
TOO CLOSE FOR CONDON: CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE 4TH KIND

BY MICHAEL D. SWORDS

Most readers of *IUR* are familiar with the Condon Committee, the U.S. Air Force-sponsored study of UFOs at the University of Colorado in 1967–68. We're aware of the intellectual dishonesty of the principal investigator in his conclusions and the damage this did to our field in the ranks of science. This was the primary sin of commission of the project. But there were also many sins of omission. One especially glaring one was the failure to investigate cases pointing toward phenomena that we now call abductions, or close encounters of the fourth kind.

The committee was composed of intelligent men who were largely ignorant of the UFO phenomenon and had been suddenly dumped into a chaos of UFO activity roiled by the 1966 flap. One aspect of that flap was the publication of the Betty and Barney Hill case.

This case became one of the most famous and spectacular cases in UFO history. The Condon Committee knew of it but apparently never considered an investigation. Perhaps it was considered an old case, one of the type that Project Director Ed Condon very much wanted to steer clear of. Perhaps it was that even the pro-UFO consultants, such as Donald Keyhoe and his National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena, cast a wary and generally disapproving eye on any such claim smacking of contact. Perhaps it was just too weird to risk taking seriously. Whatever the reasons, Colorado looked the other way on the Hill case.

THE SCHIRMER INVESTIGATION

The only "contact" case—as they were labeled then—the project investigated was that of police Sgt. Herbert Schirmer, in Ashland, Nebraska. It occurred on December 3, 1967, during the project, and since it was in a nearby state, the case was hard to completely ignore. The committee investigated the incident approximately one week later.

The initial report, despite being written by the notoriously overly skeptical Roy Craig, was generally supportive. Still, the language reveals Craig to have been a mule with all hooves firmly dug into the ground and resisting. Here is an

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example concerning Schirmer's polygraph test: "The polygraph reportedly showed no indications that the UFO report was other than truthful." Why not write instead, "The polygraph results indicated that all of Schirmer's answers were truthful"? A small point, possibly, but comments like this are little flags which say that Colorado doesn't want to take this sort of thing seriously.

Schirmer's was seen as a psychological case from the beginning. Maybe some people will object to this interpretation, but it becomes clear if you read the Condon Committee's original documents, as I have. The investigators immediately wanted to run him through a huge battery of psychological assessment tests, looking for evidence of mental dysfunction and a poor grasp of reality. The tests were conducted and evaluated by people who knew that this man had claimed to have been on board a UFO. The conclusion was "psychopathy and schizophrenia," an astonishingly extreme verdict if you consider the positive comments about Schirmer made by project personnel and consultants.

Here are some examples:

"Patrolman Schirmer is dependable and truthful."—*Ashland Police Chief Bill Wlaschin.*

"The patrolman seemed quite sincere in presenting his report."—*Condon investigator Roy Craig.*

"Sgt. Schirmer gave the appearance of being pleasant and cooperative. . . . He presents himself as a conscientious policeman who has a sixth sense or intuition about crime detection; he also seemed to gain satisfaction from the occasional need for violence in his work, although he spoke favorably about the use of Mace."—*Leo Sprinkle, called in to do hypnosis on Schirmer (a difficult task since Schirmer was a very macho guy, a type who resists being controlled).*

After characterizing Schirmer in the most negative terms for several paragraphs, the Colorado psychological assessors said, "With aggression, his reality testing is marginal to good, and, in view of other things, often surprisingly good."—*Robert Fenner and Dean Lund.*

Perhaps the patrolman's excitement at the violent side of his profession is all it takes to give one the designation of "psychopath." If so, I have known a large number of such people in both law enforcement and the military (and athletics and even boardrooms). Maybe most of us are psychopaths. One facetiously wonders whether we can also be legiti-

mately labeled “schizophrenic” despite “surprisingly good” reality testing?

