioned. Within the last 48 hours, the team was dispatched to a remote site in the Midwest where a craft and bodies were collected and ferried to the appropriate locations, seemingly without incident.

These men always comply with strict directions to document practically every single minute of these operations. They are debriefed immediately after each operation. This time, it's become clear to our debriefing teams at Wright Patterson that the first members questioned could not account for an hour and a half's worth of time spent at the site. The pattern of forgetfulness was exact with every team member debriefed so far. Debriefings were cut off for the day.

You have been selected to be part of a newly forming debriefing team whose task will be correlation and analysis of these events. Clearly, the commonality of the gap in memory among the team members was induced somehow, either by some sort of localized phenomenon having nothing to do with the recovered craft or by contact with the downed craft. But these two options are tentatively rejected for lack of supporting evi-

dence. We never encountered this phenomenon before.

We fully appreciate that you have been introduced to this material on a rather short-term basis. Ordinarily, your introduction to this information would be more gradual. But we have no time. We need to get to the bottom of this in short order.

We selected you for your unique experience in debriefing and interrogation. We kept some of the more senior team members on base for you to interview. Your assignment is to find out why even the most senior members of the team shared in this memory gap, and to find out what happened during that hour and a half. You are to keep in mind that each one of these team members is a highly-valued person of unique abilities whose loyalty and patriotism is above reproach. Although you are to draw your own conclusions in your report to me, you should be advised that the impression of those who've conducted the interviews so far is that the team members genuinely cannot recall what happened out there. Indeed, they were not even aware of the time gaps in their reports until they were advised of them by the debriefers.

Your report is to be in writing and is to have one original and no copies. It is to be hand-delivered by you to me. It is to bear the security stamps "TOP SECRET," "ZODIAC" and "EYES ONLY." You will let no one see your report but me and you will not share its contents with those with whom you are working at Wright Patterson without my authorization. We cannot be certain of anything just yet, but need to collect as much data as possible in order to deal with this phenomenon in a manner consistent with the national security. I will require your report within 48 hours.

At this time, please read this at least once more. It will not be made available to you again.

Very Truly Yours,
Col. David H., USAF

Masters read it through again. When he looked up, an Air Force captain had entered the room. "Are you finished with the letter?" he asked in a flat tone. "I'm done with it," Masters sighed, and for the first time in his professional career heard his own voice waver with what sounded like nervousness. He handed the letter to the captain, who took it without comment, counting the pages.

There seem to be at least four types of occupants (including) humanoids, Nordic in appearance, and small, strong, hairy ones. . . (with) no evidence of telepathic communication abilities, speculation in the popular literature notwithstanding. However, there is some sort of empathetic manipulation and thought control ability. . .

The captain took out a cigarette lighter and lit the corners of the pages, gingerly dropping them into a red "burn barrel," stirring the ashes with a metal rod. After the papers had been reduced to small wisps of white ash, the captain took another piece of paper out of his briefcase, signed it, and presented it to the airman, who also signed it. The airman then presented it to Masters, who signed the sworn declaration of witnessing the destruction of the document.

A writer-researcher for over 20 years, Greg Halifax lives in Southern California. This is the first in an occasional series of stories that, while presented to us from seemingly trustworthy sources, are second- or third-hand anecdotes, and cannot be verified at this time. They should be weighed as such.



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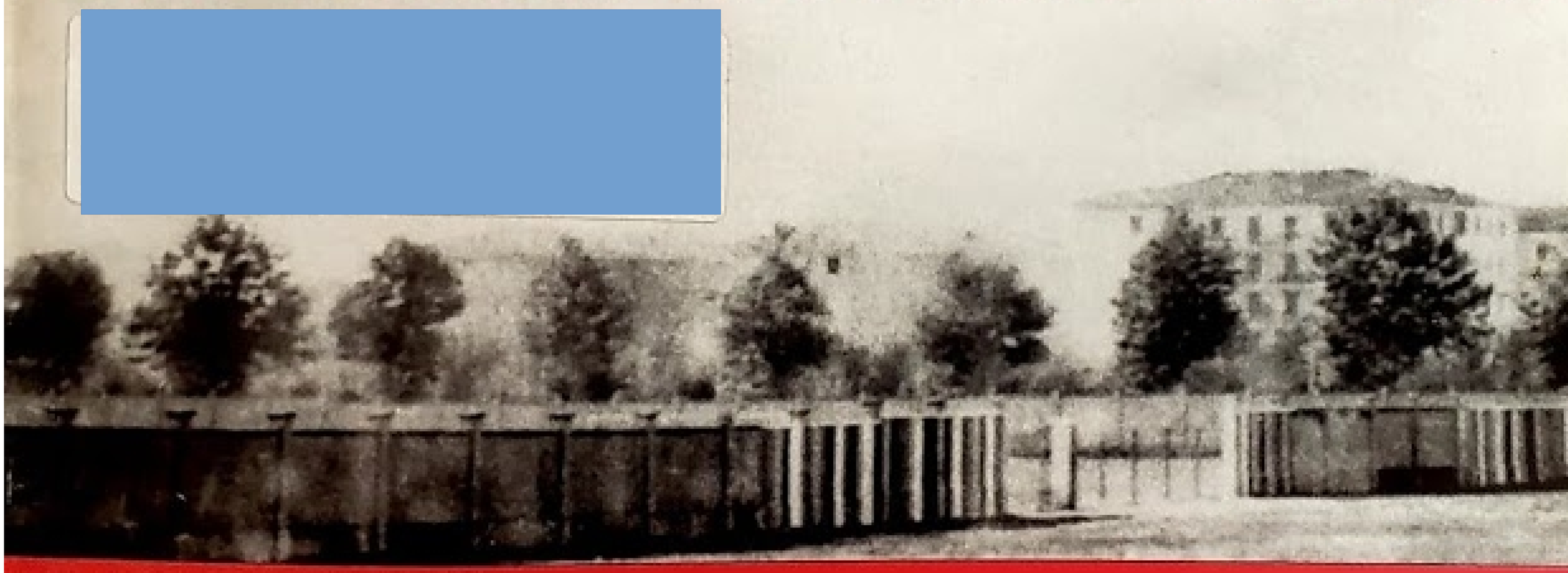
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Sedge Masters' Story, Part II

Trans-"X"

Lost Retrieval Phase

By Greg Halifax

Details on the deepest and blackest of clandestine UFO operations, such as they are, stay safely beyond the reach of average citizens. While this inevitably frustrates us, it allows the secret-keepers to do the job of collecting UFO intelligence that might best serve the military's agenda of maintaining at least an appearance of control. The saga of Sedge Masters, interrogation specialist and jaded veteran of CIA covert ops, began in the last issue. Masters was swiftly inducted into UFO program "Zodiac" after reading a special briefing on a bizarre UFO crash-retrieval. That operation left the entire 67-man recovery team with over an hour of "missing time," and Masters has been tasked to help find what lies behind this collective memory lapse. WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO READ IS LARGELY UNVERIFIED . . . but that doesn't mean it's not true.

The captain introduced himself and then requested that Masters follow him to one of the debriefing rooms. They entered a spare room with a metallic table, neon lighting, and three metal chairs—two occupied. On the table sat a clipboard, a water pitcher and three microphones wired to a Sony recording unit off to the side of the room.

Seated in the first chair was a civilian wearing a polo shirt and a cardigan. He was slouched, leaning far over the table. His hair was longish, and he wore a beard. "Psychologist," Masters guessed, correctly.

Seated across from him was another man— tall, lean, with steel-gray hair and steely eyes to match. He gave the initial appearance of being relaxed, but upon closer inspection, Masters could see that the man was still ready for action. He knew the look, having seen it many times before. The shrink and the tall fellow stood up and were introduced to Masters by the captain, who then withdrew.

During the walk over to the debriefing room, the captain had explained that the civilian would conduct the first part of the interrogation, both to give Masters a feel for how debriefings were generally handled at Zodiac, and also to help orient Masters before he picked up the thread of the debriefing. Masters was not entirely at home with this arrangement. He had long ago become the master of his own show within the Agency, and was not used to being a spectator at a debriefing. But he inwardly acknowledged the wisdom of the approach.

Moreover, he knew that he was still having difficulty in coming to terms with the letter from the colonel. He would need time to assess what was to be done, and so was grateful that he would not have to begin the interrogation.

The tall man with the steady, steely gaze began his rendition of the events of the previous day, occasionally referring to his handwritten notes on the clipboard before him.



WES CRUM

Then, without skipping a beat, the colonel jumped ahead to when the crane lifted the downed craft with a harness onto a lowboy to be trucked back to the base, covered by a framing disguise and a metallic tarp.

In effect, the colonel had abruptly skipped an hour and half of the process, after reporting almost minute-by-minute what had occurred in the previous three hours!

He was one tough customer, one of those men that the command structure called upon to take care of the rough stuff, a man much like Masters himself. This was not a guy to mess with lightly.

He was the colonel in charge of the security detail. Masters thought it rather odd that a lieutenant colonel would personally command such a small detachment of men. As if picking up his thought, the colonel explained that the Army had been tasked to establish a multilayered security cordon around the crash area and that the recovery team was inserted by truck and helicopter from Wright Patterson. His men provided security around the immediate crash site. "After that, the operation went as usual," he said, describing how cordons were set up in concentric rings around the craft. Radiation, gas and biochemical readings were taken by men in multihazard suits. There were some radiation readings, but nothing dangerous. The craft was mostly intact, even though it had plainly come in hard. All of the alien occupants were said to be aboard. "The physicians and biologists there pronounced that all alien occupants were dead," he went on. "The recovery team docs were disappointed, but I was relieved," the colonel admitted.

The heavy equipment operators went to work to extract the craft without causing it further damage. All in all, the colonel said, without any trace of irony that Masters could detect, this was a "routine" recovery. The colonel had recovered other craft before, without difficulty most of the time. "And this particular operation went smoothly because the site was blessedly distant from population centers and air routes," he noted. "There were no security intrusions whatsoever."

