

BACK TALK: DON'T RENEW THOSE UFO HUNTS

By Robert F. Dorr

Some people think the Air Force is covering up information about unidentified flying objects, or UFOs -- those pesky flying objects often portrayed as invaders from outer space.

Many critics, such as aviation writer Don Berliner of Alexandria, Va., who wrote "Crash at Corona," a 1992 book about an incident that occurred near Roswell, N.M., in July 1947, are responsible people who have no explanation of their own for UFOs and shy away from talk of alien ships and aliens.

"Qualified observers have seen things in the sky we do not understand," says Berliner, who adds he has seen evidence that the Air Force is hiding documents from the public.

Others with more extreme views claim the service is covering up that 1947 incident, which they claim involves an interplanetary flying saucer, an autopsy of a dead space alien and plenty more.

In my opinion, some UFO sightings do defy earthly explanation, but none is proof of visits from outer space. That is why I worry that the Air Force may be pressured to spend taxpayer money re-opening UFO investigations or explaining its past and current actions. This could come as the result of the publicity Nevada Gov. Bob Miller is giving to space aliens.

"I'm afraid we will have to get into the UFO business again," says a former Air Force civilian official who asked not to be named.

The Air Force investigated UFOs from 1948 to 1969 under a variety of names, including Project Sign, Project Grudge and Project Bluebook. During that time, taxpayer dollars went into investigations and into explaining to the press and public what the service was doing.

"It was a costly business," says the retired civilian.

This month, Miller officially gave the name Extraterrestrial Highway to Nevada Route 375, which crosses the desert near the Air Force's secret test facility at Groom Lake. Miller and Tom Tait, the state's tourism director, say they want to attract travelers of the very ordinary variety -- humans who come to their state to soak up the sights, gamble, and spend money in other ways.

In fact, Nevada's current mania for UFOs is being underwritten in part by 20th Century Fox, which is using the renaming of the highway to promote its summer movie blockbuster, "Independence Day," about an invasion by space aliens.

All of this makes the Nevada state government much friendlier toward UFOs than the Air Force, which seems to regret the efforts expended for 15 years and to want nothing more to do with intergalactic visitors.

Last September, the service released a 1,000-page report on the Roswell incident.

Some have claimed for years that an alien spaceship crashed at Roswell and that the event was covered up. A grainy black-and-white film purporting to show an autopsy of an alien creature is believed by a few UFO watchers to be authentic. "That was real schlock as far as I'm concerned," says Berliner. "I've seen funnier looking people at the Safeway."

The report said the crash involved an unmanned balloon from Project Mogul, a program that was developing a reconnaissance capability aimed at Soviet nuclear tests. (Mogul was not a weather balloon, as widely reported).

In recent years, the service has shied away from becoming involved in UFOs.

What we did when asked," said retired Maj. Richard Cole, former Air Force public affairs officer, "we always answered that the Air Force had investigated UFOs fully. There is a standard fact sheet explaining that virtually all UFO sightings, when investigated, had been found to have an explanation. We would send anyone who asked the fact sheet and tell them that the Air Force is not in the UFO business."

These days, Lt. Col. Mack McLaurin fields the UFO questions. "Basically," he says, "I listen."

McLaurin says he has received invitations from media outlets all over the world to go on TV in uniform and discuss the Roswell report, but "that would make it seem like we're continuing the investigation. And we're not."

Back when it accepted, studied, and commented on UFO incidents, the Air Force agreed that up to 10 percent of reported sightings were made by serious, reputable observers, such as airline or military pilots. The Air Force said none were a threat to national security.

Air Force Secretary Sheila E. Widnall called "a damned nuisance" in an interview last October. And she is absolutely right.

I am not humorless. I enjoy Miller and his fellow Nevadans having a little fun.

But these are lean times. The Air Force has serious business at hand. This is not the time for the Air Force to resume investigating UFOs. There are plenty of private citizens who can do that.

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