

HISTORY IN THE MAKING (APRIL FOOLS’)

by

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Officers’ billets, Andrews AFB, Prince George’s County, Maryland (eleven miles southeast of Washington D.C.).

December 15th 1961. 01:32 hours Eastern Standard Time.

On this day former SS colonel Adolf Eichmann is sentenced in a Jerusalem court to be hanged for war crimes against the Jewish people. His execution takes place shortly before midnight May 31st 1962

The phone rang insistently. A hand groped about in the dark for the handset after the eighth ring, followed by a man’s drowsy voice complaining down the lifted receiver in a southern drawl. “This had better be God calling.”

“I’m the next best thing, Colonel Cody,” a sardonic reply crackled over the line from the unknown other end.

“Who the hell is this? Is that you Gabreski? I’ll have your sorry arse busted down to airman and shipped off to-”

“This is *Lieutenant General* Robert Lee here, Cody, and if you don’t shut up and listen I’ll be busting your butt.”

Hubert ‘Hub’ Cody fumbled for the switch to the bedside lamp and sat up, rubbing the sleep from tired eyes. The dimly yellow lamplight revealed a staunch-faced forty-two year old, his blondish hair shorn in the regulation crew cut. Cody’s groggy mind rapidly cleared. What was the chief of Air Defense Command doing phoning him at...”It’s the middle of the night, sir,” he meekly protested after picking up his wristwatch from the bedside table and squinting at the ungodly hour.

“The interests of national security don’t keep regular hours. We have ourselves a situation, Colonel.”

“Begging your pardon, General, but frankly so do I. In nine hours I’m due on Capitol Hill to deliver a summary report to a special sitting of the senate oversight committee.”

“That will have to wait. The fox is back in the henhouse.”

Cody almost dropped the receiver. Never in his lifetime had he expected to hear that coded phrase. “Is this line secure?” was all he could gasp.

“Son, you are bunking down in a United States Air Force base on American soil. Unless the Ruskies have a secret microphone shoved up your backside, what is said between us stays safely confidential.”

“Those commie bastards did put up a bird in space years ahead of us. I wouldn’t put any form of eavesdropping past the Reds.”

“Sputnik was four years ago. We’ve put five of our own satellites in orbit since then, including last year’s CIA spy sat. The Ruskies are way behind us and have nothing to match CORONA.”

“They beat us to the punch putting the first man into space,” Cody further argued.

“And we put Shepard up there six months ago. Hell, you’re sounding un-American son! All this is beside the point. This telephone conversation is being protected by scrambler.”

Accepting his superior’s word, Cody let out a tremulous sigh. “Whereabouts?”

“New Mexico again,” Lee supplied, his tone steady and factual. “The intruder was picked up by one of the DEW line radar stations up on the Arctic Circle. Alaska Air Command scrambled Darts, but they couldn’t catch it and so turned back.”

The pilot in Cody was astounded. Convair’s delta winged ‘Deuce’ was a supersonic interceptor boasting a blistering 1,500 mph performance and packing a wallop in the form of four Super Falcon air-to-air missiles. Nothing on earth could outrun such a potent warplane!

“To cut a long chase short,” continued Lee, “Voodoos out from Hanscom Field were vectored on an interception course when the bogie swung over New England, apparently looping southwest. One of the fighter jocks from the Massachusetts 60th managed to get missile lock and shove a Falcon up its tailpipe. The craft then vanished in a fireball, presumably disintegrating midair.”

“Only it didn’t,” surmised Cody.

“Far from it,” validated Lee. “I received an anxious telephone call from the base commander at White Sands Missile Range. Shinkle reported his guys tracking a fast, erratically flying blip for a full five minutes before the contact disappeared off their radarscopes. They plotted its last known position at being directly over Alamogordo.”

Disconcerted by that snippet, Cody pondered, “New Mexico is one helluva jump from the eastern seaboard, sir. What makes you think it was the same bogie?”

“Radar cross-sections matched,” said the general. “The recovery team made a positive verification at the crash site from hull markings reported by the intercept pilots.”

“Where exactly did it go down?”

“Nowhere near Roswell this time,” revealed Lee, relief edging his tone of concern. “Over three hundred miles northwest of that shithole actually, out near Farmington. Containment proved much easier this time around. A cleanup crew was dispatched from Los Alamos as soon as confirmation of its touchdown came through.”

