

## The Day All Roads Led to Alamogordo

By Terry Clarke

A *Writer's Digest* subscriber with a rare capacity for leg work finds himself at the center of a number one world news story.

AS I FINISHED my 7:45 P. M. newscast, the little amber light above the console began to flash. Jay Bundy, our engineer at KALG, Alamogordo, N. M., calling from the transmitter, told me a rash of calls had come in while I was on the air. And people were still calling.

I switched the phone to an outside line. "KALG Radio."

"Look out toward the air base." It was a woman's voice, excited. "There's a funny light in the sky."

I'd just read a wire story on the newscast about an Unidentified Flying Object reported seen by a sheriff and several other motorists near Levelland, in West Texas. Sheriff Clem Weir and Texas Ranger Lee Hargrove, reported the sighting of a strange glowing object flitting across the sky that dimmed automobile headlights and killed car motors. A follow-up story included an account from two MP patrols at White Sands Proving Grounds, 40 miles south of Alamogordo, reporting a similar sighting during the night, near some bunkers used for the first atomic blast here in 1945.

I checked the southwestern sky from the control-room window, but the view of the air base, ten miles across the desert from the city, was obscured by dust.

The calls sounded like the kind we frequently got when there were Moby Dick

balloon launchings or rocket blastings from the firing range to the south and west of us, shared by the Air Force Missile Development Center and White Sands Proving Grounds. Because of the sightings I'd just reported on the air, I decided to check with Base Operations at the missile center.

Ken Prather, an old buddy when we'd both been assigned to the early "mis-guided missile operation" at Holloman with the air force during the Korean War, turned up on the other end of my call to Base Ops.

He said nobody had reported anything out of the way; suggested what people were seeing may have been the after-burners on two or three jet aircraft that were working a night mission over the rocket range between the air base and White Sands.

I was about to give up the call as a dry run, when Ken mentioned something that made my "news ear" perk up.

"I did hear something odd tonight, though," he said. "A major mentioned something about some engineer who works for him. Said he was driving about thirty miles south of here toward El Paso and White Sands on Highway 54 and something came along and killed his car radio and engine."

Ken didn't know the name of the observer, but he checked the flight roster and gave me the name of the major.

I called Major F home and asked him reported anything no gold mine thirty n grande.

He said one of h neer, had driven to and called him fre engineer seemed dis that had appeared and sent out some stalled his car and highway.

I pressed the n name.

"Jim Stokes."

I asked the ma Stokes' story.

"Well, he's a q about twenty year for me for a year the OD."

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I called Major Ralph Everetts at his  
home and asked him if one of his men had  
reported anything near the old abandoned  
gold mine thirty miles south near Oro-  
grande.

He said one of his men, a rocket engi-  
neer, had driven to El Paso that afternoon,  
and called him from there. He said the  
engineer seemed disturbed about an object  
that had appeared while he was en route  
and sent out some kind of heat wave that  
stalled his car and several others along the  
highway.

I pressed the major for the engineer's  
name.

"Jim Stokes."

I asked the major what he thought of  
Stokes' story.

"Well, he's a qualified engineer. Spent  
about twenty years in the navy. He's worked  
for me for a year and half. I reported it to  
the OD."

In air base directory, Stokes was listed  
as: *Stokes, James W., USNFR, 541 Linda  
Vista Drive, HEMLOCK 7-3575.*

I dialed Stokes' number. It had been  
disconnected.

\* Information gave me his new number on  
Michigan Avenue in Alamogordo. No an-  
swer. I figured he might not have made  
the ninety-mile trip back from El Paso yet.  
I decided to keep trying his number.

I called Debbie, a girl who's pretty toler-  
ant about such things, and asked her if she  
minded spending our date for the evening  
on a story instead of dinner at the Plaza  
and a movie. She said she'd fix some coffee  
and sandwiches and bring it to the studio  
while I worked on tracking down Stokes.

I wanted to get to him before the air  
force did.

Then I remembered The Flying Saucer  
Woman.