Using its own poor methods of pursuing the truth, the Condon Committee wrote off the case as a psychological aberration. Additional proof of where their collective heads were at showed up in a little note on Craig’s report for the files. He wrote, “the magnetic signature of the police car was determined and will be compared with that of other cars of the same manufacture to see if the magnetic signature has been changed.” In the case file, Craig penciled in: “Where is it?” Well, I guess we didn’t bother to do the scientific part of the investigation.

With this case as an example, it won’t stun you to discover that the project had several other opportunities to respond to CE3 or CE4 reports and decided not to bother. Maybe this attitude was good judgment; then again, maybe not. In the committee’s defense, we could suggest that it had hundreds of letters reporting sightings (true) and it could not possibly pursue them all. But someone thought the next three cases were interesting enough that they were retained in the committee’s files after all the others were thrown away.

ROADSIDE ABDUCTION?

In March 1968, the project received a letter from a woman in Texas who wanted to tell them of her experience and ask for some help in understanding it. She had read *Interrupted Journey*, John Fuller’s book about the Hills’ encounter, and this had goaded her into writing. She remembered her own encounter clearly and in detail, even though it had occurred over 35 years earlier, and she had been plagued with nervousness and nightmares since. Her doctor had recently told her family that her deteriorating health seemed exacerbated by having something on her mind that was a source of serious stress. She refused to tell them about her experience, however, for fear that her family would have “thought that I’d lost all my marbles.”

The experience as she told it in her letter is suspiciously abduction-like. She had several hours of missing time. (In the following narrative, I have corrected the spelling and punctuation, and dropped the repetition in order to let the story flow.)

The experience begins as this young woman was driving in the family car in an isolated hilly area around 10 o’clock in the morning one day in 1930:

I remember turning a curve on the road and running up to and under the side of a huge “thing” sitting by the road.

I was within a few steps of it, almost under one side of it when I stopped. It was sort of shiny gunmetal color—round and shaped like two dinner plates face-to-face with a dome in the upper top side. It was about 100 feet across, about 15 feet thick. There was a small slender door, and the door chute let down to the ground

with steps on the inside of it. The backside of the ship sat on the ground, but the downhill side was braced up with two slender legs with round plates on the ground as feet.

There was one man of normal size; I’d say about 5 feet 10 inches to 6 feet tall and about 165 to 180 lbs. This person came walking in the road to meet me and forced me to stop while he talked to me. Or, *at least I think* he talked, although I did not see his lips move, and he turned his face away and looked down.

While I seemed to hear him speaking, several other persons came walking up behind him—I’d say 8 to 10. I took these persons to be a troop of Boy Scouts, about 8 to 10 years old, average size. However, when near me, I saw that there was a big difference: they looked a bit like Japs or Chinese. They had very large slanted eyes, very large cheekbones, and very thin lips. And they did not look like children but adults. They smiled at me but did not speak. I had to smile back because they were sort of pushing each other around (horseplay), like each one trying to get in front to see better and acting like kids will.

The clothing they wore I at first took to be scout uniforms—tan in color. But when they came up close to me, I saw that there were no pockets, buttons, edges, wrinkles, or pocket flaps. Very clean, neat, and nice. They wore little tight caps cut like baseball caps with little narrow bills. The larger man was dressed the same way. Offhand, the whole bunch seemed like a scoutmaster and his troop of scouts.

We had some little argument. He said: “Lady, you’ll have to leave the highway and go around as we have the road blocked here.” I said: “What is *that*?” pointing to this thing (saucer). He ignored this question and said, “Never mind, you’ll just have to go around. We want the road left clear and open and can’t let you through here. You are a wonderful driver and you can make it all right.” [The “man” was directing her to drive off the road down into a rocky gully and then up another hillside to rejoin the road some distance away—see witness sketch.]

I still griped and argued and said: “I can’t put this big car down through that creek and rocks, it’d tear my car all to pieces, and I could never get out the upper side, and besides you don’t own this highway.”

But somehow I couldn’t help myself, and dazedly drove very slowly and fearfully down into this creek and rough canyon.

I realized that the man was walking right along the side of the car, at my elbow. I felt very safe [then] and was able to make the crossing and was no longer afraid. I wonder why?

