THE LOCKHEED UFO CASE, 1953

BY JOEL CARPENTER

Those who have relived the Cuban Missile Crisis through films like *Thirteen Days* (2000) and books like Dino A. Brugioni's *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1991), or who have experienced the tension of the shootdown of a U.S. spyplane over the Soviet Union in Michael Beschloss's *MAYDAY : Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), are familiar with the vital role that the Central Intelligence Agency–sponsored U-2 played during the Cold War.

The U-2 reconnaissance airplane.

This remarkable, high-flying, covert, strategic reconnaissance aircraft provided the means by which U.S. intelligence analysts were finally able to pinpoint and quantify the Soviet strategic threat to the West. By dispelling an early myth of Soviet nuclear superiority known as the Bomber Gap, it helped reduce pressures to escalate the arms race, and to this day it continues to span the globe on vital intelligence-gathering missions, treaty verification overflights, and environmental sensing tasks.

The U-2 has a unique place in UFO history as well. It was first test flown at Groom Lake, a secret airbase deep inside the Atomic Energy Commission's nuclear test range in Nevada. Groom Lake, or Area 51, has become inextricably intertwined with fantastic rumors of captured UFOs, reverse-engineered alien technology, and endless other exotic ideas. While maintaining silence on such matters, the CIA has officially stated that the U-2 and its successor the 2,400-mph A-12 OXCART were themselves responsible for UFO reports in the 1950s and 1960s. Given its stellar aerospace achievements, it's fitting that Lockheed's company logo has always been a winged star, and its aircraft and missiles were traditionally named after stars or celestial phenomena: Orion, Vega, Polaris, Constellation, Starfire, and Starfighter.

It's fitting too that in December 1953, at the very moment of the U-2's birth, a group of Lockheed's top engineers and pilots reported a remarkable UFO sighting. As intriguing as the UFO incident is, it has languished in the Project Blue Book files for nearly half a century, stamped "Identified," buried, and nearly forgotten. Recent study of the Blue Book case file yielded the names of seven eyewitnesses—a crew of Lockheed flight-test engineers in the air, and Lockheed's chief engineer and his wife on the ground. The chief engineer was Clarence L. ("Kelly") Johnson—the creator of the U-2.[1]

KELLY JOHNSON

Kelly Johnson was undisputedly one of the greatest aeronautical engineers of all time. In his 42-year career with Lockheed he participated in or oversaw the development of many of the company's most famous airplanes.

Born into the large family of a poor immigrant laborer in Michigan, Johnson was a study in contrasts: Scrappy and hard-working, studious and awed by airplanes, he built houses to help support his family while still excelling in school. Determined to be-

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come an engineer, Johnson was fortunate to be accepted by the outstanding aeronautical engineering department at the University of Michigan, where he eventually became the assistant of Professor Edward Stalker, a respected expert in aerodynamics.

Johnson joined Lockheed in 1933 as an aerodynamicist and assistant to chief engineer Hall Hibbard. By 1938, Hibbard and his young partner had developed the P-38 Lightning fighter, the world's first 400-mph combat aircraft. And by the time the P-38 was entering service, the two designers were looking far into the future, having launched a secret study of a highly sophisticated, radical-looking 625-mph fighter powered by a completely new form of engine called the turbojet, developed by the company's own visionary propulsion expert, Nathan Price.

The conservative Army Air Force was not ready for near-sonic speed jet fighters in 1941. But three years later,

Hall Hibbard (left) and Kelly Johnson during the war years.

confronted with Nazi Germany's advanced aircraft, it turned to Hibbard and Johnson with an urgent request to build a no-frills operational jet fighter around a less technically advanced but more developed British jet engine. Under the most stringent security measures, Johnson undertook one of the first "black" airplane projects, hand-picking a cadre of his best engineers and setting up a special division of the Burbank, California–based company. His group was soon dubbed the "Skunk Works," and they designed and built the new fighter, the XP-80 Shooting Star, within a matter of months. The airplane was a huge success, and Johnson and his Skunk Works engineers were on their way to becoming legends.

Kelly Johnson was pugnacious, stubborn, serious, and combative. Yet he had an almost artistic flair for matters aeronautical. One of his bosses remarked that Johnson could "see air." His successor Ben Rich commented on Johnson's more earthy side in *Skunk Works* (New York: Little, Brown, 1994):

> All of us had seen him rushing around in his untucked shirt, a paunchy, middle-aged guy with a comical duck's waddle, slicked-down hair, and a belligerent jaw. He had a thick, round nose and reminded me a lot of W. C. Fields, but without the humor. Definitely without that. Johnson was all business and had the reputation of an ogre who ate young, tender engineers for between-meal snacks. We peons viewed him with the knee-knocking dread and awe of the almighty best described in the Old Testament.

By the end of his eventful career, Johnson had won every major aeronautical award, some more than once, and had received special citations and medals from scientific organizations, the CIA, and President Ronald Reagan.

