

Trindade Revisited

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Ed Note: Twenty-five years ago a series of photographs of a UFO were taken from onboard a Brazilian Navy vessel, a sailing ship, then engaged in scientific work. Both the UFO and the taking of the pictures were witnessed by 47 crew members, who vouched for both. These photographs have stood the test of time, and have appeared in many books and articles about UFOs over this past quarter-century. Why, then, reopen this case after this lapse of time? Largely because of a remarkable opportunity to discuss and reminisce with the man who took the photographs, Almiro Barauna, at the time of the Second International Congress of Ufology, in April, 1983. At a dinner party, which included Leo Sprinkle, Virgilio Sanchez-Ocejo, Cynthia Hind, and Irene Granchi, new information about the Trindade event surfaced, making it worthwhile to review the whole matter, especially as there are many people interested in the UFO phenomenon who have little knowledge of this particular event, and also because the full story has never been told. One person who has followed the Trindade case and controversy over the years has been Dr. Willy Smith, and we have asked him to review it for us. To his review we have appended a short account of our conversation with Senor Barauna.

- TYPE: DD
- DATE: Jan. 16, 1958
- TIME: 12:20 P.M.
- DURATION: 1-2 minutes
- WITNESSES: 48
- PLACE: Trindade Island, off the coast of Brazil

Some UFO cases have apparently remained immune to the attacks of the self-appointed debunkers. It is curious that often these sightings are rarely mentioned in modern literature despite their potential probatory value for the reality of the UFO phenomenon. We marvel at the richness of information that has simply been ignored. The Trindade photographs fall into this category.

The Scenario

Trindade Island is located at 20° 30' S. and 29° 20' W. in the Atlantic Ocean, about 1200 Km. off the coast of Brazil, the country to which it belongs. It is a small, rocky place, used during World War II as an antisubmarine base by the United States, but largely abandoned since. In October, 1958, during the International Geophysical Year, the Brazilian Navy established a meteorological and oceanographic station there. During January, 1958, the sailing vessel *Almirante Saldanha* of the Hydrographic and Navigation Division of the Brazilian Navy had anchored there, and on the morning of Jan. 16 was making ready to return to Rio.

Cast of Characters

Besides the normal crew of the *Almirante Saldanha*, under the command of Jose Saldanha da Gama, there were on board submarine divers to take underwater photographs around the island. This civilian group was headed by Amilcar Vieira Filho, a lawyer and bank executive, and, among others, included a retired captain of the Brazilian Air Force, Jose Teobaldo Viegas, as well as Almiro Barauna, a professional photographer. All in all, 48 ocular witnesses were on deck during the incident. Also on board, but not on deck, was Captain Carlos Alberto Bacellar, who had been responsible for the revamping of the installations on the island and was commander of the oceanographic station.

A few words concerning Barauna are mandatory, as the circumstances made him the leading character of the play. At the time, Barauna was 42 years old and had had a previous involvement with the subject of UFOs. It was he, in 1953, who had refuted the authenticity of the photographs taken by Ed Keffel at a place known as Barra da Tijuca(1). In so doing he had prepared photographs which demonstrated how such hoaxes could be perpetrated. It is unfortunate that the late Dr. Menzel, a somewhat unsuccessful debunker, as well as others⁽²⁾, used Barauna's article to cast dispersions on Barauna, presenting him as a professional hoaxter.

The Play

On Jan. 6, 1958, amid preparations to cast anchor, Barauna was on deck with his f/2.8 lens Rolleiflex Model E camera. As he was prepared to take photos of the final trip of the small boat used between ship and shore, he had set the camera at f/8 and 1/125 second. The sea was not calm, and this had upset Barauna who had forgotten to take his seasickness pills. At 12:20 p.m. excitement broke out on deck at the fast approach of a bright object moving toward the island. Filho, Viegas and Lt. Ribeiro shouted to Barauna, gesticulating and pointing to the object in the overcast sky. It took Barauna about 30 seconds to get going; he then proceeded to take six photographs (at intervals of 14 seconds, as determined by later tests). The first two photographs were taken as the object approached the island. It then disappeared behind the central mountain (Desejado Peak) for a few seconds; as it reappeared a few seconds later, now moving in the opposite direction, it appeared closer and bigger. It then moved at high speed toward the sea, but Barauna missed the object in his next two frames, owing to the speed of the object and the confusion prevailing on deck at the time. He did obtain a final photo when the object was already far out to sea and when it, apparently, had stopped momentarily in mid-air. After about ten seconds it moved away and disappeared in the distance.

Commander Bacellar, as well as the other officers, insisted that the film be developed at once, in spite of the poor facilities on board for that purpose and lack of photographic paper to make prints. A bathroom was quickly transformed into a darkroom and the film was developed. The negatives were then inspected by Bacellar and others. Frames 4 and 5 showed only the sea and rocky coast

The Props

The photos were taken on a bright, overcast day, and the settings on the camera led to slightly overexposed negatives. It was, however, a wise decision of Barauna's not to attempt to modify the settings; if he had done so he might have lost his opportunity.

According to Capt. Viegas, the object was like a flattened sphere encircled at the equator by a large ring or platform. In Barauna's words, "...it made no noise, although with the shouting of the people on the deck and the noise of the sea, I cannot be certain. It had a metallic look, of an ash color, and has like a condensation of a green vapor around the perimeter, particularly in the advancing edge. Its motion was undulating, like the flight of a bat."