This was about 9:30–10 a.m., and it is the last thing I remember until I came to myself walking in on my home porch at about 12 o’clock that night—about 15 miles distant. Where I was, where I went, what happened to me those many hours, I have no idea. Neigh-



Sketch by Texas woman of her 1930 close encounter.

bors had driven along that area during the day, and [later] told my family that they saw my car parked on the hill beyond the canyon. My dad was forming a search party when I came in.

That I was taken aboard this saucer and carried away God Knows Where, I haven't a simple doubt. But, if this did not happen as I remember it, then what did? I want to know—*so badly that I'm sick*. Something did happen—what? I want to know the truth—the whole truth regardless of what it was.

The lady then offered herself for hypnosis and research, but the project ignored her. Condon filed the letter under the category “psychological.” Conceivably it was. One thing we do know: The project and Ed Condon couldn't be bothered. And another thing is at least half-true: This is an old and sickly lady asking for some help, but nothing was done. This inaction was a type of sin of omission that reflects badly on Colorado.

BEDROOM ABDUCTION?

Another abduction account came to the project early in its history. It could not be ignored because the witness was an engineer who owned a business in a local community and who insisted on seeing the committee and telling his tale. He was a repeater witness; his first UFO encounter occurred in 1913, and his CE4 in 1957. His decision to contact Colorado was also (like the lady from Texas) inspired by reading Fuller's book. The description of his case no longer exists in the project summaries, but a letter from the witness to NICAP (with a cc: to Condon) does describe his experience.

You are asleep. You suddenly wake up but are unable to move and are extremely conscious of an all-pervading

prickly sensation. You recognize the symptoms because this has happened hundreds of times before. Something is about to happen. WHAT, is uncertain, but you KNOW, consciously as the result of past and precedent-setting experiences, that no longer need you fear the event to take place because at any time subsequent you can instantly terminate the experience at will, should it tend to become too obnoxious or terrifying.

Five dark-complexioned and uniformed individuals are present and gazing down at you. “A preview,” one suggests with a smile. The others are silent. You agree, hinting that they can detain you only to the extent you choose. Nods and reassurances. They know it is true. Pajama-clad, you accompany them outside and seemingly zip into a portable medical examination room completely equipped. They switch to white smocks and gather around, two at each side and one at the head, as you are casually strapped down. They converse jovially in a language unknown and not even faintly familiar to you. “Blaze” (a hell of a name, you think secretly) advises you can talk through him. “Fine, what is the purpose?” you ask. He laughs, “Need to examine. Find out condition before flight. There are differences.”

He scrapes considerable epidermis off your feet. “Interesting but rather unusual,” is your thought, and “didn't realize so much could be scraped off.” Conversation. The other individual on your left and one on the right meanwhile examine your abdomen and genitals. Curious. One now holds a six-inch needle poised over your abdomen. “Hey! None of that! It might hurt.” Blaze reassures, “Relax; it won't hurt.” “Well . . .” doubtfully. He is right, strangely enough. But what a needle!

Assisted by the other on your right, the medic at your

head examines your eyes and face. Blaze prompts, "Repeat the words he speaks after him." O.K. The medic utters single words, presumably, and you repeat them after him consecutively as he flashes various lights in your eyes and seems to make measurements. You guess that he is counting in his tongue, and you are aware that the next number would be six. He utters a word. It's not easy to pronounce. "Six," you exclaim, and all five individuals burst into laughter. "You're all right," Blaze laughs.

A rather tall uniformed individual enters as your straps are removed. Top brass, you assume. "Take it easy with this one; it's new to him," Blaze admonishes. Agreement. They accompany you on board a ship fleetingly glimpsed or impressed as cigar-shaped and see that you are comfortably positioned and strapped into a bunk. They leave. You await movement and sense its start. You experience a feeling of intense acceleration—too intense—you lose consciousness. After a lapse of time, you are in your own bed and fully awake. Where the heck were they taking you? You receive a vague impression, "The planet 01 . . ." "Louder," you suggest. No response. Gone. Finis.