Lockheed and UFOs

Partly because of their ubiquity and partly because of their superior performance, Lockheed aircraft have played roles in many of the pivotal cases in UFO history. Its fighters chased radar UFOs over Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1952, and other Lockheed military planes were involved (or implicated) in significant events like the Great Falls UFO film case in 1950, the Fort Monmouth UFO chase of September 1951, the fatal Walesville incident of 1954, and a host of other UFO intercept events.

Capt Edward Ruppelt reported in his memoirs of Project Blue Book that in 1952, an Air Defense Command colonel, harrassed by continuing UFO sightings near his New Mexico base, proposed converting several of Lockheed's latest F-94C fighters into dedicated "UFO interceptors." Equipped with a battery of nose-mounted cameras and standing on 24-hour alert in an operation called Project Pounce, the fighters would be used in an attempt to obtain clear, close-up photos of a saucer in flight.

Lockheed's official public pronouncements on UFOs were negative. For example, on July 7, 1947, Hall Hibbard had made disparaging remarks to *Los Angeles Times* reporters who inquired about the saucers being seen nationwide:

> They're either reflections from planes flying singly or in formation, or mass hysteria and the desire of various persons to get their names in the paper. I know of no secret aviation projects which would have the slightest bearing on these so-called "phenomena."

Nevertheless, the company harbored at least two prominent engineers who were interested in UFOs—as well as two notorious UFO contactees.

Beginning in January 1952, former Lockheed aircraft mechanic George Van Tassel experienced a series of mental communications with a retinue of extraterrestrials who, he said, were based in a spacecraft hovering 80,000 feet over Giant Rock, a remote desert airfield near Yucca Valley, California. Later that year Van Tassel wrote *I Rode a Flying Saucer!* (Los Angeles: New Age, 1952), and by early 1954 he was hosting public extraterrestrial "channeling sessions" that evolved into the famous annual Giant Rock saucer conventions. In August 1953, one of the aliens finally landed and gave Van Tassel a tour of his saucer.

Orfeo Angelucci, a laborer who built fiberglass nose-radar domes for the F-94, was another Lockheed employee who claimed contact with UFO occupants. One evening during May 1953, as he told it in *The Secret of the Saucers* (Amherst,Wisc.: Amherst Press, 1955), Angelucci was driving home from Burbank when he experienced an encounter with a red, oval object. The UFO deployed a screen-like construct that displayed images of majestic humanoid beings. A few weeks later he entered a landed UFO that took him 1,000 miles into space, where he was shown a 1,000-foot "mothership" and given a tutorial on the intentions of the aliens by a disembodied voice.

In September, Angelucci went on a week-long "psychic journey" to the home world of the humanoid beings. The alien leader's name was Orion, and he told Angelucci that his own true name was Neptune—both being names, oddly, of Lockheed airplanes. Angelucci's religious-tinged story was so distinctive that legendary psychologist Carl Jung devoted considerable attention to it in his *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959).

Around the time Van Tassel and Angelucci were spreading their tales of encounters with astronauts from other worlds, Lockheed propulsion expert Nathan Price began to devote a considerable amount of effort to the creation of two fascinating concepts for disc-shaped aircraft of extreme performance. Price's place in the history of turbojet engine development in the United States is seldom highlighted, but given that he was working on an extremely sophisticated jet powerplant as early as 1938, his visionary disc-aircraft designs are noteworthy.

Filed in early 1953 (and not granted until a decade later), the patents depict a 50-foot diameter, 55,000-pound lens-shaped flying wing that incorporated a huge central turbo-ramjet of unique design. Much like today's Lockheed Martin X-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the 1952–53 Lockheed saucer was to have the ability to take off vertically by vectoring its central engine's thrust downward. Once airborne, the engine's nozzles would rotate to an aft-facing position and the saucer would accelerate in a shallow climb to 50,000 feet, where it would reach supersonic speeds, its engine gradually transitioning from turbojet to ramjet mode. When it leveled off at 100,000 feet, the vehicle would be cruising at four times the speed of sound—approximately 2,700 mph.

Kelly Johnson about to fly the "Titanium Goose" Blackbird with Lockheed test pilot Lou Schalk.

As advanced as these ideas were, anticipating in some respects the engine systems of the famous Blackbirds that flew 10 years later, perhaps the most striking aspect of Price's saucer is that it was intended to use propane, butane, or liquid-hydrogen fuels, and the patents cover some of the sophisticated engineering details and special tank technologies that cryogenic fuels require. Standard histories of Lockheed's work on hydrogen-powered aircraft indicate that the Skunk Works only attempted to actually build such components under the highly classified Air Force–sponsored Suntan reconnaissance aircraft project circa 1956–57. Engine designer Price was thinking years ahead with his saucer, and given the amount of airframe detail that the patents show, it's tempting to speculate that the designs, like the L-133 of a decade before, were the result of more than his work alone.

While Kelly Johnson and other Lockheed engineers have long been rumored to have been interested in UFOs, the Blue Book sighting file, as will be seen, provides definitive proof.

