



“The Invincible 45” (Alex Andreev, www.alexandreev.com)

Return of the FLYING SAUCERS



**A fresh look at the sighting
that started it all**

by *Martin Shough*

The sighting by pilot and businessman Kenneth Arnold of nine “peculiar aircraft” skimming over the peaks of the Cascade Mountains of Washington in June 1947 has unique significance. The worldwide press coverage that followed defined for all time the public consciousness of “flying saucers”, and we will never understand their historical origins without an understanding of what Arnold said he saw and of how his story was interpreted in the context of the times.

One aspect of this question concerns Arnold’s fitness to see what he said he saw and to accurately describe it to us in the days and weeks afterwards. Was Arnold a “reliable witness”? What does that mean? What is this quality of reliability? Is there any way of measuring it?

Another aspect is how the event and the reporting of it changed Arnold himself, along with the world around him. Arnold's own descriptions of the objects he saw in June 1947 altered over the years. The history of this change is complicated and the reasons for it difficult to extract. Why should this confusion have arisen? How ought we to deal with it?

There is a cynical and rather lazy point of view which holds that where inconsistent variations arise in witness narratives this merely serves to prove that testimony is always worthless and can tell us nothing. The history of science clearly shows that this is not so, but it is also clear that human observers are socially-embedded and highly sensitive instruments whose fluctuating outputs need to be calibrated with cunning. This is especially true where the embedding psychosocial medium is as richly evolving and as highly cathected as is the flying saucer mythology. For this reason, where the historical record shows that a witness's statements mutate into explicitly inconsistent forms over time we do normally require a strong justification for giving greater – or even equal – weight to the later forms. Logic and experience tell us that we will normally minimise corruption and contamination if we begin with a presumption in favour of contemporaneous evidence.

Arnold's case is the prime exemplar of this general rule. It is unique inasmuch as his initial sighting report was born naked, as it were. By definition no saucer mythology yet existed. But as time went by, what Arnold saw and said he saw became entangled with what society at large came to believe that Arnold saw. As the infant story was handed round to be inspected by admirers and detractors, it became swaddled in mythic embroideries and confusions, until in the end Arnold himself apparently disowned his own offspring and rewrote his will in favour of an imposter. We need to understand how and why this happened.

BAMBOOZLED BY BOOMERANGS...

It has become a widely retailed legend that Arnold never described disc-like objects at all. Many modern accounts assert that he originally reported nine “boomerangs” or “crescents”, but that a description of their motion – “like saucers skipped over water” – was misinterpreted by a journalist who thus invented the totally fictitious image of “flying saucers”. The journalist responsible has widely been identified, even in some quite recent literature, as Bill Bequette, author of the original story that went out on the AP wire from the Portland *East Oregonian* on June 25 1947.

The true part of this legend is that Arnold did indeed claim, years later, that he had offered the simile of saucers skipping over water as a description of the objects' motion. But the rest is a can of worms.

Although several different motion similes appear in early published sources, and in Arnold's own Air Force report, it should be noted that the “skipping saucers” image is nowhere among them. The original sources contain other motion similes: “like the tail of a Chinese kite, kind of weaving and going at a terrific speed”; “they flipped and flashed along”; “they flew like many times I have observed geese to fly in a rather diagonal chain-like line as though linked together”; “like fish flipping in the sun”; and “like speedboats on rough water”.¹ The claim that they flew “like they take a saucer and throw it across the water” doesn't appear in the record until Arnold offered it 3 years after the sighting in a 'phone interview with radio broadcaster Ed Murrow in 1950:

...when I described how they flew, I said that they flew like they take a saucer and throw it across the water. Most of the newspapers misunderstood and misquoted that too. They said that I said that they were saucer-like; I said that they flew in a saucer-like fashion.²

Three days later a United Press wire story out of Boise, Idaho, quoted an interview with Arnold that day (April 10 1950) in which Arnold again complained, that...

...“the press misquoted me when they said I described the objects as flying saucers.” Arnold said he merely described the objects in flight as appearing to skim through the air like a saucer over water.³

If “most” newspapers had misquoted him in 1947 then there should be at least one that didn’t. But apparently *all* of the papers misquoted him. From day-one Arnold’s story was sought by phone and in person by countless reporters who “came out of the woodwork”,⁴ so one must assume that he had opportunities to supply clarification. Yet the “misunderstanding” was widespread in the media within a few days and stayed there.

The early press certainly reported Arnold’s frustration with how his story was being mistreated. One interviewer said that a “harassed” Arnold “sighed” about all the “hoopla and hysterics”, complaining: “I haven’t had a moment of peace since I first told the story... This whole thing has gotten out of hand. I want to talk to the FBI or someone. Half the people I see look at me as a combination Einstein, Flash Gordon, and screwball. I wonder what my wife back in Idaho thinks.”⁵ Nevertheless not a single early source reports Arnold protesting that his use of the word “saucer” had been misunderstood, or reports the statement that they flew like saucers skipped across water; whereas several sources, including Arnold’s own AAF report, *do* contain statements – contrary to Arnold’s late claim – that they were saucer-like in shape.

The original press stories were written by Pendleton *East Oregonian* journalists Bill Bequette and Nolan Skiff. The phrase “flying saucers” appears in none of them but was invented by an unknown journalist or editor elsewhere (probably about June 27) on the basis of Bequette’s wire stories.

Bequette and Skiff had a first interview with Arnold in the newspaper office about noon on the morning of June 25, after which the initial stories were quickly written. The very first brief story by columnist Nolan Skiff, written just in time to make the bottom of the front-page of that day’s issue of the *East Oregonian*, uses the phrase “saucer-like aircraft”, proving that right from the start Skiff interpreted Arnold’s use of the word “saucer” that morning to be a shape simile.

Bequette had suggested to Arnold that a wire story might shake loose some information about the strange objects which both he and Arnold assumed were some sort of Army Air Force planes or rockets. He wrote a separate, slightly longer story which he put out on the Associated Press wire at the same time. Consistently with Skiff’s story it, too, said that Arnold (mistakenly identified as a US Forest Service employee) had described seeing “nine bright saucer-like objects”.

