

Analysis of the CHILES-WHITTED Sightings, July 24 1948

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SUMMARY

There is nothing in this case that convincingly rules out a fragmenting fireball, and the "airship effect" which causes the eye to see a line of glowing fragments as lighted windows in an elongated machine has been a widely known feature of such sightings at least since Hartmann made a pretty good study of it in the Condon Report. Other observers in neighbouring states saw on their far western horizon an "unusually bright meteor" that could have been the same fireball on a near-horizontal trajectory heading SW over the Alabama-Georgia border area. Chiles-Whitted saw it only for a few seconds going by above and to their right heading SW on a near reciprocal heading to them but miles higher and much faster than they thought. As it approached them, the angular rate of the object would rise geometrically in a hockey-stick curve which, interpreted in terms of an illusory near-miss with another "aircraft", could suggest the appearance of a climb and an avoiding veer. According to most SIGN sources the apparent climb was said by the pilots to be relatively small, "gentle" or a "tendency", apparently only a few hundred feet, not the dramatic "fast vertical" evasion described years later and in some newspapers. Newspaper stories of turbulent prop-wash or jet-wash were also repudiated by Chiles and Whitted in their official statements. Also the sighting was not under a solid cloud deck as sometimes reported. The night was "bright moonlit" and "clear" with excellent visibility and only "light, broken" clouds (4/10 according to AF weather report), and the only passenger witness, McKelvie, was watching the "clearly visible" moonlit landscape on the right of the plane at the time, consistent with the requirement of plenty of clear sky and/or thin cloud through which the fireball might have been seen (other observers to the East - in the sighting direction - were reporting clear skies and *no* cloud). There were two possible meteor shower radiants in the right part of the NE sky: the Beta Taurids and especially the Perseids (although it is true that exceptional fireballs are not necessarily associated with showers).

THE CLIMB

Some newspaper stories, and a late description of a "fast vertical ascent" given by Whitted to McDonald in 1968, have fostered the impression that this climb was too violent to have been an illusion. The Atlanta Constitution, July 25 1948

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1441>

describes how the object "pulled up with a tremendous burst of flame out of its rear and zoomed up into the clouds".

McDonald's account too has been very influential:

But both agreed, then and in my 1968 interview, that the object was some kind of vehicle Both saw it pass aft of them and do an abrupt pull-up; but only Whitted, on the right side, saw the terminal phase in which the object disappeared after a short but fast vertical ascent. By "disappeared", Whitted made clear to me that he meant just that; earlier interrogations evidently construed this to mean "disappeared aloft" or into the broken cloud deck that lay above them. Whitted said that was not so; the object vanished instantaneously after its sharp pull-up. . . . A horizontally-moving fireball under a cloud-deck, at 5000 ft., exhibiting two rows of lights construed by experienced pilots as ports, and finally executing a most non-ballistic 90-degree sharp pull-up, is a strange fireball indeed.

Most SIGN documents are inconsistent with these impressions of a sharp 90-degree pull-up and vertical ascent, including Chiles' and Whitted's official signed statements, which refer to the climb only vaguely and not at all, respectively.



LOCATIONS, TIMES AND REPORTED OBJECT HEADINGS

The phrase "pulled up sharply" does occur in one SIGN summary of the case and we can trace this to the Incident #144 CHECKLIST

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-37>

where it is referenced originally to the 'Atlanta Constitution July 25 1948' (see above).

The earliest SIGN source I've found is in the form of a handwritten and only partly intelligible mass of notes on a sheet of paper bearing an Atlanta hotel letterhead and what appears to be the name "Loedding" with the date "7/26/48". Presumably this sheet is Alfred Loedding's notes of his interview with C and/or W, written the day after the Atlanta newspaper story appeared.