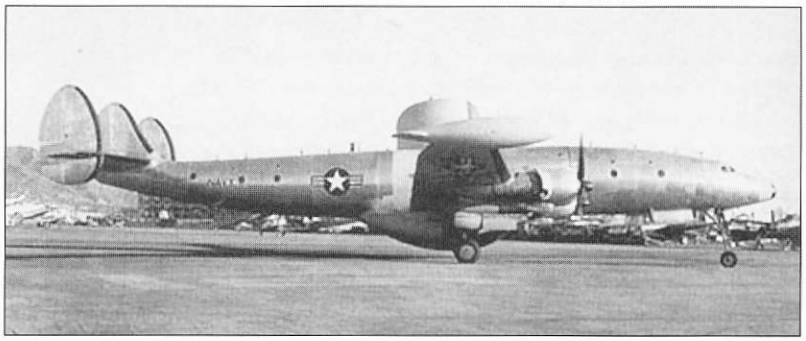
Birth of the U-2

Johnson ended his career crowned with glory, but in late 1953, the 43-year-old engineer was in the thick of the fray, entering what would turn out to be the most productive decade of his career. Having succeeded Hibbard as chief engineer the previous year, Johnson was facing greater challenges than ever before and was managing several complex aircraft programs, not all of which were going smoothly. As the end of the year approached, he was anticipating the completion and rollout of his controversial new XF-104A Starfighter, the prototype of the world's first Mach 2 combat aircraft.

Johnson's reputation within some Air Force circles had reached such a level that when he had proposed the fighter—unsolicited—to General Donald Putt's Air Research and Development Command (ARDC) in Baltimore the previ-

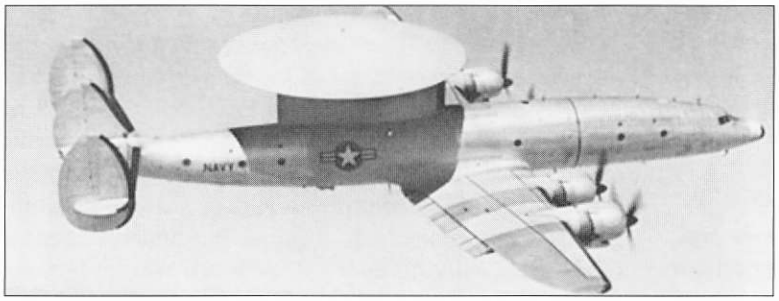
ous year, one of Putt's colonels, Bruce Holloway, had promptly written a specification around the design and placed an order for prototypes. But political factors always influence procurement decisions and contract awards, and the Skunk Works was not necessarily always the contractor of choice at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

As the F-104 was being prepared to be shipped to Edwards AFB for its maiden flight, Johnson heard rumors of Air Force and CIA interest in developing a unique new type of covert strategic reconnaissance aircraft, highly specialized and intended to fly at heights that would insure that no enemy defenses would be capable of reaching it—or even detecting it at all, if possible.



The WV-2 Warning Star, *airframe number 4301, the aircraft involved in the UFO incident.*

The Wright Air Development Center engineers who were writing the specification for the new airplane had not approached Lockheed for a proposal for this requirement, planning instead to work with smaller, more easily managed airframe contractors. Based on the CIA's own history of the U-2's development, and on chronologies by experts Jay Miller and Chris Pocock, it seems likely that the unofficial source of the information about the reconnaissance requirement was Johnson's personal friend Philip Strong, a Reserve U.S. Marine Corps colonel who was chief of the operations staff of CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence. In addition to his concerns over building a CIA role in technical intelligence gathering, Strong had a keen interest in UFOs, having been an organizer and attendee at the CIA's Robertson Panel meetings in January 1953.[2]



The WV-2, showing the radar dome.

Johnson considered that the fast-climbing XF-104A's minimalist airframe would be an ideal basis for addressing the new special strategic reconnaissance mission, if it were modified with giant, glider-like wings and lightened by elimination of such items as landing gear and ejection seat. The new airplane, given the Lockheed model number CL-282, began gestating in Johnson's mind at the very end of 1953. His journal for the project, "Log for Project X," has a first-entry date of December 1953. Yet at the same time that Johnson was beginning work on the U-2 he had, along with his colleagues, a most amazing UFO sighting.