At this point the two journalists went innocently to lunch. When they got back they were surprised to find the office secretary struggling to field telephone calls and messages from all over the country demanding more information. Bequette’s AP wire seemed to have stirred up the entire Fourth Estate and he realised that he had misjudged the story’s impact, so “I had to hustle down to the hotel, find Arnold, and wring out every last detail.”⁶

Bequette spent a further two hours interviewing Arnold at his Pendleton hotel that afternoon. A follow-up article appeared in the *East Oregonian* the next day, June 26, and was also phoned through to Portland whence it went out on the United Press wire. It naturally contained much more detail, and corrected the error about Arnold working for the Forestry Service; but conspicuously it did not correct the use of the word “saucer” given as a shape simile in Skiff’s article and in Bequette’s own earlier AP wire story the day before. The new story not only repeats the simile, but this time puts it explicitly into the mouth of Arnold himself, who is now quoted describing the objects as “saucer-like”.⁷

Bequette also quotes two different motion similes offered by Arnold. Neither of these is the “skipping on water” simile that Arnold much later claimed to have given to Bequette. Instead Bequette first quotes Arnold as saying that their erratic motion was “weaving like the tail of a Chinese kite” and then adds, “He also described the objects as ‘saucer-like’ and their motion ‘like a fish flipping in the sun.’”. We should note that Bequette here *explicitly separates* the shape descriptor ‘saucer-like’ from an associated motion simile (one which Arnold also used elsewhere).

When questioned by sociologist Pierre Lagrange in 1988 Bequette evidently did not remember the “skipping saucer” motion simile; neither did he believe that he had coined the phrase “saucer-like” as a shape simile himself. His original story had placed this phrase in quotes and attributed it to Arnold. But he told Lagrange that it was possible and that he was prepared to give Arnold the benefit of the doubt as to what he had meant.⁸ However when speaking to author Ronald Story in early 1992 his memory seemed clearer on this point, saying that Arnold *had* used “saucer” as a shape-simile that day. Cognizant that Lagrange had recorded a less explicit answer, Story remarked: “I can only repeat what he confirmed to me: that [it] was based on Arnold’s description.”⁹

The record tends to support Bequette’s memory. In addition to the Bequette and Skiff stories there are several other early news sources quoting Arnold in the same terms, including for example further news service wire reports out of Pendleton by unnamed reporters on the 25 and 26 June. One UP dispatch quotes a local businessman to whom Arnold had described the objects as “shaped like saucers”.¹⁰

A “special” correspondent for the Chicago *Tribune* filed a story after an interview with Arnold on June 25, quoting Arnold as saying that the objects were “silvery and shiny and seemed to be shaped like a pie plate”. There is no mention of plates “skipped over water”. The tableware simile appears only for the shape, not motion. As regards

motion Arnold is quoted as saying that they “weaved in flight like the tail of a kite” and “went by me like a bullet.”¹¹

Of course press stories can be incomplete. The only early source where we can be absolutely certain that we have all of Arnold’s own words accurately recorded without loss of context is the KWRC radio interview of June 26 1947. Two things about this broadcast are notable for our present purpose. The first is the background of press activity well-described by host Ted Smith, who indicates that Arnold had been interviewed directly for United Press wire reports by UP staff in Portland and perhaps elsewhere, as was Smith himself:

Well, Kenneth, thank you very much. I know that you’ve certainly been busy these last 24 hours, ‘cause I’ve spent some of the time with you myself, and I know that the press associations, both Associated Press and our press, the United Press, has been right after you every minute. The Associated and the United Press, all over the nation, have been after this story. It’s been on every newscast, over the air, and in every newspaper I know of. The uh, United Press in Portland has made several telephone calls here at Pendleton to me, and to you this morning, and from New York I understand, they are after this story...¹²

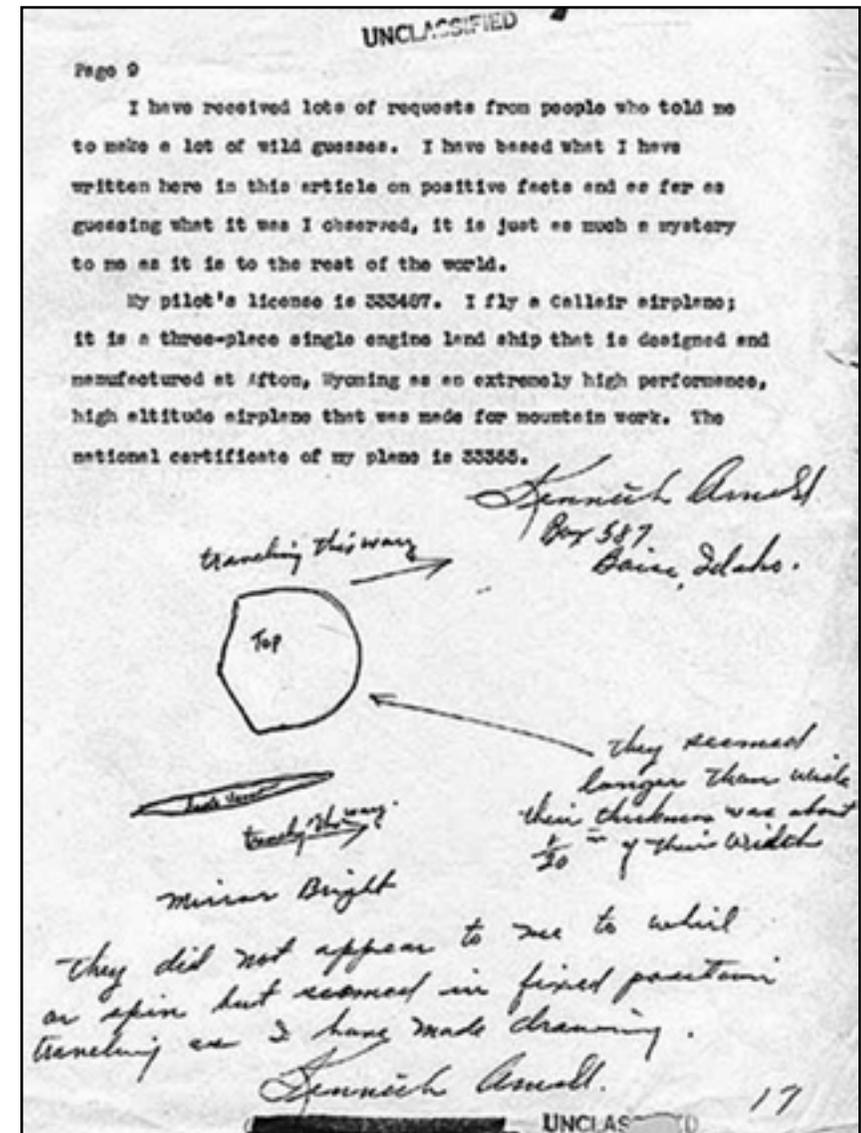
Arnold also tells us himself in the interview that he had already given his own story directly to Associated Press, not just second-hand *via* the wire and telephone reports that we know were sent by Bill Bequette on 25 and 26 June. This reinforces our impression of the sort of opportunities that were available for Arnold to correct a press misapprehension directly to the wire services, had it really been the case that he had reported nine “boomerangs”. And the second point: In this definitive early source, broadcast on June 26, Arnold does not mention anything about “skipping on water”, neither does he correct Nolan Skiff’s *East Oregonian* article of the day before attributing to him the description “saucer-like aircraft”. He was not obliged to do

so, of course; but it was another opportunity and we can be certain that he did not take it.