Coral Lorenzen was an old friend whom  
I'd come to jokingly call the flying saucer  
woman because of her interest in UFO's.  
She's the director of an information ex-  
change with the imposing name "AERIAL  
PHENOMENON RESEARCH ORGAN-  
IZATION" or APRO. For the past six

(SEE PAGE 27)

"Stokes cheeks were flushed and he seemed to be suffering from sunburn."





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years, along with fifteen hundred members in every country of the world outside the iron curtain, they had investigated over five thousand UFO sightings and reports. Coral tries to convince the powers-that-be that the flying saucers are real. Her APRO membership file, which I got a peek at, reads like a blue-book of scientists, physicists, aeronautical engineers in this country and overseas.

Just as I was about to dial Coral's number to see if Stokes had any connection with her organization, she called me.

"Hey," she said. "I just got a call from an engineer from the base who says he made a sighting today like what they reported at Levelland and White Sands over the weekend."

She said he'd called her a few minutes before from downtown and was on his way to her home.

I told her I'd like to get his story on tape before anybody had a chance to change it.

"I dunno about a tape," she said.

"Listen, Coral," I said, "hustle him down to KALG and let me get his story before he has a chance to tell it too many times and while it's still fresh in his mind."

We all rendezvoused at the KALG transmitter studios, south of the city, at 9:30; Coral, her husband Leslie, a technician at the missile center, Debbie, myself and Stokes.

The engineer's cheeks were flushed and he seemed to be suffering from a sunburn. He couldn't sit down, kept fumbling for cigarettes he didn't have. Young looking for 45, full-faced and stocky, he spoke with a kind of enigmatic southwestern drawl. He had a puffy look about him, as though if you were to stick him with a needle he'd explode.

I offered him a cigarette and, without giving him much time to unwind, I suggested we make a test tape, then play his story back to him.

We had the tape cut in time for the ten o'clock news.

### The Stokes Transcript

Q. Mr. Stokes, you say you had a rather unusual experience today along with several other people. What time did this occur?

A. Ten minutes past one this afternoon.

Q. Where were you when this happened?

A. I was on Highway 54, going to El Paso, about eight miles the other side of Orogrande. And the first indication of trouble with my car was when the radio began to fade. Then my automobile began slowing down and came to a stop. Dead motor. Ahead of me, several cars were stopped on the side of the road and the people were pointing up to the sky. I immediately got out my notebook and observed this object . . . it was an egg-shaped-looking object . . . color white on kind of cream-colored . . . and it was coming from the northeast over the Sacramento Mountains, going at a tremendous, terrific speed. As it passed over us, I experienced a warm feeling . . .

Q. Like a sunlamp?

A. Yes . . . I suppose it was like a sunlamp. And then it disappeared and made a 45-degree turn and went over to the Organ Pass. Then this little group of us talked this thing over. Mr. Duncan, I believe, got some photos of it and told me he was going to take them to the El Paso Times or Herald-Post.

Q. Were the other folk's cars affected the way yours was, sir?

A. Every car stopped.

Q. The engines died?

A. Absolutely dead.

Q. And what speed would you estimate this UFO was moving?

A. We estimated it at about Mach Two . . . or up to twenty-five hundred. That's a very rough guess . . . it was going so fast. And I'd say the object was about five hundred feet long.

Q. Did it seem to have depth?

A. Yes, it did. It was oval shaped.

Q. Could you see any distinguishing marks on it?

A. No. No vapor trails or anything of that description. It was a solid object. Definitely a solid object.

Q. Was there any sign of fire or smoke coming from it?

A. No sign of fire. No scintillations or reverberations.

Q. There was no sound whatsoever?



A. No sound, with the exception of a light heat wave that transversed over the area.

Q. Could you feel it?

A. We all felt it.

Q. You say there were clouds in the sky, but they were above the area where you saw the flying saucer?

A. The flying object was intermittent, in and out of the clouds. It was in a shallow dive. It also made one pass at the road . . . turned about 90 degrees and then back toward Organ Pass.

Q. How far was the object from you when it made the pass at the road?

A. I expect it was about a mile or two miles away from us.

Q. That's pretty doggone close. Now that you've seen this strange phenomenon, do you have any personal conclusions about what it might be?

A. No comment on that.

Q. Have you ever experienced anything similar to this in the past?

A. No.

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A. That's about all. I just hope we're ready for whatever it is.

