
Case Closed: Reflections on the 1997 Air Force Roswell Report

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The Air Force "crash dummy" explanation of the Roswell "bodies" was not a desperate attempt to preserve the Roswell coverup, as UFO promoters would have us believe. Rather, clues that anthropomorphic test dummies may have been mistaken for "aliens" came from testimonies of the Roswell "alien body" witnesses themselves. The 1997 Air Force Case Closed report, and new findings presented in this article, provide intriguing new speculations on the origin of various parts of the Roswell legend.

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The second United States Air Force (USAF) Roswell report, *Case Closed* (MacAndrew 1997), was released in the summer of 1997 to considerable initial criticism. In fact, the report provides important new information and rational explanations for claims of so-called "alien bodies" and other elements of the Roswell myth.

The first USAF Roswell report (Weaver and MacAndrew 1995) focused on the actual events of 1947 and, in particular, on a June 1947 New York University balloon experiment (part of secret Project Mogul). The debris from that experiment is widely regarded as the best explanation for the "Roswell incident" (Thomas 1995).

After the 1995 report, however, the Air Force was criticized for failing to interview witnesses who claimed to have seen actual bodies of aliens, even though reports of alien bodies did not surface until decades after the original event and are not mentioned in any original accounts from 1947¹ (see Figure 1).

In response to the criticism, the USAF examined the alien-body stories. The result, *Roswell Report: Case Closed*, presents some new explanations for the alien bodies and many other elements of the myth built up around Roswell. The Air Force said that reports of bodies and mysterious autopsies could have had several sources, including high-altitude drops of anthropomorphic test "dummies" and one particularly severe military aircraft accident.

This article provides some new information and updated material obtained by coauthor B. D. Gildenberg. Gildenberg contributed to *Case Closed* and served as a meteorologist, engineer, and scientist for thirty years at the Holloman Air Force Base Balloon Branch in Alamogordo, New Mexico (1951–1981). Holloman AFB, which lies to the west of Roswell near the White Sands Missile Range, has been the prime skyhook (high-altitude) balloon launch site for classified Department of Defense programs. The Balloon Branch at Holloman is under the Air Force Cambridge Research Center, now known as Phillips Laboratory. Gildenberg was also involved in Project Bluebook, the Air Force's official investigation of unidentified flying objects (closed down in 1969).

Case Closed was introduced to the media and the public in a poorly executed Pentagon briefing on June 24, 1997. The high-ranking officer who gave the solo presentation had not been briefed on any of the material until the night before. And the report's knowledgeable and dedicated author, Captain James McAndrew, was nowhere to be seen. Slow initial distribution of the report was also a problem. But that did not stop some critics from rushing to judgment before they actually read the report. The UFO community was quick to sound the attack, with comments along the lines of "Dummies? The only dummies are the Air Force people who thought we'd buy this yarn!" The fact that the dummy drops did not occur until several years after the actual incident in 1947 was also widely criticized.

Air Force researchers, however, did not come up with "crash dummies" in a desperate attempt to preserve the Roswell coverup, as the UFO promoters would have us

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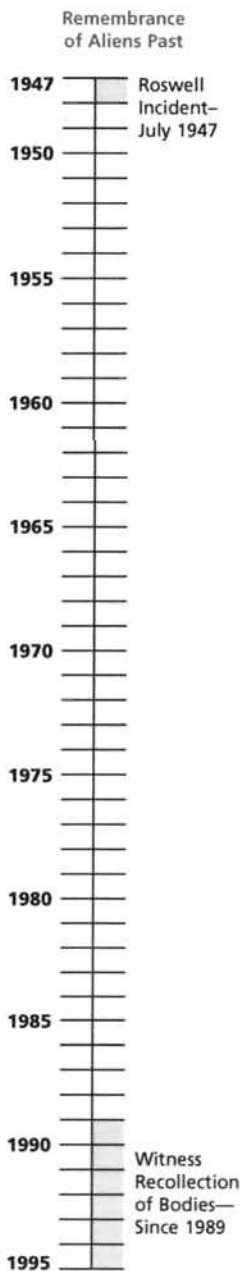


Figure 1. Forty-two year gap between the alleged crash and witnesses' first reports.

believe. Rather, the clues that dummies may have been mistaken for aliens came from the Roswell "alien body" witnesses themselves. And the time gap problems of the Air Force explanation pale in comparison to those of both witnesses and authors of popular books on Roswell.