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-31>

Here Loedding writes "climbed sharply to higher level approx 5 seconds in level flight" and the word "sharply" is annotated with: "pulled up, indicated [illegible, possibly *considerable*] acceleration (g's)", which is at odds with the impression in other SIGN docs that the apparent climb was "gentle" and is closer the newspaper stories. But the attribution on the CHECKLIST suggests that this information was drawn from the Atlanta Constitution article, which could well fit because this had been published the day before Loedding's interview in Atlanta.

It has been suggested that the apparent climb was an illusion caused by the DC-3's own evasive motion, but as Don Ledger points out (currentencounters list post 12.02.11) this does not really make sense in terms of instinctive pilotage, when the control inputs would be balanced to maintain altitude in a left bank. If anything the wing coming up would encourage an impression of a descent relative to the a/c reference frame, and experienced pilots would not likely be deceived by this well-understood effect. And illusions due to relative latitudinal motions are probably unnecessary anyway. If they saw a fireball the climb can probably be explained by how the eye perceives the changing angular relationship of objects converging on two essentially antiparallel straight paths when distance and speed are misjudged.

If the light had been another aircraft in the troposphere, approaching approximately literally head-on and possibly co-altitudinal as they thought, then their experience and judgment could correctly interpret the way it appeared to change angular position as it passed over them and present to their minds the correct intuitive picture of a familiar plane passing by at a certain distance and altitude that they could roughly estimate.

But if unknown to them it is really a high-speed fireball much further away and much higher, then plugging erroneous assumptions into this sort of intuitive calculation will yield a model of the object's motion that is incorrect but nevertheless convincing.

In the fireball case, the rapidly increasing, very large angular rate will tend to suggest that the "aircraft" is veering off its assumed head-on course as the brain tries to adjust its assumptions to the changing angular geometry.

It can be argued that a pilot who knows from long experience what is happening when another plane passes by would not mistakenly interpret an accelerating angular rate of climb for a real climb. But the point seems to be that if it is a really a meteor, and if you think it is some type of nearby aircraft ten times closer and a hundred times slower, then you *don't* know what is happening, you only *think* you know what is happening. What you expect to happen, if you think that you are seeing some type of aircraft converging with you on a reciprocal heading, is that it will go over the top of you at a constant and fairly sedate apparent true speed. When this happens your expectation is confirmed; your mental set based on familiar experience is validated. But if it is a fireball then it behaves unexpectedly. Exactly because you do think you know what is happening (being an expert means being so familiar with your usual working environment that you do expect to understand it) you can interpret what happens using inappropriate expectations.

If it was a fireball (in the order of) ten times as far away and travelling a hundred times as fast as they expected, the increase in horizontal *and* vertical angular rates would be anomalously fast in terms of their expectation. One way of the brain making sense of that is to dump the original expectation and say "OK, it must be *hugely* faster and further away than I thought, so must be a meteor". The other way is to preserve the original mental set but tweak the details, so you say "I still see some sort of nearby aircraft, but it must be a *bit* faster than an aircraft and it must have climbed over me", i.e. a UFO.

THE "JET-WASH"

On the day after the event, July 25 1948, the newspaper Atlanta Constitution carried a very influential story by Albert Riley

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which quoted Chiles as describing how the object "pulled up with a tremendous burst of flame out of its rear and zoomed up into the clouds. Its prop-wash or jet-wash rocked our DC-3".

Some other 1948 papers also contain the reference to jet wash. Some don't. It would be interesting if tedious to map the threads of wire-service stories and simple copycat reporting through this mess of reportage to work out the history. Did Chiles (and/or Whitted) give this story to multiple outlets? Or would we find it was a meme that replicated and spread from just one original news source?

Against this we have the witnesses' signed official statements both denying that they had felt any sort of wash or turbulence.

Chiles: "There was no prop wash or rough air felt as it passed."

Whitted: "We heard no noise nor did we feel any turbulence from the object."

And Loedding's interview notes dated July 26 1948

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-31>

say "no noise" and "no disturbance felt regarding any waves or wash".