Q. Are you engaged in electronic-type work now?

A. I'm in high altitude research . . . engineering work.

After we listened to the broadcast of the tape, I walked with Stokes out to his car, the new 1957 Mercury he said had stalled out at the time of the sighting. I thanked him and went back to work.

After doing a couple of hours of research with Debbie and sending out feelers for any other possible witnesses to the sighting, I did a straight news story for the wire services.

Bill Dickenson, United Press Bureau Chief in Santa Fe, routed the story through Bill Hoyt at the UP Denver Bureau, who had called me earlier in the day for more details on the MP's sighting at White Sands.

I sent a similar story to Whitie Star at AP in Dallas, who was interested in its possible connection with the West Texas sightings.

Then I took Debbie home; she thanked

me for a "charming" date. I drove up to my bachelor quarters on the hill above the city, thinking about the story; that it might make a good regional kicker. And I went to bed and forgot about Stokes and UFO'S and dreamed of the possibilities of the women on Venus.

AT 6:00 A.M. CBS-TV in New York was the first to call. I was groggy when I answered the bedside telephone: I had filed the last story to the wire services at 3 a.m. CBS wanted to know about picture possibilities. At 6:05 a.m., Nickie Tapino of United Press, a tranquillizer-pill-eating type, called wanting to know if I had any more on Stokes' sighting. I told him I'd just filed the story three hours ago.

"Great story, man! But we gotta have more," he said. "What's the Air Force doing?"

"Hell, I don't think the general's up yet," I said. "But I expect to hear from Stokes as soon as they talk to him."

Don Hormell, the morning man at our station called next. "They're driving me crazy with calls for you down here. St. Paul and Fort Worth. They carried your Stokes story on the 'A' wire all over the country and listed you as the source."

I had a quick cup of instant black coffee and went down to the studio.

Calls came in from all over the country. Bill Crago of KFNB, the *Mirror-News* station in Hollywood, wanted to record a "beeper" interview over the phone for broadcast out there.

I told him I could give him something better than an interview with me.

Our engineer, Jay Bundy, made a couple of dubs of the interview I'd taped with Stokes, and morning man Don Hormell, who'd finished his early air shift by then, and I set things up to play the tape over the beeper phone, so that Bill Crago could record it in Hollywood.

Joan Price, our KALG girl Friday, took the incoming calls from stations across the nation wanting the Stokes eye-witness account of his UFO sighting.

By 9 o'clock we were twenty calls behind. We set up a rotation system and returned

calls, played the stations and TV filled them in on their original call.

Alan Saunders, Ontario, Canada, UFO sighting then report for comparison. I offered to put tape (about 10 minutes) said his long-distance sinking and he could long. So, I gave him a tape.

Jane Choll of the Las Vegas Bureau. She was doing a special on flying saucer sightings West Texas over the I gave her the tape with information.

Sands on their sighting the wire story I'd services never carry ways cut to a word York (in this case) wire, 600 for the news filled in the details. I asked me to call back with whatever else I

While I was talking Jack Olson of TIME from Chicago. He Chicago policemen identified flying object. He said later he had hearing them tell of a "believer" out of his

It was Tuesday and we had already been wanted a detailed interview promised to call him my phone stopped ringing that day.

My little regional world news.

We fed the tape to the newsroom in New York for called. Al Capstan dub of the Stokes tape for their weekend-long

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calls, played the tape for recording by radio stations and TV outlets in distant cities, and filled them in on later details, in the order their original calls came in.

Alan Saunders of CKMC in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, called to say he'd made a UFO sighting there and he wanted a beeper report for comparison with his own sighting. I offered to play him the entire Stokes tape (about 10 minutes' duration), but he said his long-distance phone-call fund was sinking and he couldn't afford anything that long. So, I gave him a three-minute summary.

Jane Choll of LIFE called from their Dallas Bureau. She said LIFE was thinking of doing a special story on the outbreak of flying saucer sightings that had started in West Texas over the weekend.

I gave her the text of Stokes' story along with information I gleaned from White Sands on their sighting. She said she'd seen the wire story I'd filed, but said the wire services never carry a story in-toto, but always cut to a word limit assigned by New York (in this case 250 words for the radio wire, 600 for the newspaper wire). After I filled in the details her sources lacked, she asked me to call before her Friday deadline with whatever else came up.