The *Case Closed* report, and new findings presented in this article, provide some intriguing new speculations on the origins of various parts of the Roswell legend. The evidence that corroborates these explanations is not conclusive by any means, but it does lend support to a rational explanation of the Roswell mystery.

Clues from Witness Testimonies

Anthropomorphic dummy drops were performed in support of Air Force projects High Dive and Excelsior from 1954 to 1959. These projects culminated in Captain Joseph W. Kittinger's heroic world record parachute jump of 102,800 feet, on August 16, 1960, over White Sands Missile Range. The anthropomorphic dummies were flown by the Holloman AFB skyhook launch center, with remote command pilot Gildenberg steering the giant high-altitude skyhook balloons to their target destinations.

Over the course of the projects, a total of sixty-seven dummies were ejected from skyhook balloons at altitudes of up to twenty miles. A number of the dummies wound up in the vicinity of Roswell, Holloman's favorite downwind parking lot. Their conversion into part of the alien scenario was not dreamed up by the USAF researchers. The "witnesses" themselves, speaking out of the pages of the Roswell books, gave it away.

Here are some of the actual witness statements described in the Air Force report (MacAndrew 1997):

"They were using dummies in those damned things. . . . It was either dummies or bodies or something laying there. . ." (Jim Ragsdale, p. 69).

"I thought they were plastic dolls." "No hair . . . completely bald" (Gerald Anderson, pp. 69–70).

The Air Force report presented twenty-four witness statements that corroborated the dummy hypothesis to some degree. There are more witness statements in the popular Roswell literature that also lend support to the dummy explanation:

"They seemed to have no inertia, seemed to be like insects, maybe they were robots" (Third-hand from flight crew on scene, in Friedman and Berliner 1992, 53).

"It had that damned serene look on its face" (Steve Mackenzie, in Randle and Schmitt 1994, 12).

"The mouth apparently does not 'function as a means of communication or as an orifice for food ingestion,' and there are no teeth. . . . There was no hair on the head. . . . No perspiration or body odor" (UFO researcher Len Stringfield's confidential sources, in Randle and Schmitt 1994, 82).

"Looked like twins" (Leon Visse, in Fumoux 1981).

The Mechanics of Time Distortion

Critics of the Air Force report contend that the dummy drops were years too late to account for any part of the Roswell incident. The dummy drops ran from 1954 to 1959, seven to twelve years after the incident. But the real time gap is the period of decades between the supposed events of 1947 and the time when the "witnesses" finally spoke out. The problem was stated well by mortician Glenn Dennis in the Fall 1995 *Omni* magazine: ". . . [W]hen I talked to Friedman, that was the first time I tried to recall the whole experience in 40 years or more. I was remembering out loud and made some mistakes. It's hard to get such old memories straight." Difficulties with recollections of long-past events were also voiced in Randle and Schmitt 1994 ("This witness, however, told us a story . . . changing the date of the crash, the location of the bodies and craft, shape of the ship. . ." p. 220), Friedman and Berliner 1992 ("There are certainly discrepancies, but after 43 years, memories begin to fade and swirl together. . ." p. 122), and Good 1988 ("Since it's been 27 years, details like this are pretty foggy, and I may even be influenced by other descriptions I've seen or heard in the interim. . .").

