A Burr in Boeing’s Side

John Tirpak’s article, “The Tanker Answer” [June, p. 40], is an interesting attempt to put together a very complex and often convoluted history of the Air Force tanker procurement. I was especially struck by EADS North America’s Chairman Ralph Crosby’s point about how competition worked to the advantage of the Air Force. His comments raise two issues.

To begin, his data for the lease in 2002 are widely off the mark. They include the price of the aircraft, which Ralph’s staff could not have known since it has been held very close for years, plus some wild assumptions about the financing of the acquisition. The facts are that the Air Force obtained a negotiated deal for a firm fixed price of $126.5 million per aircraft in 2004 dollars for 100 aircraft, leased or bought. The Air Force paid for no development. It was to pay Boeing only after the plane arrived and passed acceptance inspection. And a lease could be converted into a buy at any time before, at, or after delivery without any penalty. The current contract for 18 planes will average about $195 million, according to press reports. This price may include some of the $4 billion to be paid to Boeing for development of the same aircraft offered in 2002 (where the firm carried all the development costs), but with some fancy options added. And the numbers ignore the fact that the US now will have to borrow all the monies to buy these aircraft, but the interest charges are not attributed to this new program. In 2002, the US was in surplus, and any leases or buys of tankers were predicated on current revenues. There is only hope that aircraft No. 19 and beyond will be less expensive.

There is a second point that needs to be made, and that is that the USAF owes Ralph Crosby a debt of gratitude. In 2002, when I met with their executives, Airbus simply was not ready for any competition. Their boom design and test were seven or eight years away. When Ralph arrived, he took a nonexistent program and drove it to one that was innovative, attractive, and almost beat the putative incumbent. Any price shaving between the first and second competitions on the part of Boeing should be attributed to Ralph’s focus, drive, and unwavering commitment to succeed. He may have lost a competition to replace aging KC-135s, but he directly caused reductions in Boeing’s offering, thereby saving the Air Force millions, and in my opinion, has put on the table a terrific offer for a very solid KC-10 replacement. Were the DOD a market company, it would lock in the price, and buy an option for 100-plus KC-45s from EADS with delivery at some time in the future. But even if we don’t buy any of these planes soon (and a shame since competition works even better when substitutes are built concurrently), Ralph and his colleagues in EADS and his earlier partner, Northrop Grumman, have proven that any monopoly is reluctant to reduce price unless it fears a strong competitor. He deserves a genuine “Well done!” from us all.

James G. Roche, 20th Secretary of the Air Force
Annapolis, Md.

Maybe We’ll Get There First

John T. Correll’s article, “USAF and the UFOs,” June 2011 [p. 68], revisited the fascinating subject of UFOs. As usual, John’s articles are well-researched and well-written. I’m sure someone in Hollywood will love the article because it stimulates interest, which is good for their business. But their business is entertainment—not truth!

Unfortunately, the article doesn’t explore any new ground, focusing instead on material that’s been rehashed repeatedly over the past 60 years. Critics, not John, always drag out Air Force Project Blue Book, and restate the tired old thesis that the US has evidence of alien visits, about which government officials consistently lie. Can you even imagine how many people would have to be involved in such a massive cover-up, or for what reasons they would do so? It never seems to matter much that there is little believable evidence to support these themes.

Think about it. Everywhere we go we leave a mountain of debris: a flag planted on the moon, a lunar land rover still sitting there, tons of equipment left behind, exploratory probes on Mars and other planets, satellites crashed on the surface of other heavenly bodies. It would be impossible for us to deny we had been to space.

On the other hand, with more than 12,000 UFO sightings in the last 100 years, we have no credible evidence of any alien visitors to Earth. Is it possible they left nothing behind on any of their trips? Even if that were plausible, you would think that in 12,000 sightings someone with a still or video camera would capture a really good photograph or film of these visitors, instead of the blurred pictures that are occasionally published and are so easily faked.

