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Clockwise from top left, Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos with Aime Michel, Jacques Vallee, Richard F. Haines, and J. Allen Hynek.

HISTORY OF UFOs IN SPAIN: A DIALOGUE WITH V.-J. BALLESTER OLMOS (Page 8)

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DIALOGUE WITH VICENTE-JUAN BALLESTER OLMOS

V.-J. Ballester Olmos was employed by the Ford Motor Company in Spain from July 1976 to December 2005, when he took early-retirement as a manager in the Finance Department. He was founder and chairman of CEONI (1968-1973), the first UFO organization on a university campus in Spain, and was an officer of the Fundación Anomalía (See box.). Born in Valencia, Spain, in 1948, he came of age in the 1960s at a time when UFOs began to receive strong news media attention internationally.

He completed a number of college preparatory courses, but his preoccupation with UFOs interfered with his formal education and he never completed the work for a degree. He was hired by Ford in 1976 and employed there for 30 years with intensive on-the-job and external training in labor economics, financial mathematics, insurance, risk management, pensions, and treasury matters. He also privately studied topics from statistics to psychology, geophysics to sociology, and many other scientific disciplines and basically has been a life-long self-taught person.

Ballester Olmos has long been a voice for reason and sanity in regard to UFO investigation and research, and his writings have been published widely in both Spanish and English. He has collaborated with Dr. J. Allen Hynek, Dr. Jacques Vallee, and Dr. Richard Haines on several publications, and has been a speaker for Mutual UFO Network symposia in the United States.

As is customary for these dialogues, I first asked him when and under what circumstances his involvement with UFOs began.

Hall: What was your age when you first became aware of UFOs? What first attracted your attention to the subject? Was it a particular event?

Ballester Olmos: As a child, I was interested in both the natural Earth sciences and space. As a teenager, I started to read astronomy and I found a footnote reference to "flying saucers" in the book *Our Neighbour Worlds*, by V.A. Firsoff, which excited my curiosity. I then decided I had to learn more and study this phenomenon by myself.

Hall: In those early years, was there ridicule attached to the subject by your peers or by society? Or was the subject considered a legitimate topic of discussion and study?

Ballester Olmos: This is most interesting, because contrary to the experience of other foreign colleagues, in my personal case my public involvement with a serious approach to UFOs, TV appearances, press interviews, congresses, books, etc., was not viewed negatively by my peers, in fact the reverse was true. Top management in my company always provided support and acceptance. I believe it is evident that if you treat any subject formally and with a scientific orientation, it pays its dues.

Hall: You have been instrumental in obtaining the public release of formerly classified UFO reports from the Spanish Air Force. How were you able to do that?

Ballester Olmos: In the early nineties I developed a catalogue of UFO sightings in Spain by personnel from Air Force, Navy, Army, Civil Aviation, and Police. My major objective was to try to convince the Air Force Staff to declassify the UFO archives in their custody since 1962. When I started my personal contacts with Air Force officials to present them reasons and arguments why secret UFO reports should be in the public domain, they were very receptive, and they followed my suggestions (e.g. centralization of dispersed UFO files in other Air Force commands) almost literally. When the decision was finally made to transfer the body of archives from the Air Force Headquarters to the Intelligence Section of the Air Operative Command at Torrejón AFB in Madrid, to be reviewed for declassification purposes, the officer in charge of Intelligence (Lt. Col. Bastida) contacted me officially. It was nice to realize that the new UFO protocols by the Spanish Air Force and their latest status report had used my own publications as standard text books! The rest is history: from 1991 to 1999 I
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Ballester Olmos dialogue, continued

was able to monitor the declassification process from inside, being the only civilian ufologist to play a (loose) consultant role.

Hall: Tell us about a few of the more significant Spanish military UFO sightings. Have there been aerial encounters or landing trace cases?