We also find that Arnold himself used both “saucer like objects” and “saucer-like discs” as shape-similes in his own original Air Force report typed by his own hand on or about July 08 1947. Once again, just as important as the fact that Arnold uses these phrases is the conspicuous fact that he does *not* use these terms in the context of any motion simile. Even if previous attempts to correct journalists’ misapprehensions had failed – indeed *especially* if they had failed – here was the opportunity, two weeks on, for Arnold to set the record straight first-hand in the most important, official forum. But far from taking the chance to explain that he only mentioned saucers in the first place in order to suggest a skipping motion, Arnold explicitly confirms “saucer” and “disc” as shape similes, whilst in reference to motion he says only that they “flew like many times I have observed geese to fly in a rather diagonal chain like line”, and erratically “dipped” or “flipped and flashed in the sun” as they “swerved in and out of the high mountain peaks.”¹³ And even though the shape of the “disk” Arnold drew in this report (and repeated numerous times on carbon copies for other people) was more shovel-shaped or shell-shaped than truly saucer-shaped, with an axial ratio “longer [in the direction of motion] than wide”, it most emphatically was not remotely crescent- or boomerang-shaped (which would of course have been wider than long).

...AND BEWILDERED BY BATS

There are two oft-cited early references that appear to be significant exceptions to the dominant discoidal description. One early newspaper report does use the phrase “crescent-shaped”; another quotes Arnold as describing the objects as “somewhat bat-shaped”. We will consider these in turn.



Page from Kenneth Arnold's original report to the Air Force showing 'shovel' shape

The *Oregon Journal*, June 27, said that Arnold “clung stoutly to his story that he saw nine shiny crescent-shaped planes”, but these words are not in quotes from Arnold, they are the writer’s. Where Arnold is actually quoted in the same article he says, “They were half-moon shaped, oval in front and *convex* on the rear. I was in a beautiful position to watch them...they looked like a *big flat disk* [emphases added].” This describes the sort of shape Arnold drew for the Army Air Force, a flat plate with a trimmed off or tapered rear edge, and the “half-moon” clearly plays the same role here as the “half pie-pan” in the description used by Arnold elsewhere: “half a pie-pan with a convex triangle in the rear”. The shape in Arnold’s drawing suggests that he may have had in mind a *gibbous* moon, i.e. between half and full; howsoever the reporter has interpreted “half” to mean “crescent” (in some people’s imaginations “moon” and “crescent” might be almost synonymous) and neglected the rest of the description.

The other phrase is to be found in Bill Bequette’s second story published in the *East Oregonian* and telephoned to Portland on June 26 (see above). In this case the phrase appears in quotes, and at first sight is more troublesome. Arnold described the objects to Bequette as being “flat like a pie-pan and somewhat bat-shaped”. A modern reader whose mind-set is influenced by the crescentic flying-wing imagery which progressively took over during Arnold’s later years (beginning with his August 1947 claim that just one of the objects had been been a sharp-winged crescent, and ending with the late claim that all nine had been crescent-shaped) tends to interpret “somewhat bat-shaped” as indicating flying mammals of the genus *chiroptera* which would seem to imply wide, extended wings. But one’s first impression is frustrated by the fact that Arnold is also quoted in the same interview as saying that the objects were “saucer-like”.

The apparent incongruity of a *chiroptera*-like image among the other descriptions and drawings of June/July 1947 may be a matter of our excessive literalism. Researcher Barry Greenwood has pointed

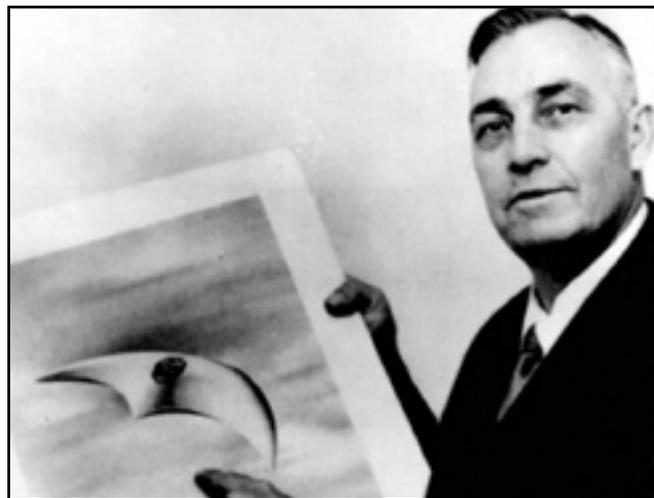
out¹⁴ that the *Batman* comic-book franchise was popular at the time and that “bat”-inspired design was widely disseminated in print and in other merchandise. This imagery was often far from naturalistic. Such imagery might have influenced Arnold to think of his saucers’ pointed trailing edges as “somewhat bat-shaped”.

Another interpretation of that early phrase might be that Bequette quotes the phrase out of context. Other possible explanations then are that Arnold was referring to table tennis bats and/or aircraft-marshalling signal bats.

Table tennis bats are widely (although not universally) known in the US as “paddles”. A table tennis bat, not quite round and with its “tail” edge tapering towards the handle, could well be an apt simile for the objects Arnold described and drew, but an American in 1947 would arguably have been much more likely to think of the word “paddle” than the word “bat” in this context.

Perhaps for Arnold, as an aviator, a more likely allusion would be to the signal bat used in aircraft marshalling during that era. This object, “a flat round club with a short handle, resembling a table-tennis bat, used by a man on the ground to guide the pilot of an aircraft when taxiing”¹⁵ appears universally to have been known as a “bat”, and the activity was known as “batting”. Arnold may well have been familiar with this practice of “batting” from the ex-Army Air Force flyers that he mixed with as well as from newsreels and general aviation-community scuttlebutt.

Looking at the famous crescentic flying wing illustrated in his 1950 pamphlet and the 1952 book (an artist’s rendering of a wooden model Arnold said he made for the AAF) many have assumed that this explains an early use of the phrase “somewhat bat-shaped”, but this is a misunderstanding based on a failure to carefully examine date order. The flying wing model represents only *one* of the objects, and Arnold’s own first realisation of its unique shape postdates by at least five weeks his use of that phrase, which he used only in the context of his earliest “disc” and “saucer” descriptions.