The colonel steadily flipped through his notes on the clipboard and gave a detailed account of how security was established for the area and maintained throughout the recovery. But then it happened. The shrink noticed it, too, and cast Masters a fleeting, sidelong glance. Up to this point, the colonel's rendition of events had been moment by moment, almost burlesquely detailed in the minutiae of the challenges presented, tasks performed and decisions made in the relatively mundane mission of establishing and maintaining security around an area that had already been secured by a much larger Army cordon established beyond the horizon of the crash site. Then, without skipping a beat, the colonel jumped ahead to the point in time when the crane lifted the downed craft with a harness onto a lowboy to be trucked back to the base, covered by framing disguise and a metallic tarp. In effect, the colonel had abruptly skipped an hour and half of the process, after reporting almost minute by minute what had occurred in the previous three hours!

His tone never varying, the colonel went back to describing the minutiae of establishing security for the convoy back to the base, use of helicopters, local police, Army MPs, etc. The frustrated psychologist was about to interrupt the colonel to take him back over the gap when Masters tapped the shrink's right leg with his left hand, shooting him a glance which told the shrink to let the colonel go on to the end of his story unimpeded. The colonel went on, as if giving an operational briefing, but in a tone appropriate for the intimate circumstances of the small audience in a small room.

In another hour, his rendition complete, he finished off with the securing of the craft and the remains in a special receiving building on the base. He then saw to his men getting fed and reporting to the debriefing area. The tapes whirred on quietly. The shrink looked over at Masters.

"Colonel, may I see your notes?" Masters asked. The colonel flashed an inquiring glance at the shrink, who quickly nodded his approval. The colonel handed the clipboard to Masters, who flipped through the pages. The notes were written in small, block letters. The time was carefully noted in military, 24-hour notation down the left margin of the graph paper pad. A very methodical guy, thought Masters. Several pages back, he found the gap. There was no space on the page to mark its place in the flow of events; the time margin notes simply skipped ahead an hour and a half from the beginnings of the excavation to the securing of the harness to lift the thing onto the lowboy. Masters looked at the colonel, who gazed back at him with the superficial appearance of openness in his eyes. Masters knew that there was more.

The colonel had not been wholly successful in keeping the contempt he felt for Agency spooks out of his voice during the introductions and in his eyes on two other occasions during the debrief. Masters made a mental note to leverage that attitude in his exploration of the gap. On the other hand, the captain had given Masters a quick run down on the colonel's resume on the brisk walk over. He was one tough customer, one of those men that the command struc-



WES CRUM

ture called upon to take care of the rough stuff, a man much like Masters himself. This was not a guy to mess with lightly.

"Colonel, your notes appear to be very thorough."

"Thank you, sir," the colonel responded flatly, with the barest hint of a smile.; "You seem to have recorded every event in fine detail here in your notes," Masters continued, gesturing toward the colonel's clipboard on the table. "Yes sir," said the colonel, now without a smile. The colonel could sense it coming, even though

"The physicians and biologists there pronounced that all alien occupants were dead," he went on. "The recovery team docs were disappointed, but I was relieved," the colonel admitted.

he seemed to have no notion of what this CIA spook was getting at.

What the hell, thought Masters. *Here goes . . .* And he spoke firmly. "Colonel, what happened back here, ten pages back, down at the bottom?" The colonel looked at the page, then looked up at Masters.

"I'm sorry sir; I don't follow you."

"Sir, there is over an hour gap in your notes right there on that page and no such gap exists anywhere else in your notes. Why is that, colonel?"

The colonel seemed perplexed by this information, and quickly looked at his notes. He was clearly taken aback by the gap in the margin notes. It was equally clear that he was searching his recollection of events for some explanation. For the first time, his professional demeanor slipped, and a look of confusion crossed his face. Masters could see that the colonel had no clue as to why there was a gap. The colonel said nothing, just flipping the note pages back and forth, as if there was a page that had gotten stuck to the one above it. Then he just stopped, looked at the psychologist and then Masters. He stammered, "I-I don' know, sir. I have no idea why there are no notes for that period. Perhaps things were going so smoothly that I had nothing to note down." Masters decided to press: "But colonel, the entire operation went smoothly, yet you found every detail worthy of note before this point. What made this portion different?"

At this, the colonel's face went blank. After a moment, his expression brightened. "We can check with my XO. I'm sure that Chet can fill in this time period. He's a good man for detail. That's why I selected him for the team."

"We already checked with your XO, colonel," the shrink broke in, his jaw tightening. "His notes and his rendition of events have the same gap."

The colonel was plainly nonplussed by this intelligence. Masters pressed on. "Colonel, forget about your notes for a minute. Do you recall what happened during that hour and a half or so?" The colonel stared at the government-issue, gray metal table surface, as if his notes of that period were written there. After 45 long seconds, he said quietly, as if his answer were a surprise to himself, "No." Masters looked at the psychologist for a moment, then pushed his chair back from the table. "Colonel, thank you."

"Wait a minute! Is that IT?" the colonel barked.

"Well, for the moment," said Masters. "Let's sleep on it and we'll resume this in the morning. You and your men have had a long day. Maybe everything will be more clear after everyone is more rested." Masters was able to dodge the colonel's impulse to argue, spinning about and leaving the room, dragging the diminutive shrink along with him. He pulled the shrink into the next unoccupied debriefing room and closed the door.

"Doctor, I want typewritten transcripts of each of the interviews with the recovery team," Masters murmured, his voice slow and even, "and I want them as soon as possible, even if you have to keep everyone up all night and even if you have to have brigadiers typing them. Can you do that?" Masters asked, making it clear that it was not a question. The doc took a small step back.

"Uh, sure. I'll check with the captain. A lot of them are already being transcribed right now."

Masters warmed to his place of authority. "Please arrange to bring them to my quarters as they are completed, along with the tapes."

The smaller man hesitated. "Well, I'll need to check with the captain . . ."

"Look, Doc, check with anyone you want, but get me the damn transcripts. I'll take care of the captain."

As it turned out, the captain was way ahead of them, and had already made all of these arrangements and more. It went just as the letter had said. Every one of the team members drew a blank when pressed about the missing time. After the fifteenth transcript, Masters turned off his light, rolled over and tried to go to sleep. But sleep would not come.

The accumulated knowledge of the past few days jammed into his mind. First, he learned that his government really believed that there were flying saucers and little green (gray?) men, and that they were covertly funding this rather elaborate program to run around at night surreptitiously collecting these things whenever they slipped a cog and crashed. Then, as if that were not enough, a bunch of hard-bitten cold warriors go out to hold the eggheads' hands and keep away the riff-raff while the eggheads recover this saucer thing, and no one can remember what the hell

For the first time, his professional demeanor slipped, and a look of confusion crossed his face. Masters could see that the colonel had no clue as to why there was an hour gap in his notes...

happened. Worse still, they all forget the same hour and half!

What the holy hell is happening here? He finally drifted off to a fitful sleep just before dawn, about 20 minutes before the airman knocked on his door to wake him.

Masters decided that it was all fine and good for the military boys to demonstrate how wonderfully disciplined they were at dawn by being all starched and chipper, but he'd had it with all that long ago. He politely but firmly informed the airman that there would be a change of plans and that he would be rising at noon, thank you. The airman started to stammer out a protest, but something in Masters' tone told the airman that this was probably not a good idea.



At the crack of one, Masters blearily arose, cleaned up and made his way to the captain's office, escorted by the ubiquitous over-armed airman.

"You all right?" the captain asked. Masters could not tell if he was being cute or if it was a sincere inquiry. Once he and the captain were alone, the captain made it clear that the inquiry was genuine. "Look, it's quite a jolt to everyone the first time that they're introduced to this stuff. On top of it, you get pushed into something that none of us has seen before. No one can blame you for feeling a little disoriented by all of this," the captain commiserated.

"Yeah," said Masters.

"So, what next?"

"We start again. And you get to start with the colonel . . ."

"Wait a minute, captain," Masters interrupted. "Why don't we cut to the chase here and break out the sodium pentothal and the other drugs? What about hypnosis? I mean, I've been at this for a while, and I can tell you that your colonel there is the kind of guy that if he thought he had something to tell us, he would have already told us. We're wasting our time here." But Masters could tell from the captain's reaction what the answer would be. The captain stiffened and said with pointedly measured words, "MISter Masters,"—whenever the military types did not much care for someone, they would place uncommon emphasis on the first syllable of "mister"—"These are our people and their loyalty is beyond question. We do not use truth serum on people like this. And we're not going to hypnotize them, either. I don't know how they do things at the Agency, but that's how we do it here, sir."

Yeah, yeah—all honorable men, Masters thought to himself. Out loud, he said, "For your information, captain, that's the way we handle it at the Agency, as well," he replied. "But we need answers, and if we don't get them, we are going to have to do something other than shrug our shoulders and wonder what happened out there."

The captain seemed ready to take the matter to another level, but then he shrugged it off. "Mr. Masters, once you've been in this area of intelligence for a while, you will probably become more accustomed to running up blind alleys. But you're right; we have to do something about the gap thing. But we also have to treat our people with respect and dignity, not like counterintel agents from Russia."

"Very well, captain," Masters said impatiently. "Let's go see if the colonel has had a sudden recollection of things past, shall we?" The shrink and the colonel were already back in the grim little debriefing room. The colonel did not look quite the same this morning. He was pouring himself a glass of water, and as he did, Masters noted that his hands

were shaking. His eyes were averted. *What is this?* thought Masters. The shrink noted it, too, Masters could see. "Tape on, Doc?" Masters said to the psychologist.

"Yeah."

"Okay, colonel. Did you get a good night's rest?"

The colonel looked up at Masters with a bewildered, desperate look. The steely-eyed eagle of man was nowhere in evidence. The colonel started slowly, his voice a hoarse, tremulous whisper, "S-s-something happened this m-morning. I remember now. It's all right to tell you now. It wasn't all right before."

Momentarily taken aback, Masters queried, "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know, really. I just know that I couldn't tell you yesterday, but now, it's okay." He blinked and repeated, "It's just okay, now, that's all."