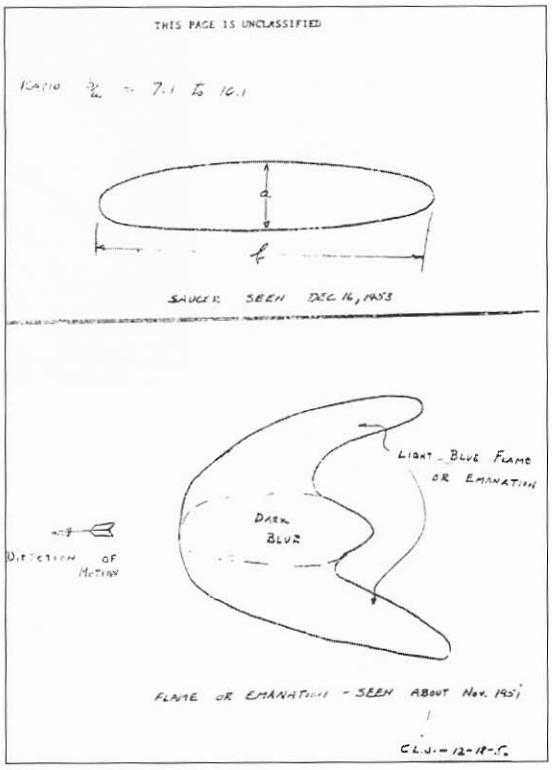
The UFO incident

On December 16, Johnson and his wife Althea were visiting their Lindero Ranch near Agoura, California, which was situated on a hillside facing the coast not far from Point Mugu Naval Air Station, an aircraft and missile test facility. At about 5 p.m., Johnson was looking through a window at the brilliant sunset when he noticed a dark elliptical shape in the sky in the direction of Point Mugu Cape. His first thought was that it was a lenticular cloud, or possibly a smoke trail from an aircraft, but it remained stationary and unchanged for several minutes. He called for Althea to bring him his 8-power binoculars and ran outside. By that time the object had begun to move, accelerating away from him in a shallow climb in a direction opposite to the motion of the other clouds in the sky. It seemed to be very large and distant, and moving fast, but he had no real way of knowing its actual size, distance, or speed.

At the same time, coincidentally, a Lockheed airplane was in the air on a test flight along the Los Angeles coastline. Constellation Airframe 4301 was the prototype

Philip Colman, Roy Wimmer, and a Lockheed test flight crew. Kelly Johnson and Wimmer are on the right.

for a Navy Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft, the WV-2 *Warning Star*. The WV-2 was a large four-engine transport equipped with huge blisters housing radar antennas (a search radar unit in the belly and a height-finder in a dorsal fairing), and was designed to fly very long-standing patrols far off the coasts of North America to provide long-range detection of incoming Soviet bombers. Constellation 4301 was the first of a long line of Navy WV-2s and Air Force EC-121s that would provide a vital part of the North American air defense network throughout the 1950s and 1960s.



Kelly Johnson's signed sketches of UFOs sighted in 1951 and 1953.

At the controls of the *Warning Star* were Rudy Thoren and Roy Wimmer, both highly experienced senior test pilots in the Constellation program, assisted by Joseph F. Ware Jr., another longtime Lockheed engineering test pilot.[3] Also in the cockpit were Charlie Grugan, another veteran company pilot, and Lockheed's chief aerodynamicist, Philip A. Colman. It was customary for Lockheed engineers to ride aboard their planes during test flights, and Johnson himself often did so. (There are no indications that the elaborate radar systems, which required a crew of at least a dozen men, were active during the flight.)

Thoren had been recruited by Johnson from their alma mater, the aeronautical engineering school at the University of Michigan, and had been chief of flight test for Lockheed since 1946, in charge of all the company's test pilots. Colman was a Cal Tech graduate who had made valuable contributions to the P-38 program, and who would soon be tasked by Johnson with designing the wings for the new CL-282 recon plane. All of the crewmen were top representatives of their fields, having flown for the company for years in development programs of a variety of sophisticated aircraft.

The exact purpose of the test flight is not detailed in the sighting reports, but such flights often involved calibration of airspeed vs. engine power settings at various altitudes, and therefore the crewmen were very conscious of the height of the aircraft. Altitude recording instruments were carried on board. In short, one could hardly imagine a better set of witnesses to a UFO.

Though Wimmer was technically the pilot in command, he had turned the controls over to Thoren and was maintaining a watch for other air traffic as Thoren conducted his tests. They had turned from a southeast heading to west, just off the coast of Long Beach, when, at 4:58 p.m., Wimmer noticed a dark shape ahead at about their altitude of 14,000 feet. After watching it for a few moments and noting that it was not moving, he jokingly pointed it out to Thoren, saying, "Look out, there's a flying saucer."

Thoren turned the WV-2 a bit to the right to head toward the object. The other men saw the object too and watched it for a few minutes with a growing sense of curiosity. It appeared to be a very large aircraft of some type, but as it remained stationary and unchanged in shape over at least a five-minute period (note how this corresponds to Johnson's observation of a stationary object), they became more and more intrigued. Thoren finally diverted from his course and headed directly at it. They flew toward it at about 225 mph for some time without appearing to gain on it at all. Then Wimmer, who was less occupied with piloting tasks and was able to keep a constant watch on the object, commented that it seemed to be disappearing. Within a few moments it appeared to head west directly away from them at high speed, remaining dark and solid-looking the entire time as it dwindled to a tiny dot.

