

[Article provided by Oberg.]

From: JamesOberg@aol.com  
Date: Mon, 9 Aug 1999 10:36:39 EDT  
To: webmaster@ufomind.com

Title: Apollo-12 Pseudo-UFOs Solved Since 1977

SPACE WORLD magazine  
February 1977  
Palmer Publications, Amherst, Wisconsin  
Editor-in-Chief, Ray Palmer  
(Magazine was indexed in the  
Readers Guide to Periodic Literature)

Article "Astronauts and UFOs --  
The Whole Story", pp. 4-28,  
By James Oberg, Associate Editor.

Excerpt regarding Apollo-12 mission, Pages 14-22

Astronaut Conrad and the UFO people clashed again over his next space mission, Apollo-12. According to the Research Director of APRO, Dr. Harder, Conrad reported that he was being followed by a UFO on the way to the moon. Conrad claims that it was just a joke about the large panels which enclose the lunar module during launch but are jettisoned later in the flight and which tumble through space a few miles from the Apollo all the way to the moon. Harder says that Conrad, under pressure from a secret government agency, is lying.

These are Conrad's words: "They've been after me for years because we were followed by a UFO on the way to the moon. That, of course, was untrue. The guy who came up with it was going by our transcript where we saw debris from our own rocket and we were joking with the ground crew about it. He took this out of context...I called the ground and said, 'hey, gang, we're being followed, there's some flashing object out there'. Some scandal sheet took that and made a helluva story out of it. But it was nothing like anything I was connected with".

Conrad has left NASA and lives in Denver, presumably beyond the reach of any NASA censors. He describes a phenomenon common to all Apollo moon flights; the claim that he saw a UFO is also common, but hardly as valid.

Conrad confirmed these quotations in a letter to me dated April 12, 1976. "I hope your paper is widely printed," he added. Referring to Harder's claim of coverup, Conrad could only say: "I think you have more than your share of kooks."

Let's take a moment to look at the Apollo-12 flight more carefully. It probably rates as one of the most "UFO-ridden" space flights ever made, and probably did more than any Apollo mission to encourage the stories

of astronaut sightings of UFOs.

What lies behind all these stories? Who started them? What is the "official" NASA position?

Apollo-12 was launched on November 14, 1969, on the second moon landing mission. The crew consisted of Gemini-II veterans "Pete" Conrad and Richard Gordon, and space rookie Alan Bean (Conrad had also flown Gemini-5.) Taking off during a thunderstorm, the craft was twice hit by lightning which threatened to abort the mission.

Instead, the flight proceeded successfully to the first pinpoint moon landing four days later. Astronauts Conrad and Bean flew their Lunar Module in to a precision touchdown near the Surveyor-3 automatic moon probe. During a scheduled moon walk, the men retrieved samples from the robot craft. The return on Earth was "routine", if flights to the moon can ever be considered routine.

On the outbound leg, Conrad had radioed to Earth that the Apollo was "being followed". This message, transmitted over the open radio link, was heard by hundreds of newsmen and by millions of Americans. It immediately gave rise to new UFO stories.

According to the account best known to UFO believers (published in *Saga* magazine, May 1970, entitled "Apollo 12's Mysterious Encounter with Flying Saucers", written by T.G. Beckley and Il. Salkin), the astronauts watched two flashing lights near their Command Module about 150,000 miles out from Earth. At first, the ground thought it was their S-IVaB booster rocket but quickly calculated that it would have been in a different direction. Next, they suggested that the lights could have been pieces of the Lunar Module "garage", called "SLA Panels", which are quite large and highly reflective. Conrad, so the UFO story goes, remarked that this was unlikely since one of them had suddenly taken off at a high velocity, something that a piece of space debris simply could not do. Finally, the astronauts decided to ignore the apparently harmless escort and carry on with their mission.

In lunar orbit, new (or perhaps the same) UFOs dogged the spacemen. During the descent to the lunar surface, millions of television watchers on Earth saw bright objects crossing the field of view of the Apollo TV cameras. Similar objects were seen during the launch from the moon and during the final approach to Earth.