"Well, colonel, who told you that it was okay?" Masters probed.

"THEY did," the colonel replied, looking as if he did not quite believe it himself.

"Who is 'they,' colonel?"

"The . . . the aliens on the ship," said the colonel, clearly shaken by his own realization of what he was saying.

Masters looked at the shrink. "The dead things on the crashed saucer?"

"No. The ones on the big ship that showed up as we were fitting the harness on the crashed one."

Masters and the shrink shot each other a look and both said at once, "WHAT big ship that showed up?"

"Th-there was a ship." His voice trembled. "A huge mother, twenty times larger than the one we were digging out. It just suddenly . . . showed up overhead, took up a position right above us, so low that we figured . . . we thought that the Army boys at the outer perimeter wouldn't be able to see it."

"What did it do?" asked Masters, flipping a pen between his thumb and forefinger.

"Nothing," said the colonel. "It just hovered up there, threatening us and trying to scare us off from the wreck. They didn't want us there." He closed his eyes, his face drawn. "They didn't want us to take the craft or the bodies."

"How did you know that? Did they tell you that over a p.a. system or something?"

A look of amusement, quickly gone. The colonel shivered. "No," he said. "Believe me, they did not need any p.a. system. It was real clear how they felt on the subject." .

The colonel and the shrink again exchanged surprised glances. Masters ventured, "Are we talking telepathy, here, colonel?" He made no effort to hide the skepticism in his voice, but the colonel seemed not to notice, too busy reliving the moment with the mother ship overhead.

"No, not exactly;" the colonel said slowly. "It wasn't telepathy. It was more just like being able to feel their hostility. We could feel that they did not want us there. We all understood that. We didn't even need to talk about it. But it wasn't verbal. It wasn't like we received a thought-out sentence or anything like that. We didn't need to. We—uh—got the point."

"Empathy," whispered the psychologist, transfixed by the colonel's words.

Masters took a deep breath. "Okay, colonel, what did you and your men do, once you felt this hostility from the ship?"he asked.

"I ordered the men to go weapons hot and wait to fire on my command or at the first sign of an overt attack." He looked down to the floor for a few seconds. "The order was superfluous, really. All of us had already done that the minute the damn thing showed up."

"Was there any sign of hostility?"

"No. It just hovered there, emanating hostility for the next hour and a half. We just held our ground, ready to shoot it out of the sky at the first move it made. But it didn't do anything."

"So, what happened, eventually?" Masters asked, his voice softening.

The colonel squinted in frustration. "It just flew straight up into the night, and that was it," he said. "The guys went back to lifting the wreck onto the trailer and that was that. I guess we were all a little too busy to bother with noting our procedures at that point." The slightest tinge of sarcasm and defensiveness entered his voice again.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" Masters pressed again.

"There was no way. I couldn't tell anyone. I couldn't even remember. But when I woke up this morning, I suddenly remembered it all, and knew that it was okay with them (to) tell you all about it now."

" . . . 'okay with them' . . ." Masters repeated slowly, under his breath. There was a knock on the door and the captain ducked in. "Excuse me, gentlemen, colonel, Mr. Masters, Doc, could I see you outside for a minute, please?"

"My apologies, colonel." But the colonel seemed lost in thought, and merely glanced up and waved the captain off. Masters and the psychologist followed the captain out into the hallway. The captain seemed very excited. "I don't know what's happening in your room, but I would bet money that the colonel suddenly remembered a Mexican standoff with some big ship that showed up and tried to scare our guys off. Am I right?" He looked expectantly from Masters to the psychologist. "Our first fifteen team members all said the same thing. Can you believe it? The colonel said it, too, didn't he?"

Now it was the shrink who was excited. "Yes, yeah— that's right! It's as if the—uh— aliens 'turned

on' their memories of the incident. The little gray bastards have thought control and empathy projection. But can you *believe* this shit? These gray critters get scarier at every turn!" But Masters could see that the shrink was actually thrilled that they were making this discovery. At the same time he noticed that the captain wasn't nearly as thrilled. The truth, as it were, had *not* set him free. A thought occurred to him. "How do we know that this version is the truth, either, gentlemen?"

The captain and the doctor spun around to look at Masters. "Whaddya mean?" the captain asked in a rush. "They remember what happened now."

"Yeah," Masters agreed slowly, "Maybe . . . maybe not. These memories are now 'allowed' by the aliens, the same aliens that would not let them even talk about it before." He turned to the shrink. "Doc, you know anything about hypnosis?"

The psychologist brightened. He saw what Masters was getting at. "You're talking about screen memory, aren't you? Like, the aliens only allowed the team to remember what they wanted them to remember, right?"

"Yeah, something like that," Masters replied. He could see that this line of questioning was making the captain cross and uneasy. Masters looked squarely at the captain. "So, Doc, how would one go about punching through that screen memory to get at the truth?"

"Well, it isn't clear that it can be done at all," the captain snorted. "But if it can be done, it will be with either deep hypnosis or some sort of inhibition-reducing drug, like sodium pentothal. Even then, it isn't certain that we can break through or that we can even get to the truth if we do."

"Hypnosis is very unreliable," the Doc injected. "Also, if these alien guys are this good, they might be able to implant several layers of screen memories. It would be a crap shoot at best," he added, then shrank into silence, suddenly aware of the captain's discomfort with the whole discussion.

The captain turned to Masters. "I remind you again, Mr. Masters," he said, "that we do not put our people under hypnosis or drugs unless they are under suspicion of counterespionage, which is not applicable here. Moreover, you heard him: Hypnosis is unreliable, and even if we used drugs, we couldn't be sure of the results."

Masters sighed. "Well, captain. One thing we're damn sure: Your fine colonel, your quintessential man of action in there and his group of class-A battle studs did not just stand there cocked and locked for an hour and half without doing something or without something happening. Your colonel is also one meticulous muthuh who doesn't take a breath without documenting it. But for an hour and a half, he and all of our team didn't write one damn thing down on their clip boards. Doesn't that make you just a little curious to know what REALLY happened out there, captain?"

"Hell, yes, I'm curious," the captain snapped, "but not at the price of degrading these good people, some of the best people that I or anyone else has ever worked with." He drew himself up and stared into Masters' eyes. "No, MISter Masters. We are not going to do what you suggest. Besides, their real memories will probably surface eventually—no matter what we do or don't do."

"Very well, captain," Masters said coldly. "I just hope we have the time to find out what we need to know about this before these gray bastards have taken over the whole damn place. What good will your people's dignity do for them then, captain?"

"That is about enough, Mr. Masters," the captain spat, as if he were dressing down a new recruit. "In any case, the decision is not up to me. The base commander will have to take care of this one."

"Very well, captain," Masters said coldly. "I just hope we have the time to find out what we need to know about this before these gray bastards have taken over the whole damn place."

* * *

Masters looked out the window of the 727 as it lowered into Washington. There would be no hypnosis, no truth drugs. The base commander was unconvinced of Master's argument. In any case, that is not "how we treat our people." And so on. Masters sneered to himself and then knocked back his Scotch-on-the-rocks. On balance, he vastly preferred the Russians and the Iranians to this shit. Maybe it was time to retire, after all.

But the Agency had other ideas, as he would soon discover.

A writer-researcher for over 20 years, Greg Halifax lives in Southern California. He has a number of good friends from the military-industrial complex.

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Sedge Masters Part III

BY GREG HALIFAX

The Ballroom, the Scooter and the Christmas Ornament

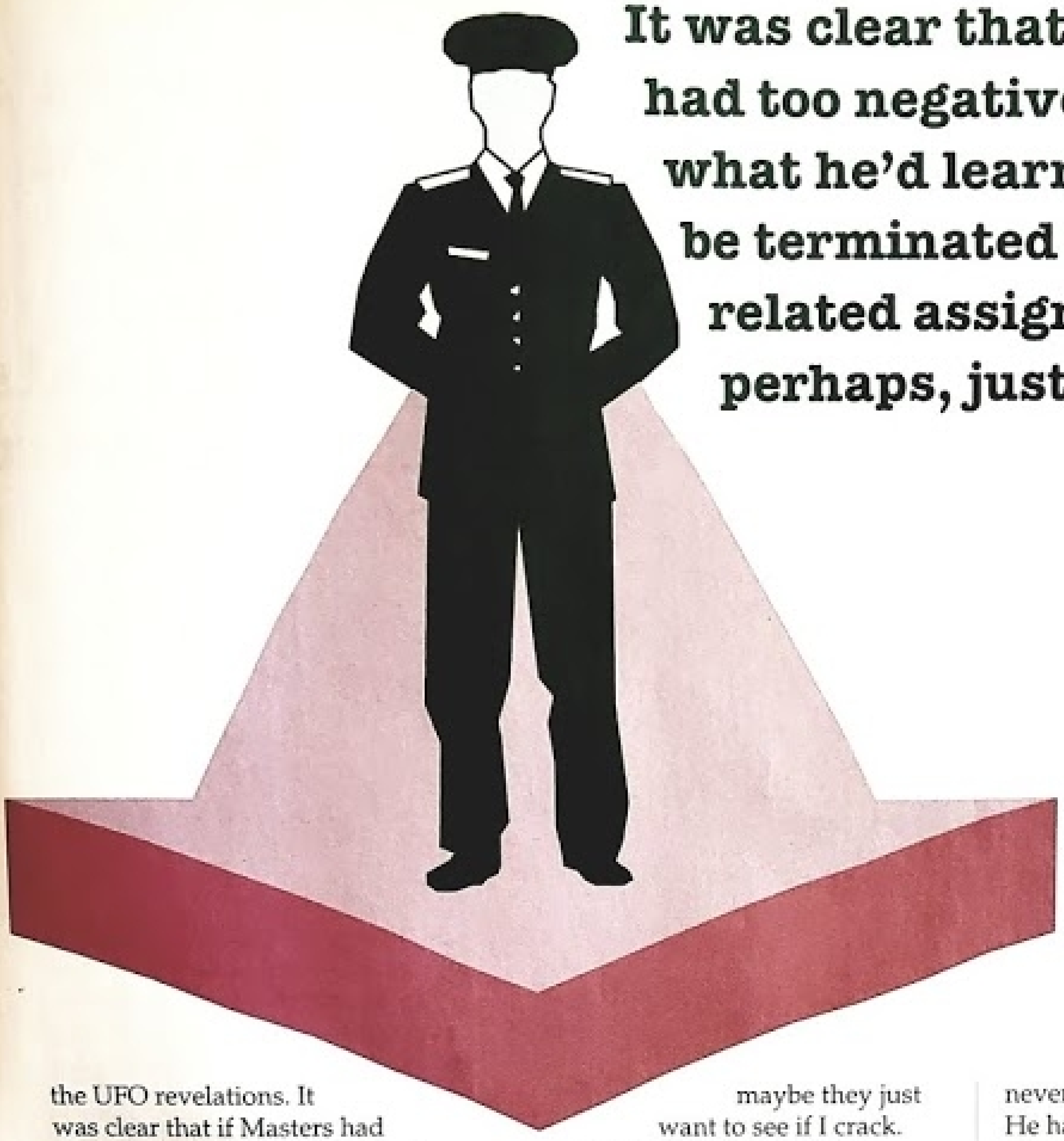
Interrogation specialist and veteran operative Sedgewick Masters has been tasked with uncovering the secrets behind UFO reports. CIA background notwithstanding, there are just some secrets that stubbornly resist the probes of even the world's best investigative minds, forcing the most sensible and objective man to completely re-evaluate his version of reality. After a sudden and perplexing briefing on the state of the UFO phenomenon as the best intelligence pros know it, Masters was hustled off to Wright Patterson Air Force Base. There he sat in on the debriefings of some men from the Air Force's top-flight crash recovery team—all of whom had experienced over an hour of "missing time" during a sensitive recovery operation. Still reeling psychologically, Masters is about to engage in another round of the patently weird.