Arnold showing crescent-shaped UFO

By his own account Arnold did not tell a soul that a ninth object might have differed from his “saucer-like objects” and “big flat discs” (i.e. might possibly have been wing-like, crescentic) until saying this privately to the two Army Counter-Intelligence Corps officers Capt. Brown and Lt. Davidson who interviewed him on July 31 1947.¹⁶ Reflecting on this omission when first discussing the matter publicly in 1952 he makes a point of excusing it, explaining that it had been an impression too uncertain even to mention to his wife. This is all clearly inconsistent with the theory that he had told the newspapers about a *chiroptera*-shaped crescent wing as early as June 25 1947.

Moreover Bequette’s June 26 quote implies that *all* the objects (“they”) were “somewhat bat-shaped”. The flying crescent model reflects accurately the outline he had drawn for the FBI in Aug 1947 of just one of the objects, “a very wraith-like looking thing [that] wasn’t round at all”,¹⁷ which he said he selected for the purpose because it had seemed distinctive. That early drawing was made a couple of weeks after Arnold had been exposed to Capt Brown’s drawing of the Rhodes object, and to Lt Brown’s description of it as a “flying wing”, and it was captioned in his own handwriting as follows: “one

object looked like this, the second from last of the formation. Seemed slightly smaller.” Plainly the shape of this newly-remembered odd-man-out has nothing to do with the phrase “somewhat bat-shaped” used to characterise all of the objects weeks earlier when Arnold had not even been clear in his own mind that there had been an odd-man-out at all. Equally plainly Arnold must have intended the phrase to convey something about the “big flat discs” with their tapered trailing edges.

Once the story of the single flying wing emerged Arnold appears to have maintained it consistently in public for many years. As far as can be determined he never described this one object as bat-shaped. The allusion to bats vanishes early from the record, before Arnold even acknowledged the existence of the flying wing. It was apparently a simile he used once that day in 1947 and, unlike “saucer” and “disc”, never repeated. In later years he does not speak of mammalian bats, but rather of manta rays, rafts, mediaeval axes and other things.

In the end we cannot know for sure what Arnold meant when he said whatever it was he said to Bequette and to other journalists and intermediaries in June 1947, only what was printed, or broadcast and recorded. But, however one looks at it, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the term “saucer” must have been chosen by Arnold that day to imply something significant about the shape of objects that he also described as featureless mirror-bright “big flat discs”, objects which, whilst not truly circular, were somewhat round.¹⁸

And although from 1950 Arnold denied having used the word “saucer” exclusively or exactly as a shape simile, this is not the same as a denial that the objects were discoidal. A preponderance of evidence shows that he *was* prompted to use the word “saucer” *at least in part* as a shape simile for his “big flat discs”.

Arnold apparently never believed or claimed that his objects were *perfectly circular* discs, but his reassertion of this fact is too often presented as though it were equivalent to an admission that he had

really said that the objects were boomerang shaped. I have found no source where Arnold ever described any of the objects as “boomerangs” and the uncritical re-echoing of this claim throughout much recent sceptical literature has been damaging. Nevertheless, the combination of vagueness and image-creep in Arnold’s own descriptions post-1950, culminating in his denial of having ever employed a “saucer” shape simile at all, are at least partially responsible.

OF FLYING DISCS AND FLYING WINGS

Would Arnold have had any special reason to expect to see discoidal aircraft in June 1947?

At that time images of approximately-discoidal aeroforms were not totally unknown. It is well-known that a few of the hundreds of imaginative spaceships of all shapes depicted in cover art for *Amazing* and similar publications during previous decades did have discoidal symmetry. But Arnold, according to his own account, had no familiarity at all with sci-fi and fantasy magazines, and certainly did not interpret his sighting in a fantastic context. He thought he had seen Army “aircraft” or perhaps “guided missiles”.

The idea of disc-like aircraft did exist on the fringe of the aeronautical world. A speculative item about a circular-wing aircraft design had appeared in print in the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1946. The magazines *Science et Vie* in France and *Mechanix Illustrated* in the US had both carried cover pictures of the USAF’s abortive experimental plane – the heel-shaped “Flying Flapjack”, only one of which briefly flew in Connecticut before being scrapped - during the previous year. But there is no evidence in any document that Arnold had heard of these ideas at the time, still less that he was influenced by an interest in them.

In contrast to this, flying wing designs were more than a fringe idea and a fond hope - they were an engineering reality, developed in



Vought V-173 'Flying Pancake', predecessor to the 'Flying Flapjack'

several forms in the US by ex-Lockheed designer Jack Northrop since 1939 (from a concept pioneered by Northrop in 1929) and famously in Nazi Germany by (among others) the Horten brothers, whose designs had been the subject of much interest by Britain and the US in the immediate post-war period. This image was far more widely disseminated in the popular culture.

Indeed one witness (a Forestry Service look-out in the Cascades who saw a line of bright somethings on the same day as Arnold) thought it prudent to emphasise to journalists that what he saw “was not the flying wing”;¹⁹ whereas Clyde Homan, manager of a tulip-growing business who along with his farm foreman saw nine similar objects undulating and giving off sun reflections as from bright metal near Woodland, Washington on June 27, “ventured the opinion the objects might have been the new type of tail-less aircraft known as flying wings”, even though he could not make out any shape behind the bright reflections except that they were “very flat and very, very thin”.²⁰ A couple of days later a Portland newspaper quoted the assurance of Col. Carl Spaatz: “The Army has no aircraft that could fit description of the discs; it is not the flying wing.”²¹ A

3-page illustrated spread on the Northrop XB-35 had appeared in the January 1947 issue of the widely-read magazine *Popular Science*. It would probably be fair to say that the flying wing was the iconic image of futuristic aviation in post-war America.

If Arnold's sighting had been influenced by notions of what advanced planes ought to look like then one would expect his report to have emphasised features of flying wings rather than of flying discs. And there *are* features of Arnold's early verbal description that, lifted out of context, can be interpreted as suggestive of flying wings. He spoke of the objects' "wing or whatever it was" and emphasised that what especially puzzled him about their shapes was that he "couldn't find any tails on them". If we ignore talk of saucers and discs, and if we ignore also Arnold's own drawings, with their annotation saying that the flat discs were "longer than wide", then his description of "half a pie-plate with a convex triangle in the rear" could also be interpreted as a kind of flying wing (wider than long) with a small "triangle" being a sort of vestigial fuselage, and from this we could get to Arnold's later image of the sharp-winged crescent. Is it possible that these details are, as it were, fossils of Arnold's true first impression, preserved inside a more discoidal image which Arnold improvised during the first weeks as he subtly adapted his story to conform to popular expectation?

It is understandable that there may have been a cultural pressure in this direction, and one can point to individual influences. Arnold's discoidal sketch in his Air Force letter must have been drawn after the July 04 United Airlines case which is referenced in the letter. By July 04 the "flying saucer" or "flying disc" stereotype is becoming well established everywhere, and Capt. E. J. Smith – an impressive and influential witness with whom Arnold closely allied himself in his appeals to the Army Air Force to take the saucers seriously – had that day seen nine "discs" described as "circular, flat on the bottom and rough on top, bigger than our [DC-3] aircraft" silhouetted against the Idaho sunset.