They all felt that it was a large object at a considerable distance, and compared its size to the largest types of transport or bomber aircraft. The men later reported that they thought little more of the incident at the time due to their preoccupation with completing the test mission, but Thoren was intrigued enough that upon returning home that evening, he told his family about the sighting and sketched the object.

The following day, Kelly Johnson had returned to work and was discussing the WV-2 test flight with Thoren, who was still ruminating on the incident. A bit worried that Johnson would ridicule him, the pilot casually mentioned the sighting. Thoren was surprised when Johnson excitedly interrupted him and described his own sighting in detail. Both concluded that all the witnesses had been viewing the same object at the same time!

Over the course of the next few weeks, each of the pilots wrote a detailed personal account of the case, probably at Johnson's urging, and the chief engineer, in his typical meticulous style, assembled them into a file (Lockheed file LAC/149536) and drafted a personal cover letter addressed to the "Air Force Investigation Group on Flying Saucers" at Wright Field. Then, tough and combat-

ive as he was, Johnson hesitated to send the report. After all, he was hoping to get a foot in the door of the Air Force's new covert strategic reconnaissance aircraft competition and was very concerned that a UFO report might jeopardize his credibility. He may have sought the advice of his friend, Lt. Gen. Donald Putt.

Putt's role

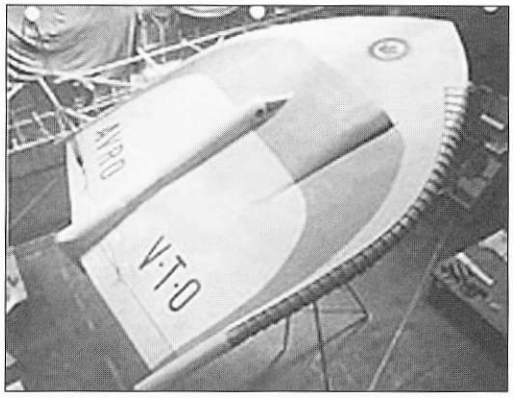
ARDC Commander Putt, who had the responsibility for reviewing and approving new Air Force reconnaissance projects like Johnson's CL-282, also had a long, if intermittent, association with the UFO problem. A former test pilot with a solid Cal Tech engineering background, Putt was one of the stars of the Air Force, having risen to prominence as project officer for the B-29 bomber during WWII. Closely allied with Theodore von Karman's Scientific Advisory Board (he would be its military supervisor for several years), Putt had helped make science and advanced technology the backbone of the emerging air service. He had been commander of T-2 Air Intelligence during a crucial period following the end of hostilities in Europe and had been a strong backer of Operation Paperclip, the transfer of German aeronautical scientists to Wright Field.

A widely respected, politically savvy officer, Putt showed little evidence of the antipathy to UFOs that many other Air Force generals exhibited. For example, in December 1948 Project RAND missile expert James Lipp had written a paper at Putt's request that examined the possibility that UFOs were extraterrestrial spacecraft that used propulsion principles comparable to known or foreseeable rocket technology. (The fascinating paper was published as an appendix to the final report of Project Sign in February 1949.)

General Donald Putt.

Just months before the Lockheed UFO incident, Putt and 25 USAF scientists and officials had visited the plant of Avro Aircraft Limited in Toronto, Canada, where he had seen a full-scale engineering mockup of an advanced, supersonic, saucer-like aircraft, Project Y, that had been conceived by a group of ex-British engineers.

He was impressed enough by the design that ARDC would begin to fund its development within the year. The Project Y vehicle was a virtual replica of Kenneth Arnold's initial June 1947 sketches of a spade-shaped UFO, probably because the Avro craft's chief designer was an avid collector of UFO data and considered Arnold's report to be reliable. The Project Y machine, which had been under development since the fall of 1951, was somewhat similar to Nathan Price's 1952–53 concept, and like the Lockheed saucer was intended to be able to take off vertically, hover in midair, and climb to extreme altitudes at incredible



The Avro flying disc, Project Y, full-scale mock-up.

speeds. It seems likely that Lockheed, having originated one of the most sophisticated saucer-like aircraft concepts to date, would have been aware of the Avro design prior to the UFO incident.

In any case, Putt's visit to Avro was no secret. It was featured prominently in U.S. newspapers, particularly in the *New York Times*. In two articles, one in September at the time of the trip, and another in early October, the *Times* discussed Putt's interest in the Avro VTOL disc. Perhaps a more important indicator of the effect of Putt's Avro visit was Project Blue Book's *Report 12*, which was issued about 11 weeks before the Lockheed UFO incident. *Report 12* devoted several pages to a somewhat garbled history of the Avro project and its designer's attempts to interest the United States in the concept.

The report noted that the Avro engineers believed that the Soviets were responsible for many UFO reports, and that Red saucers were being launched from submarines off the North American coasts on surreptitious overflights. Avro, *Report 12* said, wanted to install their saucer in submarines too.