After his 1968 interviews (House Committee on Science & Astronautics Symposium July 1968 pp.42-3) McDonald put the matter very delicately: "There is uncertainty in the record, and in their respective recollections, as to whether the DC-3 was rocked by something like a wake". This appears to imply that in 1968 one of the men was claiming to recall a wash disturbance effect which he had explicitly repudiated in 1948.

The passenger witness, McKelvie, did mention that he felt an unusual amount of vibration, but this may not be significant. Some ordinary turbulence is not unexpected at 5000 ft.

THE "ROCKET" WITH WINDOWS

The appearance of a fragmenting bolide can be weird. The "airship effect" gives you the flaming cigar with windows. Hartmann's 1968 study of the eyewitness descriptions of Titan 3 C-4 Sept 1967 and Zond IV March 1968 re-entries and the Feb 1913 Great Lakes meteor train or fragmented bolide is instructive - especially the latter because neither UFOs nor rockets even existed yet. All of them have many examples of the "machine with lines of illuminated windows" type, even down to the "double deck" in the 1913 case. Very similar to Chiles-Whitted:

"The series of lights travelled in unison and so horizontal that I could think only of a giant flying machine"

"They did not seem to be falling as meteors usually do... our first impression was of a fleet of illuminated airships"

"a large airplane or dirigible with two tiers of lights strung along the sides"

Chiles and Whitted? No. The disintegrating fireball train that passed 46 miles up over Ontario on Feb 9 1913.

"wingless airplane-looking vehicle... on fire in front and behind.... many windows"

"fat cigar... square shaped windows"

"solid rocket-type vehicle with three lights"

Chiles and Whitted? No, re-entry of Zond IV March 3 1968.

The C-W event was very short. The duration 5-10 sec could even be a significant overestimate, given the typical "slow-motion" effect of shocking circumstances. A longer figure of 10-15 sec is given on the Incident #144 CHECKLIST but where this originally comes from is uncertain. Chiles said in his own signed statement it might have been visible for 10 seconds. Whitted said 5 seconds, but not more than 10 seconds. The earliest file source for the figure of 10-15 sec is the sheet of handwritten notes dated July 26 made by Loedding after his interview with C-W in Atlanta. Did C & W think about it and change their minds about this later, as well as reducing the 10-15 seconds to 5-10? Possibly. But it may even have come from a newspaper story read by Loedding when in Atlanta. It remains an uncomfortable fact that the previous day's 'Atlanta Constitution' is referenced twice as a source for other data in the Incident #144 CHECKLIST.

And how significant is 5-10 (or even 15) seconds? The Zond IV re-entry I already referred to

and which was seen as a cigar fuselage with not only windows but even riveted panels (!) was estimated to pass by in "about half a minute" (travelling an apparent 150 yds only 1 mile south of the observer). The 1913 Great Lakes fireball train - perceived in the same "airship" terms even then - took much longer. One witness who thought of headlights on an aircraft said "after a minute or a minute and a half I could see it was a meteor."

Massey's description of a cylindrical object over Robins AFB with a "faint phosphorescent glow on the belly of the object", a "trailing faint blue flame" and a "long stream of fire coming out of the tail end" is very similar to C/W's.

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1399>

He was asked if he was aware of C/W's story before reporting. A comment in Capt. Sneider's evaluation comments that there was no chance of cross-influence between Massey and C/W. At the time of original reporting this may be true. But by the time of this interview Massey answered a question if he was aware of the C/W sighting, replying that he was, having read it in the papers. So perhaps the possibility of influence by the time of his detailed report cannot be ruled out as a factor encouraging his impressions.

On the other hand, an early July 24 message from Maxwell Flight Service Centre to HQ MATS

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1393>

describes Massey already reporting a "squash-shaped object with a flaming exhaust", which - assuming "squash" indicates a basically elongated or ovoid body with one end possibly more pointed - does seem to confirm that Massey reported something similar in shape to C/W from the very first, not just in his later interview after he read it in the papers (see below for more on this message).