“I trust the cover story being circulated is better than the weather balloon garbage put out by the 509th’s press officer after the ‘47 incident. The public barely swallowed that lie.”

“A bit more imagination has gone into making this one plausible. The official line is that a SAC Hustler flying on a training mission took a nosedive into the desert. We “leaked” that it happened to be carrying a B43 nuclear bomb load, necessitating the alert and massive security clampdown.”

Cody silently approved. The transonic B-58 bomber, another racehorse from Convair’s prodigious stable, could explain away the cross-country flybys, allaying the hysteria of sky watching Americans on the lookout for flying saucers in recent years.

“I trust the wreckage has already been recovered, sir.”

“It’s being trucked to Kirtland even as we speak.”

“The eggheads at the Special Weapons Centre will want to cut up that quick smart.”

“They won’t get the chance. The second it arrives it’ll be airlifted to Nellis and from there choppered out to the bunker at Papoose Lake. Our own techs will dissect it.”

“Am I to assume that I’ll be flying out to evaluate the wreck?”

“It’s never wise to make assumptions, Cody. There’s a Herk attached to the 1254th Air Transport Wing leaving Andrews for Groom Lake at 0500 hours. Be on it.”

“Sir, the oversight committee won’t be pleased when I don’t show.”

Lee sighed. “I’ll call in some favors and have General White reschedule it.”

Cody was impressed. Friends in high places did not come any loftier than the United States Air Force Chief of Staff.

“I don’t mean to question your authority, sir, but since I’m only going to be inspecting fresh wreckage of the type we already have in storage, can’t that wait until I’ve finished delivering my report?”

“Bodies were recovered also.”

“We’ve long had those on ice too, General.”

“But we’ve never salvaged a live one before.”

Thankful he was sitting down Cody sagged on his bunk. This was a revelation!

“I’m assigning you the initial interrogation of the spaceman. Your job is to find out where he’s from and the purpose of his flybys. Later on we’ll persuade him to show us how his technology works.” Lee paused, weighing up his next words. “Use any means necessary, Hub. Our nation’s security is at stake. If we can’t stop incursions by alien craft, how are we to protect this country against the Ruskies?”

“I understand completely, sir. You can count on me to get results.”

“That’s why you’re given the dirty jobs. You have your orders, Colonel. Carry them out.”

‘Yessir, General.’

The line clicked into silence, leaving Cody alone with his swirling thoughts. Too keyed up to go back to sleep, he replaced the handset and perched on the side of his bed in contemplation. Trading Washington snow for Nevada rain would rob him of a white Christmas, not that he celebrated the holidays. His only family was a spinster sister in Little Rock he had not telephoned in years.

Shivering, he pulled the coarse grey service blanket off the bed up around his shoulders. The tremors afflicting his hands, unrelated to the cold of winter or the thrilling news, went unnoticed.

An oddball mix of anxiety and expectancy, he normally experienced this degree of excitement only when combat flying. Cody was a decorated veteran of two bloody conflicts. Flying Army Air Force bomber escort missions over Occupied Europe during World War II in piston engined Mustangs, seven years later he graduated to piloting Sabre fighter jets over Korea.

His interwar years had hardly been unexciting. In the peacetime lull Cody had become a coveted Air Force test pilot stationed at Wright-Patterson, the Ohio base he again called home after accepting his current posting with ATIC. The man’s reputation as a no-nonsense, fearless son-of-a-bitch was well deserved, earning him a cluster of multicoloured chest ribbons and the enmity of his colleagues.

This made him a formidable investigator for the USAF Air Technical Intelligence Center, officially tasked with debunking Soviet aerospace technology but in fact fulfilling an even more covert role.

Colonel Hub Cody strapped on his watch and unzipped the shaving kit in his footlocker. In less than three and a half hours he would be winging his way westward to what was fast becoming the securest military facility in America in order to chat with a being from outer space.

“I’m gonna need coffee first,” he decided.