It appears that events strung out over a number of years in the distant past may indeed have been cobbled together to form the basis of a supposed single event. Figure 1 shows some of the balloon activities in the area (Mogul, High Dive and Excelsior, Vee balloon, Viking/Voyager) that certainly contributed to UFO sightings in general and might also have contributed to the Roswell phenomenon. There have been thousands of skyhook balloons launched from the Holloman AFB Ballon Branch over fifty years, with many far exceeding the famous Hindenberg zeppelin in size. The skyhooks, shining brilliantly in changing colors high in the stratosphere while the

earth's surface was still in darkness, generated countless UFO reports. In 1972, this same Air Force group launched Project Viking nose cones from Roswell. These vehicles looked like classic UFOs and routinely generated many UFO sightings, despite preflight publicity.

Tethered mini-blimps were used to measure low-level launch winds at Roswell for the Viking project. Seen from a distance, they also resembled spaceships and probably were sketched as such in Randle and Schmitt 1994 (first photo insert).

As Figure 2 dramatically shows, the first body/autopsy descriptions did not appear until the late eighties—more than four decades after Roswell and more than three decades after the dummy drops. The time difference between July 1947 and

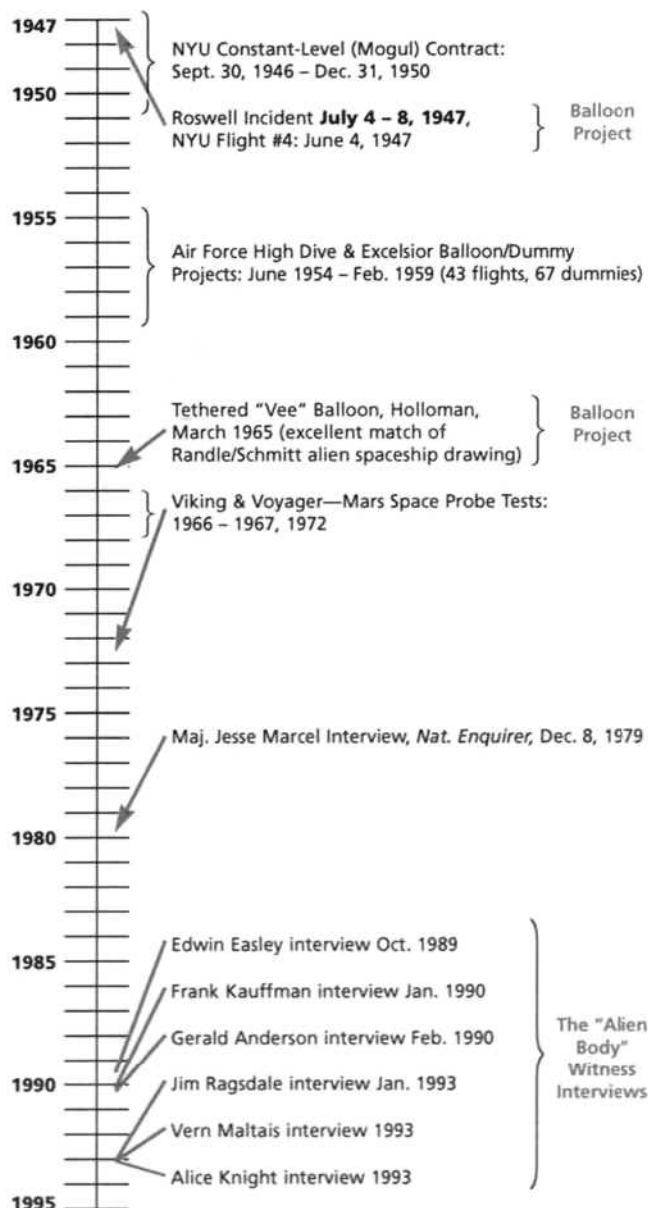


Figure 2. Balloon Project/Witness Interview Time Line

the dummy drops appears rather small in comparison to this time gap.

