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in Page Titles

Location: [Mothership](#) -> [UFO](#) -> [Updates](#) -> [1998](#) -> [Jun](#) -> **May 20 1957: Two USAF Fighters Intercept UFO**

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### May 20 1957: Two USAF Fighters Intercept UFO

From: Stig Agermose <[wanderer@post8.tele.dk](mailto:wanderer@post8.tele.dk)>  
Date: Mon, 8 Jun 1998 02:20:36 +0200  
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Thanks to Duncan Curtis (addresses at the end). URL:

<http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/Launchpad/8608/406th.html>

Stig Agermose

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An Unusual Intercept?

There are many unexplained phenomena; it is not my purpose here to explain what happened on the mission described below. However, something unusual clearly happened during an interception mission flown by two USAF aircraft, belonging to 406th Fighter Interceptor Wing (FIW). Aircraft involved were North American F-86D Sabres. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to get first-hand accounts from both pilots involved, first off, Milton Torres;

"It was a typical English night in Kent. The 406th FIW had committed to Met [Metropolitan] Sector (RAF) to have F-86Ds stand alert as an operational requirement. The date was May 20, 1957, and our squadrons were considered combat qualified when they committed us to the operational requirement. My recollection seems to indicate that this function was rotated about England between the various RAF and USAF units. This particular night the 514th Fighter Interceptor Squadron [FIS] had the alert duty. Two F-86Ds were on 5-minute alert at the end of the runway at RAF Station Manston awaiting the signal to scramble. The hour was late as memory serves me, and the weather was IFR. Looking back at my log book, a total of 30 minutes of night weather was logged on a 1-hour and 15 minute flight. The details such as exactly what hour the scramble occurred or what we were doing just prior to scramble totally escapes me, however, the auxiliary power units (APU) were 'on', and the power was transmitted to the aircraft. We were ready for an immediate scramble and eager for flight time."

"I can remember the call to scramble quite clearly, however, I cannot remember specifics such as the actual vector to turn after take off. We were airborne well within the 5 minutes allotted to us, and basically scrambled to about Flight Level 310. Our vector took us out over the North Sea just east of East Anglia. Normally, Dave Roberson, the other member of the set of two fighters would be lead ship. I can only suggest that I was leading due to an in-place turn of some sort. I remember in quite specific terms talking as lead to the GCI [Ground Controlled Intercept] site. I was advised of the situation quite

clearly. The initial briefing indicated that the ground was observing for a considerable time, a blip that was orbiting the East Anglia area. There was very little movement and from my conversation with the GCI all the normal procedures of checking with all the controlling agencies revealed that this was an unidentified flying object with very unusual flight patterns. In the initial briefing, it was suggested to us that the 'bogey' actually was motionless for long intervals."

"The instructions came to go 'gate' [select afterburner] to expedite the intercept, and to proceed to an Initial Point at about 32,000 feet. By this time, my radar was on, and I was looking prematurely for the bogey. The instructions came to report any visual observations, to which I replied "I'm in the soup and it's impossible to see anything!" The weather was probably high alto stratus, but between being over the North Sea and in the weather, no frame of reference was available, i.e. no stars, no lights, no silhouettes - in short nothing. GCI continued the vectoring and the dialogue describing the strange antics of the UFO."

"The exact turns and maneuvers they gave me were all predicated to reach some theoretical point for a lead collision course type rocket release. I can remember reaching the level-off and requesting to come out of afterburner only to be told to stay in afterburner. It wasn't very much later that I noticed my indicated Mach number was about .92. This is about as fast as the F-86D could go straight and level."

"Then the order came to fire a full salvo of rockets at the UFO. I was only a Lieutenant and very much aware of the gravity of the situation. To be quite candid, I almost shit my pants! At any rate, I had my hands full trying to fly, search for bogeys and now selecting a hot load on the switches. I asked for authentication of the order to fire, and I received it. This further complicated my difficulty as the matrix of letters and numbers to find the correct authentication was on a piece of printed paper about 5 by 8 inches, with the print not much bigger than normal type. It was totally black, and the lights were down for night flying. I used my flashlight, still trying to fly and watch my radar. To put it quite candidly I felt very much like a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest."