So here we have a theory: Perhaps in Arnold's post-July 04 sketch an original, more idiosyncratic impression of a tail-less flying wing was morphing towards a "saucer-like disc" because this stereotype was taking over the public imagination and had even influenced Capt. Smith, regarded by Arnold as "probably the most highly thought of and respected veteran pilot that flies the air lanes".²² Perhaps Arnold was motivated by wanting to hang onto the coat tails of "Big Smithy" and borrow the support of the growing number of other "saucer" eyewitnesses around the country?

But this suggestion seems out of character for Arnold, who was no meek hanger-on but a tall, well-built and capable self-made man with a healthy opinion of his own worth. He gives the impression of sticking stolidly to his guns in the midst of speculation and ridicule. Character testimonials from Army Air Force Counter-Intelligence Corps agents, journalists, aviation professionals and others who knew and/or interviewed him paint a picture of a self-reliant and forthright man not inclined to tell people what they wanted to hear. The theory that in the first couple of weeks he transformed flying wings to flying discs to ally himself more closely with a popular "flying saucer" craze is not very consistent with the character and actions of a man resentful of being characterised as a "screwball" and who complained, "I haven't had a moment of peace since I first told the story... This whole thing has gotten out of hand. I want to talk to the FBI or someone."²³

This invites us to consider an alternative scenario in which Arnold perhaps tended to revise an original quasi-discoidal description in the other direction, away from an image increasingly associated with wild speculation and towards more aeronautically-credible flying wings, by increasingly emphasising features which had distinguished their shapes from true discs and/or suppressing explicit statements that might have suggested circular symmetry.

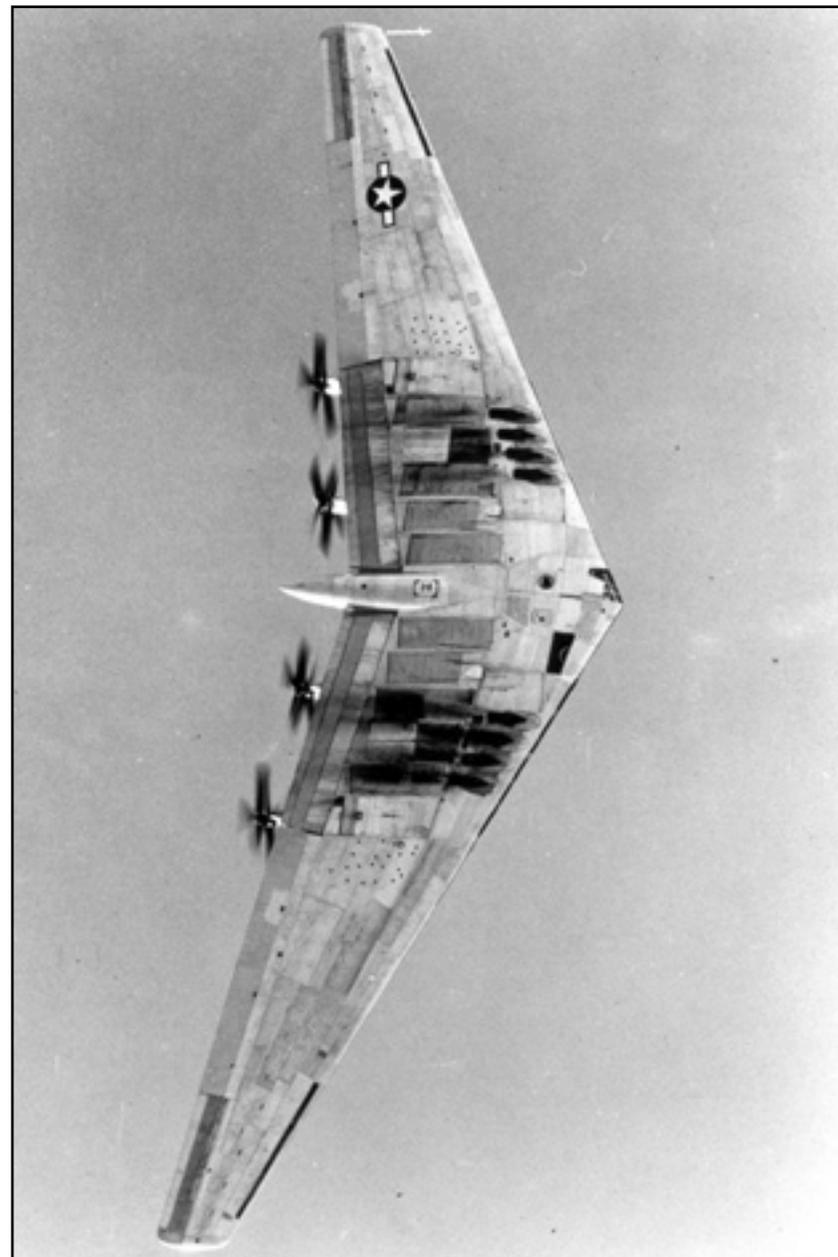
Arnold certainly had motivation. His initial efforts to get the AAF and FBI to take him seriously seemed to be frustrated, and

he expressed disappointment about this in his original AAF letter and in a telex of July 12 1947 to the Public Information Officer, Wright Field. Official reticence may have increased his aversion to being publicly associated with saucer-sighters whom the newspapers too often portrayed as nuts and kooks.

On July 31 1947 Army CIC officers Brown and Davidson exposed Arnold to what they called a “flying wing” photographed by William Rhodes in Phoenix, intimating that it was “genuine”. Arnold’s reaction is consistent with a tendency to seek the endorsement of conservative military authorities. He suddenly remembered a fact that he had never mentioned before – that one of his objects had looked just like it. It would also fit the way the explicit descriptions and drawings that are part of the public record prior to this date give way later to vaguer and more evasive descriptions. His 1950 pamphlet “The Flying Saucer As I Saw It” and his 1952 book are both notable for a reluctance to be verbally explicit about shape, and both allow the image of a sharp-tipped crescent wing to stand alone as representing *at least* one and – but only by tacit implication at this stage – possibly all of the objects.

Arnold told the Army Air Force that he had spoken with former wartime AAF fliers who had been alerted about radical jet designs that might be encountered in the European theatre – an apparent reference to experimental Nazi aircraft. And Arnold was quite proactive in pursuing the mystery of his sighting (*vidé* his activities in the Maury Island affair and contacts with the AAF), which raises the possibility that Arnold might have been made aware soon after June 24 of rumours of possible recovered Nazi designs. Could he have learned or guessed that these designs included flying wings, of interest not only to US engineers hoping to build on the initial promise of the Northrop XB-35 flying wing but also to the Russians?