Sedge Masters had been back in Washington, D.C. for two weeks. Most of the time he had spent drinking in his townhouse in Fairfax. A small part of the time he had spent reporting on what had occurred at Wright-Patterson: the entire UFO recovery team losing its collective memory of the threatening appearance of a second, much larger UFO over the recovery site, and then the sudden, inexplicable recollection of the events by all 67 members of the team. While he was at the base, assigned specially by the Agency to debrief the team's commander, he had argued in favor of using hypnosis and drugs to try to penetrate beyond what he suspected were "screen memories" of the event. He had been overridden by the local commanders, and his own supervisor within the Agency had gone along with that determination. The first debriefing took place in a safehouse in the countryside outside Fairfax. His boss, the colonel, took in Master's oral report impassively, asking no questions.

Masters and the colonel had worked together for some time in a variety of contexts. They were not chummy by any means. The colonel had never left any doubt in Masters' mind as to who was in charge and that the colonel was all business. The colonel had made no effort to justify or explain why he had backed up the commanders at Wright-Pat in overriding Masters' position that the recovery team interrogation should have gone on, using whatever pharmaceutical or psychological means were available to get to the bottom of what had happened during the "missing time."

Masters was supposed to be in charge of the debriefing operation, but he had been outranked by an Air Force captain. A *captain*, for chrissakes! So, he drank . . . and waited to be summoned again. It was not just the issue of being undercut by his supervisor in the Agency whom he had come to trust. There was also the very fact that there were UFOs at all, that the government was recovering them, had been doing so for decades, and that there was a secret network within the government, Zodiac, that seemed to be able to skirt the chain of command with impunity, spend money earmarked for other projects, and generally do whatever it damn well pleased, all in the name of UFOs and their importance to National Security. One of Master's strengths had always been that while he was flexible and open-minded, he thought he had a firm grasp on the world in which he lived. He had been alive for 49 years. And two weeks ago, he discovered in the span of a day that he had understood nothing about his world, and he was not real damn happy about this revelation.

During Masters' second meeting with him, the colonel had questioned him about his personal reactions to



It was clear that if Masters had too negative a take on what he'd learned he would be terminated from UFO-related assignments. Or, perhaps, just terminated.

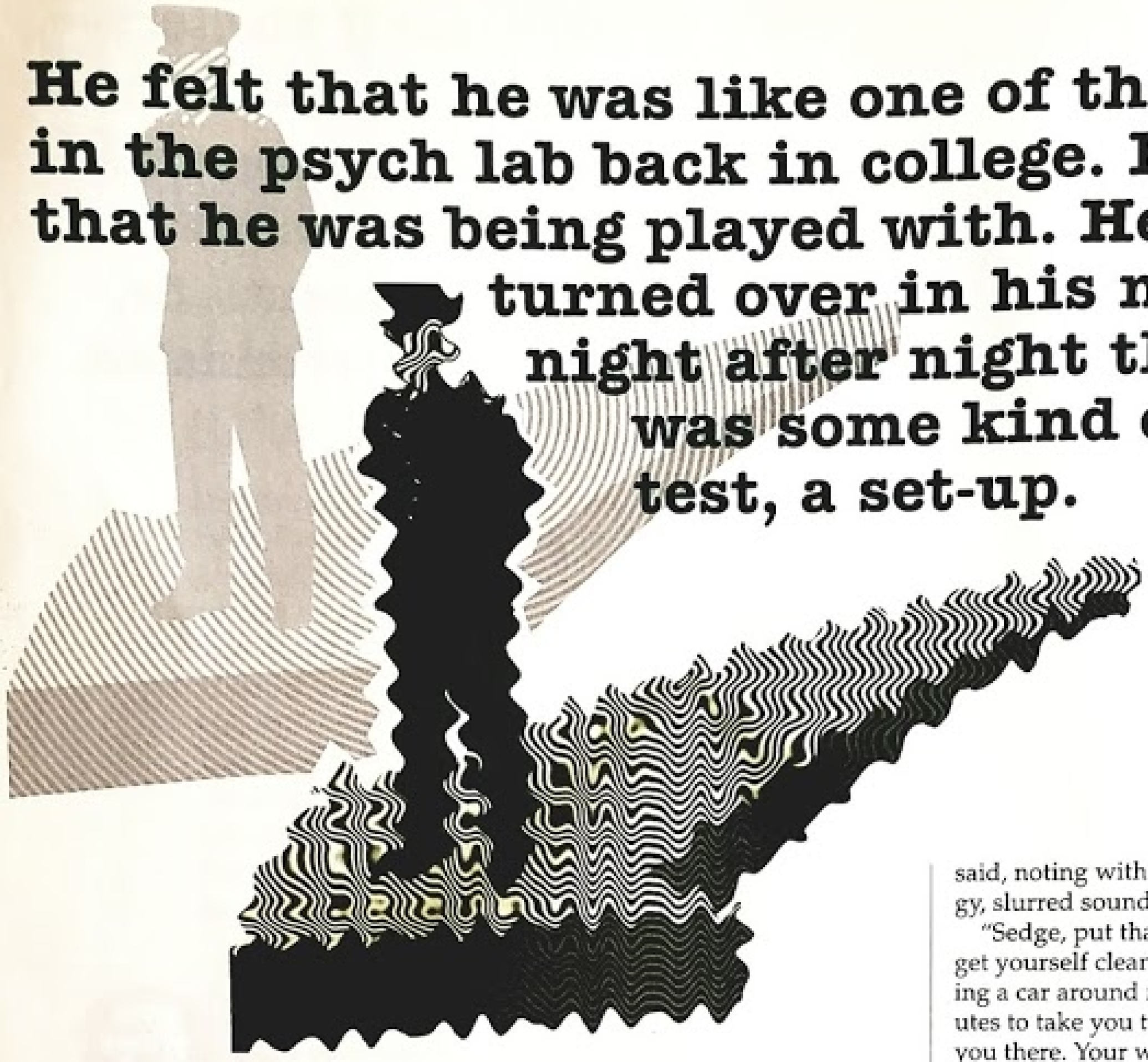
the UFO revelations. It was clear that if Masters had too negative a take on what he'd learned he would be terminated from UFO-related assignments. Or, perhaps, just terminated. The colonel had broken with the usual protocols of introducing new recruits to Zodiac slowly, gradually, to allow them time to adjust to the radically different paradigm. There was not time to do that in Masters' case, the colonel said. He was ordered to report to Fort Belvoir for three days of psychological testing, and then he was told to sit tight, relax, and wait for further orders.

When he went out jogging along the creek near his home, he had the distinct impression that he was being followed, but even he, with his experience in field operations, could not be sure. Why were they following him, he thought. The dumb bastards think that I'm going to meet Woodward and Bernstein while running along the woods. Or maybe they just want to see if I crack.

Still, he couldn't be sure.

His wife was out of town, as usual, on yet another sales junket on the West Coast. She had not expected him to be back so soon. Not that it would have made any difference. Although their marriage had started out happily enough, her life had become her work. His frequent, prolonged absences on foreign assignments were now mirrored by her sales travels, conventions, and temporary postings all over the world except here at home in Virginia. She was supposed to be assigned to D.C., but had not spent three weeks there in the last eight months.

He was very much alone, which, up to now, had been fine with him. He wished she were home. He needed someone to talk to. The colonel told him not to discuss the UFO matters with his wife. Everyone knew that was the rule. Everyone also knew that the rule was almost never observed. Except by Masters. He had never shared with his wife what he did. Up until now, he had never wanted to. For some time, he had been missing their lost intimacy, their joyous partnership and the sweet conspiracy of their youth. But now, he realized for the first time just how much they had lost as the chasm between them widened. It was for times like these that they were married, every bit as much as for their sense of shared beauty, cleverness and wit when they were young. He thought about her increased drinking when she was home and wondered if she shared his yearning for communion. If so, he wondered what had driven her to reach the same conclusions. After all, no one had told her that UFOs were real and that most of what she thought she knew was false. Or perhaps she had been told something very much like that by his shows of indifference. She thought of her marriage to him as a



sort of fulfillment of her life's expectations, and it did not exactly turn out that way, did it?