(Image:

F-86D 52-10012 of 514th FIS, Manston. The smoke trails indicate that this aircraft has just fired a salvo of Mighty Mouse rockets, and is flying through their wake. Note that the rocket tray is already closed. Visible below the right wing is one of the scoring cine cameras. (Roberson))

"The authentication was valid, and I selected 24 rockets to salvo. I wasn't paying too much attention to Dave, but I clearly remember him giving a 'Roger' to all the transmissions. I can only suppose he was as busy as I was. The final turn was given, and the instructions were given to look 30 degrees to port for my bogey. I did not have a hard time at all. There it was exactly where I was told it would be, at 30 degrees and at 15 miles. The blip was burning a hole in the radar with its incredible intensity. It was similar to a blip I had received from B-52s, and seemed to be a magnet of light. These things I remember clearly. I ran the range gate marker over the blip, and the jizzle band faded as the marker superimposed over the blip. I had a lock on that had the proportions of a flying aircraft carrier. By that, I mean the return on the radar was so strong that it could not be overlooked by the fire control system on the F-86D. I use in comparison other fighters and airliners. The airliner is easy to get a lock on while the fighter, not being a good return, is very difficult, and, on that type of aircraft, a lock-on was only possible under 10 miles. The larger the airplane, the easier the lock on. This blip almost locked itself. I cannot explain to the lay person exactly what I mean, save to say that it was the best target I could ever remember locking on to. I had locked on in just a few seconds, and I locked on exactly 15 miles [range], which was the maximum for a lock on. I called to the GCI. 'Judy', which signified that I would take all further steering information from my radar computer [rather than the GCI site]".

At this point, it is worth describing the operation of the F-86D's complex fire control system (FCS). In the F-86D, the

pilot had to do the work of the radar operator, as well as the flying. After the pilot, with the help of GCI, located the target on his radar scope, he closed to within 15 miles, where he could 'lock on' the target, that is, lock his radar on the target for automatic tracking. He then received steering information on his scope, and could concentrate on flying the aircraft to follow the steering signals (represented as a dot on the 8-inch screen). At 20 seconds to go, a circle began shrinking on the screen, and the pilot had to increase his precision to keep the dot centered in the circle, while keeping the trigger depressed. With 4=BD seconds to go, 'Phase III' of the fire control system operation came into effect, during which the computer corrected for any movement of the aircraft about the vertical axis; the pilot then just had to attend to the attitude of the aircraft. If the pilot was still flying onto his target, at 2=BD seconds to go, the circuits in the firing section of the computer were readied for the 'target' to be shot down. Twenty four 2.75-inch unguided Folding Fin Aircraft Rockets (FFAR) were the sole armament of the F-86D. Dubbed 'Mighty Mouse', they weighed 18 pounds each and could be fired in salvos of 6, 12 or 24. As the rockets left the aircraft, they fanned out, to give a 'shot-gun' effect, increasing chances of a kill - each rocket had the explosive power of a 75mm artillery shell, and traveled at a speed of 2,600 feet per second. Optimum range for the Mighty Mouse was around 4,500 feet, with a theoretical maximum effective range of 9,000 feet.

"Now, back to the intercept of the UFO. I had an overtake of 800 knots and my radar was rock stable. The dot was centered and only the slightest corrections were necessary. This was a very fast intercept, and the circle started to shrink. I called '20 seconds', and the GCI indicated he was standing by. The overtake was still indicating in the 7 or 8 o'clock position. At about 10 seconds to go, I noticed that the overtake position was changing its position. It moved rapidly to the 6 o'clock, then 3 o'clock, then 12 o'clock and finally rested about the 11 o'clock position. This indicated a negative overtake of 200 knots (the maximum negative overtake displayed). There was no way of knowing of what the actual speed of the UFO was, as he [could have been] traveling at very high Mach numbers, and I would only see the 200 knot negative overtake. The circle, which was down to about an inch-and-a-half in diameter, started to open up rapidly. Within seconds, it was back to 3 inches in diameter, and the blip was visible in the blackened jizzle band moving up the scope. This meant that it was going away from me. I reported this to the GCI site, and they replied by asking, "Do you have a Tally Ho?" I reported that I was still in the soup and could see nothing. By this time the UFO had broke lock and I saw him leaving my 30 mile range. Again, I reported that he was gone, only to be told that he was now off their scope as well."