Oddly enough, an article touting Putt's positive comments about the Avro saucer appeared in the December 16 edition of the magazine *People Today*—the very day of the Lockheed sighting. Putt clearly made his views on the Avro saucer known within the Air Force as well. On December 29, Maj. Gen. John Samford, Air Force director of intelligence, memoed Col. George L. Wertenbaker, ATIC chief, on the Avro program.

> It is my understanding that you are continuing an active interest in the 'Flying Saucer' being developed by the Canadians. Also, you may have knowledge of General Putt's reaction to their program from his recent trip to that country. I would appreciate your analysis of this Canadian program. There is also an interest from both the possibility standpoint, and the time factor required

> by a foreign country to achieve results in this field. If you so desire, we might be able through our contacts with the Canadians here, to arrange ATIC representation during this development, or phases thereof.

Kelly Johnson had close personal and professional ties with Putt and officers like him, and it's likely that some time in early 1954 the two discussed the Lockheed UFO sighting. Putt also received a copy of the formal Lockheed sighting report from the company via some unnamed intermediary. The general understood Johnson's concerns about the credibility problems a UFO report would cause, and forwarded the file to Wertenbaker at the Air Technical Intelligence Center at Wright-Patterson AFB in mid-February with a personal cover letter.

"This report was handed to me by Lockheed personnel," Putt informed Wertenbaker, with the explanation that "Mr. Johnson was most reluctant to write the report in the first place and then refused to forward it on to you because of his belief that those who profess to have seen flying saucers are not usually considered to be logical and practical hard-headed engineers. However, I thought you should have the report for whatever value it may be in your overall studies."

Putt's intervention would seem to have guaranteed that the incident would be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the eventual official Blue Book evaluation was that the object was just a lenticular cloud, despite the quality of the witnesses.

The Case File and Its Implications

Although the sighting was not highly dramatic in comparison to many UFO reports, what makes it particularly unusual—and scientifically useful—is that it was a long-duration daylight sighting of an object seen by two independent groups of very qualified observers. Moreover, these groups—one stationary and one moving—were separated by very long baselines in both horizontal and vertical planes, facilitating triangulation of the object's position. In addition, Johnson was able to observe the UFO through binoculars.

Unlike many sensationalized UFO events, the witnesses themselves recorded these observations in a calm, professional manner while the details were still fresh in their minds. No media attention was sought or desired. And most importantly, the integrity and competence of this particular group of observers is almost unquestionable. Since these witnesses spent much of their professional lives observing airborne objects, a more qualified set of eyewitnesses would be hard to imagine.

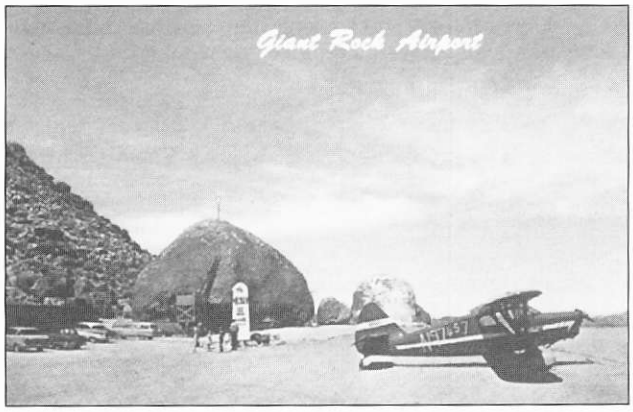
Because of their precise observations and careful documentation of the incident, a great deal of information can be extracted from the account. Available weather data makes it clear that Blue Book's rubber-stamp identification of the object as a lenticular cloud is untenable . . . and therefore the object's identity is still a mystery. There was no question about this in Kelly Johnson's view. He was absolutely certain that it was no cloud, aircraft, or other mundane object.

The case file reveals a multitude of intriguing threads, including references to prior sightings by several of the engineers. Johnson furnished two signed sketches with his report. One showed the December 1953 object, a simple flattened ellipse, but the second, dated "about November 1951," shows a strange object resembling a rounded, sweptback, flying-wing aircraft. In his written account, Johnson elaborates:

> I should also state that about two years ago Mrs. Johnson and I saw an object which I believed at the time, and still do, to be a saucer, flying west of Brents Junction, California, [a small town just east of Johnson's Agoura ranch] on a very dark night. I did not see the object itself but saw a clearly defined flame or emanation, as shown on the attached sketch. This object was travelling from east to west at a very high speed and with no noise. The flame or emanation was a beautiful light blue, having extremely well defined edges. My first impression was that it was an afterburning airplane, but the lack of noise and the pure spread of the flame eliminated that possibility completely.

Roy Wimmer mentioned in his report that he had seen mysterious lights over Santa Catalina Island sometime in 1951 or 1952 during a flight in Constellation 1961S, the original prototype of the Constellation line.

Joseph Ware reported that he had previously visited a group of UFO enthusiasts at Giant Rock. While he does not specify the group by name, it seems clear that this is a reference to contactee George Van Tassel and his followers. Van Tassel had been a mechanic for Howard Hughes,



who was, via his airline TWA, the original customer for the Constellation airliner. Van Tassel had later worked directly for Lockheed on the Constellation program and it's almost a given that the Constellation test crew on board the WV-2 during the sighting would have known him.