He poured himself another drink. There were old friends he could call. But he knew that the lines were tapped. More to the point, he had not been good about keeping up his relationships outside the Agency. His work was his life, and, for the first time, he regretted how isolated and dependent upon the Agency he had become. He therefore resented what he was thinking and feeling. This was the first time in his career that his supervisor had undercut him. This was the first time that he felt so . . . out of the loop. Intelligence was always compartmentalized, always shared only on a need-to-know basis. But this time, he felt that he was like one of those rats in the psych lab back in college. He felt that he was being played with. He had turned over in his mind night after night that this was some kind of weird test, a set-up. There were no UFOs. There were no little green men, gray men, whatever. It was all just some sort of perverted test. They were checking his stability or his confidence in his own perception or something like that.

He poured another drink. Well, he had had it with this bullshit! He would call the colonel and tell him that he had put in his 25 years and he was taking early retirement. He looked over at the phone next to his chair as if it were a venomous snake. Gingerly, tentatively, he extended his hand toward the phone. Screw it! He reached for the phone . . . just as it rang.

"Sedge?" the colonel's voice came over the phone, more like a barked command than a question.

"Yes, sir. I'm here," Masters said, noting with irritation the groggy, slurred sound of his own voice.

"Sedge, put that bottle away and get yourself cleaned up. We're sending a car around for you in 30 minutes to take you to the fort. I'll meet you there. Your wife still out of town?"

As if he didn't know, thought Masters. "Yes sir, she's still in San Francisco at that dealers' convention. Won't be back 'til Friday."

"Good. See you then." The receiver clicked twice as the colonel hung up. Masters dangled the receiver from its cord for five seconds without moving. New assignment? Termination from Zodiac? Or just plain old termination? Or with extreme prejudice? Oh, fer chrissake, just get your ass in the shower and get on with it, he thought. If they wanted to do it, they'd just come in here and do it. No need to summon you back to Fort Belvoir. With that, he slammed down the receiver and heaved himself awkwardly out of the chair, weaving down the hall for the cold shower that he hoped would give him some semblance of alertness by the time he reached the fort.

After the usual security routine



The officer told them that they were trespassing on private property and that they would have to leave at once.

with the changed badges and whatnot, Masters was admitted to a small conference room with a table and two chairs. The colonel was sitting at one of them with two briefing folders in front of him.

"Sit down, Sedge."

Masters took the chair across from the colonel. The shower and the fresh air on the drive over had helped, along with the quart of ice water he had gulped down right after the shower. Still, he was in no mood for any more mind games. He . . .

"I'll get right to the point," the colonel began. "You made quite a case for use of aggressive debriefing techniques where these UFO devices are involved. I was impressed, but there was more at stake in the situation in Ohio than just getting to the facts. That retrieval team is valuable to us. They've proven their worth many times over. We cannot easily replace them and, what's more, we don't want to. I know you didn't agree with me or the flyboys out at Wright-Pat, but you just have to suck it up on that one, Sedge. I know that you didn't like the way it was handled, so I'm going to give you a chance to test your theory, at least the hypnosis part," the colonel said, gesturing toward the folders in front of him. He pushed one of them toward Sedge.

"Read this while I get us some coffee," the colonel instructed. He got up and left the room, and as as he left, an MP with an automatic weapon entered the room and stood guard at Masters' back. What do they think I'm going to do, he thought, eat the file?

The report in the folder was

brief, followed by surveillance reports and standard, no-contact security background checks. The subjects were two young graduate students in the Los Angeles area, Mike Castillon and Bob Earnest. Earnest had contacted a UFO organization in Colorado and reported a series of odd events. Most of the information came from taps on the organization's phones, supplemented by undercover agents within the organization. So we actually spend assets on these UFO whackos, Masters thought.

In the first of these episodes, Earnest and Castillon had encountered a large USO (underwater submerged object) off the coast of Palos Verdes, near Catalina Island. Before their eyes, the USO had then become a UFO, flying right over their heads while they were driving around the peninsula in an open sports car on Palos Verdes Drive North. This was around midnight. They were going to visit some young woman they knew who lived on the other side of the peninsula. They first noticed the USO as a large, brightly glowing mass under the surface of the ocean which was moving at high speed directly toward the part of the peninsula on which they were driving. They lost sight of it as it approached the cliffs below them, but were startled as it broke the horizon and flew soundlessly over them toward the higher slopes to their right. They followed the path of the UFO up a valley, away from the water, and when they could drive no further up the increasingly rugged terrain, they climbed up the slope on foot. Suddenly, they encountered a police officer whose uniform they described as "strange." The officer told them that they were trespassing on private property and that they would have to leave at once. The two students somewhat indignantly explained what they were doing and also opined that whoever owned the steep, overgrown slopes going up to the cliffs would probably not mind their presence, but the "officer" was unmoved and ordered them again to leave.

One odd fact came out in the telephone interview: the "officer's" patrol car was seen by the students to be parked behind the "officer" on the steep slope, even though there were no roads and they themselves had to abandon their car to climb up the steeply-inclined and overgrown mountainside. They described the car as "odd" but offered no specifics in the taped phone calls. They followed the "officer's"orders and left the area.

The second incident took place two weeks later at almost the same location when the young men were driving the same sports car on the same road to see the same young woman. This time, a shiny, much smaller UFO was seen pacing their car's progress up the road, about 20 feet away from them and directly off to their side. When they pulled over to get a better look, it flew away into the night sky. They heard no sound from the object.

The third sighting involved only Castillon, who had a UFO hovering over his sports car as he drove through Wilmington on Pacific Coast Highway on a Saturday morning. The thing hung over him for about 20 minutes and then just flew away. Again, the object emitted no noise that Castillon could detect. The traffic was so light during all of these incidents that there were no other witnesses known to Earnest and Castillon.

The fourth incident was the focus of the report. Earnest and Castillon had met some fellow at a friend's party who shared with Earnest an interest in very avant garde music. Strangely, neither Castillon nor Earnest could recall the fellow's name. Earnest was more friendly toward this fellow than Castillon; the latter considered the fellow "a little strange" and did not care for his taste in music. A few days after the party, Earnest called the fellow, who invited them to visit him at his house on Dapplegray Lane in Rolling Hills Estates, a small, exclusive community on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. They took him up on his invitation one night later that week.

The strange fellow's home was heated too much for their liking and after Castillon grew tired of humoring Earnest's interest in this guy's strange recordings, he finally persuaded Earnest that they needed to be going. Masters noted that when Earnest was pressed by the telephone interviewer to provide details of what happened in the home, he was rather vague. Other than the excessive warmth and the music, all that he could remember of the evening was that he and Castillon had taken off their jackets and outer shirts because of the heat, leaving them with only their T-shirts and jeans on. It was almost exactly midnight when they left. As they went down the porch steps to the short walkway to the street, they both saw a bright, glowing red ball a little larger than a basketball resting on the front lawn. Oddly, there was no mention of their host noticing the ball or even staying with them as they walked toward it to check it out. They stood there looking at the ball for what seemed like a moment and then got into Earnest's car, a VW.

It was then that Earnest noticed that the clock in the VW showed the time as 3 a.m. He mentioned this with surprise to Castillon. Their watches confirmed the time. Somehow, they had lost three hours looking at the red ball.

There was a fifth episode which occurred in New Orleans during Mardi Gras a few months after the "red ball" incident. According to Earnest, they were staying in a hotel when there was a loud bang and flash outside, followed by a large gray coming right through their locked door, startlingly fast. It loomed over them for a few seconds while they were paralyzed, and then withdrew through the same door just as swiftly.

The transcripts of the telephone interviews were always with Earnest, not Castillon. Earnest told the interviewer that Castillon was not particu-



As they went down the porch steps to the short walkway to the street, they both saw a bright, glowing red ball a little larger than a basketball resting on the front lawn.

larly interested in these odd events, even though he acknowledged their strangeness. Earnest, on the other hand, had apparently become a UFO enthusiast as a consequence of these encounters. He found out about the UFO organization and wanted Castillon and himself to be hypnotized to try to find out what happened during the missing three hours.

As it turned out, the hypnotherapist, one Dr. Beth Culp, who donated her services to the organization, was an Agency asset. She had done work for the Agency for the past 15 years and had been working on UFO-related incidents off and on for the last 11 years. She arranged to interview the two students in the next two days and Masters was to go along as a "representative" of the UFO enthusiast organization to observe the hypnotherapy regression sessions.

Masters noted with disappointment that no chemical injections were discussed with the young men, although he sensed from the report that Castillon would not be amenable to such a procedure, as

it had taken some salesmanship on Earnest's part just to get him to go along with hypnosis.

The colonel reentered the room as the MP left. He set down the coffees on the table. "I left yours black," he said. "Well," said the colonel, "here is your chance to see if hypnosis can bring back those memories you say are being masked by these aliens."

"How do we know that the red ball is from aliens?" Masters asked, sipping his coffee.

The colonel smiled. "Well they aren't OURS, Sedge, if that's what you're getting at."

"How do you know, sir? How do you know that there isn't a compartment apart from yours where someone knows that we designed these things to control people or for some other agenda?

The colonel seemed amused by this, despite his usual stern manner. "Trust me on this, Sedge. They are not ours. Indeed, they are not anyone else's. They are something of a mystery, really. That's why you're going out to Los Angeles: to try to find out what the damn things are."

"Colonel, you spoke of the ball as if there were more than one. The report only spoke about one, as I recall."

"Very good, Sedge. After you cover this hypno-debrief, I want you to swing by Wright-Pat again and tell your friend the captain what you learned. He may have more information for you on this. Then come back to D.C. and we'll talk. Have a good trip, Sedge, and, uh, keep it professional while you're on this mission, all right?"

Masters was sorely tempted to tell the colonel to take his assignment and shove it, along with his advice on drinking, but he just barely managed to hold his tongue. He maintained a sullen silence on the drive back to Fairfax, despite the best efforts of the outgoing seaman driver. Christ, graduate students, red balls, UFO nuts and hypnotists, he thought. Not to mention conducting a domestic operation within the borders of the United States in violation of the National Security Act of 1947. If this were a test, he had no idea where it was going.