While I was talking with LIFE in Dallas, Jack Olson of TIME MAGAZINE called me from Chicago. He had the report of the Chicago policemen who had chased an unidentified flying object in their police car. He said later he had talked with them and hearing them tell of their experience made a "believer" out of him.

It was Tuesday and the week's issue of TIME had already been put to bed. But Jack wanted a detailed fill for next week. I promised to call him more details as soon as my phone stopped ringing. It never stopped that day.

My little regional kicker blossomed to world news.

We fed the tape to the Mutual Network newsroom in New York. Then NBC-Monitor called. Al Capstaff asked me to send a dub of the Stokes tape to him air-express for their weekend-long show.

Then we got word from the Air Force

Missile Development Center ten miles from town.

The Pentagon had seen or heard my story and called the Missile Center wanting to know what was going on.

And with the five-sided shadow of the Pentagon over them, officials at the missile center here had called in Stokes and interrogated him behind closed doors.

I called PIO at the air base, along with the wire services, news magazines, newspapers and half the other radio stations in the United States. No word coming out.

Then station owner Wayne Phelps, station manager Bob Hoffman and myself had a conference. We had no way of knowing whether Stokes was telling the Air Force the same story he had told me, or whether he decided to deny everything under questioning.

We decided to continue using and feeding the story until we could get some kind of definite statement from the Air Force. We were practically running our own news network and more and more calls continued to come in from all over the United States and Canada.

Then General L. I. Davis, the center commander, called. He wanted to hear the taped interview with Stokes.

I played it for him over the phone. From the general's tone when I finished playing the tape, I guessed Stokes had told the Air Force officials the same amazing story he'd told me.

Then, after the general told me he had no statement to make at the time, I called Col. John McCurdy and Lt. Virgil Dominick of the Public Information Office at the center.

I asked them if they believed Stokes' story.

"We have no choice," they said. "He's a recognized engineer and a retired Chief Petty Officer with 24 years' experience in the navy. He should know what he sees."

I breathed a sigh of relief. For I remembered what Col. John P. Stapp (of fastest-man-on-earth fame) had told me when I did a story for the Air Force on his faster-than-sound ride on a rocket sled.

"When a man is under the pressure of interrogation, he's liable to deny his own

**As a writer, what's your opinion of Terry Clarke? Did he turn leg work and energy into a news carnival just for the pure kick of it; or did he have a genuine story? Were you Terry Clarke, what would you have done?**

name. And when a man sees something, and people appear to doubt him, he's apt to reverse himself rather than risk being held up to ridicule."

ABOUT MID-AFTERNOON the UFO story got another shot in the arm. A Coast Guard Cutter in the Gulf of Mexico reported spotting a UFO similar to the one Stokes had described. They got a visual fix, picked up on their radar.

Then the tone of calls coming in from listeners and newsmen from across the country began to change. A note of anxiety crept into their voices. And I talked to more "believers" that afternoon.

We got a flood of calls when the Air Force released an ill-timed Moby Dick weather balloon over the city.

Voices bordered on hysteria. We put on bulletins that there were no flying saucers hovering over the city, only a gas-filled plastic bag, shaped like a translucent ice-cream cone, bobbing in space.

By late afternoon, still no trace had been found of the other witnesses to Stokes' sighting. If the Air Force had found any, they weren't letting it get out.

But the Air Force officials at the missile center still declined to discount Stokes' story.

Newsmen and I discussed this at the wire services, and radio stations. News magazines told me that if the Air Force people were still buying Stokes' story, then they must know something we didn't.

Late in the day the missile test center had appointed a special officer and put him in charge of the growing UFO investigation. Major Dwight Hillis was given the title: "Center Co-ordinator of Unidentified Flying Object Reports."

The hole in the Stokes story, as far as I am concerned, is that I was unable to reach the other witnesses that Stokes reported had seen the object while their cars were stalled on Highway 54.

