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FRED LEE CRISMAN
AND
THE MAURY ISLAND INCIDENT OF 1947

Summary and analysis of
the available public record.

- SOURCES: THE WORLD OF FLYING SAUCERS, by Dr. Donald H. Menzel and Lyle G. Boyd; Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1963.
- THE REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS, by E.J. Ruppelt; Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1956.
- THE FLYING SAUCER READER, edited by Jay David; a Signet paperback, New American Library, New York, 1967. (reprints chapters from both Ruppelt and Wilkins [see below] on the Maury Island incident).
- FLYING SAUCERS ON THE ATTACK, by Harold T. Wilkins; American edition by Citadel Press, New York, 1954.
- THE COMING OF THE SAUCERS, by Kenneth Arnold and Ray Palmer,; published privately by the authors, Boise, Idaho, and Amherst, Wis., 1952.
- [The Maury Island incident may also, according to personal recollection, have been dealt with in THE FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL, the first book by Maj. Donald E. Kehoe, published circa 1950 in paperback and no longer available.]
- SEATTLE TIMES, Jan. 4, 1966.
- SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Jan. 5 and 6, 1966.

If Crisman's age of 47 as given in 1969 is correct, he would have been about 25 at the time of Maury Island, old enough to have flown fighter planes over Burma in World War II, a claim he reportedly made at the time and which none of the accounts appears to question. Otherwise, there is not a single detail in the published accounts regarding his life prior to then.

At the time in the summer of 1947, he was operating what was called a harbor patrol on Puget Sound and apparently living in Tacoma. The nature of this harbor patrol is nowhere explained, but judging from a statement made by his assistant, Harold Dahl, about recovering a log boom worth \$5,000, it appears to have been a sort of waterborne trash-collection service operated by these men in which their compensation consisted of salvaging whatever they found worthwhile in return for keeping navigable waters free of debris.

No further details substantiate such an inference, but on the other hand the accounts contain nothing to contradict it. They do make clear that while this arrangement may have been some sort of contract with the Coast Guard, Crisman and Dahl were not members of the Coast Guard, as one account assumes. Wilkins and Menzel both spell Crisman's name "Chrisman," but the Arnold-Palmer version uses Fred Lee Crisman and there appears little doubt the man they are talking about is the same one living in Tacoma today -- unless identities have been switched.

In any case, Dahl was the principal in the actual incident at Maury Island. Crisman was not there, but played an important role in what followed.

The incident did not become known publicly for almost two weeks. There was obvious confusion at the time, and still exists, as to whether it was genuine or a hoax. The evidence at this late date appears weighted in favor of a hoax, with Crisman playing a major role.

The story actually begins on June 24, 1947, when a Boise, Idaho, salesman of fire control equipment was flying his private plane east of Mt. Ranier in Washington and sighted nine metallic-looking, saucer-shaped objects flying at speeds of more than 1,000 miles per hour and behaving in ways no known aircraft could duplicate.

While there had been many earlier sightings throughout recorded history of equally strange aerial phenomena, none had received anything like the enormous publicity or achieved the world-wide impact of the Arnold sighting. With seismic suddenness, it posed the possible existence of an alien technology far advanced beyond any known to terrestrial man and fully able to get at him. Arnold, a go-getting business type who flew his own plane, appeared fully normal otherwise and credible as a witness due to his experience in the air. He was impossible to ignore.

Whether one believes in flying saucers or not, it was Kenneth Arnold's sighting that put them irrevocably into the consciousness of the human race, and with them their disturbing implications to the ethnocentric concept of the cosmos.

It was around a week later that the Maury Island incident became public knowledge, but to a much lesser extent. By this time there had been still other sightings, some apparently genuine, but some obviously fakes. The news media were beginning to be wary of handling such items, and apparently viewed the Maury Island account

with enough scepticism to ignore it to a large extent.

According to Palmer and Arnold, Crisman telephoned Palmer at Amherst, Wis., where Palmer was publisher of Fate magazine, to tell him of Dahl's story and apparently tried to sell him the story. Palmer apparently stalled, got in touch with Arnold, and asked him to fly to Tacoma to investigate, sending him \$200 in expense money.