Major Jesse Marcel's interview about Roswell took place more than thirty years after 1947. Marcel, the central figure of the Roswell story (see Korff 1997), is often quoted as saying the debris was "not from earth." But a very revealing statement relevant to the whole Roswell mythos appears in an interview Marcel gave *National Enquirer* reporter Bob Pratt on December 8, 1979. When Pratt asked if the debris was a rocket or not, Marcel responded, "Oh, no. Unh. Unh. I've seen rockets. I've seen rockets sent up at the White Sands testing grounds. It definitely was not part of an aircraft, nor a missile or rocket" (Pflock 1994). In other words, whatever it was that Major Marcel saw on Brazel's ranch, it was not a spaceship. All too often, statements like these are ignored by those UFO authors who perpetuate the Roswell legend.

Glenn Dennis is the mortician who described a mysterious Roswell alien autopsy. The nurse who allegedly told him about it was described by Dennis as either missing or transferred to London. Three other principals in his story are: "Captain 'Slatts' Wilson"; a pediatrician who later moved to Farmington, New Mexico; and a big red-headed colonel. A summary of the Air Force findings on these individuals appears in Figure 3.

The only nurse at Roswell Army Air Field in 1947 who was transferred to London—1st Lt. Eileen Fanton—matched Dennis's recollections of the "missing nurse": single, small, short black hair, and dark eyes. There are two possible matches for Captain "Slatts" Wilson. The first is Captain "Slatts" Slattery (the only known Air Force nurse at Roswell ever to use the nickname Slatts), and the second is Captain Idabelle M. Wilson (the only Air Force nurse at Roswell named Wilson). Captain Slattery did not arrive at Roswell until August 1947 (after the July incident), and Captain Wilson served from 1956 to 1960. The only physician to relocate from Roswell to Farmington happened to be a pediatrician and, in fact, was the only pediatrician in the Farmington area for many years. But this man, Capt. Frank B. Nordstrom, served at Roswell from 1951 to 1953. The only tall, red-headed colonel at Roswell Army Air Field/Walker Air Force Base was Col. Lee Ferrell, who was base hospital commander from 1954 to 1960.

A review of military aircraft accidents showed that the only accident for which burn victims were autopsied at Walker AFB was a KC-97 crash near Roswell on June 26, 1956. Many of the elements of the Glenn Dennis story—the missing nurse, Captain "Slatts" Wilson, the red-headed colonel, a secretive autopsy of badly burned, foul-smelling (gasoline-soaked) bodies, the pediatrician who left to Farmington—are actually found in history. But they are not found in July of 1947—rather, they appear spread out from the 1940s to the 1950s. The Glenn Dennis story is a classic example of how memories can be distorted over time.

The Gerald Anderson story (see Friedman and Berliner 1992, 90–92) is another splendid microcosm of the entire

Roswell web. Many of the descriptions he provides can be correlated with actual military events in New Mexico—only these events occurred over a period of many years, not days.

Supposedly, in July 1947, five-year-old Anderson and family stumbled upon the main spaceship near the plains of St. Agustin, 120 miles to the west of the Roswell/Corona area.

The first thing he noted was "a circular silver object . . . kind of balanced up on one of the trees." Next, he said, "it crossed my mind that it was a dirigible, a blimp that had crashed. . . ." It turns out that on one occasion the Holloman Balloon Branch had tethered a mini-blimp at 10,000 feet, near the northern boundary of the WSMR. It broke loose during a thunderstorm and was located a few days later, near Socorro. Socorro borders