For better or worse, Lockheed's contactees lurk in the background of the Johnson sighting. The likelihood is high

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LOCKHEED—*continued from page 9*

that Johnson, at least, would have been aware of Van Tassel's beliefs and activities, and probably considered that ridicule aimed at the Giant Rock group could easily have spilled over onto his own sighting and onto the Skunk Works itself. This may explain the fact that his sighting report file was held back from ATIC and only reached Putt through a "back channel."

The most fascinating single point in the file is its clarification of Kelly Johnson's opinions on UFOs. Far from sharing the skeptical attitude that Hall Hibbard displayed in 1947, Johnson reveals himself to be committed to UFO reality:

> I should state that for at least five years I have definitely believed in the possibility that flying saucers exist—this in spite of a good deal of kidding from my technical associates. Having seen this particular object on December 16th, I am now more firmly convinced than ever that such devices exist, and I have some highly technical converts in this belief as of that date.

What happened circa 1948 to make Johnson a "believer?" Was he given intelligence briefings that convinced him? Had he spoken to reliable pilots who had had persuasive sightings? Had he heard of Project Sign's legendary Estimate of the Situation that concluded that flying discs were extraterrestrial? Had CIA's Phil Strong used Johnson as an unofficial consultant or sounding board on UFO-related issues?[4] Since he felt that it was important to document the sighting and ultimately forward a report to the Air Force (in spite of any embarrassment it might cause himself or Lockheed), Johnson obviously was aware of the existence of the Air Force's UFO investigation project, but he clearly was not intimately familiar with it, since his report is generically addressed to an "Air Force Investigation Group on Flying Saucers," rather than to Project Blue Book by name.

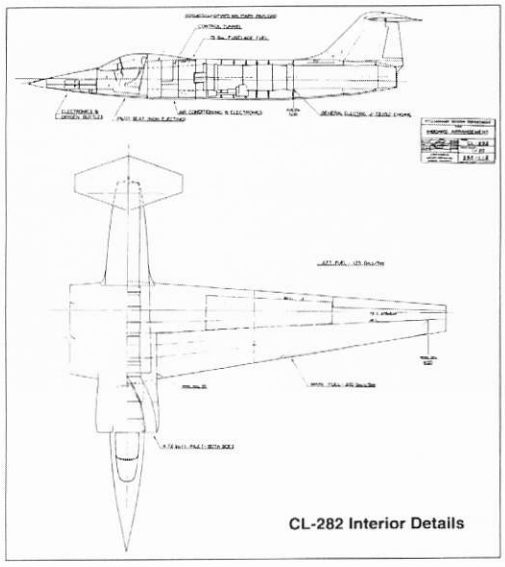
It is worth noting that Johnson does not specifically state that he believed in the extraterrestrial origin of these devices. But it seems clear that he regarded them as vehicles of some type, and certainly their performance was beyond that of any known or foreseeable manmade craft—even Avro's or Lockheed's own super-saucer concept.

Another unanswered question is what effect Johnson's sighting may have had on his peers in the military and the intelligence community. Given Johnson's stature, such a report must have given the most UFO-phobic skeptics pause, and in fact there are indications that Johnson made many of his closer associates aware of the incident over the years.

IRONY

Johnson's formidable political and engineering skills overcame any negative effects the sighting may have had on his reputation, and even though the Air Force did reject his modified XF-104 reconnaissance aircraft concept, he was victorious in the end when, in late 1954, the CIA awarded him a contract for a developed version of the CL-282. Code-named Aquatone, but known to Johnson's Skunk Works design group as the Angel, the glider-like jet (later designated U-2) would begin test flights at Nevada Test Site Area 51 in August 1955. Soon, according to the official CIA history of the Aquatone program, the U-2's gleaming, sunlit surfaces would begin generating dozens of high-altitude UFO sightings, particularly among airline pilots on the Chicago–Los Angeles routes. The CIA's history asserts that the U-2 itself was thus responsible for "over half of all UFO reports" of the 1950s, although this claim is dubious and unsupported by other evidence.[5]

Lear Electronics, a company owned by another aviation legend, William Lear Sr., built the crucial autopilot for the Aquatone. By the 1980s, Lear's son John would be promoting stories concerning the existence of alien spacecraft being stored, or even flown, at Area 51. Some of the early versions of these tales claimed that Lockheed was operating these UFOs under the code name Redlight.



CL-282 Interior Details

And intriguingly, in the 1970s, when the Skunk Works, under its new head, Ben Rich, began studying methods of drastically reducing the radar cross-section of aircraft, its engineers had toyed with saucer-shaped designs. Stymied by the nonaerodynamic-faceted surfaces dictated by the electrical engineers who were responsible for finding ways to scatter radar waves from the airplane's skin, some Skunk Works old-timers pondered even more exotic forms. "Several of our aerodynamics experts," Rich recalled,

> including Dick Cantrell, seriously thought that maybe we would do better trying to build an actual flying saucer. The shape itself was the ultimate in low observability. The problem was finding ways to make a saucer fly. Unlike our plates, it would have to be rotated and spun. But how? The Martians wouldn't tell us.