The idea would feed into his belief that he saw secret AAF planes or rockets. He could well have come to believe that this was the only reasonable explanation for the AAF’s reluctance to investigate. And



Northrop XB-35 ‘Flying Wing’

a flying wing could well have been the image in his mind when he began “adjusting” his recollection of the the objects’ shapes towards something aeronautically plausible that he knew the AAF would be more inclined to take seriously.

By 1977 Arnold had inverted his pre-1952 account of eight “plainly observed” discs and one half-glimpsed “smaller” flying wing, to describe, instead, one “*larger*” flying wing, darker and now *clearer* in outline than eight smaller objects of more uncertain shape, hinting that the rest might have been crescent wings too.²⁴ By Feb 1978 he was telling journalist Bob Pratt that all of the objects had been crescent-shaped wings.²⁵

For a man of Arnold’s character – who thought of himself as one of a community of no-nonsense mountain aviators and whose daily milieu consisted of other fliers, some of whom were ex-Army – a desire to court the respect of conservative authority figures in the military is somewhat more psychologically plausible than a desire to reinforce a media reputation as “Mr Flying Saucer”, and such a desire could have influenced him to morph the shapes of his objects progressively towards flying wings, *via* the “genuine” Rhodes object, which was drawn for him by Army CIC agent Capt. Davidson and described to him by Lt. Brown as a “flying wing”.

The alternative is that Arnold initially believed he saw nine flying wings but subsequently told the Army Air Force, Army Counter Intelligence and the FBI that they were (with one remembered exception) discoids in order to fall in line with the cultural predominance of a “saucer” motif invented mistakenly by journalists. This really does not fit either the psychosociology of the moment or the historical documentary evidence.

In summary, it appears that Arnold really did originally report what could be fairly described as nine distorted saucers, which he himself described as “saucer-shaped”, “saucer like” and “big flat discs”, not exactly circular like mother’s crockery but (as he drew them multiple times) somewhat round shapes that had “looked

perfectly circular” when seen by the reflection of the sun off their mirror-like tops, but which were revealed as roughly shovel-shaped or scallop-shaped when “observed quite plainly” in black silhouette against the snow, having a very shallow, dished cross-section when seen edge on. And the most likely explanation of his later drift towards a crescent description is that he regretted using the “saucer” shape simile, and denied it, because of unintended consequences: He wished to distance himself from the risible *cultural stereotype* of the “flying saucer”.

WAS ARNOLD A ‘CREDIBLE WITNESS’?

Kenneth Arnold is the one witness to “flying saucers” whom we know could not have had any prejudicial prior expectation of seeing them, for they didn’t yet exist. This makes Arnold’s observation almost uniquely uncontaminated.

But of course no observation is a passive process taking place in a psychological vacuum. Observation is always an active process of filtering and pattern-matching controlled by an individual’s mental set. There is no sign of futuristic fantasy or space preoccupations in Arnold’s mental set, but it transparently included factors like aviation, the post-war politico-military situation and ornithology, and we can see these operating on his expectations at different points in his accounts of the sighting. These factors can to some extent be allowed for. But how can we know that, in addition to these explicit prior determinants, there may not be others, unidentified but still likely to distort the output of the observing instrument called Kenneth Arnold in unpredictable ways?

One avenue is to cross-check qualitative and quantitative details of the original reports for internal consistency. The reasoning here is that when an event is projected from the physical to the reportorial through, as it were, the lens of psychological preconception, there is

the opportunity for distortions which skew the overall picture, and these distortions are not required to be symmetry-preserving. In other words the projected picture is not required to make physical and geometrical-optical sense. On this internal consistency test Arnold scores quite well.²⁶ But this only tells us that if Arnold's observation was significantly distorted by unknown psychological factors they have left no obvious internal trace.

Another avenue which I have been urged to take by several correspondents²⁷ is to apply lessons learned from studying Arnold's experiences and actions *after* the event. Arnold had a number of other minor sightings in the months and years after June 24 1947, and it has been argued that this fact reveals him to have been an unreliable observer, prone to error.

In a similar vein, his activities as what has sometimes been called "the first ufologist" in the Maury Island affair are often cited as tending to indicate poor judgement or worse.

These issues are more difficult to reason about because there is so much subjectivity involved. As investigators we, too, each have our own 'mental set' that predisposes us to favour one interpretation or another, just as Arnold did. This is why it is important to test our conjectures as far as possible against specific documented facts, and to take care to respect the historical time order of these facts.

ARNOLD AS 'THE FIRST UFOLOGIST' – MAURY ISLAND

The Maury Island affair began with a claim that harbour patrolmen had seen doughnut-shaped saucers over Maury Island in Puget Sound, Washington, just a few days before Arnold's sighting. Fragments of material dropped by one of the saucers was said to have been recovered. *Amazing Stories* publisher Ray Palmer wrote to Arnold, now nationally quite famous, and offered to pay his expenses if he would fly up to Tacoma and investigate the story. Arnold went. Should a sensible

person have taken up this proposal from a pulp magazine publisher to fund an investigation into the story in the first place?

Arnold ignored the first letter he received from Palmer a few days after his sighting because he had no idea who the man was and didn't read this kind of literature. He was more interested in trying to raise the interest of the AAF and FBI. But he seemed to be failing. He had been asked indirectly for a written report, but had had no feedback and no one had been to see him. After a week a second letter from Palmer arrived in early July, offering payment for a story. This time Arnold responded, but not until the end of the month, and only to the extent of sending Palmer a carbon copy of his letter to the AAF.

Meanwhile, by July 12 Arnold had expressed his "considerable disappointment" to Army officials in writing that they weren't able to offer any explanation of the report he had sent "some days ago". His tone suggests that he was slightly miffed about being given a cool brush off. He then received a third letter from Palmer, this time suggesting he go to Tacoma. Arnold did not reply but put it to one side to "think it over".

Only after this did he at last receive a personal visit from Capt. Brown and Lt Davidson from Hamilton Field, California. "I couldn't figure out," he said, "why such an efficient body as Military Intelligence hadn't called on me before." Now that they had arrived he was impressed by their courtesy, but a meeting with Capt. Smith and *Idaho Statesman* aviation editor Dave Johnson was a disorganised affair from which "nobody found out much". The two Intelligence officers then went through all of the saucer mail received by Arnold since June 24, "much of which I did not feel capable of evaluating", in particular collecting all the requests from organisations for accounts of his sighting. They left him with his curiosity still unsatisfied, but with the invitation to call or wire Hamilton Field if anything else came up.