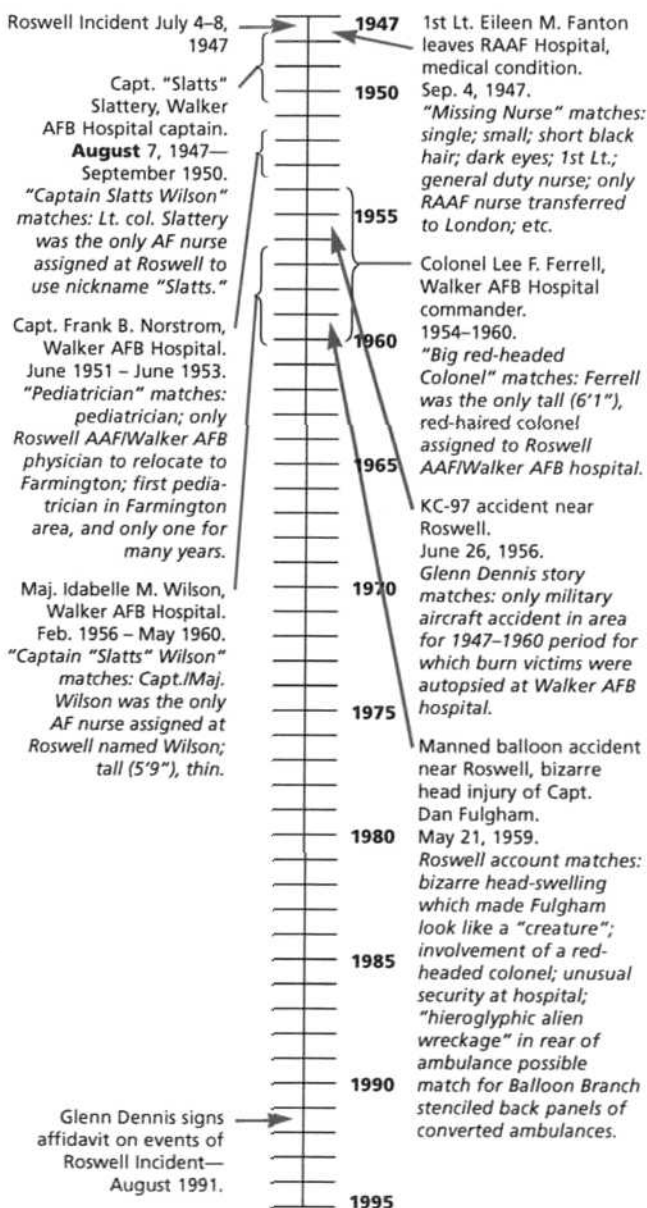


Figure 3. Glenn Dennis Time Line

the plains of St. Agustin. But that blimp tore loose in 1972.

Next, Anderson noted, "It tore up a lot of sagebrush and there were small fires smoldering here and there. . . ." The Explosive Materials Research and Test Center (EMRTC) operates in a rugged area west of Socorro, on the northern fringes of the plains of St. Agustin. It performs research on explosive materials, including the demolition of aircraft fuselages. Anderson's family might have stumbled on the aftermath of such a test. He later described MPs coming out of trucks to order them out of the area. A gash in the hull revealing a multitude of cables and wires is possibly further evidence of the true nature of what they saw. But such tests were not conducted until after 1950.

Next, Anderson described the "aliens": "[H]is eyes was [sic] open, staring blankly. . . . I thought they were dolls. I didn't think they were alive. . . ." He said a truck convoy arrived and crews began a ritual. The activities of the crew and the vehicles, as described by Anderson, closely fit a description of a Holloman Balloon crew preparing an anthropomorphic dummy launch for Project High Dive. The payload people may have arrived first, and Anderson probably saw the dummies lying outside, while the crew was inside the instrumentation van. He also gave a good description of the tracking aircraft. But the events that Anderson described took place in February 1959, not July 1947. And they took place somewhere between White Sands, Roswell, and Corona, not near the plains of Augstin.

Anderson added other testimony, extracted from a family diary. It described an event near Magdalena, in the plains of St. Agustin. The story involved ranchers seeing a flying disc in that area, with government officials restricting access. Perhaps they witnessed the aftermath of a classified Discoverer satellite nose-cone launch from Magdalena. From a distance, dangling from the crane prior to launch activities, the satellite would have looked decidedly disc-shaped. But that was in 1960.

The weaving of these four disparate time-space events into a single space opera, if this in fact occurred, would have been worthy of Shakespeare. Perhaps many of these events were innocently combined into a single event by Anderson, a victim of a faded memory. But, considering Anderson's proven duplicity with diaries and phone records (Klass 1997), he may have strung together real or imagined events quite deliberately. Either way, the episode highlights the magnitude of the task originally confronting the USAF investigators.