*Nellis AFB, Nevada (eight miles northeast of Las Vegas).
December 16th 1961: 09:04 hours Pacific Standard Time.
On this day in Venezuela, JFK begins his presidential tour of Latin America.*

Seven hours of deafening engine noise and bone-shuddering turbulence seated uncomfortably in the cold, cavernous bowels of a C-130 transport with nothing for company but a freight pallet and muddy jeep did nothing to curb Cody's anticipation. Barely waiting for the loading ramp door to lower he stepped eagerly from the Hercules' cargo hold tan briefcase in hand, sloppily acknowledging salutes from the ground crew.

Feeling stupidly conspicuous out on the windy tarmac dressed in Air Force blues beneath his overcoat when surrounding personnel worked in drabber fatigues, the colonel quickstepped to a parked jeep. The faceless officer waiting alongside it crisply saluted Hub before smiling and extending his gloved hand. "Welcome back to Watertown, Colonel Cody," he said, using the informal title that christened Groom Lake base and a jab at the Nevada aridness.

Cody returned the handshake. "Thanks...?"

"Mitchum, sir." The captain tapped a woollen finger on the nametag stitched on the left breast of his thick olive jacket.

"That's right. Sorry, I'm not very good with names."

"It's been a while since you last visited us, sir."

"Two years." Hub seldom forgot dates or places. Nellis remained strong in his memory as the station where he trained to fly the F-86 for his combat tour in the Korean War.

"The base commander extends his courtesies, sir. He regrets that duties prevent him from greeting you personally and hopes that you understand."

"Pleasantries often take second place to duty," Hub remarked. "Tell me, how is ole what's-his-name?"

"Gone, sir. Colonel Holbury recently assumed command."

"Which explains why he's too busy to meet me." An air of petulance marred Hub's observation. It was an irrational reaction on his part. He had concerns of greater importance than being snubbed by a peer. "I'm anxious to get to Papoose, Captain."

"There's a Choctaw waiting on the pad to fly you out there, sir. If you'd like to get in, I'll drive you to it." Mitchum climbed behind the wheel of the covered jeep as Cody took the passenger seat, clutching the battered briefcase to his chest.

Motoring down the taxiway toward the main base area, Cody remarked on the noticeable increase in hangars.

"Watertown's undergoing a major expansion," explained Mitchum. "Started last year with the extension of the main runway by another three thousand feet. We're getting surplus Navy hangars in addition to housing units."

"How many personnel now?"

"Up around the thousand mark."

"I take it all this expansion is due to the A-12 programme."

Mitchum gave Cody a sly glance, understanding the superior officer held a higher security clearance but audaciously assessing him anyway. "Special storage tanks for the JP-7 fuel are being built at south base. It's being dubbed 'Tank Farm'. Flight testing is scheduled to begin in a few months."

Cody did not take exception to the captain's distrust. OXCART was a highly classified CIA project to develop in utmost secrecy the world's first Mach 3 strategic reconnaissance aircraft, and here they were chatting about it as casually as they would discuss the weather.

"Sir, mind if I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

“What’s over the hill?” Mitchum used the base lingo for the Papoose range.

“Captain, did you hear what happened to the last man who asked that question?”

“Nope, can’t say that I did.”

“My point exactly.”

Mitchum shot Cody a fearful look before shutting up for the rest of the drive. Hanging a right into the main thoroughfare, he chauffeured Cody to a temporary helipad at the northern corner of the expanding complex and the colonel was soon lifting into the squally afternoon sky aboard a whirring H-43. The grateful captain was prudently left behind.

Nellis played out beneath the lumbering chopper as unremarkable outbuildings situated near the southwestern shore of Groom Dry Lake, a three-mile wide alkali lakebed serving the Air Force as an unprepared landing strip bordered by the Groom mountain range. Flying slowly south, the elderly Choctaw headed low across the parched landscape, the unadventurous pilot keeping Papoose Mountain and the surrounding foothills firmly on his right.

Cody scarcely had time to collect his racing thoughts before the ten-minute flight was over. Banking west, the chopper rounded the extreme southern end of the mountain range and set down on a cleared patch of desert at the foot of an innocuous cliff three-quarters of a mile long.

Disembarking, Cody was assailed by a wintry shower dispelling the residual high desert heat. Papoose Lake sprawled away on his left, as waterless and uninviting as its larger counterpart fifteen miles to the north. He had barely taken two steps beyond the chopper’s umbrella when the clamour of grinding metal rent the rainy air. A hole in the cliffside was opening up!