Indeed, when asked in his interview about possible "windows" and "decks divided into sections", Massey replied that he wasn't sure: "It would be hard to tell if there were windows, and a divided deck could not be recognised from the ground", which from the UFO point of view is the right answer considering that he saw it pass "overhead". But if he saw the same fragmented fireball as C/W, and if the fragments were the "windows", why did Massey *not* see any "windows"?

OTHER FIREBALL REPORTS?

It is true that we don't have many reports of possible simultaneous fireball sightings in the Chiles-Whitted case.

It would be helpful to have some idea of how many witnesses/reports might be expected. The 1968 Zond IV re-entry I mentioned had hundreds of witnesses from Kentucky to Pennsylvania. That was at 9:45 PM EST. In the 1967 Titan 3 C-4 re-entry, Hartmann "solicited observations through a local newspaper" and received a total 15 reports. It was 9:53 PM MDST. In the C/W case I count a possible total of only 9 recorded witnesses associated with similar reports along a rough corridor from Virginia to Alabama, see attached map.

The hour of the night is not favourable, and as Kevin Randle pointed out (currentencounters list post 12.02.11) the news outlets in 1948 were very limited, compared even to 1968. Nevertheless we have only this short list of possibles in the SIGN file:

- civilian on fire watch, Robins AFB, 0145
- pilot near Blackstone, Virginia, 0230
- aircrew en route Blackstone-Greenboro North Carolina, 0230
- aircrew + passenger near Montgomery, Alabama 0245
- 2 hunters near Covington, Georgia "about 0300"

(+ sightings by at least seven persons in Augusta, Ga, area, mentioned in the file but apparently confirmed as having happened 2 days later July 26. There was also a flap of reports in the Pacific NW on the evening of the C/W sighting, but evidently also unrelated)

One approach to these different times is to take them seriously and say they represent different points on the track of a real UFO flying over the area. But they don't make a coherent track at all. They are all over the place (see map). Considered as sightings of nearby objects at low level in local airspace, none of these trajectories forms a continuous track with another. Yet they are similar reports of a similar fireball-type object travelling in the same direction in a similar rough time frame.

If there is a connection, what is it? A shower of unusual meteors? Unlikely. If there were multiple fireballs of course that would only multiply the expected number of witnesses (and fireballs do not occur in showers and are not especially associated with meteor showers either).

Capt Sneider's report concludes:

COMMENTS: Analysis of data under Incident #144 reveals that four separate cases are involved; one having occurred on 24 July 1948 and the others on the 26 July 1948. A preponderance of evidence is available to establish that in almost all cases an unidentified object was seen within stated times and dates over an extended area, pursuing a general Southerly course. Descriptions as to size, shape, color and movements are fairly consistent.

Sneider's language is as clear as mud but what he meant was this: The Covington report was in a newspaper cutting and apparently was considered only background info, so we can reduce it to 4 separate official reports on 24 July. Then the Blackstone and Blackstone-Greenboro reports are being collapsed into one "case" (Incident #2). And the Robins and C/W reports are collapsed into another (Incident #1), so we get down to two "cases" separated by about 500 miles. You could then make it "one case" by assuming a UFO flying at 2000 mph from Virginia to Alabama, but this is not what Sneider was thinking. He was dismissing the eastern pilot sightings as unrelated sightings of "a very unusual meteor" meteor, the rationale being as follows:

This sighting is considered separately since the descriptions of speed as "meteoric" and "terrific", the manner of travel described as an arc or horizontal, and the fact that it "faded like a meteor" seem to indicate that the object seen was not the one observed in Incident #1.

[See http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-20](http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-20)

So Sneider says there was only one true unknown, one "case", sighted at two places, which was "obviously not a meteor".

But I'm uncomfortable with this method and I suspect the "meteor" seen from Blackstone-Greenboro *could* have been a distant fireball also seen by C/W [and by Massey if the 1-hour time glitch can be repaired].

