

Socorro's Famous UFO Sighting

by Dave Thomas

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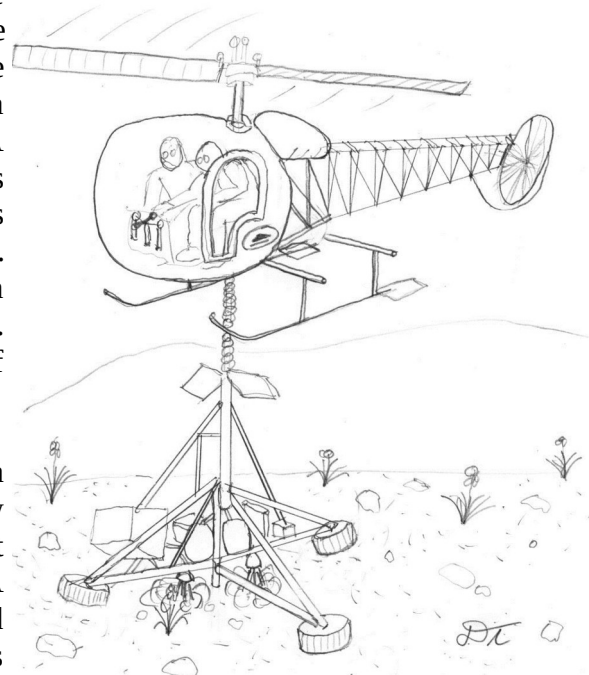
The Socorro, New Mexico UFO "Landing" of April 24, 1964 is one of the most credible UFO sightings in history. The case put New Mexico on the UFO map, and was only overtaken by the Roswell Incident when that legend emerged from obscurity and blossomed in the late seventies.

The witness in the Socorro case was a well-respected policeman, Lonnie Zamora, who claimed in the Project Blue Book report he filed that he saw a flame in the sky, and then "a shiny type object ... oval in shape." He also described "two people in white coveralls..." Zamora said he saw the object fly up about fifteen feet above the ground, and then leave the area "travelling very fast." Nearby, the bushes were still smoldering.

Zamora's earnest nature and credibility, along with the physical traces, brought the Socorro event to national attention. Astronomer J. Allen Hynek came to town, and was very interested in the pod-like tracks and burn marks at the scene. Ray Stanford wrote a whole book about the incident, Socorro Saucer in a Pentagon Pantry. The Socorro event was even featured on Unsolved Mysteries, where Jerome Clark, author of The UFO Encyclopedia, said there was "not one iota of evidence" that it was actually a military craft being tested. But what really happened there?

There are numerous hypotheses, of course. Stanford said it's another case of extraterrestrial visitors and government cover-up. While most scientists think there must be life elsewhere in this vast universe, they generally agree that the huge amounts of energy required for interstellar travel make actual alien visitation quite unlikely. Although some pundits speculated that the story was cooked up for publicity, I think Zamora was being honest, and that he indeed saw something very strange that day. Could it have been military aircraft? In 1995, Bernard "Duke" Gildenberg, from Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, learned from Capt. James McAndrew, the AF's point man on Roswell, that on April 24, 1964, there were special tests being conducted at the north end of the White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) involving a helicopter used to carry a Lunar Surveyor around. A portion of the WSMR Range Log clearly specifies Surveyor testing at WSMR on April 24th, 1964, thus providing the "one iota" of evidence demanded by Clark. The helicopter was required to support Surveyor, which was designed to maneuver in much weaker lunar gravity. It would have been a strange sight indeed. (Drawing of Surveyor and pilots).

There have been other explanations put forward. In a 1965 letter from Nobel laureate Linus Pauling to new Tech president Stirling Colgate, Pauling asked about what Tech scientists thought about the sighting. A handwritten comment on that letter states "I have good indication of student who engineered hoax. Student has



left. Cheers, Stirling.” When I discussed this with Colgate before he died a few years ago, he could not recall any details.

While stories still swirl around the student prank hypothesis, another man who claims to be a former Tech student, Bruno, claimed he and a friend were taking dynamite sticks from a nearby shack, and using them to propel 55-gallon drums into the air, when they were surprised by Zamora, and quickly left the scene.

Dorothy Landoll, who was married to a physics student back in 1964, knew First State Bank staffer Polo Pineda, who was also acting police chief at the time. She said Pineda’s description of what Zamora saw was a good match to pictures of the Apollo Mission’s Lunar Excursion Module (LEM), which she saw when they appeared in a 1966 newspaper.

What actually happened on that bygone afternoon south of Socorro? Perhaps we’ll never know. I think that Lonnie Zamora did see something real, and really strange, on April 24th, 1964.

Dave Thomas teaches a class on Science and Pseudoscience at NMT, is a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and is president of New Mexicans for Science and Reason. He will be giving a free talk, “My Physics Professor Caused the Roswell Incident!”, on Saturday, August 15th at 1:00 PM, at the Socorro Public Library.

**"My Physics Professor Caused
the Roswell Incident!" with
Dave Thomas
Free Public Lecture
Socorro Library
401 Park St.
Saturday
August 15th
1:00 PM**

