



By **David Olson**

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MINOT — A routine bomber flight in the pre-dawn hours of Oct. 24, 1968, turned unforgettable for navigator Patrick McCaslin.

McCaslin and his B-52 crewmates were practicing maneuvers in the skies above Minot, N.D., when officials at the nearby Air Force base radioed a request.

"The tower called and said, 'Could you guys keep your eyes open for anything unusual?' " said McCaslin, recalling that flight four decades ago.

"We asked, 'What are we looking for?'

"They said, 'You'll know it if you see it,' " McCaslin said.

"This is a dim memory," he added, "but I think one of the pilots said, 'Are the missile crews seeing things again?'"

McCaslin's first move was to focus the plane's radar into a narrow, high-intensity beam.

"I saw a (radar) return off to our right; it was faint on the first sweep and then it was very strong on the next sweep," he said.



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When McCaslin informed the pilots about the contact, they replied they couldn't see anything because of cloud cover, but asked him to keep them apprised of what the object did.

What it did, McCaslin said, was move faster than anything he had ever clocked on radar.

"From one sweep (of the radar) to the next, it came from three miles to one mile," he said. "Later, we computed the closure speed at 3,000 miles an hour."

From there, it only got stranger.

"It blew my mind that this thing had closed on us this quickly," said McCaslin, who recalled that as he advised the pilots of what the object was doing, the bomber lost radio contact with the tower.

"We could hear them, but they couldn't hear us," he said.

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A short while later, the object dropped from the plane's radar.

Officials in the tower also watched the blip disappear from radar and asked the bomber to fly lower in an attempt to regain contact.

This is a drawing by B-52 pilot Brad Runyon of a craft sighted October 1968 over the Minot Air Force Base. Bill McNeff / Special to The Forum

As the plane approached the spot where radar contact was lost, the crew finally saw something.

"The pilots indicated they could see it visually, just hovering above the ground," McCaslin recalled.

"They said to me, 'Why don't you unstrap and come up and take a look at this thing?' " said McCaslin, who decided to stick close to his ejection seat.

"I didn't know what this thing was."

Shortly after the pilot and co-pilot began observing the mysterious, glowing object, it rose quickly into the sky and disappeared.

Long witness list

While the bomber crew members were making their observations, workers on the ground were seeing something similar and reacting to alarms going off at one of the Minuteman missile silos near the Minot air base, said Bill McNeff, who heard parts of the story firsthand from a brother-in-law who worked as a security guard at the air base in 1968.

McNeff, a retired electrical engineer living in the Twin Cities and a former director of the Minnesota chapter of the Mutual UFO Network, said the Minot incident was one of the things that inspired him to pursue decades of research into UFO phenomenon. His quest led him in the 1980s to the National Archives in Washington, where he poured over the files of Project Blue Book, the official U.S. Air Force inquiry into reports of unidentified flying objects in the 1950s and '60s.

"There were incidents (during the Minot episode) that did not make it into the Blue Book files," said McNeff, who added the official record doesn't reflect that two airmen passed out after a close approach from the UFO.

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He said a report that the lid of a missile silo was tampered with was also left out.

"What I learned later is that the lid was completely off the silo and lying on the grass," McNeff said.

'Patternicity'

McNeff said the Minot case ranks among the most intriguing of all UFO sightings because of the number of witnesses and its proximity to a heavily guarded nuclear installation.

Those factors don't impress Michael Schermer.

Schermer, the publisher of Skeptic magazine and founder of the Skeptics Society, shakes his head at any suggestion UFOs are anything more than earthly events that have yet to be explained.

"What the public has done is equate 'UFO' with 'extraterrestrial spaceship,' but to date we don't have a shred of evidence that any of the sightings represent extraterrestrial," Schermer said.

He said the Minot case, with its radar contact indicating an object that moved extremely fast, is interesting, but proves nothing.

In this 2003 Forum file photo, a B-52 takes off while another sits on the runway at Minot Air Force Base.

"How do you know it just wasn't one branch of the military not telling the other branch of the military what they're doing? That happens all the time." Schermer has coined a term for why some equate UFOs with visits from outer space.

"I call it patternicity, the tendency to find meaningful patterns in random noise," he said.

"Basically, our brains are wired to always find an explanation even if there isn't one," he said. "In other words, we have a low tolerance for ambiguity."

Vega schmayga

McCaslin, who eventually became a pilot and later a high school science teacher in Texas, where he still lives, doesn't know if what showed up on his radar that night 40 years ago came from outer space or inner space.