The sloping roller door, one of half a dozen entrances to individual hangars, was perfectly camouflaged to blend in with the desertscape. Undetectable from the air and nigh on invisible at ground level, the hollowed cliff disguised America’s greatest secrets.

Met by a pinch-faced major flanked by rifle-toting, poncho-wearing Air Police, Cody dispensed with formalities and marched through spattering raindrops into the seventy-foot wide doorway, forcing the others to perform a hasty turnabout.

“What’s the condition of the prisoner?” Hub demanded without preamble. Ranking personnel would be aware of his orders.

“Alive and unwell, sir,” the major reported, hurrying to keep pace with Cody. “Dr Grainger is with him now.”

“You’ve confirmed it’s male?”

“Bit hard not to, Colonel. He has a pecker the size of a moose. I have film and sound technicians standing by to document the cross-examination.”

“They can wait. This first session is an informal chat to determine exactly what we are dealing with before proceeding.”

Cody strode unerringly into a prefabricated building. Blasted out of the bedrock, this particular hangar served as medical studies centre. Adjacent hangars housed various reverse engineering projects, including the detailed examination of saucer wreckage from the most recent UFO crashes.

Wending his way through sterile corridors, the sickly sweet aroma of disinfectant cloying his nostrils, the sudden heat stifling, Hub stopped outside a windowed door with AUTOPSY ROOM chillingly stencilled in red lettering on the frosted glass. Armed guards rigidly framed the doorway. Peeling off his leather gloves and stuffing them in his coat pocket, Cody entered and commanded the attention of those in the room.

A masked, white-gowned nurse ventured over to assist the colonel in donning attire to match hers, removing his cap, coat, and case. Contamination protocols had to be observed.

Suitably garbed in medical clobber, Cody pushed open the double doors leading into the adjoining examination room.

The pasty-skinned alien, covered from the waist down by a green surgical sheet, reclined on an autopsy table attended by a single white-robed figure hovering over him like a fretful angel. When the preoccupied hospital worker failed to notice him, Cody cleared his throat to announce his presence.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’ve brought a cold into my sickbay,” the man said without looking up.

“Dr Grainger, this is a morgue.”

“Only because you lot kept bringing me dead specimens,” the doctor carped. “As this fellow is breathing, it has become an infirmary.”

“Keep him that way for my interrogation,” Cody commanded.

Leaving his patient’s bedside, Grainger squared off against Hub. Only his unfriendly grey eyes were visible on his masked face, but they flared with indignation. “Colonel Cody, is it? Major Cole informed you were flying in from Washington. Let’s get one thing straight, *sir*. As a mere captain, you outrank me. But as Chief Medical Officer of this facility I say when and if my patient is fit for questioning.”

Faced with German and Chinese foes in the past deadlier than this upstart hiding behind his gown and credentials, Cody inflected contempt into his curt response. “No, doctor, I’m afraid you don’t. Not when the nation’s security is at stake. What’s the medical status of the spaceman?”

Hesitating, deciding whether to continue this pissing contest, Grainger backtracked by grabbing the chart from the end of the bed and making a show of unhurriedly perusing its pages.

“Other than a scalp laceration which we cleaned up and stitched, he came in largely uninjured,” he revealed with deliberate slowness. “There’s no physical evidence of a depressed or basal skull fracture. X-rays show no epidural, subdural, or intracerebral haematomas.”

“Cut the medical jargon. In English, Grainger.” Hub imagined the doctor smiling smugly behind his mask.

“He’s not bleeding into the brain.”

“So what’s your diagnosis?”

“Concussion.”

“That’s a surprisingly minor injury for surviving the trauma of a major air crash.”

“When he was brought in, I was told the recovery team had removed him from some sort of escape capsule found half a mile east of the main crash site. That ejection spared him fatal injuries.”

A detailed post-crash report had yet to be compiled and given to Cody, leaving him to work in the dark. Gazing upon the alien sickbed, he asked, “When will he be conscious?”

“I sedated him earlier to prevent him thrashing about. The wealth of information previous autopsies yielded has been invaluable in diagnosing and treating him. Their physiology is remarkably similar to ours, identical in many respects in terms of organs and blood composition. Minor skeletal differences aside, I’d say they are uncannily humanlike.”