By the time his plane leveled off from its climb out from Dulles, Masters had already ordered two Scotches from the middle-aged flight attendant. Here's to you, colonel, and your goddamned UFOs, red balls, and Dr. Culp the therapist, he thought as he knocked back the first shot of J&B. By the time his plane descended into the brown sludge that L.A. called a "sky," he was pleasantly buzzed and erroneously thought he was ready for his rendezvous with Dr. Culp.

They were to meet two hours before Earnest and Castillon were expected to arrive, at a hotel in Redondo overlooking the beach and King Harbor. Culp had a suite at the hotel. Masters knocked on the suite door and heard someone unlocking the multiple locks after checking the spyhole.

He was not quite ready for Dr. Culp, as it turned out. She was almost as tall as Masters himself (5'11", Masters guessed), with long blonde hair, beautiful, large, clear blue eyes. Her dossier said that she was 48 years old, but she looked at least 15 years younger. She was very pretty, slim and had a dazzling smile. Masters was a cool customer in a crisis, but he could feel his voice sounding a little off-key as he introduced himself to the striking therapist. She was very much in possession of the moment and seemed to take delight in the effect she had on him, even though she had become used to this sort of thing over the years. Masters was irritated with himself for being so taken aback by her.

She asked him if he would like a drink, and he thought, now, that's more like it. Culp poured Masters a Coke over ice. She poured herself a Perrier with lime. So, that's how it is, he thought. Little Miss Prim.

"I understand that the colonel has already gone over the protocol for these interviews, Mr. Masters?"

"Yes. You will put each of them under individually and ask them a battery of questions aimed at figuring out what happened during the three hours that they thought that they were looking at the ball. They were instructed not to talk with each other about the incident, but, given the passage of time, you know that they did, right?"

"Right. But we do the best that we can to filter out the corrupted recollections. As you know, hypnosis is not perfect, but it beats sitting around scratching our heads, wondering what happened."

"I agree with you on that," said Masters. He also noted that these were the same words that he had used in arguing with the captain at Wright-Patterson about using hypnosis to debrief the recovery team. She must have been given a more thorough briefing than I was told, Masters thought.

"Have you done this before?" Culp asked.

"Yes, but under much different circumstances." Masters did not elaborate, even though it was clear from Culp's expectant gaze that she expected him to do so.

When it became clear that he had nothing more to say, she crisply instructed, "In this instance, I will do all of the talking. If you have any questions, you will write them down and pass them to me. Please do not make any sudden movements or noises while the session is in progress. Do you have any questions?"

"Only one: do they have any real drinks in that refrigerator?"

"If by 'real' you mean alcoholic, yes they do. But the colonel was quite specific that you are not to have any during this assignment."

"I see. And if I were to disregard that instruction?"

"Then I would be forced to stop you and put your lack of cooperation in my report." She looked at him levelly, as if to say 'even though I look like a willowy woman, I can deal with you physically, if the need be.' He believed that she would really try, too.

"Okay, Dr. Culp," he smiled. "It looks as if I am your prisoner for the time being.

"Good," she said, "Let's rearrange the furniture to make it more comfortable and get ready for our guests.

"One other thing, Doctor," said Masters, "Why did you rule out sodium pentathol or some other psychoactive drug?"

"I didn't rule it out; our subjects did. Mike Castillon was not at all enthused about doing this. The only way he would agree was if only hypnosis were used. Besides, we often find that hypnosis gets better results with hidden memories than drugs. As you know from your background, drugs are more useful when there is a subjective inhibition making the subject less than forthcoming."

"How do you know that isn't indicated here?" he asked, picking up the coffee table.

"Because it isn't that these subjects don't want to talk about it. They just don't remember," she said, lifting her end of the table.

"How can you be sure of that?" he asked, thinking of the recovery team's statements that they were later "allowed" to tell a different version of events. She caught his eye and asked, "Just what are you thinking of in asking that?" Oops, Masters thought.

"Oh, nothing." Damn, he thought. She isn't cleared for that.

Culp set down the table and drew herself up to her full 6'1" (in low heels), setting her clear, light blue eyes right into line with Masters'.



B. HERD

"There are over 2,000,000 files in this room documenting an equal number of separate reports involving facts similar to your red ball story."

"Mister Masters, if we are going to work together effectively on this assignment, you are going to have to be frank with me. Now why do you think that these subjects might be holding back during this interview? If I am to discharge my duties during these interviews, I need to have all of the information you have that you can share with

me. Do I make myself clear?"

Oh, fabulously, Masters thought. "I can't go into the details, Ms. Culp, but it is possible that these phenomena involve making the, er, subjects obey a command not to talk about what they underwent during the missing time sequence, as opposed to not remembering what happened. That's why I asked about the drugs. But if it's to be hypnosis, then so be it. I was just curious as to what your thoughts were on the subject, that's all."

Culp seemed to relax a bit. "Well, it's true that in some of the purported abductions with which we've dealt the subjects sometimes say that they've been instructed not to talk about all or part of their experience. In fact, they become quite agitated if pressed on the subject, even while under deep hypnosis."

"So, how successful have you been when you try to break through this 'instruction'?" he asked.

"It's hard to say. Sometimes, they don't budge. Other times, they tell us a more detailed story behind the so-called screen memory. But still, I get the feeling that we're just getting the next screen memory and not what really happened. You may be right about the drugs, but we can't make citizens accept them against their will."

"Oh, yeah, of course," said Masters, while thinking, the hell we can't.

There was a knock at the door. Two good-looking young men stood at the door, smiling and filled with the quiet cockiness of men in their prime. Both of the young men were a little surprised by the statuesque Dr. Culp. But they quickly recovered, their spirits much improved by her obvious charms, notwithstanding Masters' brooding presence and less-than-enthused greeting. Culp explained the procedure, escorted Castillon to the far bedroom, turned on the TV in his room, got him a drink and came back to the other bedroom to start with Earnest. Masters noted that both of these fellows seemed normal enough. They did not give the appearance of being counter-cultural or science geeks.

The stories told by the two men were virtually identical on every point, particularly the most important point that they lost three hours of time that night on Dapplegray Lane. The stories did not change under hypnosis, except that they now said that they remembered spending the three hours just standing on the walkway staring at the glowing red ball until it floated up into the night sky. No amount of probing by the resourceful Dr. Culp ever penetrated behind this story. No alien ships, no medical exams, no short or tall grays, nothing. Just standing there for three hours and then leaving. Neither man showed any discomfort when pressed; they just had nothing more to say. Masters wanted to inject both of them with drugs, but knew that Culp would not go for it.

One thing that both Dr. Culp and Masters noticed was that while Earnest was understandably interested in what had happened, Castillon seemed almost weirdly detached from and disinterested in the red ball experience and the other incidents that he described. He said that he had other concerns, with graduate school, his pending marriage to his fiancée, and financial pressures. He also said that he simply did not have time for UFOs. Castillon regarded Earnest's interest with bemusement. Even so, both Culp and Masters thought that Castillon's outlook was a little too detached, as if he had been conditioned to disregard the experience and not look into it further.

After saying goodbye to the two young men, Masters suggested that Dr. Culp and he debrief over dinner at the Charthouse overlooking the water. Culp declined, stating that they should do their work without distractions, in the most efficient manner possible, as she had a plane to catch.

They were in general agreement as to their impressions of the men's story. The two men seemed to be sincere. They had nothing to gain by making up the story. Indeed, Castillon was uncomfortable with the time that he gave to this exercise, being anxious to get back to his normal pursuits.

"There's one more thing to do before we leave this mudhole of a town," Masters said. "We should drive by the house on Dapplegray and see what there is to see."

"No need," said Culp, as she was repacking her briefcase.

"Why not? Don't you think that there's something to be gained from going back to the scene?"

"Sure, but not from me doing so. I was raised in Palos Verdes. In fact, I went to Dapplegray Elementary School. I've seen Dapplegray Lane dozens of times. There's nothing about the street to suggest anything out of the ordinary, . . . except . . ." and she hesitated.

"Except what, Dr. Culp?" Masters asked.

"Oh, it's nothing, really." She waved her hand dismissively and went back to her packing.

"Humor me, Beth," Masters said, moving around the table to face her.

"Well, there was a report which came into the UFO center in Denver several years ago which we just finished investigating, but it was so off the wall that I am sure it has nothing to do with our boys and their red ball."

"Enough with the coyness, doctor; . . . give! What supposedly happened?"

"Oh, it was kind of like one of those terrible, low-budget science fiction movies from the Fifties. In fact, that's what we thought inspired this little story. However, there are certain similarities to these interviews."

That settles it, thought Masters, grabbing her hand. "Come on. You can tell me the story on the way. . ."

Once they were in the car, Culp resumed her story. "It happened seven years ago, in August of 1971. There were these two young guys around the same ages as Castillon and Earnest. Their names were John Hodges and Peter Rodriguez. They

were visiting a mutual friend on Dapplegray Lane. At 2 a.m., they left their friend's house and got into Hodges' car. Then they saw two large brains in the middle of the road ahead of them, each about as high as a man's waist when standing, and each apparently alive. Hodges drove around the brains and took Rodriguez back to his apartment below Palos Verdes."

Masters interrupted her, "Wait a minute. Hodges sees two giant, living brains in the middle of the road in front of him, and he just drives around them? Just like that?

Culp laughed. "I told you that it didn't make any sense. He said that they were afraid of them and felt that getting away was the most important thing to do at the time.

Masters remained incredulous. "So, did they call the cops about this?"

Culp laughed louder, still. "Well, no. Of course not. If they did that, then their story would begin to make sense." Masters shot her a look of intense skepticism. She seemed amused at his frustration in dealing with what he clearly regarded as nonsense.

"Okay," she said. "The story wouldn't make sense in any event, but the point is that it was weird that they didn't call the cops, honk their horns, go bang on their friend's door or a neighbor's door. Instead, they just try to get home without any effort to report it to anyone. And it somehow takes Hodges two hours to get home, even though he lives nearby.