Reports from the two other planes

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-39>

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-41>

describe a "meteor brighter than any ever seen before" or what "appeared to be a rocket trail" travelling at apparent altitude but "on the distant western horizon", "20deg above the horizon", "slightly above the horizon", on a "southwest heading" (210/230 deg) and "appeared to be

travelling horizontally". One plane was on a heading of 215 deg, the other on 240 deg, so they saw it receding more or less ahead of them or ahead and to their right. One plane noted the trail covering 80-90deg of azimuth. The other saw it for 3 seconds, but conceivably because of the way they were facing (SW) they could have missed the start of the incandescence and only noticed it as the meteor tracked SW into their forward field of view.

Say the Blackstone-Greenboro area planes are at 5000ft (probably less in the one case where he'd just taken off) the horizon is about 85 miles away. Another object at 6000 ft (i.e., if really below the clouds near Montgomery, Al., as C-W thought) would be below the curve of the horizon - unless it was closer than about 180 miles. The Alabama-Georgia border area is ~500 mi away, and a fireball tracking anywhere near the zenith there would have to be in the order of 100,000ft up to even peek over the horizon for our pilots near Blackstone-Greenboro. They saw it some degrees up over their western horizon, an estimated 20 degs - probably an exaggeration, but that fireball could have been maybe 40 miles up over the Alabama-Georgia border area and so tens of miles away from C/W, travelling at tens of thousands of MPH. The angular rate then would be proportional to an object a tenth of a mile away travelling hundreds of MPH, and this could be what C/W saw going by as it broke into fragments high over S Alabama.

Personally I think we need very strong reasons not to regard these sightings as confirming a high altitude fireball far to the west, on a heading that would fit the C/W sighting. The only real strong argument is the reported time discrepancy, and I'm not sure that this is strong enough for reasons already discussed.

TIMING

But if they are all one and the same fireball the scatter of times must be due to error. Is this possible? It does happen. For example, I recall the wide scatter of times in reports of the March 1993 Cosmos re-entry over the UK (the so-called "RAF Cosford incident"): there was a cluster of times around the re-entry time of about 0100, but related outliers occurred from 0015 to 0200.

As chance would have it, while we were discussing this Joel Carpenter posted (currentencounters list post 15.02.11) hot news of a fireball seen all over the NE states of the US, see:

http://www.amsmeteors.org/fireball2/public.php?start_date=2011-01-01&end_date=2011-12-31

Joel points out that according to the comments most witnesses thought (mistakenly) that it fell nearby. Also, Look at the spread of times reported for the same event - from 12:10 EST to 13:00 EST, with outliers from 11:45 to 13:15. And this is when everyone is plugged in to mobile phones, laptops, GPS, digital watches, 24-hr TV, radio and internet.

In the 1948 case the Covington hunters' memory of "about 0300" is probably not difficult to deal with, given the admitted uncertainty and likely circumstances. (This parallels vague reports in the 1993 Cosford case made by a couple of eel fishermen and a scout troop camping in the hills, where the times recorded were very wide of the true time at 2100 and 0200 respectively. These are a] situations where people are not attentive to the time in the first place and b] where reliable primary sources might be lacking and where misleading times may be associated with them in secondary sources.)

Massey at Robins AFB said it "came out of the north" and "headed southwest". This could easily put it on the trajectory reciprocal to C/W BUT this depends on a 1-hour confusion (i.e. with time zones as SIGN speculated, but discounted). The time given is 0140-0150 EST in Macon Georgia. The plane from Houston was apparently reporting time as 0245, also EST. But it has to be admitted that the file is a bit confused. One SIGN doc has 0345 on the Chiles-

Whitted report and another has a hand-correction from 0245 to 0340.