“We’re dealing with a being from outer space,” Cody reminded Grainger, scrutinising the reposed extraterrestrial. A live specimen was more startling than studying crash scene photographs or cursorily examining refrigerated corpses.

Bald and bandaged, his overlarge head shrank the babyish, snub-nosed face, exacerbating his infantile appearance. A jaw line devoid of a chin cupped a lipless mouth downturned in relaxation. His hands, lying at his sides, were dainty and elegantly fingered, like a woman’s.

The feet were similarly small and feminine. But the bulge in the sheet around the groin was unmistakably mannish.

“Has he spoken?”

“Nothing intelligible,” revealed Grainger. “That has less to do with whatever alien lingo he communicates in and more with his dazed state. Do we have a linguist on the base?”

“There are decipherers on hand.”

“Making sense of an extraterrestrial language will be unlike decrypting a code. It’ll be more complex for starters.”

“Concern yourself with making the spaceman lucid for now. Let me worry about translating the interview. Revive him.”

“He’s resting.”

“*Wake him*, Captain. That’s an order,” Cody insisted, resorting to the chain of command.

Grumbling, the doctor prepared a syringe from a tray of medical paraphernalia on hand and injected the sleeping alien’s forearm with a stimulant.

“Get out,” Cody further ordered him.

“I must protest, Colonel!”

“Fine, but do it from outside this room. On your way out get the nurse to bring me my case and a cup of joe – black, four sugars.” Cody needed his own stimulant.

The colonel tore off his mask and gown. He would meet this man from the stars proudly in uniform as an officer of the United States Air Force. Settling in the chair at the alien’s bedside, returned briefcase on his lap, Cody impatiently waited for Earth’s grounded visitor to recover. Unfastening the buckles holding tight the straps down the front of his scuffed luggage, he removed a portable dictation machine and set that on his knees instead, placing the opened case down on the polished linoleum floor. The short battery life of Dictaphone’s boxy ‘Travel-Master’ presented no inconvenience; Hub merely wanted to record a sample of the meaningless alien speech that would predictably keep their exchange brief. He drained his mug of bracing coffee before the spaceman finally stirred.

“Ooh, who parked the sky-bus on my head,” the alien groaned.

Cody nearly fell out of his chair. “You’re speaking English!”

“Course I am, Einstein. It’s the universal language.”

“English is the general speech of the universe?”

“In my world it is.” Opening his huge amber eyes, the alien blearily absorbed his stark surrounds. “When am I?”

“I’ll ask the questions, stranger. Don’t you mean *where* are you?”

Nervously eyeing the uniformed man sitting not two feet from him, the alien changed his tune. “You look military.”

Setting his recorder on the lino, Hub rose and jerked his rumpled tunic straight. “Colonel H. Cody, United States Air Force.” Unprepared for this historic moment, he lamely mumbled, “Er, welcome to Earth. And you are?”

“In a whole heap of trouble,” the spaceman moaned.

“Have you a name?”

“Lucas.”

“That’s not a very alien handle.”

“What’s your first name?”

“Hubert.”

“And you criticise mine.”

“Alright, Lucas, where do you hail from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me. Do you come from local space?”

“Definitely.”

“What do your people call themselves?”

“Smart.”

Cody persisted. “What race do you belong to, wise guy?”

Lucas clammed up.

“For what purpose does your kind visit Earth? We have documented hundreds of sightings over the last ten years. Thirteen crash landings within United States borders alone enabled us to recover dozens of bodies. The evidence is irrefutable.”

“Yet you keep it out of the public eye.”

“We protect America’s citizenry.”

“From themselves?”

“From hysteria.” Cody narrowed his green eyes. “You’ve obviously been studying us for at least a decade. I’m guessing far longer than that.”

“Time has no relevance for us,” Lucas stated.

“Your craft was observed snooping over sensitive military installations. Are you in league with the Soviet Union, conducting surveillance missions for the Ruskiies?”

Musical laughter escaped Lucas’s slit of a mouth. “Paranoia is indeed rife in this period.”

“Do you deny violating United States airspace?”

“I’ll admit to sightseeing. Will you take responsibility for firing upon an unarmed ship?”

“Analysis of previously wrecked craft turned up no recognisable weaponry. That’s not to say armaments unfamiliar to our experts won’t be found aboard the remains of your spaceship.”