Here, then, is a major case for "astronaut UFO sightings". Besides the three astronauts, millions of Americans saw the TV images and heard the voices of the crewmen wondering what the objects could be. They were obviously unidentified, they were flying in space, and they were objects of some sort. Hence, they were UFOs.

The "Fawcett List" of space UFOs [in Hynek and Vallee's UFO book] says that the astronauts "said a UFO accompanied them all the way to within 132,000 miles of the moon, preceding them all the way." The origin of that mileage figure is obscure, but it lends unwarranted authenticity to the report.

Observatories in Europe also watched the two UFOs, other sources reveal. Embellishing the story, another UFO source claims that "Next day, the 15th, at 21.15 hours, one bright revolving light approached the Apollo 12 spacecraft." Fawcett, not to be outdone, also claims that the astronauts photographed the UFO (or UFOs).

One of the loudest proponents of the Apollo-12 UFO is APRO research director Dr. James Harder. At a UFO symposium at the University of California at Santa Cruz on November 8, 1975, Harder claimed that one UFO "followed Apollo 12 on three orbits around the moon". Further, "NASA suppressed the UFO incidents for fear of panic", but Harder was able to discover the sightings because it "was disclosed by a member of the space team" who he refused to identify.

Since all the material Harder used to "prove" the existence of the incidents were public information (Harder could have read it in Saga, which is hardly a top secret government report), his reference to a coverup and to secret inside information were clearly only gimmicks to impress the news media with the value of his "information".

NASA, meanwhile, says that no such UFO event took place. The lights, according to Dale Myers (Associate Administrator for Manned Space Flight; quoted in a letter dated Feb. 5, 1973 to Mr. Donald Ratsch of APRO), were spacecraft fragments: "During all of our Apollo lunar missions, objects have been sighted by the various crews. Subsequent to the crew sightings, the flight controllers determined the observations were probably either the S-IVB booster, the spacecraft lunar adapter (SLA) panels, or smaller objects such as mylar foil particles. Because of their large size and highly reflective surfaces, the S-IVB and SLA panels should be visible at great distances in the space environment. . ."

Astronaut Conrad, as quoted earlier, claimed that the flashing lights were obviously SLA panels but that he was joking with the ground. He denounced the Saga story explicitly and gave his opinion that Harder was a "kook". Astronaut Gordon has publicly stated that he has never seen a UFO on any space flight. Alan Bean, the only one of the three still on active NASA duty, issued a statement soon after Harder's latest charges went out over the news media late in 1975. In a UPI dispatch:

"Astronaut Alan Bean...said that at no time during his mission did he ever see an unidentified object. Bean said that there were some metallic parts which floated behind their space- craft after the Apollo-12 lunar module lifted off from the moon. He said these small pieces were visible until they (the astronauts) made an engine burn. The metallic objects were parts of the insulation which came off the lunar module during the launch phase and lunar orbital phase. 'At no time did we see anything which was not of our spacecraft, either during lunar orbit or during the voyage to and from the moon,' Bean stated."

To Harder and his "NASA coverup", these statements are just more lies designed to confuse the American public. So let's go back to the key Apollo-12 UFO encounter and try to determine just who is confused.

Late on November 15th, 1969, about 150,000 statute miles from Earth, the Apollo crew was talking to capsule communicator astronaut Gerald Carr about some lights they were watching out their window. Apollo: The object is very bright and it is obviously something that is tumbling. It is tumbling (at) one and one half revolution(s) per second, or at least it is flashing at us (at) about that (rate). ..

CAPCOM: Roger. We are standing by. CAPCOM: (Apollo) 12, (this is) Houston. Apollo: Go ahead. CAPCOM: As best we can tell, looking at things down here, on those SLA panels, we assume they weren't imparted with any great amount of delta-V (velocity change)--like anything more than one or so feet per second when they separated (thirty-three hours ago). Your SLA panels would probably be only about 300 (nautical) miles (345 statute miles) away from you right now. \*"\*" The following reply by Conrad has been claimed by UFO believers to indicate that the lights (the so-called "SLA panels") have suddenly pulled away from the Apollo, something that a tumbling piece of debris could not do. To clarify the meaning, punctuation and a few extra parenthetical words have been added by the UFOlogists: Apollo: That could be true, but gee whiz, when I(just) turned around I saw one of those "SLA panels" leaving the area at a high rate of speed, and it looked to me like it was leaving us pretty (fast)-at a pretty rapid clip, like it got a lot more than a foot per second or so. CAPCOM: Well, since we don't really have any idea how they left, or what their trajectory could be, it's kind of tough really to say just what the heck that could be. Apollo: Okay. We'll assume it's friendly anyway, OK?