Ballester Olmos: The archives finally amassed 84 files (released from 1992 to 1999), amounting to 122 actual cases from 1962 to 1995. After analysis there were 25 unexplained cases to 97 explained cases. Over half of the total cases involved distant lights in the night sky, mostly explained. Among Daylight Disc cases there are no examples of typical "flying saucers" seen in plain daylight in the set of unknown reports. All such incidents had conventional solutions. Radar-Visual incidents represent, obviously, the highest score in terms of aeronautical strangeness.

Hall: Were any of these strong radar-visual cases?

Ballester Olmos: Typically, these are tracks matching the sighting of an anomalous object in the atmosphere. Although 2 out of 3 reports lie in the explained category, there are a few unknown phenomena of this kind. In principle, it could be interpreted as there being a promise of pay dirt in the Air Force UFO stories. Most of the radar-only cases (i.e., no eyewitness) are in the unexplained category. Most records are poor as far as factual data is concerned, only a few lines taken from military radar logs with no follow-up. The majority of these are candidates for false echoes, and lack of information prevents us from doing a proper analysis. Close encounters score high in strangeness too, and what I have just said about radar-visual cases applies here as well. My on-line bibliography shows some papers where those cases are described.

(<http://www.anomalia.org/bibliog1.pdf>)

Hall: What is the Spanish government position on UFOs currently? Does the Air Force still investigate new cases?

FUNDACION ANOMALIA

Ballester Olmos was co-founder of the not-for-profit Fundacion Anomalia (FA) in 1997 and served as vice-president and research director until a few years ago when he resigned to opt for a more independent activities. He remains an associate collaborator of FA. Their mission statement is "to promote the study of the influence in the popular culture of the advancements of science and technology, of scientific anomalies and what wonders; the preservation of archives, the release of journals and books, to grant prizes and scholarships to advance research in those fields; as well as the fulfillment of museum activities to release the historic-artistic-cultural inheritance." FA has edited some top publications on UFOs, and hosts his personal blog. (<http://www.anomalia.org>)

Ballester Olmos: The Spanish Government as such holds no opinion, it is entirely an Air Force issue, and the Air Force Chief of Staff decided to eliminate the existing level of classification of UFO reports and allow full public disclosure. Their internal writings, however, show that they perceive UFOs as representing no risk to National Defense, and that keeping those accounts secret is not compatible with a modern democracy. The protocols exist by which if and when a UFO sighting is reported to Air authorities it will be thoroughly investigated following "IG-40-5" (the new procedures for UFO inquiry made in 1992, based on my input, and quite similar to the MUFON manual, for example). The final report to be declassified after review by the Chief of Staff. Nevertheless, there have not been any UFO cases reported to the Ministry of Defense since 1995.

Hall: Briefly, what is the history of official UFO investigations over time. Have there been periods of strong official interest?

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Ballester Olmos Dialogue, continued

Ballester Olmos: Historically, the depth of UFO inquiry by the military in Spain has been superficial, with a few exceptions. Air Force reports lacked even a common format until 1968. Since December 1968, a procedure has been in place for the field investigation of a UFO sighting to be conducted by an Air Force officer acting as military "judge." (The last such investigation took place in 1980). The first attempt to request the end of the secrecy was made in the mid-seventies by the CEI (Barcelona-based UFO organization). A journalist received a few summaries of files, which he published in violation of his agreement with the Air Force. This severely strained the civilian-military UFO relationship until the nineties. Official work on UFO cases was stronger in the seventies due to a number of UFO cases both in Spain and in the region of the Canary Islands. Since the decade of the eighties, there has been a decline in cases and in official interest.

Hall: Do you think that UFO reports represent a genuine scientific anomaly? If so, what type of evidence has led you to this conclusion?