The Blackstone-Greenboro air sightings were reported as 0230 EST and appear to be a fireball - SIGN treat them as such and thus irrelevant to the "unexplained" Montgomery case. But the direction of travel (SW) is the same as the Robins AFB sighting and the Montgomery sighting. The object seen by the hunters near Covington, Ga, was also probably a brilliant meteor, only a few seconds, and again in the right direction (W rather than SW, but reconcilable).

The Robins AFB report by Massey the civilian watchman is problematical. Because of the similarity of description and the exact one-hour discrepancy, SIGN initially suspected a time-zone error, suggesting that the airline reporting times would not be EST, but they appear to have dropped that idea. I don't know how to resolve this in favour of the fireball theory, but it has to be uncomfortable for the UFO theory that the suspicion exists. Perhaps Massey or the interviewer made an erroneous 'correction' at source?

Massey's description is very similar to C/W's. He was asked if he was aware of C/W's story before reporting. A comment in Sneider's evaluation comments that there was no chance of cross-influence between Massey and C/W. At the time of original reporting this may be true. But we have little information about what he reported then (see below). By the time of his interview Massey answered a question if he was aware of the C/W sighting, replying that he was, having read it the papers. So perhaps the possibility of influence by the time of his detailed report describing "windows" etc cannot be ruled out.

The three aircrew reports, two in Virginia and one in Alabama, are more interesting: two at 0230 and one at 0245. If the two eastern reports are independent of one another, one would say that 0230 gets the majority vote, so might there be an explanation of why the other time was reported as 0245? Speculation, of course, but there might be, if C/W had a reason for delaying the time of their report.

When C/W reported this apparent air-miss by radio they asked about military traffic conflicts etc in the area. But they didn't do this immediately. They apparently first talked to the passenger witness, McKelvie. His own report commented that the crew seemed excited and nervous about what had happened. Perhaps they discussed it because they were unsure about whether to report a UFO or not. When they decided to, it may have occurred to them not to emphasise the fact that they had delayed in making this report of a potential collision hazard in the civil air lanes. Consequently they may have reported it as occurring closer to the time of their radio report, or allowed this to be assumed. Thus 0245 gets recorded as the event time instead of some time nearer to 0230.

As I said, pure speculation, but we can take this a bit further:

Brad Sparks points out (currentencounters list post 14.02.11) that they had an ETA of 0253 at Montgomery, Al., ~20-25 mi NE of their reported position at the sighting time. (I didn't realise until now that they landed at Montgomery, I thought they flew on to Atlanta. Well, in fact they were apparently scheduled to go to Atlanta via Columbus, too, but skipped Columbus because of fog.) So the sighting window, during level cruise and therefore prior to starting descent from 5000ft @ 500ft/min ~10 mins out, would be before ~0243.

Then consider that Chiles said: "After it passed we must have sat there for five minutes without saying a word we were so speechless"

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1441>

Does this hiatus suggest they were not immediately thinking about starting their descent to Montgomery at the time? If it does (and I think so) then it would tend to push the time back well before 0243, possibly to about 0238, helping to repair discrepancy with the Blackstone-area pilots' fireball "about 0230".

This might be consistent with my speculative suggestion that C/W allowed it to be assumed that the sighting happened immediately before the radio reporting time, at about 0245, when in fact there had been an understandable delay in deciding to report.

I had thought that C/W also talked to McKelvie immediately after the sighting and before reporting. But couldn't afterwards find the source that gave me that impression. They did talk together, see

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1437>

but when they first did so isn't stated (but see below).

In McKelvie's statement

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-56>

he noted that C/W "seemed quite excited and they seemed nervous over the episode", which could suggest an excited reaction noticed immediately after the sighting, but not necessarily.

[Note also McKelvie stated the landscape below was clearly visible in the bright moonlight, hence why he was looking out of the window, emphasising the scattered nature of the clouds.]

Re the possible time zone issue: According to this UPI report, 24 July 1948, Chiles gave the sighting time as "0245 CST", not EST.