“We were a civilian vessel,” contended Lucas, propping his scrawny childlike body up on his elbows.

Seeing that this line of questioning was getting nowhere, Cody changed tack. Good investigators tried every avenue. “You punched out from your damaged craft before it crashed. That implies you were a member of the flight crew, possibly the pilot himself.”

Lucas shook his outsized head. “Navigator, and a lousy one at that.”

“I was a wartime pilot myself,” Cody said, hoping a bond might form with the alien, thereby loosening his reluctant tongue. “How do your craft operate?”

“Like your fossil fuelled automobiles,” Lucas wisecracked. “You put the gas in, you depress the accelerator, and then off you go.”

“The propulsion system is beyond human understanding.”

‘Current comprehension,’ Lucas cryptically remarked.

Cody about-faced, playing hardball now. “You will cooperate, willingly or forcibly,” he asserted. “I urge willingness on your part. The alternative is...unpleasant.”

“Intimidation cheapens you, Colonel. Will you threaten me with dissection? I think not. You would’ve carved up enough of my fellow travellers unlucky to die in crashes to see what makes us tick. Notice any outstanding peculiarities, or should I say, unnerving similarity?”

Focused on his bullying, Cody made the observation, ‘Our drugs work on your body. I’m told sodium pentathol is an effective truth serum. If that fails, there are more aggressive non-lethal methods of persuasion. Shock treatment, for one.’ His chiselled face softened slightly, appealing to the alien’s carefully veiled intellect. ‘Let me spell it out for you, Lucas. I’m the only friend you’ve got. You are marooned far from home on a foreign world.’

“Not entirely foreign.” Lucas chuckled in that maddening manner again.

“Because you’ve visited us before.”

“Cos I was born here.”

Cody let out a shocked breath. “That’s not possible. Y-You’re a spaceman, from outer space.”

“*Au contraire*, Hubert,” refuted Lucas. “I am an Earthman, same as you. But a later model. Shit, you must be cheesed off. And it’s not even April Fools’.” He glanced around the anonymous, windowless room. “What is this place? Where am I being held?”

Astonishment caused Cody to blab, “S4.”

“Ah, Area 51.”

“That’s the government designation for the old Nevada Test Site. It’s classified. How could you possibly know that?”

“If I told you that I’d cause further contamination.”

“Are you contagious?” Cody wished he had not been so hasty in removing his surgical mask. What if this lunatic alien carried an infectious brain disease?

“Nah, guilty of polluting the timeline. Aw, what the hell. Our jaunts to the past have already corrupted history. You think I’m alien!”

“For crying out loud, what are you on about?”

“It’s good that you’re seated, Cody, cos this’ll be a real knockout. I’m from Earth’s future.”

The weirdness of it all suddenly added up. Farfetched as the claim was, it made sense. UFOs vanishing off radarscopes were not zooming up into space. They were escaping forwards in time!

Cody’s hands were trembling noticeably. “What year are you from?” His voice sounded tiny and insignificant, losing its authority.

“Are you really prepared for the answer to that?”

“I doubt I could ever be.”

“Then we’ll leave it a blank. I wouldn’t want to blow your mind.”

“But time travel is a science fiction tool, a factual impossibility.”

“In your time, this time, certainly,” Lucas conceded. “In mine it’s a reality and the province of the very wealthy. The rich pay handsomely for sightseeing jaunts to holoshoot dinosaurs and the pyramids, or witness the signing of the Magna Charta. The tour company I crew for is called Blasts to the Past. Catchy handle, don’t you think?”

“Let me get this straight, hotshot. You fly *tourists* back in time.”

“Flew. Safe bet to say my flying days are over.”

“Don’t you conduct scientific expeditions too? Direct observation of history must make for fascinating research.”

“But not as profitable as playing chauffeur to fare paying passengers. In my century money still talks loudest and scientists are stingy payers.” Lucas watched the colonel intently, seeing his mind ticking over. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“You can read my mind?”

“I study human nature. You soldiering types are so transparent. You’re contemplating the military applications for unlimited time travel: winning wars otherwise lost. Think again, flyboy. History is written in stone and unalterable. We can observe times gone by only.”

“But you complained of corrupting history already.”