Arnold went, and first contacted Dahl, who initially was reluctant to talk, appeared very frightened, speaking of telephoned threats to himself and his family if he didn't keep his mouth shut. Gradually, Arnold got his story, which was that on June 21 (three days prior to Arnold's own experience near Mt. Ranier) Dahl had been patrolling near Maury Island three miles north of Tacoma when he saw six large doughnut-shaped metallic-looking craft overhead. Five were circling around one in the center that appeared to be in trouble. They drew close to it, and presently debris began falling from the center craft, some of it damaging Dahl's boat, killing his dog and injuring his young son. Then the craft all shot up into the sky and disappeared. Dahl picked up some of the fragments (he estimated many tons were left on the island) which were of two kinds: slag-like chunks which appeared to be parts of a cylindrical object such as the refractory jacket of a firing chamber of some kind, and thin sheets of aluminum-like metal similar to those that make up the skin of an airplane.

Arnold writes that for several days he stayed at a hotel in Tacoma, talking intermittently with Dahl and Crisman and trying, with the aid of an airline pilot friend, to check out their story. Yet he never was taken to Maury Island, and although Crisman showed him the boat allegedly damaged by the falling fragments, Arnold did not believe the old boat he was shown was capable of functioning as a patrol craft nor that the damage it showed was anything like as extensive or severe as Dahl and Crisman had represented.

In the meantime, Arnold had contacted two Army Air Force intelligence officers at Hamilton Field in California who had investigated his own sighting. They flew to Tacoma, interviewed Arnold, Dahl and Crisman, took some of the alleged fragments, and then were killed when their plane crashed in flames shortly after takeoff from McChord AFB.

Also during this time, two Tacoma newsmen, one from International News Service and another from United Press, somehow learned that Arnold was in town and repeatedly called him up. They not only told him they had been warned to stay away from the case and advised him to do so too. They also told him they were receiving mysterious telephone calls from an unidentified man who was giving them exact, play-by-play accounts of what Arnold was doing, with whom he was talking, and about what. Arnold and his airline pilot friend turned their room upside down, but could find no evidence of bugging.

Menzel and Ruppelt both say that Crisman was the mysterious caller. However, Arnold goes out of his way in his account to relate how he suspected Crisman, but was able to establish in at least one instance that Crisman was in the room with him at the time one of the mysterious calls to the newsmen was being made. He makes it clear he thinks someone else was doing the calling.

Arnold left Tacoma profoundly disturbed over the death of his two Air Force friends, by the apparent inconsistencies and internal contradictions in the Dahl-Crisman story, and by certain other inexplicable circumstances connected with the whole encounter which are too involved to detail here.

If, as appears likely, the Maury Island incident was a hoax, the conclusion appears probable that Crisman was at least the straw-boss of the whole operation. Dahl is described as a beefy, rather simple young man, manifestly incapable of dreaming up such a complicated story. Crisman emerges as smooth and articulate, tending toward the gregarious but always somewhat evasive and even mysterious. Arnold remarks that he never was able to find out where Crisman actually lived. The identify of the mysterious telephone caller remains a major problem.

Treatment of the whole story by various writers adds considerable color to it. As noted, the press at the time appeared afraid of the story. It did not become widely known, even among saucer enthusiasts, for some time. It is believed (relying entirely on memory, since the book is no longer available) that the first major account of it was given by Maj. Donald Kehoe in his first book, THE FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL, published probably around 1950. If the same memory is correct, Kehoe accepted the story as genuine and indicated Crisman and Dahl soon afterward were "transferred" from Tacoma for some probably sinister reason and no longer could be located.

Arnold and Palmer, who published their account of the incident in 1952, clearly regard it as a hoax, and in prefatory material Palmer appears to indicate he thinks it was an intelligence job.

Harold T. Wilkins, a British saucer enthusiast, probably published his version in Britain at about the same time, but it did not appear in an American edition until 1954. Wilkins appears to accept the incident as genuine, but is gravely suspicious about the way it is handled.

Ruppelt's REPORT ON UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ published in 1956 after the author had been Air Force spokesman on the Saucer question for several years, treats it as a hoax, but dates the Maury Island sighting at June 31, 1947, a full ten days after Dahl told Arnold it took place on June 21.

In 1963 Dr. Donald H. Menzel published his well-known and painstaking book debunking the whole idea that saucers actually exist, and, apparently relying mostly on Ruppelt, also dates the Maury Island sighting at June 31, not June 21.

Menzel's account is extremely interesting, however, in the way he concentrates his scorn on Ray Palmer, the publisher of Fate who got Arnold to investigate the Maury Island affair. To build up his case against Palmer, he excoriates him for publishing, during World War II, the so-called Shaver Mysteries. These were accounts, purportedly written by a man named Shaver, dealing in detail with claims that mankind all along has been under surveillance by extra-terrestrial beings in alien spaceships. These were published years before flying saucers or spacecraft concepts had become part of the public consciousness. Menzel calls the Shaver Mystery series a clever combination of the works of Charles Fort and Ray Palmer's imagination, but he attacks Palmer as though his offense were far more -- and unforgivably -- serious.