As for me, I was the UFO focal point at Stewart AFB, N.Y., in the 1960s, and I received lots of reported sightings, which Air Force officers investigated. None of them proved to be fruitful. Even so, I believe in space travel and expect one day we will send an expeditionary shuttle to some distant planet. But like the late Carl Sagan, until I see some credible hard evidence to the contrary, I am not yet ready to believe that aliens are visiting Earth—despite what well meaning pseudo scientists and Hollywood producers claim.

Perhaps alien artifacts have altered the course of 20th century history, perhaps extraterrestrial visitors are studying our civilization from an intergalactic vantage point that obscures our ability to detect them in any detail, or perhaps entrepreneurs have just tapped into our curiosity and fertile imaginations with very profitable entertainment ventures. After all, UFOs offer an exciting theatrical premise for a television series.

One day, however, we may truly have alien visitors here, if we don’t visit them on their planet first.

Lt. Col. Donald L. Gilleland, USAF (Ret.)
Melbourne, Fla.
I was stationed with the 4203rd Photo Technical Squadron at Bolling Field when I first was interviewed by an officer from the Pentagon about my own ideas concerning UFOs and atomic energy. That was about 1948. Our squadron was tasked to process photography from Operations Sandstone and Dick Tracy. Anyone related to reconnaissance during that time of the new Strategic Air Command and the CIA was a target for speculation.

Dick Tracy was all of the aerial film that the Germans had exposed over the Soviet Union and captured in Berlin on orders from General Eisenhower, and Sandstone was the testing of nuclear weapons near Eniwetok Atoll. We held the future in our hands because this was material for making target charts and blowing things up. That Pentagon officer was a major who was recalled for that specific purpose: getting information about flying saucers. Who better to ask than people in the reconnaissance business? Me? I knew nothing, but had an open mind.

As a participating member in the Dick Tracy, Operation Genetrix, the U-2 program, the SR-71, Corona, lunar landings, and so on, I never once saw anything that suggested any recent landings, and so on, I never once saw when all of the books and articles that go back to his house, then to the Army two crash sites.

"USAF and the Ufos" is, in my words, another in a long line of Peter Jennings-style red-herring articles. I can tell this is simply written to try and shake the last bits of respect from all of the solid work done by many UFO researchers over the last 60 years-plus. I have followed and studied hundreds of reports on the UFO/ET field for 40­plus years. I have fol­lowed reports of Project Blue Book and the move of its records to the Air Force archives at Maxwell AFB, Ala. A few years later, while attending the University of Den­ver, I wrote my master’s degree thesis on “The UFO Phenomenon: A Study in Public Relations.”

"USAF and the UFOs" brought back memories. As the Air Force spokesman on UFOs at the Pentagon from 1967 to 1969, I wrote the Dec. 17, 1969, news release announcing the close of Project Blue Book and the move of its records to the Air Force archives at Maxwell AFB, Ala. A few years later, while attending the University of Denver, I wrote my master’s degree thesis on “The UFO Phenomenon: A Study in Public Relations.”

Why Correll, a former Air Force public affairs officer, skirted the PR aspects of the UFO phenomenon is puzzling. The Air Force was its own worst enemy, for the story of the Air Force and UFOs is essentially a tale of a credibility gap wider than the Grand Canyon.

"USAF and the UFOs" mentioned the possibility of explaining all sightings. The Air Force mistakenly viewed the unexplained cases as a challenge to its capability. Why should the Air Force prove that flying saucers don’t exist? A universal negative is impossible to prove. Why weren’t advocates of extraterrestrial UFOs made to prove that they do exist? The late Phil Klass, whom Correll mentions (p. 70) as a person of UFO debunker, had a standing offer of $50,000 to anyone who could provide evidence to the National Academy of Sciences that UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin. Needless to say, Klass kept his money. (Klass gave me a plaque upon my retirement, which I still have. It reads: "UFOs Are Real. The Air Force Doesn’t Exist!")

In the final analysis, it was the Air Force’s unwillingness to be open and frank with the press and public about UFOs that caused the service more than 20 years of grief.

Tom Vance
Redwood City, Calif.

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