Soon after this Arnold thought over Palmer's letter and consulted Dave Johnson on the wisdom of taking up the offer to go to Tacoma and investigate the rumoured saucer fragments. Johnson could see no

harm in finding out if the offer of funds was sincere and advised him to answer. Arnold did so and, finding himself unexpectedly in prompt receipt of \$200, flew to Tacoma on July 29. He did it because he was fascinated and frustrated. He wanted to get to the bottom of what had happened to him. His innocent sighting report seemed to have turned the world crazy so that he seemed “the only sane one of the bunch!” He was unhappy that he was viewed by many of the public as a “screwball” and not taken seriously enough by the authorities. He wanted solid evidence and here was a chance to get it.

Arnold’s account of subsequent odd events in Seattle and Tacoma – the pre-booked hotel room, suspicions of electronic eavesdropping, shady characters, deceptions, confusions, embarrassments, and rumours of sinister threats – has been interpreted by some as evidence of naivety, gullibility and paranoia. But the first point to note is that Arnold himself provides this “evidence against interest” in what has every appearance of a full and frank memoir.²⁸

Secondly, there is the fact that Arnold, and Capt. Smith – who at Arnold’s invitation joined him in Tacoma after the first day – were the subject of attention from Army Counter-Intelligence at the time, and were also being deliberately hoaxed by a real-life shady character called Fred Crisman, who under his *alter ego* of Jon Gold was much later to become embroiled in the Kennedy assassination prosecution.²⁹ A few weeks after surviving an attempted murder by gunshot from a passing car outside Tacoma in 1968, Gold *aka* Crisman was summoned by New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison to testify after being identified as one of the suspiciously clean-shaven and well-shod “train yard hobos”, photographed leaving the area after the shooting, accompanied by “police” wearing radio earpieces.³⁰

An ex-fighter pilot who claimed to have worked as a State Department special investigator during 1946-7, Crisman clearly exerted strong influence over his reluctant partner and probable dupe Harold Dahl. Arnold records that he and Capt. Smith were indeed very suspicious at times of the Maury Island story and especially of

Crisman, whom they caught in an apparent lie. But Dahl’s innocent believability and the surrounding events kept them guessing.

Those events included warnings from United Press’s Ted Morello and local reporter Paul Lance about possible threats to their safety, and the shocking deaths of Capt. Brown and Lt. Davidson in a plane crash *en route* back to Hamilton Field from their meetings with Arnold and Smith in Tacoma. Arnold cannot be held responsible for this concatenation of odd events, fuelled by press speculation. Throw into the mix the ‘saucers’, and the unsought celebrity, and it is little wonder that Arnold – in the thick of it – did not see all of these events quite as coldly as an uninvolved armchair sceptic with the accumulated hindsight of 60 years. Nevertheless, and despite the later influence of *Amazing Stories* publisher Ray Palmer, I find Arnold’s account of these events³¹ to be quite thoughtful; I would say even conscientious.

It would be fair to say that Arnold was caught up in the events in Tacoma, and perhaps took actions which at the time may have seemed sensible but which with many years’ hindsight might be thought questionable. But the world had been caught up in the saucer mystery and had turned Arnold into Mr Flying Saucer. Why do we imagine that an event like this would not change the man? It did. We might be doubting Arnold’s sincere conviction had it not. He was, of course, uniquely certain that his “saucers” did indeed exist, and suspected that they may have been a military secret, and this may have made him more than averagely inclined to wonder if the strange goings-on in Tacoma might be sinister; but as far as one can judge from his ingenuous account, and to the limited extent that it is possible to calibrate it from independent sources, it does not appear to me to have made him inclined to any more gullibility and paranoia than might have affected any of us in his shoes. Indeed, he records everything, including his own doubts, fears and mystification, with engaging frankness.

Years later Arnold did become, to some extent, an innocent victim of his own saucer mythology. But I don’t see any evidence that on June 24 1947 he was a victim of anyone else’s. Maury Island does

not in my opinion cast a shadow back in time over June 24. These events play a part in the future unfolding of the saucer story, but that is a separate issue. I personally do not agree that they raise any serious questions about flaws in Arnold's character that would tend to undermine his original report relative to what we ought to expect from a witness of at least ordinary care and objectivity. The character testimony of those in a position to judge him at the time consistently portrays him as appearing conscientious, honest and not naturally very imaginative, and I tend to think that this profile fits what I see of the man in his own words and actions.

ARNOLD AS 'REPEATER' – HIS SUBSEQUENT SIGHTINGS

One very experienced researcher has suggested that “[Arnold's] credibility as a good observer is contradicted by the numerous UFO sightings he had in the weeks, months and years after his initial sighting. He became a ‘repeater’.”³²

In the months and years after June 24 1947, whilst flying in the course of his business and/or during trips with a cine camera hoping for a repeat of his original sighting, Arnold did indeed have a number of other sightings of objects that puzzled him, and he filmed some. Why did he make these observations, and in particular what can they tell us about Arnold's mental set on June 24 1947? Do they tend to indicate that Arnold was a man primed by latent psychological factors to begin “seeing things” on June 24 1947? Or do they suggest that being fortuitously in the right place to see things on June 24 was what changed the man and primed him to begin looking for others? The state of the observing instrument (Kenneth Arnold) cannot be assumed to be a constant. We may need to recalibrate the baseline at June 24 1947.

To decide which of these scenarios fits the facts better it is important first to have some feeling for the nature of those later sightings. If they

were highly exotic we might be tempted to conclude that Arnold's original sighting had been a trigger that allowed irrational thinking to flow to the surface, in the nature of a Damascene “conversion”, a sudden unlocking of a dormant or latent tendency to fantasise.³³ But if the later sightings were not highly strange or exotic, and especially if it should appear the case that most or all of Arnold's reports contain the detail tending to permit plausible explanations of them, then this would favour the alternative that Arnold was simply sensitized by the original sighting to the possibility of seeing saucers.

Secondly, and semi-independently of the nature of each individual sighting, there is the matter of the frequency with which Arnold made them (relative to his opportunities and his efforts to see things). If the frequency suggests that Arnold was abnormally prone to make these sightings, or if the context suggests that he tended to see saucers with the least excuse, then we should not be able to rule out the interpretation that this reveals a pre-existing underlying credulousness on the part of Arnold as of June 24 1947. On the other hand, if the frequency seems unremarkable it would imply no such thing.

Arnold flew up to 100 hours a month on business at this period and carried a movie camera in the cockpit at all times after June 24, ever vigilant for a second sighting from the big-windowed cockpit of his CallAir mountain plane. Over the following 20 years or so he had in the region of 10 sightings in all, several supported with a movie record of some kind. Most of these sightings are trivial or explainable – either by Arnold's own admission or as suggested by information in his own accounts of them. The movie film clips showed nothing more than blurs and distant sun reflections, and none was worth anything as evidence, as Arnold himself and Ray Palmer both conceded.