Several other witnesses provided hints of dates far removed from July 1947. For example, Richard C. Doty, of Majestic-12 fame, cited 1949 for the event—replete with six aliens, five dead and one living (Peebles 1994, 316). Major Marcel, in his first post-Roswell interviews in February 1978, could not even remember what year the "incident" occurred (Klass 1997, 24).

Another Rosetta stone of the mechanics of time distortion are provided by pro-Roswell authors Randle and Schmitt. In their 1994 book *The Truth about the UFO Crash at Roswell*, they mention the Moby Dick balloon project (p. 154). Randle

and Schmitt claim that the project was run by New York University, that it was secret, and that a July 1947 launch turned up in Norway. But coauthor Gildenberg participated in all phases of Moby Dick, and notes that: (1) it was not secret; (2) it was run by various Air Force groups, not by NYU; (3) the Norway event was in 1950; and (4) Moby Dick was not active at Holloman until December 1951, four years after the "Roswell crash" (see Figure 4).

Conclusion

The Air Force Roswell report *Case Closed* provides several plausible explanations for many aspects of the Roswell UFO story—the bodies, the military retrieval convoys, the secretive autopsies of burned crash victims, the red-headed colonel, and more. Even the "archaeologists" who are often mentioned by UFO authors as present at crash recovery sites may finally have been explained. Randle and Schmitt found they could not be traced to practicing archaeologists in New Mexico at that time, but it turns out that they were probably just Holloman officers on the dummy launch/recovery teams. In that era, pith helmets and shorts were approved summer gear in the Southwest.

When you consider all the genetic, geological, astronomical, and climatological side branches leading to modern humans, a spaceship's dropping human-looking "aliens" all over the Southwest seems highly doubtful. That an alien culture millennia ahead of ours could do such a good imitation of the Keystone Cops—crashing into each other or into our balloons or planes with wild abandon—does seem rather strange. And if the sinister alien threat were real, the Air Force wouldn't have held an inept press briefing to blame the whole thing on dummies—instead, they would have briefed Congress to ask for more money for rockets, lasers, and satellites.

Furthermore, new witnesses are still coming forward with a decidedly non-alien spin on events of that time. One such example is former Roswell hospital supply officer Lorenzo Kent Kimball (Kimball 1997).

A Broadway show from the era of the Roswell event was called *Bells Are Ringing*, and one hopes they have rung for our readers. The best tune from that production makes for a great conclusion: "The party's over. . . . It's all over, my friends." However, the Myth Machine that is Roswell is now entirely

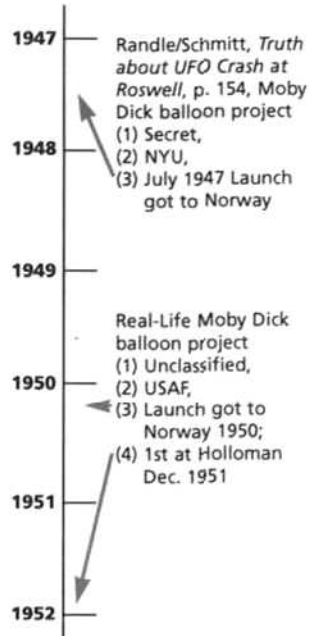


Figure 4. Project Moby Dick Time Lines (Randle and Schmitt's vs. Actual)

self-propelled. The need for facts as fuel has long since passed. The Roswell machine could be coasting on the debris of reality for a long time.

Note

1. Major Jesse Marcel, the Army Air Force official who claimed the debris recovered from a New Mexico ranch in 1947 was not of this earth, never mentioned any bodies. Neither did other principals, such as Marcel's son, rancher Mac Brazel and his family, or Lt. Col. Cavitt. For a detailed discussion of the recovery of the debris, see Korff 1997.

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