The UFO reasoning, as worded by APRO member Brad Sparks, goes as follows: "After the SLA panels separated and the S-IVB's tanks were emptied (on Nov. 14) they could not change their velocity simply because they had no form of propulsion to do so. But Conrad saw one of the "SLA panels" (on Nov. 15th) suddenly leave its position at a "high rate of speed", an impossibility, unless it really was a maneuverable spacecraft of some sort. But where does one find a maneuverable spacecraft nearly 150,000 miles from the earth?. The answer: (excepting Apollo 12 itself) in November of 1969 there weren't any. The conclusion is inescapable: One (possibly two) maneuverable spacecraft not of man-made origin were following our Apollo 12 on November 14 and 15, 1969."

To anyone familiar with the flight plan of an Apollo moon flight, Conrad's words imply nothing of the sort. Two facts must be brought to mind. First, Apollo and the Capcom were discussing the present position of the SLA panels based upon their initial separation velocities from the spent S-IVB rocket stage. Second, the SLA panels break free after the Apollo pulls off from the booster; the astronauts then perform a maneuver called the "turnaround" the Command Module returns to the booster to dock with the now-exposed Lunar Module, before pulling the LM free from its "garage".

Striking the UFOlogist's punctuation and clarifying words from the communication, and putting it in proper perspective, what Conrad was saying was:

Apollo: That could be true (that the SLA panels were flying off at one or so feet per second), but gee whiz, when I turned around (right after they flew free, thirty-three hours ago) I saw one of those SLA panels leaving the area (of the LM "garage") at a high rate of speed, and it looked to me that it was leaving us pretty...at a pretty rapid clip, like it got a lot more than a foot per second or so.

The UFO believers' reasoning--and the entire basis for Harder's and for the Saga article's Apoilo-12 UFO sighting--is phony. The most generous description of it would be a mistake, a misreading of the transcript's meaning in an attempt to "prove" a UFO incident that never really happened outside of the fertile imaginations of certain UFO believers. Conrad's statement, Gordon's statement, Bean's statement, and the NASA letter must stand validated on this case: Apollo-12 was not followed by a UFO on its way to the moon.

But how about on the way back? "A light of indistinct shape" was spotted just prior to re-entry, according to UFO sources. Saga reports that "...at 11:47 a.m. on November 24th, the spokesman for Apollo 12 reported in a startled voice that they were all watching a bright red object flashing brilliantly against the earth." This incident was carefully analyzed by Brad Sparks of APRO (I am indebted to his letter to Saga of August 28, 1970, a letter Saga editor never bothered to answer), who objects that "the astronauts did not report that the object they were seeing was red, and they stated specifically that 'it's a steady light', not flashing." It was seen between them and the dark earth, somewhere off the coast of India by a guess of the crewmen. Perhaps it was a ship's searchlight, perhaps a fire, perhaps a violent lightning storm...there is no reason to suspect that it was a craft in space. The astronauts lost sight of the light as they turned the Apollo to take a series of photographs of the sunrise.

The wild fantasies printed in Saga do not end here. Beckley and Salkin claim that the astronauts had been "startled by unaccountable seismic disturbances on the lunar surface." This event never occurred; there were no such earthquakes during their visit.

Beckley and Salkin refer to "a mysterious blue halo encircling one of our spacemen." Sparks of APRO considers this to have been lunar dust kicked up while the crewmen were walking around. Photo analyst Dick Underwood suggested that it is a defect in the development of the photo caused by the vivid solar glare off of a highly reflective surface; Underwood quickly located half a dozen similar "haloes" on other space photos taken during the 1960s. Whatever it was, this "halo" appeared only in the photo, and was neither seen nor remarked on by the astronauts.