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1444>

Another confusing point to note: I mentioned an unexplained handwritten correction on one of the SIGN summaries from 0245 to "0340". Note also that in this OSI interview Chiles himself reports that the time was 0340 (twice repeated by the interviewing agent)

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=MAXW-PBB4-9>

FURTHER NOTE RE THE QUESTION OF C-W's SIGHTING TIME V. REPORT TIME.

I just re-read Whitted's and Chiles' accounts of actions after sighting, and they show room for lots of delay before reporting, supporting our inference that the sighting occurred well before descent and thus probably much earlier than the 0245 recorded. Here's the end of his statement:

I asked Capt Chiles what we had just seen and he said that he didn't know. Capt Chiles then contacted the company radio operator at Columbus, Ga., and asked him to contact Lawson Fld at Ft Benning, Ga., and find out if the Army had any jet or experimental planes in the vicinity. The company operator called us back a few minutes later and stated that Lawson Field reported that they had no planes in our area. Capt Chiles then reported back to the company radio operator saying that a strange aircraft had just passed us and it looked like some type of rocket ship. We passed up Columbus because of ground fog and continued on to Atlanta.

Now here's the end of Chiles' statement:

After it passed it pulled up into some light broken clouds and was lost from view. There was no prop wash or rough air felt as it passed. *After talking to the only passenger awake at the time*, he saw only the trail of fire as it passed and pulled into the clouds [emphasis added - this appears to be the source of my impression that McKelvie talked to the crew immediately after]. I called the company at Columbus...

So, they sat in shocked silence as Chiles said for "5 minutes" before saying anything (hyperbole of course, but indicative)

Then they talked together about what they'd seen.

They probably also talked to McKelvie, who was 5 or 6 seats back on the right side (just about level with the back of the wing root) who noted in his report that they were "excited" and "seemed nervous" about it.

Then Chiles called the company operator with a query about Army activities.

Then the operator called Ft Benning and talked to the Army.

"A few minutes later" the operator called Chiles back and explained that the Army had nothing in the area.

ONLY THEN did Chiles report to the operator that "a strange aircraft just passed us".

FURTHER NOTE ON MASSEY (ROBINS AFB) SIGHTING TIME

When talking to the investigator Massey appears quite certain of the time, 0140-0150 EST, because he had to write down the take-off time of the DC-3 he was guarding at that moment. That would mean any "error" had to be with C/W, and some speculation about whether airlines fly on Daylight Saving Time appears in the file. But C/W plainly give their time as EST and it's hard to imagine how they could be wrong. So this seems to be a dead end.

On the other hand I found this

<http://www.bluebookarchive.org/page.aspx?PageCode=NARA-PBB2-1393>

a message from Maxwell Flight Service Centre to HQ MATS, forwarded to ATIC for information on 4 Aug 1948. The original date and time are not shown, but this could be the very earliest record of the Massey sighting, describing it as reported by the Robins AFB dispatcher to MFSC on the morning of the sighting:

"The following report received from the Maxwell flight Service Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama is quoted for your information:

"On 24 July 1948, the aircraft dispatcher on duty at Warner Robins AF Base notified the Maxwell Flight Service Center that a fluorescent squash-shaped object with a flaming exhaust had been sighted at 0250E. This object was sighted by Mr. -----, a member of the civilian alert crew, who stated that the object appeared to be wingless and was headed south at terrific speed. Mr ----- estimated the object to be about twenty-five feet in length.

"At 0315E Eastern Airlines Houston-to-Atlanta flight reported similar object in vicinity of Lawson AF Base, and was forced to alter course to avoid collision.

"No further information available this Center."

NOTE: "sighted at 0250E" which would make Massey's sighting essentially simultaneous with

the C/W sighting and seal the deal for the fireball... .

(BUT... the same message places the C/W sighting at 0315E, so this confuses things - at least I suppose this is the C/W sighting, but as well as having a different time the location is wrong, too. As far as I can make out Lawson AFB must be Lawson Army Airfield, south of Columbus, Ga., which is about 100 mi away from where C/W were flying!)