"He was recently regressed under hypnosis by one of my colleagues and he remembered a much different story to explain the two hour gap. He said that he encountered the brains again outside of his apartment, whereupon he was projected out of his car and into an equipment-filled room, where he was confronted by humanoids who warned him of the dangers of nuclear war.

"Hodges was abducted a second time under similar circumstances and was given a brain implant that he was told by the humanoids would increase his 'psychic awareness.' They also told him that humankind is the product of millions of years of scientific experimentation."

By now, Masters was chuckling to himself. Culp herself smiled with a hint of embarrassment.

"What?" she said, pretending not to know why he would be laughing about the kidnapping brains of Dapplegray Lane.

"Beth, it sounds like bad drugs to me, not bad brains," he said between bursts of laughter. She started laughing, too. "Well, I tried to avoid telling you about it; I know it sounds like that stupid old movie, 'Donovan's Brain,' or something."

"I think that we ought to add a blood test to these interviews," Masters said, not laughing as hard, now. "These things have to be hallucinations."

Culp stopped laughing at that. "Sedgewick, this is no hallucination. I'm not standing tall for the brain story. But it is clear to me that these two young men that we met today really believe that they saw what they say that they saw. And they only had one beer apiece when they visited that fellow."

"Did we check the address where they saw the ball?" he asked.

"Yes. The problem is that it was being leased to the guy with the weird music. He moved out. Tracing him went nowhere. The intriguing question is whether he is the same guy who was visited by Hodges and Rodriguez six years earlier. Unfortunately, we lost contact with Hodges and Rodriguez before we knew about Castillon and Earnest. So we've been unable to check. We're working on it."

At 2 a.m., they left their friend's house and got into Hodges' car. Then they saw two large brains in the middle of the road ahead of them, each about as high as a man's waist when standing, and each apparently alive.

They were proceeding west on Palos Verdes Drive, the street that encircled the entire Palos Verdes Peninsula. After they passed the reservoir above San Pedro, the quality of the drive changed, with the road narrowing and the trees becoming much more dense. Young girls were riding horses along the side of the road, with their dogs bounding along ahead. It was a beautiful place, an island of rural tranquility above the brown urban sea of L.A., purchased and maintained with money, lots of money. It was not Virginia, but it reminded Masters of his home state, the horses and the rural peace.

Soon they came upon the sign for Dapplegray Lane. They turned right and followed the short road up and down a couple of hilly rises and dips. It ended in a cul-de-sac, with no curbs at the side of the road. Most of the lane was shaded with the 40-year-old trees which lined it on both sides. There were ranch homes spaced out at some distance from one another on both sides. Masters could see the stables and tennis courts in the back yards.

It was quiet, comfortable and seemed utterly unlikely to be the venue for alien probes and giant, disembodied brains. Which house was it, he wondered, that was the temporary abode of this alleged alien agent? No house looked more likely than another. They all seemed quintessentially domestic and serene. They would run all of the records, but he already knew that they would find nothing.

"Which house was it?" Masters asked.

"That one over there, on the northwest side of the street," she replied. He could see that it was yet another of the ranch-style homes, perhaps a little more in need of maintenance than its neighbors, but otherwise serenely normal by all appearances.

He brought their car to a halt and jumped out to look around. There appeared to be no one home. The windows were shuttered from the inside. He pulled himself up on the backyard fence. Nothing unusual there. What in the hell had happened here? He walked back to front yard and looked at the faded lawn next to the front walkway, the place where the ball had been seen. There was no sign on the grass of anything out of the ordinary, except for small patches where lab samples had been taken. Culp told him that lab tests of the soil and grass revealed nothing unusual.

"See?" said Culp, breaking through his reverie, "There is nothing here, and now you've made me miss my plane to Vancouver."

"Sorry, but I thought we had to see it ourselves, and I figured that I better take a former native with me, in case I needed an interpreter for the brains."

She laughed. "I've been gone for years, and most of the people who I knew here were a little short of brains, frankly. In any case, we've seen it. Now, can we go to the airport?"

Just an hour after landing at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, Masters gave his report in writing and orally to the Air Force captain with whom he had the cordial disagreement three weeks before. The captain made no comment until Masters completed his presentation.

The captain then said, "Don't be too disappointed that you couldn't come up with much out there, Mr. Masters. We've had quite a few of these reports, and, so far, they've led us nowhere."

Masters was a little surprised by this, although by now, his capacity for surprise had been somewhat diminished. "You've had more of these?"

The captain rose from his desk. "Let me show you something; please come with me." He directed Masters down the hall from his office until they came to an unmarked door that looked like a broom closet. He unlocked it, turned on the lights and escorted Masters into a very large file room which contained rows of file cabinets.

"There are over 2,000,000 files in this room documenting an equal number of separate reports involving facts similar to your red ball story. Sometimes the balls are white, green, yellow, blue or orange. But the basic outline of the story you were told is repeated millions of times in these files, which weíve been compiling since 1945. The wiseguys around here refer to this place as 'the Ballroom,' a little play on words." The captain chuckled wanly.

"2,000,000 since 1945? Have all of these been investigated?" Masters asked, impressed by what he was told.

"No way that we could devote the resources to such an effort. In fact, your interview of Castillon and Earnest was more effort than we usually go to with mere ball incidents. We dug deeper in their case because of all of the other sightings that they experienced in addition to the red ball business. There are just too many of these ball stories to follow up on. We don't even put these on the computer. We just convert the reports to our format and put 'em in here on the off chance that they turn out to be more significant than we think they are."

Masters could feel his frustration with the captain's way of doing things rising once again (only this time he'd only been on the base for an hour; last time it took two whole days). "And just how significant do you folks think that they are?" he asked, trying to give no hint of his feelings.

"Near as we can figure from the stories in these files the balls are some sort of scanning device. It could be that when Castillon and Earnest said that they just stood there for three hours they did just that, while this red ball scanned them for data."

"Yeah," said Masters, without conviction, "It could be."

"Besides," the captain added, " we had bigger concerns to occupy our resources."

"Such as?" Masters asked.

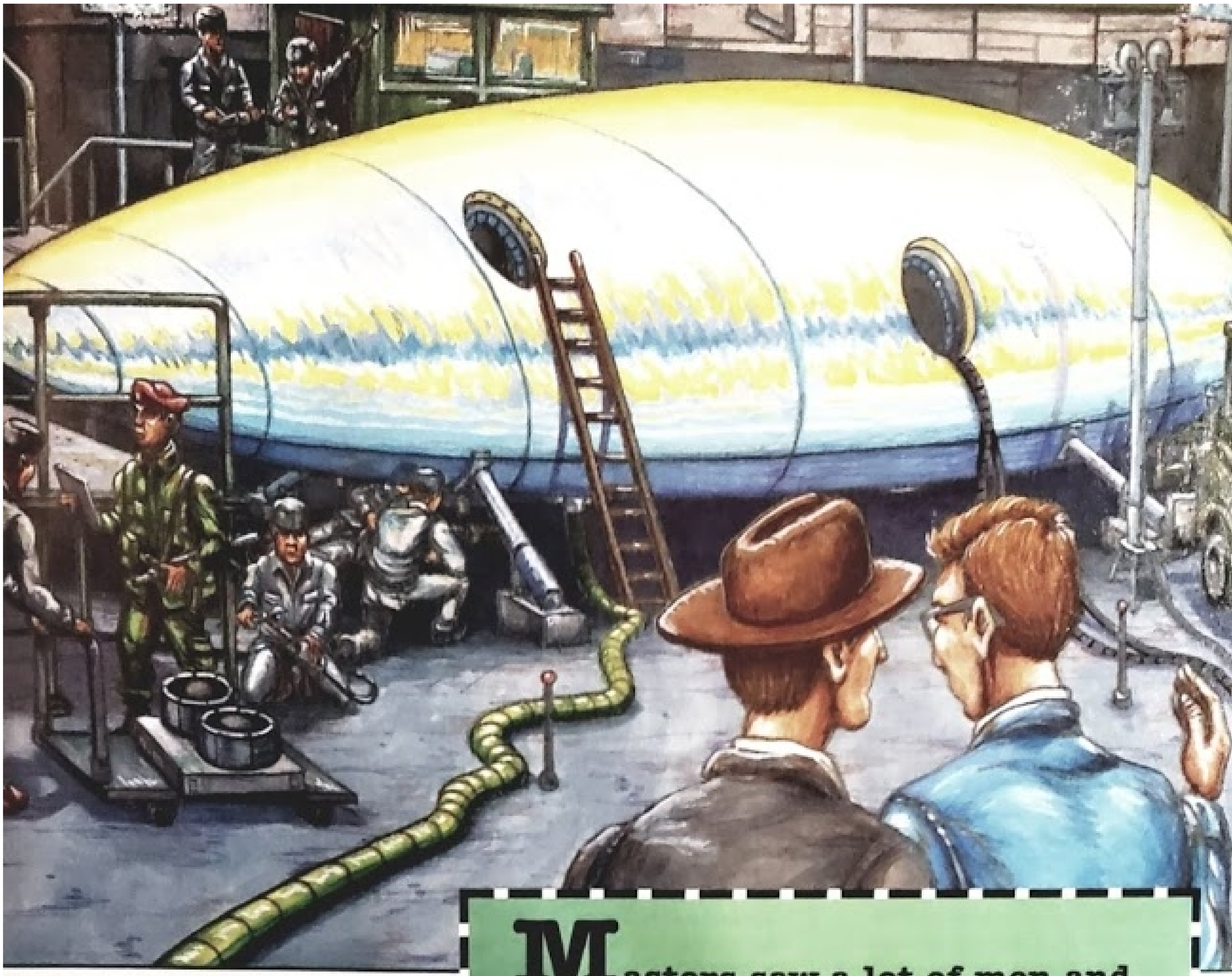
"I'm glad you asked that. Come with me. The colonel instructed us to show you some things that we recovered several years ago, one of which has recently presented us with a somewhat unique problem."

"Lead the way," said Masters, still thinking about over 2,000,000 ball incidents, and wondering, what next?