Ballester Olmos: Let me respond to this question with some perspective. There was measurable progress in UFO research from the fifties to the early eighties, but this tapered off when most ufologists were absorbed by myths like abductions, Roswell, Gulf Breeze, and the alien autopsy film, mostly promoted by commercial interests. This led to a new perception whereby many scientists that could have entered into the UFO scene simply did not dare to be involved with such a crazy situation. Academic attitudes on UFOs are based on a reaction to the most publicized and popular stories, like the above topics, and cannot be anything but negative.

Hall: I'm not so sure that some of the topics you mention belong in the mythical category, but your point is valid as to how academics tend to form their attitudes toward UFOs. I think we have some important areas of

FOTOCAT Project

Ballester Olmos's FOTOCAT Project was begun in 2000, as a long-term program designed to collect all photographic UFO reports published in the UFO literature with related information supplied by national and regional ufologists. The database is an Excel file with 23 data columns containing fundamental information on picture, film, and video cases worldwide, up to December 31, 2005. The information includes date, time, identification (if there is one), location, photographer's name, duration, special features, and, above all, references. Mainly it is a catalogue of sources, not a gallery of portraits, to serve as a user's guide and tool. Thanks to strong international cooperation, currently the FOTOCAT catalogue has attained almost 8,500 entries. It will be posted online in its entirety when the count is 10,000 entries.

(<http://fotocat.blogspot.com>)

disagreement. But your viewpoint must be respected, mainly because (as we say in the U.S.) "You have done your homework" by conducting serious research for many years. You are far from being merely an arm-chair commentator who casually issues opinions without looking seriously at the evidence.

Ballester Olmos: In Europe, hundreds of UFO researchers from Spain to Scandinavia continued to concentrate on field investigation of current cases and on revisiting classic encounters, like the 1954 wave, rather than move toward the mythical aspects as we see it. Over the years we realized that many important UFO cases, when professionally reviewed, could be explained reasonably when examined more critically instead of simply being taken at face value. Independently, we arrived at the same conclusion: that the most probable model for the vast majority of UFO reports was a variety of misinterpretations of natural or man-made objects, processes and phenomena. In my view, and based on my own experience, the skeptical approach in

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Ballester Olmos Dialogue, continued

Europe is not preconceived or due to prejudice; it is the result of active work and rigorous examination of events.

Hall: I think it depends mainly on the definition of "UFO" in the first place, and of "important" in this context. The vast majority of everything reported can generally be explained, but in my experience the majority of reports are trivial (not "important") at the starting point of investigation. Anyway, the serious hard core reports that remain after rigorous investigation are what matter.

Ballester Olmos: Nowadays in Europe, most researchers are focused on historical research. Governments of Sweden, Spain and England have declassified their military, secret UFO archives thanks to the work of civilian ufologists (Svahn, Ballester Olmos, Clarke). The Italian Center for UFO Studies (CISU) has released prominent books on early European waves (Stilo, Verga). Finally, a sort of loose but robust organization has been started with the creation of the EuroUFO network.

Hall: I think most U.S. Research is also focused on historical information now.

Ballester Olmos: From my perspective, and I believe it is shared by many colleagues in both Europe and America, there are a number of events that look anomalous and still defy rational explanation, especially those where scientists and engineers have quantified them in terms of energy output or physical properties (Vallee, Maccabee, Rudiak, Sparks, Haines, among others). Whether in the final analysis this proves to be an example of miscalculations and bad science, or the apparition of a physical phenomenon in the Earth's environment whose nature is alien to us, only time will tell.

Hall: Of course, I agree with that.

Ballester Olmos: In the meantime, I do favor the strictest application of scientific methodology in the study of the rarest

instances of UFO events, multiple-witnessed and supported by physical evidence such as measurements, photography or footage, or traces. It must be complemented with better coordination of efforts and the preparation of scientific bibliographies which concentrate all the wisdom and UFO knowledge acquired since 1947.

Hall: What do you think about the extraterrestrial hypothesis (ETH)?