Menzel appears equally intent upon discrediting Arnold, whose personal reliability no one else has attacked, and his fervor in recounting the Maury Island hoax in order to undermine the credibility of both Palmer and Arnold is a little difficult to overlook.

It suggests, as a matter of fact, that if the Maury Island story was a hoax, it was elaborately and expertly contrived by someone who had a very precise idea of just what had to be discredited. The intricacies of the Dahl-Crisman story (which have only been hinted at here) could scarcely have been developed and coordinated

so quickly merely on the basis of the June 24 Arnold sighting. It is reasonable -- indeed, it is almost necessary -- to suppose that the complicated fabric of the Maury Island story could only have been woven by someone who was fully aware of the much broader issues at stake, such as those posed by the so-called Shaver Mystery series. It is therefore logical to postulate that the Shaver series may have been based on knowledge uncomfortably close to what was considered to be highly dangerous if it became generally known under circumstances of increased credibility such as that provided by the Arnold sighting.

To continue the postulate, if Menzel's attitude betrays a genuine concern over keeping whatever may be the facts about unidentified flying objects from the realm of credibility, then the Maury Island hoax may have been an intelligence operation originating in very high places. If so, Fred Lee Crisman played an important, although probably not the most important part, in it. Palmer is quoted as saying that when Crisman telephoned him trying to sell him the Maury Island story, he (Palmer) recognized the voice as that of a man who repeatedly had called him through the years he was publishing the ~~Shaver~~ Shaver Mystery series, arguing and threatening him in an effort to get him to stop it.

If a high-level intelligence operation was involved, it may have set precedents that appear to have been followed faithfully in later operations -- the introduction of strange, inexplicable and often conflicting details, the barrage of ridicule, intimidation and even terror against some of those trying to get at the facts, and the almost universal implication that any departure from accepted norms is the creation of kooks or charlatans. The question may be: whose charlatans ?

As a footnote to the above, there is a later incident in the same area, possibly totally unrelated but which should be checked out because of the propinquity factor.

On Jan. 3, 1966, Maj. Gen. Irving L. Branch, commander of the flight test center at Edwards AFB in California, was flying a T38 jet trainer solo from Edwards to ^{Boeing Field} ~~McChord AFB~~ near Tacoma. At 3,000 feet (one account says 1,500 feet) his plane^N vanished from the radar screens at about 10:22 a.m.

The next day his jacket was found floating in the Sound. Still later his body was recovered by scuba divers from the wreckage of his plane found in 60 feet of water off Point Jefferson. Stories in the Seattle Times for Jan. 4 and in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer for Jan. 5 and 6 said his plane clipped the tops off trees for half a mile before crashing into the Sound.

If the cause of the accident ever was explained publicly, it was not reported. The Air Force insisted Gen. Branch was flying alone (in the presumably two-seat trainer) but never described the purpose of his trip except to say it was to confer with officials at Boeing.

Before the wreckage had been located and Branch's body found, police on Jan. 4 investigated ^a reports that a man wearing a wet, orange-colored flight suit walked barefoot into a Seattle waterfront bar, the Cove Restaurant at Pier 56, at about 6 p.m. on Jan. 3. He appeared confused, asking where he was and asking to borrow a dime ~~from~~ to call an unidentified Air Force sergeant. He was given the dime by two other unidentified men, with whom he then left the restaurant-bar. The woman quoted as reporting this, Mrs. Judy Brown, a cocktail waitress who lived at 14805 Linden Ave. N., told Patrolman Chris Holevas about the incident, even though at that time she had not yet heard about Gen. Branch's crash. She said the ~~two~~ ^{two} other customers left money on the table when they left with the man in the flight suit and said they would be back, but did not return. She described the wet man as appearing in shock, holding his left side, and muttering "Roger and out" several times. Police said they had no further reports on any of this.

Due to the lack of any explanation of Gen. Branch's crash, which is disturbing because of his disappearance from radar at either 1,500 or 3,000 feet, it is reasonable to ask whether the incident of the three men was something more than a drunken hoax. If so, who was involved, and what was the purpose? Gen. Branch was no ordinary airman. He had been in charge of special weapons development at Kirtland AFB in New Mexico (which suggests nuclear weapons) and apparently was an important figure likely to be surrounded by maximum security. Were the three men part of it? Was this the beginning of a distraction operation that later was found unnecessary and abandoned?