But the irony becomes even richer, straining credibility. About the time of the December 1953 sighting by Johnson and his test pilots, Lockheed had won a contract from the Naval Research Laboratory to modify a WV-2 aircraft with a new, advanced AN/APS-82 radar that would enable air targets to be more easily detected in high sea-clutter environments. The new antenna's size—17.5 feet wide—was such that it was initially thought that it could not be accommodated on an aircraft (one concept was to place it in an airship) but Lockheed's engineers, beginning their design work in January 1954, had devised a unique solution. Wind tunnel tests demonstrated that a properly shaped rotating fairing could provide enough lift to nearly offset the weight of the antenna system. An 18,000-pound lenticular "rotodome" some 30 feet in diameter—the first of its kind—was installed on a WV-2 that was retained by Lockheed as an experimental model. It was the same aircraft, Constellation airframe number 4301, that had been involved in the December 1953 UFO sighting. The WV-2E made its first flight with the saucerlike fairing in August 1956.

The shape of the rotodome (which had a strong resemblance to Price's supersonic saucer design), probably

In staged spoof photo, Lockheed engineers crowd around radar dome as "alien" emerges.

combined with company lore about the UFO incident on the WV-2 (and maybe Van Tassel and Angelucci too), proved too much for Lockheed's engineers, and just before the dome was installed on the aircraft, they decided to have a bit of fun by using it as a prop in a saucer-spoof photo.

The photo lacks clarity, but a small entity appears to be emerging from a hatch atop the dome. He waves to the eager Lockheed technicians . . .

Notes

1. The Lockheed case came to my attention through a reference in Michael David Hall and Wendy Ann Connors's book *Captain Edward J. Ruppelt: Summer of the Saucers—1952* (Albuquerque, N. Mex.: Rose Press International, 2000). Hall and Connors, in turn, had learned of it from one of veteran UFO historian Loren Gross' invaluable monographs, *UFOs: A History, 1953: August–December* (Fremont, Calif.: The author, 1990). I was intrigued by the unusual sketch of the UFO that accompanied the report and was curious as to which Lockheed engineer was responsible. The Hall-Connors version of the story was drawn from the "sanitized" Blue Book files released to the public in the 1970s in which the identities of the witnesses had been obscured. Mike Hall kindly provided the Blue Book microfilm roll containing the file. Mary Castner of CUFOS gave indispensable assistance in this project, and Brad Sparks's encyclopedic knowledge of the CIA's interaction with UFOs, FOIA releases, and general UFO history led to recovery of unsanitized versions of the Blue Book case file that contained vital information. This article would not exist without their outstanding cooperation.

2. Extensive declassified documentation on CIA's interaction with UFOs makes it clear that Phil Strong was the Agency's point man on the issue as late as 1962. While Pocock states that he considers it unlikely that Strong was Johnson's source of information concerning the Air Force reconnaissance project (and other Lockheed officials already knew of it), senior CIA official Robert Amory recalled that this was the case. In any event, Johnson clearly had close ties with Strong, who was moving in rather interesting circles. Strong had links with strategic reconnaissance studies such as the 1952 MIT/Lincoln Laboratory "Beacon Hill" project and the reconnaissance panel of the USAF Scientific Advisory Board. At the same time, he was involved with CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence UFO research. See www.foia.ucia.gov; Norman Polmar, *Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified* (Osceola, Wisc.: MBI, 2001); Jay Miller, *Aerograph 3: Lockheed U-2* (Austin, Tex.: Aerofax, 1983); and Chris Pocock, *The U-2 Spyplane: Toward the Unknown* (Atglen, Pa.: Schiffer Military History, 2000).

3. Wimmer and Ware would be crew members on early flights of another famous Lockheed product, the C-130 Hercules, in 1954.

4. According to a former senior aerospace management official who knew Johnson, USAF Chief of Staff General Hoyt Vandenberg had given a briefing to the heads of the major aviation companies circa 1948 in which he emphasized the Air Force's continuing concern with UFOs and its ongoing investigation of reports.

5. To UFO researchers, who know of tens of thousands of sighting reports, this controversial claim seems absurd on its face, but it may be a matter of semantics and perspective. Former CIA photoanalyst Dino Brugioni states that he was one of the liaison points between the U-2 program and Air Force UFO investigators. Brugioni claimed that airline pilot reports that might have been stimulated by early U-2 development flights in the Nevada area circa 1955–56 were referred to him by certain Aquatone-cleared Air Force personnel. He would check flight plans and inform the Air Force investigators of probable "hits." From CIA's point of view, many UFO reports that it learned of via this highly selective channel were caused by the U-2. ✦