PROBLEMS WITH FIREBALL THEORY

The theory isn't perfect. There are problems. They have different weights and none of them is simple to interpret.

First the "rocket" drawings, both men show a clear outline shape and a broad similarity in the two tiers of rectangular openings or windows. Again there is a lot of subjectivity in the judgment but for my money I don't find them a problem for the fireball theory, given ample historical precedent for very similar illusions due to fragmenting fireballs in far less difficult circumstances than this. There is opportunity too for unconscious confabulation during discussion after the event when impressions such as the "windows" could have been firmed up in both men's minds.

On the other hand if Massey at Robins AFB saw the same fragmented fireball as C/W, and if the fragments were the "windows", why did Massey *not* see any "windows", just the smooth "belly" of a cylinder with a "phosphorescent glow" along it? This fact is not inconsistent with a ventral view from the ground of the same object seen in lateral view from the air by C/W (but Massey knew of C/W's descriptions at this time and some influence can't be excluded).

If the one-hour Montgomery-Robins time difference could be nailed down it could be strong support for an unknown. But the nagging suspicion of a time error doesn't go away - note the MFSC message quoting the Robins dispatcher's early report of a time of 0250E for Massey's sighting.

The pull-up seen by C/W remains dubious IMO. The issue of how "sharp" they actually thought it was at the time remains unresolved. The record of their words is ambiguous, and anyway it's hard to define how you would measure such an impression in a way which is a very convincing separator between a true high-G manoeuvre on the part of the object and an *impression* of such in confusing circumstances. So it's not simple.

The number of other sighting reports is arguably very low for a brilliant fireball train, even given the time of night and relative lack of publicity outlets in 1948. If it was seen as "an unusually brilliant meteor" by pilots 5-600 miles away one feels it ought to have been seen by more people over such a wide area. Of course, we can't prove that it wasn't.

Finally there is the matter of the cloud base.

If C/W saw a fragmenting fireball streaking by above and to their right it was many miles high and certainly tens of miles slant range (elevation above horizon depends on whose figures you use: Whitted thought it was 1/2 mile away and 500ft above their own 5000ft; Chiles thought it was as close as 700ft away, and not much if at all higher because he thought it was below the clouds - these imply about 11 deg and 35 deg respectively). It has to have been seen between and/or through the clouds, which were reported as broken, 4/10 at 6000ft. This obviously implies 6/10 of the sky clear. The question is "Which 6/10"?

I don't know exactly where the weather obs come from - possibly Maxwell AFB? This would be close on the West side of the town of Montgomery, about 40-45 deg and 20 miles from the sighting location which was about 20 miles SW of Montgomery, the sighting direction moving through an arc from NE to SE. The cloud in this area and in these directions is not necessarily guaranteed by the local weather obs. This pencil of bearings limiting the C/W sighting contains

all of the locations of the other fireball-type sightings that night (see map) and at all of these locations the weather was given as clear, bright moonlight, *no* clouds. The SIGN file notes that weather obs confirmed in all cases the condition reported by the observers. From the DC-3 itself, C/W reported "clear, bright moonlight" and only "some light broken clouds" whilst McKelvie, in the back, was watching the landscape which was clearly visible to the right of the plane (E/SE) illuminated by bright moonlight, suggesting the possibility of plenty of clear sky in the appropriate direction.

And complete cloudlessness may not be necessary - they said the light from the thing was very brilliant, comparable to burning magnesium, which would be dazzlingly bright and might transmit *through* some thin broken clouds as well as between them. The brilliance of the burning sources ("windows") might have been bright enough to blind the eye to any fainter light diffused by intervening thin cloud except that which they saw as the "blue glow" - or I suppose a cloud-diffused halo of light around the fragments could have helped give rise to the impression of a cylindrical "body" containing the "windows".

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