Houston radio commentator and UFO enthusiast Frank Haley has his own theory about why the Apollo-12 TV camera did not work on the moon (NASA says Bean accidentally pointed it toward the sun). Says Haley, "The camera was intentionally shut off to avoid showing something on the moon that disturbed the astronauts" ("Haley's Comment" newsletter, Mar. 22, 1976). It is only a matter of time before this nonsense is absorbed

into the lore of the "Apollo-12 UFOs".

But Apollo 12 did see some unidentified flying objects, and NASA engineers were justifiably concerned that they could have been debris from important spacecraft systems which might indicate unexpected failures, or which might interfere with other spacecraft equipment. Hence, the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston (now the Johnson Space Center) gave a contract to Lockheed to study the objects seen on the TV pictures and on some movie film.

The Lockheed report was quietly issued on March 18, 1970, about the same time that the sensationalized and fictionalized Saga story was being printed. Titled "Unidentified Visual Phenomena Associated with Space Flight" (NASA Contract NAS 9-5191, LEC/HASD No. 671-80-013), the report documents the "moon pigeons" (a term "coined by NASA engineers to describe unexpected objects seen in operational photography that defy positive identification") of Apollo-12. Contract engineers were F.D. Beatty and J.G. Baron.

"Unidentified visual phenomena associated with space flight were rather common operationally," reveal the authors, "but...little or no documentation of past events has been made." Before UFO believers jump up and down with confirmation of a whole family of "astronaut sightings of UFOs", the authors announce their intention of demonstrating that "such events were spacecraft debris associated with an earlier pyrotechnical operation, or ice, or window reflections. Cases for each of these theories have been presented and exhibits of similar occurrences are included. Positive identification was not possible... The quality of the imagery precludes a precise definition of the object under question... In general, it takes much more information to identify an object than it does to detect it."

Sixteen millimeter color magazine 1165M, exposed on Apollo-12, shows three objects, called "A", "B", and "C". The objects appeared during the LM jettison maneuver in lunar orbit. "A" is believed to be a small segment of the docking channel; "B" was identified by engineers as a portion of the docking ring, possibly the fiberglass seal; "C" was probably part of the electrical harness. All were near the spacecraft and were tumbling.

>From this and other examinations, Beatty and Baron concluded that "most 'moon pigeons' have as their source a programmed pyrotechnic event and are the normal debris associated with such an incident. They are often spectacular... The main thing to be learned from this study is that the event (in question) was, in all probability, a normal result of routine spacecraft operations... These data will undoubtedly be of use to the engineering, scientific, and public relations communities." The closing reference clearly indicates that Beatty and Baron were aware of the "Apollo- 12 UFOs" controversy and felt that their study would be useful in demolishing any UFO buffs' rumors.

Unfortunately, the "moon pigeons" report seems to have been filed away in the NASA archives. Baron, who still works at the Johnson Space Center, told me early in 1976 that he never got any feedback on his

report, even though it was fun doing it and it had pretty obvious implications for UFO reports. NASA apparently decided to let the UFO writers spread their rumors, hoping that the stories would fade away if ignored.

What had happened, though, was a new shot in the arm for "astronaut UFO cases". The explanations could never catch up with the misinterpretations and wrong impressions engendered by the overheard conversations and viewed images from Apollo-12. Millions of Americans were practically eyewitnesses to a "space UFO", and were suitably impressed. When presented with the Saga story and with APRO's (and MUFON's) account of the "maneuvering alien spacecraft at 150,000 miles from Earth", the average citizen could only assume that it might indeed be true. If NASA was denying it, well then, the government has been known to lie to us in the past.

It is a vain hope to imagine that the truth will ever catch up to the Apollo-12 and other UFOs. As detailed here, the Apollo-12 UFO never existed. Somehow, millions of people believe that it did. There is sufficient blame for this delusion to be generously distributed to UFO buffs, NASA public affairs officers, sensation-seeking news media, and lazy readers.

(end of excerpt)