They were met by an AP who drove them in a Jeep out to one of the hangars somewhat removed from the flightline. The hangar was guarded but unmarked. The captain saluted the guard and they entered the hangar, going through the usual security routine and changing their security badges before going further into the hangar.

When they went through the second set of doors, Masters saw a lot of men and women in unbuttoned white coats standing around some sort of drone aircraft which was connected by cables and wires to racks of test equipment and computers attended by prototypical "nerds" whose unkempt hair appeared in stark contrast to their crisp white coats. No one seemed to notice when they first walked in. Everyone seemed intent upon a test that was being run.

As they drew closer to the group,



Masters saw a lot of men and women in unbuttoned white coats standing around some sort of drone aircraft which was connected by cables and wires to racks of test equipment and computers.

Masters realized that what he thought was a drone was actually built as a piloted craft. It had a cockpit with a seamless clear canopy. But there was something wrong . . . something not quite right. The captain looked a little smug as he led Masters up to the craft. At first, Masters told himself that he would not bite. He would wait to be told. But he couldn't stand it any longer. There was something so odd about this little flying wing model . . .

"Captain, what is this thing? And who flies it? The cockpit's so small, it would have to be a seven-year-old. And what's that humming sound?" Masters asked.

"Do you notice anything else odd about it, Mr. Masters?" the captain asked, obviously enjoying this.

"Well, yeah. Where are the engines? There are no props and no jets. There are no ailerons. And the shape of the wings is not right for a plane. It's just a wing, with no fuselage, no tail. And what is that humming sound?"

"Quite right, Mr. Masters. This is a recovered craft which we picked up in a field in the Midwest around 1972. It's a sort of single-seater flying wing craft superficially similar to the flying wing prototypes developed by the Germans and us during World War II."

The captain went on while leading Masters over to a table with a coffee urn and coffee cups. "We kind of lucked into this one. We didn't see it on radar or anything like that. There were three good ol' boys who were out hunting one fine fall day in 1972 to the west of here. Their dogs ran across this small gray who had died in the woods. These old fellows back-

tracked down the trail of the gray once they got over their shock at the appearance of the alien. About a mile back up his trail, there was the plane, sitting in a field, just as pretty as you please. There was no crash. The alien had made a perfect landing, as far as we can tell. But something went wrong for him. He was dead. These old boys, being the good patriotic members of the World War II generation that they were, hightailed it back to their truck and got to a telephone to call the Air Force."

"We rounded them up, retrieved the body and the plane, and scared the hell out of our hunters while still appealing to their patriotism. One really nice thing about the World War II generation is that they know the value of national security and don't put up much of a fight about keeping these things secret."

"So, I take it this was the same kind of small gray that we recovered from Roswell?" ventured Masters.

"Yeah. That's right," said the captain. "For all we know, that little guy was bred just to deliver this little plane to us. The way it's scaled down, some of the engineers have taken to calling it 'the Scooter.' Kind of cute, because of the small scale of the thing and all."

"Yeah, cute," said Masters. "So what did they use it for?"

"We have no idea," said the captain. "We speculate that it is just some sort of small shuttle craft for one creature to come down and gather samples or whatever, but we may be guilty of anthropomorphism. For all we know, this thing may be capable of intergalactic travel. It doesn't seem likely, but, then, neither does the entire situation, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," said Masters, "I know what you mean. So, do you know how it works, after having it for six years?"

"Well, not exactly," the captain said. "We're still trying to figure out the basics . . . like, er, how to turn it off."

"What?" said Masters. "You mean that humming sound is coming from that thing? I thought that you guys didn't know how to run it?"

"We don't," the captain said a little sheepishly. "One of our researchers just got a little frustrated at having an intact craft without being able to turn anything on after years of tests and experiments, so he just abandoned the protocol one day and started punching touchscreens and proximity switches on the thing without even taking notes and it suddenly sprang to life. The instruments came on, the thing started making that humming sound, and it obviously was and is ready for action."

"So? What's the problem? Just have the guy reverse his steps and the thing should shut off, right?" asked Masters.

"Yeah," the captain said, "that might work, but the guy who got it going was so surprised when it powered up that he forgot the sequence of what he did. We can't duplicate it, and even if we could, we have no assurance that reversing the command steps would reverse the current result. They may not think as we do and may not wire things the same way."

"Has anybody tried to switch anything differently since the thing fired up?"

"Uh, no. Look around you, Mr. Masters. We are in a building. Suppose one of these geniuses punches the wrong button and this thing decides to go transluminal right through a wall?"

"What if it runs out of fuel?" Masters asked.

"Again, we don't know. It's been humming for over a year and half without running down so far. Since we don't know how they generate the power for it in the first place, it is difficult to determine what to throw at the problem. But we're working on it and we'll solve it someday."

"Has everything that you recovered been along the lines of the Scooter?" Masters asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Not at all. Let's go back to the Jeep and I'll show you another one we are supposed to show you in connection with your next assignment." Masters took one last look at the Scooter, with its lithe, otherworldly lines and walked out to the Jeep.

The AP drove them to a different hangar further down the flight line. This one was also guarded, although it now occurred to Masters that none of these hangars were as heavily guarded as he would have expected under the circumstances. He mentioned this to the captain, who replied, "We're just taking a page out of your book, Mr. Masters. If you want to protect something really well, you don't telegraph to the world where it is by placing a heavy security force around it. Besides, there are people right on this base who are way too curious about what goes on here. The best disguise is no disguise at all."

Once again, they exchanged their security badges inside for special Zodiac clearance badges. Masters was then escorted into the large enclosure of the hangar. He involuntarily inhaled and held his breath at what he saw, a large, ovoid disc, which had to be over 50 feet wide and 23 feet tall at the widest point. It looked like one of those opaque glass ornaments his parents used to hang on their Christmas tree when he was a kid. There were service scaffoldings and ramps all around it, with about 55 people working on it and cables and hoses snaking away from the craft.

"Uh, . . . ours or theirs?" Masters asked.

"Theirs, if you mean the aliens," the captain said.

Masters said nothing, but kept walking slowly up to the craft, keeping an eye on it to be sure that this was not a dream or that it would not just fly away despite the closed hangar doors. One look at the thing and it seemed clear that his question was rhetorical. He felt that he knew from its very appearance, even as glimpsed through the scaffolding, no human had ever designed this vehicle. There was just something about

the proportions, the angles, the material, the whole thinking that had gone into it which was not familiar, not . . . human. Masters walked up to it very slowly, craning his neck up to follow the upward curvature of the ship's hull.

"May I touch it?" he asked.

"Sure," said the captain. "This one was recovered a few years ago off the coast of Denmark, where it had sunk in relatively shallow water. The Danish government cooperated with us in retrieving the thing and getting it out of the country without a big to do. Getting it into the base was a bit of a nightmare. We had to truck it through the city on a lowboy in the dead of night, covered with a tarp and flanked by plenty of security. It was pretty tense, I can tell you."

While the captain prattled on about the difficulty of housing the ship and the problems they were having trying to decipher its complex systems, Masters extended his hand toward the ship's hull. He touched it. It was cool and smooth to the touch, like a piece of fine sculpture or porcelain. As the captain spoke, Masters ran his fingertips up and down the hull, gradually placing his whole palm on the surface and rubbing it back and forth, as if he were wiping down a horse after a hard ride.

"May we go inside?" Masters asked.

The captain was shot a look by a general who had just approached within earshot as this question was asked. "Not today, sir. We are performing some tests utilizing supercoolants and it is not a very healthy place to be right now."

"Mr. Masters," the general smiled, extending his hand and shaking it. "It is a pleasure to meet you." Introductions were made all around.

"I'm sorry that we can't accommodate you on going inside the spacecraft, but I am sure that you find even the outside very impressive."

"That would be putting it mildly, General," replied Masters.

"Well, maybe next time, when you visit us again," the general said. "Why don't you and the captain join me over at the O-club for a drink? I was just heading there myself."

"General, I'd really like to get a look inside this ship before I report to Washington, and I . . ." Masters hesitated on account of the look he received from the captain. Masters knew it was poor etiquette to refuse the general's invitation.

The general cut him off, "Oh, you'll get your chance to see it, but not right now, as the captain explained to you. Let's take my car, and you can tell us what you found out about these damned red balls that are cropping up all over the place. The captain mentioned to me that you were looking into it out in California." As he was speaking, the general shepherded Masters, the captain and everyone else within earshot toward a side door of the hangar where his car and driver were waiting. It was clear to Masters that this general was not used to taking "no" for an answer. With resignation, he exited the hangar after one look at the saucer.

There was just something about the proportions, the angles, the material, the whole thinking that had gone into it which was not familiar, not . . . human.

Back at Fort Belvoir, Masters had just finished his report to the colonel. "Well, so much for hypnosis," the colonel observed.

"Not necessarily, sir," Masters said. "We really need to try harder and longer on this thing and also use drugs on the tougher cases." The colonel's face showed some irritation with Masters' tenacity, although he had come to expect it by now.

"Sedge, we're going to have to put your screen memory hobby on hold for the time being. I want you to report to the office of Admiral Keating this afternoon. Keating's people stumbled on something up in the Arctic Ocean, and I want you to be in on the debriefing. You'll be going to Connecticut, so you'd better pack some warm clothes."

"May I ask what this trip is about, sir?"

"Sure, you can ask. For now, let's just say that it relates to what those young fellas in California told you about the USO off of Palos Verdes and that large craft we pulled out of the waters off the coast of Denmark. But it will be Admiral Keating who gives you the briefing. Meet with him and no one else when you get to the Puzzle Palace. Then report to me personally when you get back from Connecticut."

As Masters drove to Fairfax to pack for his next assignment, he wondered where this was all going. After all, he had never actually seen a UFO in flight, never seen an alien, never received any objective confirmation of their existence. While the ships he'd been allowed to see were initially impressive, now that he was more distant from the event, he was confident that George Lucas' or Steven Spielberg's prop men could do as well. He shook his head at what he had gotten himself into and drove down the highway to prepare for his next excursion into the wilderness of mirrors that his work had become.