Ballester Olmos: Let me reply with another question: Where are the close encounters of the past, those landings leaving ground marks, the cars halted by EM effects radiated by UFOs, the humanoids stepping from their vessels, the aircraft pilot's chasing episodes, now that we have the accumulated know-how to perform a good on-site inquiry? Recently, the Belgian UFO organization SOBEPS conducted a European survey about the best UFO cases: well-investigated cases with high strangeness, reported in the last several years. The SOBEPS study found that lately there have been no good reports of flying saucers.

Hall: We still hear of such reports in the U.S., but the investigation network is not very good.

Ballester Olmos: FOTOCAT records show a contrary conclusion, that since 2000 the rate of incoming reports has largely increased up to one per day! What is happening? I call it the 21st century paradox. For me it is just the surreal effect of the internet, where any dot that appears in a picture after it is printed is considered a UFO and it is placed online. Where have those flying saucers gone that we loved and lost? I mean, those cases to which we thought the ETH was the only response?

Hall: When I compiled *The UFO Evidence* Volume II, I found dozens of these old-fashioned UFO cases right up to the 21st Century! So we have a disagreement on that point. I do agree completely about the alleged UFO photos that show up regularly on the internet.

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Ballester Olmos Dialogue, continued

Ballester Olmos: Frankly, most of the cases which I used as a paradigm for a potential extraterrestrial cause have been demolished with time, or a reasonable doubt has been raised about them. Some remain, yes, this is why I am continuing hard at work, because there are anomalies in our skies and we do not seem to have adequate explanations for them all.

Hall: What are your recommendations for the future? How can UFO research be improved?

Ballester Olmos: The future of UFO research, if there is one, will be a labor of love with the preparation of mammoth compilations of knowledge (Gross, Clark, Koi), statistical work (Johnson, Rodeghier), and doing science with UFO data (Meessen, among others.) We have the most important asset: the raw data that we have been amassing for 60 years now. And we have the competence and the know-how. We need to calmly proceed to look at the data, discuss it in proper forums and extract final conclusions.

Hall: Do you foresee UFOs being taken more seriously by society and its major institutions so that funding becomes available for serious studies?

Ballester Olmos: The possibility of having university, industry, or government funding for UFO research is remote. For instance, in the last few months Dr. Claude Poher has unsuccessfully tried to obtain funding to support his laboratory experiments to confirm his theory of "universons." And we are talking about France, the only country which has a national, scientific center for UFO studies, and the proponent is a CNES scientist of reputation. As far as the United States is concerned, I believe the Condon Report killed any further opportunity. Recent individual support by tycoon Laurance Rockefeller or the National Institute for Discovery Science was limited or simply not lasting.

Hall: Do you think we will ever determine the truth about UFOs scientifically, or will the controversy continue indefinitely?

Ballester Olmos: I definitely think that only the application of scientific methods will permit us to define what UFOs are. This August, my co-author Ole Jonny Braenne delivered a major paper we wrote on the first catalogue of UFO photographs in Norway. It was during the European meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration, and in the congress, professor Bjørn Gitle Hauge (Østfold University College, Halden, Norway) presented a speech with initial results from optical spectrum analysis of the Hessdalen lights. The research discovered that these are ionized gas, not anything solid, where Scandium, a metal element typical of the area, plays the role of igniting mechanism when combined with acid and air. So even recurrent, objective phenomena like this can be explained without resorting to anomalous forms of ball lightning, or other extravagant geophysical entities.

Hall: That is important, to account for any borderline phenomena by applying scientific techniques.

Ballester Olmos: It causes me to think that science will allow us to make discoveries, and the wide variety of UFO experiences we have accumulated over the years represent a terrain where scientific discoveries will take place. Whether all of these are Earth-bound or not, it is still too soon to say. I am fully confident that sooner or later we will be able to close the controversy; it cannot last forever. In my opinion time runs against the reality of the phenomenon.

Hall: Thank you for an excellent and thought-provoking interview. □

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