

Case write-up from:

UFOs: GREATEST SCIENTIFIC PROBLEM OF OUR TIMES?
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Case 16. Washington National Airport, July 19
and 26, 1952

One does not have the full picture on UFOs and their official investigation until he has studied carefully many of the cases in the later 1949's and early 1950's, prior to the 1953 turning-point of the Robertson Panel and CIA debunking order. In the past year, I have rather carefully gone over several dozen important cases from that period, and have run down witnesses in many of them. In the case of the Washington Airport incidents, I have never located any witnesses for personal interviews, but the basic facts of this most famous of all UFO episodes are well attested in press records which I have gone over, so personal interviews are not so crucial here.

I shall not attempt a full recounting, since so much went on that even a chapter in Ruppelt's book (Ref. 1) does not do justice to it. The principal points deserving emphasis are these: Unknown returns were picked up on as many as three separate radars in the Washington area, at times all three sets having compatible echoes. Visual observations of these fast-moving objects were made from ground and air, especially the latter. Despite frantic confusion on both of these two occasions, the record is moderately clear as to who saw what and where. The CAA radar controllers, to this day, insist that the echoes were good hard echoes, quite unlike familiar ground-returns caused by anomalous propagation under inversions. The official explanation put out at the time was that the radar returns were due to anomalous propagation, and the visual sightings were caused by refraction effects due to the same inversions responsible for the radar anomalies.

I have examined the radiosonde data for both nights, have computed the refractive index gradients, and find that, after making allowance for lag effects in the radiosonde, radar ducting could not have occurred. The suggestion that an inversion of the sort exhibited by the radiosonde data for that night at Washington caused the reported visual effects is absolutely absurd. First of all, the inversion was a very weak one by mirage standards, so that even the ground observers could not have seen mirages. But worse, the optics of mirages and the "optics" of radar ground returns are significantly different in several respects, so that false targets would not seem to lie in the same place in the sky to a visual observer and a radar observer. Furthermore, the most important visual observations were not on the ground but in the air by several commercial pilots (and even by one jet pilot who was vectored close to one of the radar targets moving over the capitol). Finally the temperature data aloft at aircraft altitude were not even remotely capable of producing anything like what was described by the pilots.

1952: RV
Wash. DC

These 1952 "explanations" have never since been challenged, and the summary analysis of this case that Bluebook still sends out when queried on the case is a verbatim assemblage of the hasty remarks made by frantic officers trying to get the Air Force off the hook in that tight squeeze of July, 1952. I even found a passage in the currently distributed case summary which asserts that "unfortunately the only day for which weather data was obtained was for 26 July 1952," precisely the assertion I found appearing on a memo dated 29 August 1952 from Capt. James (a radar officer) to Capt. Ruppelt (copy of memo in Bluebook file on this case). But, amusingly, a dozen sheets of dog-eared paper further on in this very same file that Maj. Quintanilla gave me, I found the allegedly missing Weather Bureau radiosonde data for July 19! When I plotted it, it became quite clear that no anomalous propagation could have produced the solid radar returns so emphatically described to the press by the experienced CAA radarmen on duty that night.

Donald Keyhoe, in one of his books, vividly describes the press conference at which all this misinformation was put out to press, Congress, and public. Several reporters had asked a few questions of knowledgeable radarmen and tried to object that the weather data simply did not support the Air Force claim of ground-returns; but their objecting questions were cut off.