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Appendix IV

MARCH AIR FORCE BASE - 23 September 1951

I. DISCUSSION OF INCIDENT

The first report of this incident, which appeared in Status Report No. 1, proved to be incomplete and misleading. Further investigation has corrected the discrepencies and the following account of the incident is considered to be accurate.

At approximately 0700 PDST, two F-86 aircraft were scrambled from George Air Force Base, California, on a routine mission. The flight was vectored to 118° 40'W - 33° 50'N by GCI. (See inclosed overlay.) The flight orbitted the position and took up a heading toward Long Beach Radio. At approximately 0755 PDST the flight reported to GCI that they observed an unidentified object high at 12 o'clock. The flight was 30 seconds out of Long Beach Radio at this time. The object appeared to be in a left orbit at about 50,000 ft. The object could not be picked up by the ground radar, however, visual contact was maintained. The object continued a left orbit and passed over the two aircraft. Attempts were made by the F-86's to identify the object but they were unsuccessful due to the altitude of the object and a fuel shortage. At approximately 0810 or 0815 the flight was released by the ground controller and they returned to George Air Force Base. The object appeared to be an aircraft with 45° swept wings and bright silver in color. When last seen the object was in a left orbit, or circling to the left. The pilot's opinion was that it was a swept wing type aircraft.

At approximately 0800 PDST four additional F-86 aircraft were scrambled from George AFB to relieve the two above mentioned F-86's. The four aircraft split into two, two-ship elements, denoted as Flight 2-A and 2-B on the inclosed overlay. Flight 2-A was vectored to a position at 117° 30'W and 30° 20'N. They arrived at this position at approximately 0810 and sighted the object high at 12 o'clock at what appeared to be over Muroc AFB. A steady climb was made to 43,000 ft. and the object was found to be near March AFB. The object appeared to be in a controlled orbit to the right and left at 50,000 to 55,000 ft. The two aircraft stayed in the area for 10-15 minutes before breaking off the intercept due to a fuel shortage and landed at 0845 PDST. The object appeared to be a swept wing aircraft.

The second element of the group, noted as Flight 2-B on the overlay, observed the object soon after take-off. The object appeared to be going south. The flight made a series of climbing turns under the object as they climbed to 43,500 ft. The object was in a wide right turn. At approximately 0925 PDST the aircraft broke off the attempted intercept and returned to their base. This flight reported that the object appeared to be round and silver.

No more intercepts were attempted. At no time was the object observed on the radar screen nor was it reported to be observed visually from the ground. The F-86's, however, were continually tracked by radar.

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The F-86's were unable to climb to the estimated altitude of the object due to the fact that they were carrying external fuel tanks and elected not to jettison them.

II. STATUS OF INVESTIGATION

At 0700 PDST a radiosonde balloon was released from the Long Beach Municipal Airport. This balloon was lost at 0743 PDST, eight miles from the airport on a bearing of 95° true, due to a malfunction of the tracking equipment. (See Point A on overlay.) At this time the balloon would have been at approximately 40,000 ft. The winds above 40,000 ft. are unknown but it is logical to assume that at this altitude they will be relatively constant in direction. Assuming a relative constant direction of 270° and an average velocity of 30 knots above 40,000 ft. (the wind at 40,000 ft. was 280° at 21 knots) the possible flight path of the balloon can be plotted on the overlay.

The original sighting by Flight 1 could very possibly have been the balloon as their heading was toward Long Beach Airport. The altitude of the F-86's at the time of the sighting is unknown but was probably below 40,000 ft. At 0755, the time of the original sighting, the balloon would be at 50,000 to 55,000 ft. and approximately ten miles directly ahead of the two aircraft. The apparent orbitting of the balloon cannot be explained. The balloon would make a gradual turn due to wind shifts but these are so gradual that it is doubtful if the movement would be apparent from an aircraft as fast as an F-86.

Referring to the ground track of Flight 2-A, if a 30 knot wind at 270° is assumed, at 0810, the approximate time the F-86's sighted the object from a 355° TC, the balloon would be at B on the overlay. The balloon would probably be at an altitude of 60,000 ft. and nearly straight ahead of the aircraft. Due to the size of the balloon, the distance could have been misjudged and the balloon could have appeared to be near Muroc. Once again the orbitting of the object cannot be explained.

The attempted intercept by Flight 2-B cannot be explained. If the ground track given by the leader of Flight 2-B is correct it is very doubtful that the flight was observing a balloon. The time that they sighted the object is not known but if it is assumed that they flew beneath the object for 30 minutes, it is highly doubtful that a wind shift of nearly 360° could occur above 60,000 ft. to give the illusion of a turn.

The possibility of this object being an experimental aircraft from some southern California aircraft plant, naval airfield, or from Edwards Air Force Base was checked with negative results. No other balloons were released in the vicinity.

III. CONCLUSIONS

With the information available, it cannot be concluded that the object was definitely the radiosonde balloon released from Long Beach Municipal Airport. However, since the balloon was near the flight path of two of the F-86 elements, and assuming that the orbitting of the object was an illusion due to the relative motion between the balloon and the aircraft, it can be concluded that the unidentified object was very possibly a radiosonde balloon.

The third attempted intercept, the one in which the object was followed in a wide turn, cannot be explained.

It is not believed that further interrogation would produce any additional significant details due to the fact that some of the personnel involved have been transferred overseas and due to the time since the incident.