The project decided to examine the witness for psychological problems using university staff members David Saunders and Victor Raimy. They viewed the witness as being almost two people: one, a smooth, confident, literate man capable of talking coherently on almost any subject; the second, an anxious, rambling, nearly incoherent reporter when speaking of his UFO experiences. Raimy and Saunders used these different behaviors to write off the case as an individual suffering from "a circumscribed psychotic process which is extremely well compensated for" (Raimy) or "paranoid personality structure" (Saunders).

Raimy was actually quite impressed with the qualities of the witness. Saunders, paradoxically because he was the alleged UFO enthusiast of the two, was not. He flatly dismissed the case as "sufficient to warrant our *disinterest* as UFO investigators *at this time*." Neither man was seemingly willing to entertain what is to many people a reasonable hypothesis (even in psychology), to wit, that the remembrance of traumatic events creates an unnatural nervousness and personality change when such memories are being revisited. Instead, the case was simply dumped into the "ignore" file.

THE LIGHT TUNNEL

To complete this short excursion into one of many areas of lost opportunities by the Condon Committee, I turn next to a brief account from an intriguing letter from a fellow in Georgia. The witness was a conservative Christian who was having some difficulty explaining his experience in terms that his cosmology could accept, but he felt that it might be important to report it to the committee anyway.

He felt that his experience was something like a "religious dream vision" in which he was taken up to heaven. But it was a pretty peculiar taking up. Late one evening in 1949, he, his wife, and their child were sleeping. He awoke and a light beam entered the bedroom. A funnel or tunnel of light surrounded him on the bed. He was pulled upwards through the tunnel. He interpreted this as being raised up to Heaven and God. While in the tunnel he noticed that its sides were composed of bright, active round dots, and black dots that seemed a little further away. The bright dots would swarm together and this clustering appeared to push the black dots away. He interpreted these light forms as angels and devils, doubtless keeping him safe.

When he reached the end of the light tunnel, he was met by strange beings, humanlike but different. They had round eyes, a slit mouth without musculature, no nose, no ears, a pinkish chalk-colored skin, and didn't speak. To him they must have been some kind of being from the Apocalypse. All this will ring many bells with abduction investigators.

The Colorado project response was to file it under "Religious, psychological," not surprisingly.

One must wonder what UFO research might have been like if Colorado had been a serious, open-minded (dare one say "scientific?") research project. Might we have been able to establish a (relatively) uncontaminated set of CE4 cases with data gained under the auspices of a sanctioned academic study? What might that have meant for future research in this area? With what sounds like grays and bedroom visitation and missing time and posttraumatic stress disorder all inhabiting the dust-covered, rejected files of the project, this element of the UFO phenomenon might have been established, or at least clarified, 15 years before it arose from the work of a friendly UFO investigator and artist named Budd Hopkins.

Congratulations, Ed Condon, Bob Low, David Saunders, and Norm Levine. All of you, as usual, blew it. ♦

MARS ROVER SPOTS "UFO"

NASA scientists said March 18 that the Spirit rover on Mars apparently has spotted an unidentified flying object streaking across the planet's sky. The scientists said the object could be the first meteor seen from the surface of another planet, or another NASA spacecraft sent to explore Mars nearly 30 years ago.

The sighting was an accident. Spirit was photographing the Martian sky with its panoramic camera when one of the images it sent back to Earth contained a streak—the brightest object in the sky at the time.

Spirit's mission controllers said the streak probably was a meteor entering the thin Martian atmosphere at high speed. However, it also could have been the Viking 2 orbiter, which was sent to Mars in 1976 and is still circling the red planet in a polar orbit—a path that matches the direction of the streak in Spirit's photograph.—UPI, March 18, 2004.

In ufology, a close encounter is an event in which a person witnesses an unidentified flying object. This terminology and the system of classification behind it were first suggested in astronomer and UFO researcher J. Allen Hynek's 1972 book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry*. Categories beyond Hynek's original three have been added by others but have not gained universal acceptance, mainly because they lack the scientific rigor that Hynek aimed to bring to ufology.