Sometimes, when you're on a story like this, new leads sometimes make up for dead ends. Reports came to us that Trent Lindsay, 50, owner of a local finance company, his wife and his 22-year-old son, Byron, a

graduate of Texas A&M, was driving on Highway 54, and had seen the actions of the object. He was the first individual to report it this way in a newspaper.

Q. Had you been driving your speedometer?

A. Not until after the sighting. We were driving about 20 miles per hour when the speedometer showed 110 miles per hour.

Q. Did you see a bright cylindrical object ahead of us towards the highway? We had passed right up high. I'd guess it was about 100 feet high.

Q. Did the speedometer show 110 miles per hour?

A. It seemed to me that the object was traveling at a speed that would have caused the speedometer to show that way.

Q. Was the object moving in a curve?

A. Not exactly. It's curved in the curvature of the earth.

Q. Did all the witnesses see it?

A. (All nodding) Yes, we all agreed it was traveling at that speed.

Q. How long did it stay in the air?

A. About three minutes. We slowed down to about 20 miles per hour when we were attracted in. After it passed, it disappeared.

Q. Did the object have any lights?



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Stokes' role in the Stokes story, as far as I am concerned, is that I was unable to reach the witnesses that Stokes reported had seen the object while their cars were stalled on Highway 54.

At times, when you're on a story like this, leads sometimes make up for dead ends. Reports came to us that Trent Lindner, owner of a local finance company, and his 22-year-old son, Byron, a

graduate of Texas University, were traveling in the same vicinity as Stokes, on Highway 54, and had seen a strange object and the actions of the speedometer of their car was the first indication. Byron Lindsay told it this way in a tape-recorded interview:

Q. Had you had previous trouble with your speedometer?

A. Not until about 9:30 this morning. We were driving south toward El Paso, about 20 miles away from Alamogordo, when the speedometer jumped from 60 to 110 miles per hour. Then we saw it. A bright cylindrical-shaped object, moving ahead of us toward the southwest. It must have passed right over the car. But it was up high. I'd guess about 10,000 feet.

Q. Did the speedometer continue to spin?

A. It seemed to lean in the direction the object was traveling. Then, when the object disappeared over the Organ Mountains, the speedometer returned to normal... and stayed that way.

Q. Was the object traveling horizontally?

A. Not exactly. It didn't fly levelly like a plane. Its course seemed to follow the curvature of the earth.

Q. Did all three of you see the same thing?

A. (All nodding yes) Yes. And we all agreed it was traveling at a tremendous rate of speed.

Q. How long did you observe the object?

A. About three minutes. When we saw it, we slowed down almost to a stop, but the speedometer didn't return to zero. It seemed to be attracted in the direction of the object. After it passed, it returned to normal again.

Q. Did the object look like any aircraft

type you've seen in the skies in this area?

A. It had no lines or angles like a conventional aircraft.

I discussed this report with Jack Sampson of the AP Albuquerque Bureau. He thought this sighting, almost identical to Stokes' except for the effect on the speedometer, rather than the car engine, added to the credibility of Stokes' story.

Next I checked with a mechanic acquainted with the make-up of speedometers in 1954 Mercury cars.

I was told that modern speedometers do not work on a strictly mechanical principle. They contain a magnet in an aluminum housing and the needle moves with eddy currents. Thus, he said, a speedometer could be made to act erratically under some other magnetic influence.

I put all the loose ends together, combined all the UFO tapes I'd made including interviews on the Levelland incident, the MP patrols report from White Sands, the official reports on UFO's from the Air Force Missile Development Center and a taped interview with Coral Lorenson on the history of UFO reports. We devoted our entire 10 o'clock newscast to the UFO story.

Then I relayed all the new information I'd gathered to the wire services, news magazines and other radio stations who'd asked for it.

I drove home that night, thinking over the events since I asked Stokes to make the tape 24 hours ago. And I wondered, if I hadn't gotten to him before officials released the story, would the story ever had seen the light of day?

### SACKCLOTH AND SILK

Clothe me in sackcloth,  
Mark me with ashes;  
Dress me in silks  
With bright-colored sashes.  
The saintly are shining,  
The sinners, forbearing,  
And I never know  
Which clothes I am wearing.

—Ralph W. Seager

(*The Lyric*, Summer, 1957)