As determined by the photographs, the object was tilted slightly, the upper part directed toward the motion. It appears quite sharp in photos 2 and 3, corresponding to the closest approach and minimum speed, while the contours appear slightly blurred in photos 1 and 4, corresponding to the maximum distance. In view of the distance from camera to object, a shutter speed of 1/125 second is sufficient to freeze an object moving at speeds of several hundred miles per hour. (The Brazilian Navy estimated the speed of the object to be 600 to 700 mph.) The object shown in the four photos resembles the planet Saturn, and it is not luminous. The photos were proclaimed authentic by John T. Hopf, APRO photographic analyst, as well as by the Cruzeiro do Sul Aerophotogrammetric Service, to which they were referred by the Brazilian navy.

The Critics

The incident and the photos caused furor in Brazil, and sides were quickly taken. An inquiry to the Ministry of the Navy made by a member of the Parliament (Sergio Magalhaes) prompted an investigation. The resulting dossier was never made public in its totality, but some details became known to the press, which had also discovered additional information. It appears that this incident was not an isolated one but that at least seven other sightings had occurred over or near the island in the closing months of 1957 and in January, 1958. It was stated that some of these events had been witnessed and confirmed by Commander Bacellar. A photograph, taken with a simple box camera by a sergeant of the garrison prior to Jan. 16, was part of the dossier. Although it was never released, it was seen by Barauna when he was being interrogated at the Ministry of the Navy, and by Dr. Olavo Fontes. The Barauna photographs were released to the press in person, by then President of Brazil, Juscelino Kubitschek

The matter came to the attention, of course, of the U.S. Naval Attache in Rio. Apparently aware of the attitude of the U.S. military toward UFOs, he filed a report on March 11, 1958(3), calculated to preserve the status quo. It is characterized by its inaccuracies and by the obvious bias of the writer, epitomized by the closing paragraph: "a flying saucer sighting would be unlikely at the very barren island of Trindade, as everyone knows Martians are extremely comfort loving creatures."

Nonetheless, this same report transcribes the official position of the Brazilian government, referring to a carefully worded communiqué issued by the Ministry of the Navy, denying any attempt to suppress the release of the photos that *were taken by Mr. Almiro Barauna* in the presence of navy officers on board the Almirante Saldanha, and remarking that the Navy could not venture an opinion on the nature of the *object that was observed over Trindade Island*. [Emphasis has been added to indicate that the Brazilian Navy accepted as a fact a) that an unidentified object had been detected over Trindade Island, and b) that the Barauna photos were indeed taken at that location and showed the object in question, whatever its true nature

might be.]

Bibliography

1. Story, Ronald D., *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF UFOs*, Doubleday, 1980, p. 41.
2. STENDEK, No. 26, December 1976, p. 14. Article by Michel Bougard, translated from an original in French.
3. Information Report, 39-58, Office of Naval Intelligence, signed by M. Sunderland, Capt. USN [Copy available at CUFOS].

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Interview With Almiro Barauna, April 20, 1983

It must be remembered that this interview with Mr. Barauna was held 25 years after the event, and that due allowance must be made for the frailty of human memory. Nonetheless, no major contradictions to the facts stated in Dr. Smith's article were found. It was Barauna's recollection that he had used 1/200 sec. exposure at f/6, as against the earlier statement of 1/125 sec. at f/8. It was his recollection also that the Navy had calculated that the object at its closest was 14 km distant and that the object appeared the same size as the full moon (1/2 deg). This seems a surprising distance, yet simple calculation shows that at that distance the object would appear to travel 48 degrees across the sky in a minute and would have an actual size of about 350 feet. Neither of these are unreasonable figures.

Q: What was the public's reaction?

A: Opinion was divided; three newspapers attacked me, six supported me. My enemies took advantage of the situation! But it didn't come out in the newspapers for 30 days.

Q: What happened during those 30 days?

A: The Navy was testing the photographs. I went three times to the Navy's secret service. The Navy also sent the pictures to Kodak to do chemical tests.

Q: Do you have the lab reports?

A: The Navy kept those classified.

Q: Did anyone ever come up with seemingly solid evidence against you?

A: There were just proofless accusations.

Q: Was there any attempt by the Navy or the government to hush it all up?

A: They did not try to cover it up. They did not become "Watergate" [A new word in

Portuguese]. I had total support from the Navy.

Q: Did the Navy think in terms of a space ship or a man made device?

A: There was no attempt at interpreting what it was. ...they just gave a physical description of it in the report.

Q: (by Sprinkle) After all these years, how do you feel about your historic event?

A: I feel peaceful as I always have felt. I've always been fully confident about the sighting.

Q: When you tell this story to your grandchildren as time goes by, what will most clearly stand out in your mind?

A: The way the Navy and the crew backed me up.

Q: What was the weather like?

A: There was cirrus in the sky.

Q: Did the object ever pass in front of anything?

A: It passed in front of clouds but not in front of the mountain because it was higher than the mountain. But at one time it did pass behind the mountain and then returned.

Q: How high above the water was it?

A: Three or four hundred feet above sea level.

Toward the close of this informal interview, three things came up which I feel are significant. Just to clear the record, I asked if the object had been detected by ship's radar. He replied that it hadn't because all the electrical power aboard ship was out at the time. He was sure of the reality of the power outage because just before the object appeared a launch was being hauled up from the water by electric pulley, and it stopped midway just as the UFO appeared! A remarkable coincidence?

I asked casually how it was that, with so many men on deck at the time, no one else snapped a picture. The reply was unexpected. Yes, there was a newspaper photographer on board but he became so excited that he wet his pants; no picture was taken!

One final thing: the captain demanded that the films be developed immediately, so a dark room was improvised, a sergeant holding the curtains shut to keep out stray light during the 20 minute development.