Two weeks after his original sighting Arnold cabled a fellow pilot: “I flew over 1000 miles today (July 8, 1947) at 10,000 foot altitude hoping to get a moving picture but without success”.³⁴ The previous day, July 07, Arnold had flown 7½ hours all over the Cascades area

with Dave Johnson, aviation editor of the *Idaho Daily Statesman*, also without seeing anything.³⁵ Arnold continued seeing nothing at all that he thought worth an inch of film, not even a bird or a cloud or a distant plane, for over a month.

Then on July 29 when flying alone from Boise, Idaho to Pendleton, Oregon, descending into the La Grande valley at 5000 ft over the town of Union, Arnold found himself flying “head on” into a cluster of small “brass coloured objects that looked like ducks”. Startled, he grabbed his camera and began filming. “Even though I thought they were ducks when I first saw them, I wasn’t taking any chances”. Arnold was heading roughly north. The objects, appearing a couple of feet across, veered to his right³⁶ past the plane, “fluttering and flashing a dull amber colour”. They seemed to be round with a dark spot and looked “rough on top”, but he couldn’t be sure “because it all happened so suddenly”. He “attempted to make a turn and follow them” but they disappeared to the east, apparently too fast for him to follow. The filming was “not very successful” and showed only a couple of tiny specks.

Many critics in later years³⁷ have argued that Arnold did see ducks, and that his considered opinion – he was “positive they were not birds” – damages his credibility as a witness. But this is an argument whose conclusion – that Arnold observed birds poorly – is inconsistent with its premise: that the clues indicating birds are “extraordinarily blatant” in his account.³⁸

Arnold’s *opinion* may be questioned, but when we ask, “what is the latent information Arnold provides?” we find that *despite* having an interest in persuading us of the strangeness of the sighting he describes the essential features of flying head-on at close range into a cluster of small objects that are the same order of size as ducks, which he initially thinks *are* ducks, that he says flutter like birds, and that fly in a cluster “like blackbirds”. The head-on closure rate with a flock of ducks could have approached 200mph, meaning that they would have gone from dead-ahead at a range of 100m to falling behind the right wing in a little over 1 second, a very fast angular rate impossible

to match in a turn and well fitting what Arnold described as “a terrific rate”. They were lost to sight behind Arnold and “in the east”, i.e., they were receding into the sun which was on the SE horizon. It was 5:30 am, about sunrise at Arnold’s location. The reddened dawn light could also help to explain the “amber” colouration. Arnold said that he did turn and try to pursue, but they were too fast. He thought a lot about the possibility that they were birds, and assures us that he knew the wildlife in the area. But he also tells us: “I heard later that several farmers in the vicinity of Union had observed what they thought a peculiar cluster of birds that morning”.³⁹

It may be instructive to put ourselves in the position of a man who “knows” that there are saucers out there (because he has seen them, and because other respected authority-figures such as Capt. Smith have ratified his observation), who has been flying thousands of miles with camera in hand eagerly hoping to see more saucers, who knows that officialdom needs more to convince them to take him seriously, and who knows that the world’s press and public are eager for more sightings – and then we should ask ourselves if we, with all these axes to grind, would have done so well in observing a confusing and fleeting encounter with a flock of unfamiliar birds, and described it so cautiously and objectively, including evidence ‘against interest’, in a book designed to definitively justify ourselves and our original sighting to the public.

Arnold snatched another short film of two objects that appeared to race under his plane “going to beat hell” near Mt. Lassen, California, on a sunny day in 1951. One of them appeared to “change density” and in illustration of this Arnold referred Dr James McDonald to another sighting by a Boeing test pilot who told him he saw an object like a manta ray whose wings “rippled” as it flew past his plane.⁴⁰ Arnold apparently saw a similar effect. This density-changing object seemed to be transparent or “wraithlike” and Arnold thought that he could see a pine-tree right through it as it passed between his plane and the ground, whilst its companion was “solid as a Detroit automobile”.⁴¹

Once again the encounter was very fleeting. He shot some 16mm film, but the result was disappointing because, as he recalled later, he had trouble keeping the camera on the fast objects and flying the plane at the same time. He sent the film to Ray Palmer, who determined that something appeared on only 40 frames, or just a few seconds of film. Arnold told Dr Richard Read in 1965 that the film was “difficult to interpret”⁴² and he may not even have seen it developed. He publicly asked Palmer about it in 1977. Palmer said that he had sent the film to the Air Force who replied that they could find nothing on it. Palmer claimed that it was returned with the 40 frames missing.⁴³

So was Arnold startled by a low-flying fast jet near Mt Lassen? Did he see it accompanied by its shadow “rippling” over the forest landscape? From the very limited latent information in Arnold’s description it seems possible, but we will apparently never know. We do know, however, that Arnold made no claims for the value of his film as evidence.

A third sighting, of a triangular object, was made by Arnold near Idaho Falls in July 1966. In this case not only did he make a film but there were many other witnesses. McDonald discussed the detail of this with Arnold by ‘phone a few months later, and according to his notes Arnold told him that it had been explained in the papers as a possible pyramidal “weather balloon” or a high-altitude research balloon as apparently indicated by ESSA. Arnold collected many news clippings on the incident. Hundreds of people sighted the object moving SW apparently at great height, and a B-52 flew up to it at 54,000ft. It was “probably released from Minneapolis”.⁴⁴

In 1977 Arnold publicly discussed this sighting again and commented that on this occasion he’d obtained a “good” film, but only of what probably was a partly deflated balloon. I think it’s interesting and characteristic – and we might argue that it is character-diagnostic – that when Arnold tells us about having one good film he openly says that it was probably a balloon.

Of other sightings made by Arnold over the years little or nothing is known.

CONCLUSION

So what should we say about the status of our “observing instrument”, Kenneth Arnold, on June 24 1947 and in the following crucial days when its read-out was first obtained and studied? Do we have evidence that it was defective or maladjusted?

I think we have to say that we do not. Relative to the standards of caution and dependability of any ordinary observer in 1947, innocent of the sorts of exotic notions that have contaminated other observers since, Kenneth Arnold seems to have been, so far as we can tell, in fairly good working order.

That does not, of course, mean that his sighting report is simply a photograph of objective reality. What he saw remains uncertain and controversial. But what he *said* he saw appears to have been described in 1947 with rather good internal consistency, and we lack significant evidence that he did *not* see it as he described it. And whilst the origin of the “saucers” remains complex and intriguing, we can with some confidence put those bamboozling “boomerangs” back in the box of ufological canards they came from.

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