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But he said one of the explanations the Air Force came up with - that his bomber crew was looking at a star called Vega - is hogwash.

Well, he actually used a stronger noun.

And his irritation with the official story is still evident after four decades.

"My business was to navigate with several means, the star Vega for one," he said. "This thing was at or near the ground. How could it be a star if you're looking at the ground?"

When TV specials air interviews with McCaslin, his neighbors will approach him and ask if he believes in UFOs.

"I'll tell you what I tell them. I believe what I saw that night. I'm not ready to accept all the things that you see out there - about alien abduction and all that - because I didn't have that experience.

"It would be a leap in logic to say it came from outer space," McCaslin said.

"It could have come from inner space," he said. "It could have come from anywhere."

Scientist says some UFO reports worth pondering

Stories about a B-52 bomber's encounter with an unidentified flying object in North Dakota in October 1968 pop up on many Web sites.

In one posting, Twin Cities-based UFO researcher Bill McNeff relates what co-pilot Brad Runyon reported seeing in the early morning hours on that day 40 years ago.

Runyon described an object more than 200 feet in diameter and hundreds of feet long.

He said the object had a metallic cylinder attached to one end, with a crescent moon-shaped section glowing yellow-green connected to the cylinder.

This page on UFOcasebook.com details the 1968 UFO encounter of a B-52 crew from Minot Air Force Base.

Many scientists dismiss UFO sightings as unremarkable.

Many, but not all.

"My perspective is there's certainly something going on. I don't know what it is," said Bernard Haisch, an astrophysicist and author of more than 130 scientific publications.

Haisch believes the UFO question deserves to be pondered by the scientific community, even if 99 percent of reports are explainable or hoaxed.

"There's still a huge amount of data that is potentially useful," said Haisch, who operates a Web site called ufoskeptic.org .

He defines "skeptic" as someone wary of extraordinary explanations for perplexing mysteries who is also willing to look at data.

With the rise of string theory - which allows for the possibility of multiple universes - Haisch finds it odd that physicists are usually the first to scoff at the idea of visitors from other worlds.

"It's kind of a strange situation," he said.

Thomas McDonough, senior scientist with a group called The Skeptics Society, grew up believing in the paranormal, but gradually became a doubter.

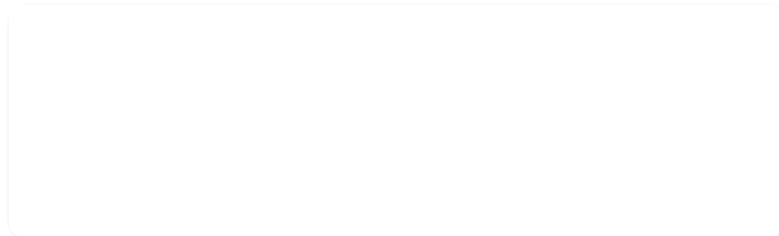
"There are so many ways people can be fooled," said McDonough, who like Haisch is from California and has a Ph.D. in astrophysics.

Absent tangible evidence, McDonough said he has concluded that the Earth is not being visited by aliens.

However, he's keeping the door open to possibilities.

"Every now and then in science, someone comes along with a weird story that leads to something new.

"But most times," he said, "the weird stories lead to something mundane."



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Dave Olson is a reporter, photographer and occasional videographer. He graduated from Minnesota State University Moorhead with a degree in mass communications, and during his time at The Forum he has covered many beats, from cops and courts to business and education. Currently is writing business stories, but jumps on daily news as needed. He's also written about UFOs, ghosts, dinosaur bones and the dwarf planet Pluto. You may reach Dave at 701-241-5555, or by email at adolson@forumcomm.com.

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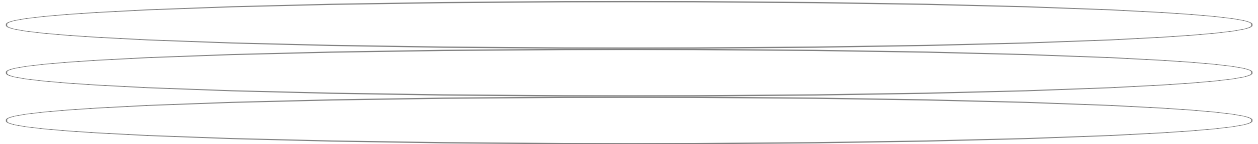
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