"With the loss of the blip off their scope, the mission was over. We were vectored back to home plate (Manston) and secured our switches. My last instructions were that they would contact me on the ground by land line."

"Back in the alert tent, I talked to Met Sector. They advised me that the blip had gone off the scope in two sweeps at the GCI site, and that they had instructions to tell me that the mission was considered classified. They also advised me that I would be contacted by some investigator. It was the next day before anyone showed up."

"I had not the foggiest idea what had actually occurred, nor would anyone explain anything to me. In the squadron operations area, one of the sergeants came to me and brought me into the hallway around the side of the pilot's briefing room. He approached a civilian, [who] looked like an IBM salesman, with a dark blue trench coat. He immediately jumped into asking questions about the previous day's mission. I got the impression that he operated out of the 'States, but I don't know for sure. After my debriefing of the events, he advised me that this would be considered highly classified and that I should not discuss it with anybody, not even my commander. He threatened me with a national security breach if I breathed a word about it to anyone. He disappeared without so much as a good-bye, and that was that, as far as I was concerned. I was significantly impressed by the action and I have not spoken of this to anyone until recent years."

(Image:

F-86D section view. The radar and fire control system occupies the area forward of the cockpit. The Might Mouse rockets were housed in a tray on the fuselage bottom, just forward of the wing (seen here extended in dotted lines.)

And that would indeed be that, were it not for the back-up of Milt Torres's element partner on that night, Dave Roberson. Though Dave sees some details differently, it is clear that something unusual did occur:

"As I recall, I was the flight leader, and we were on a training mission making simulated attacks on each other. While on this flight, we were contacted by someone (probably Manston), and told to contact a GCI site. I believe it was the site in East Anglia just north of the Thames (Bawdsey?). They queried me about the weapons status of our aircraft. We were unarmed, as was the usual status on training flights, and I so advised. We were directed to land at RAF Bentwaters where our aircraft were armed with live rockets."

"We received a briefing of some sort on the ground. I don't recall by whom, but I believe it was by land line. I specifically recall being advised that more than one GCI site and multiple 'unknowns' were involved and that the area extended into Scotland. I don't recall being advised of other RAF or USAF aircraft being involved, but would seem probable that they were."

"After launch, we were vectored independently. Normal procedure would have been to receive an initial heading and altitude along with a call-sign and frequency of the GCI site to contact. I don't recall ever going above 10,000 feet, but Milton [Torres] was sent to higher altitudes. I was vectored on several of the unknowns and in spite of the ground clutter, I did get several pretty good returns, but was unable to maintain radar contact long enough to get a lock on. Information from the controller indicated the unknowns were changing speed and altitude quite frequently. Some of my runs were in the cloud and others were in the clear. I don't recall how many attempts at radar and/or visual contact I made, but it was several."

"One [run] I remember quite well was at 3,000 feet. I was told that the 'bogey' was at angels 3 and at very slow speed. I recall being told that the unknown was at 12 o'clock and I was closing. Perhaps because of the ground clutter I never got a positive radar contact of the unknown. At this point, I believe I was in the vicinity of Norwich. As directed, I attempted to get a visual contact when I closed to less than 2 miles, but was unable. If the unknown was lighted, he must have blended with the ground lights. The bogey then either accelerated or descended and the controller lost him."

"I don't recall whether we became low on fuel or the unknowns left the area; but at some point the controller rejoined us and we recovered to Manston. I do not recall being contacted one-on-one by anyone about keeping the details quiet. However, due to some of my later activities in the Air Force involving close-kept operations, where I learned to blank out details in my mind, this lack of recall does not surprise me. I do recall Milton was rather excited and talked about getting a lock on one of the unknowns, but I don't remember the details."

"I might add that during this time frame (spring of 1957), while either standing cockpit alert or acting as runway control officer, on two occasions I saw some activity to the south of Manston [English Channel/North Sea area], which involved several lighted objects moving in strange ways. They were sometimes motionless and sometimes accelerating in various directions which did not appear to be consistent with either fixed wing aircraft or helicopters known to me at that time. I reported these to control tower and/or Met Sector, but never requested or received any explanation of what they were."

Any further comments on this episode would be most welcome. I am currently working on completing a book solely concerned with the USAF at Manston. If you can help in either direction, please drop me a line at the address on my home page.

(That is

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