

'Phantom' Sought in Skylab Hoax

By Jack Anderson and Les Whitten

As the Skylab III crew descended into the Pacific a few days ago, some Americans waited breathlessly in fear the astronauts would never emerge alive.

Their fears were not just normal concern about their heroes. Quite the contrary, they had actually heard mysterious voices telling of an explosion over Moscow, an oxygen loss and a conversation with President Nixon.

The voices were real enough: only the messages were false. These disturbing and potentially disastrous reports during the final days of the Skylab III mission were "broadcast" in various parts of the country by a "space phantom" now being sought by federal investigators.

Although we learned of the fake broadcasts days before Skylab splashed down, we withheld the story after counseling with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. We feared it could create panic or stimulate equally sick people with electronic talent.

But now that Skylab III is safely down, here are the facts:

In Rocky Mount, N.C., officials of Unifi, Inc., a textile firm, were on a long distance call to New York on Friday, Jan. 25, when they began getting interference. At first, said Larry Ayscue, a custom service coordinator for the company, "it sounded like radio transmissions from an airliner."

He soon realized, however, that he was overhearing what sounded like transmissions between Skylab III and the Houston space center. He could hear only the "Skylab" end of the conversation, and he could even hear "the click when they let go of the mike key."

Other people picked up extensions, and Ayscue took notes. At 11:50 a.m., he heard the astronauts say they had been "taking military photos of silos over Moscow" when they "received an approximately 10-megaton explosion." The spacecraft, the voices said, was completely disabled and had only 11 hours of oxygen left.

The "Skylab crew" then stated they were sending "scrambled" transmissions "on channel 5 and channel B." Whereupon, said Ayscue, he heard something resembling Morse code coming over his phone line.

That done, "astronauts" began speaking with the White House. "Yes, Mr. President," came the cool, monotone voice. "Yes, Mr. President. We understand this." The "Skylab crew" acknowledged that they understood their wives had been notified and were being flown to Houston.

At 12:15 p.m., the voices reported that their "secret documents and equipment" had been jettisoned. The transmissions then abruptly ended.

Similar reports of mysterious space messages were quietly investigated by our associate Joe Spear. He found about a dozen other rational people had heard

the voices. All reported essentially the same details.

At NASA, officials advised us that still others around the country had reported similar phone interference. A Connecticut doctor told of hearing a conversation from space alleging that Skylab had been struck by a meteorite. A Jacksonville, Fla., man had heard the space voices, and claimed he recorded them on tape.

Now, NASA's security specialists are trying to find which "fone freak" perpetrated the elaborate hoaxes. So far, we have learned, only the "Space Phantom" knows.

Weicker vs. Buchanan—When the Sigma Delta Chi journalistic fraternity wanted a hot debate, they seized on the idea of pitting Watergate Sen. Lowell Weicker, (R-Conn.) against blustery White House speech writer and media critic Pat Buchanan. Weicker readily agreed to meet Buchanan before the Washington chapter, but Buchanan refused to appear.

Bebe's Name—When three naive New Jersey contractors came to ex-Sen. George Smathers' firm with a contract problem, they say they got a promise of help from the President's friend, Bebe Rebozo.

Lew Malnak, of Lew Malnak and Associates, and two of his top executives, say the promise came from a young Smathers partner, Thomas A. Davis, whom the three contractors had seen about a \$750,000 contract dispute.

As they recall it, Davis told them the dispute could easily be dealt with through "Bebe." Davis, after jogging his memory with notes, says herecalls seeing the trio, but he emphatically denies ever involving Rebozo's name.

Through Bebe is a close friend of Smathers, we can find no evidence that either of them were ever helpful to Malnak. Both Davis and the Malnak men agree that Smathers' firm did not handle the case.

Now, two years later, Malnak is still looking for justice on the Navy contract, this time with the help of Reps. Edwin Forsythe (R-N.J.) and Les Aspin (D-Wis.).

Tax Twist—While the Internal Revenue Service tries to kill tax exemptions of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, whose probes of dirty politics apparently upset the White House, the IRS has just granted an exemption to a legal defense fund founded by a group of rich Nixon supporters.

The lucky businessmen are the Pacific Legal Foundation, whose board includes J. S. Fluor, head of Fluor Corp. and a big GOP contributor. The foundation will defend "responsible citizens," presumably businessmen and others, in trouble with the federal government.

Meanwhile, the Fair Campaign Practices Committee, which has weathered three previous audits, is fighting for its life with the IRS, and thus might make a handy "client" for the Pacific Legal Foundation.

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