Lucas shrugged his bony shoulders. “You got me there, Hubert. I can’t pull the wool over your eyes.

“I shouldn’t be divulging this, but excursions back from the future do impact on historical events, only not to the degree you envisage. Our tours scratch the surface of time without unduly changing the face of it. View it as a ripple on a lake: the surface tension is temporarily marred, but the main body of water remains unaffected. History can be wrinkled, never permanently changed.”

Distrust kept Cody from taking the future man’s word at face value. Claims this revelational required thorough investigation. The implications of the technology alone

warranted careful scrutiny. “You will explain in great detail the workings of your craft to air force technicians.”

“I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t cooperate.”

“It’s beyond me. Driving a hover car doesn’t make you a mechanic.”

“All aircrew know the basics of the craft they fly in.”

“There wouldn’t be enough of my ship left to reconstruct anyhow.”

“I like jigsaw puzzles.”

Lucas chuckled.

“Something funny?”

“I’ll say. A tour bus driven back in time has added to the UFOlogy rampant in this decade.” Eyeing Cody with derision, he speculated, “You’ve gotta be assigned to Project Blue Book.”

The colonel refused point blank to comment.

The saucer crash of 1947 at Roswell, New Mexico, prompted Air Materiel Command to conduct preliminary studies of flying disc reports. Project Sign came into being late that same year and continued into early 1949. Its findings were radical, proposing that UFOs were indeed interplanetary spacecraft. Fearful of fostering paranoia and creating nationwide panic, the Air Force embarked on a mission of disinformation. Project Grudge became the succeeding investigative body and manipulated to explain every single case on its books by conventional means: UFOs were nothing more exotic than misidentified aircraft, weather balloons, unusual cloud formations, or the planet Venus. Witnesses themselves had their mental health thrown into doubt, discrediting crucial firsthand reports. By the end of 1949 Grudge had completed laying its smokescreen and was officially terminated. But in 1952 it had been reincarnated in its present guise as Project Blue Book to allay public fears again by whitewashing the damning truth that Man was not alone in the universe.

The United States government remained paranoid about what it designated HFOs: Hostile Flying Objects. Petrified that the Soviets might lay their Red hands on alien technologies, congressionally approved funds were cunningly diverted to provide secret Air Force projects with the resources and manpower needed to counter the threat. Colonel Cody was unofficially tasked with securing that funding.

“You smoke Hubert? You must do. In your day and age it was the fashionable trend. I’m dying for a cigarette.”

Cody reached down into his briefcase. Hesitant, he pulled out a distinctive red and white packet, tossing it to Lucas. “Smoking a big habit in the future?”

“Illicitly. The authorities outlawed the practice some time ago, declaring it addictive and socially deplorable. Much like alcohol and sex. Thank god for free enterprise and the black market.” Lucas turned the cigarette packet over in his girlie hands, examining it minutely. “A Marlboro Man, huh? I’ve only seen examples of this in museums. This is 1960 right?”

“It’s ‘61, actually. As navigator on a time travelling craft, you should know precisely when it is.”

“That’s what a nav-computer’s for. I only push the buttons. Something a trained monkey could do.”

Aware that the American space programme had launched monkeys atop German-based V-2 rocketry since 1948, culminating in placing chimpanzees into orbit this very year to spearhead man’s entry into the cosmos, Cody found Lucas’s offhand remark perturbing. Were apes centuries from now smarter than humans?

“If memory serves me right, Hubert, in about three years time the government will print warning labels on cigarette packaging proclaiming that ‘smoking may be hazardous to your health’.”

“Is it?”

“Only if you inhale the smoke.”

“What is the future like?”

“Boring. Sterile. That’s why we make flights into the past. Livelier times.” Popping a cigarette into his thin mouth, Lucas mumbled, “Got a light?”

Reaching into his case again, Cody pulled out the Colt .45 he always carried around. Rumours that the standard service issue pistol was to be phased out next year in favour a smaller calibre revolver would not make him swap. Closing the lid, he pointed his preferred gun fearlessly at Lucas’s face.

“One of those quaint novelty lighters. I wasn’t aware they made them this big in the mid twentieth century. In my time the pieces in private collections are all derringer sized.”

Frowning at the reference, Cody pulled the trigger. Lucas never saw it coming; for all his evolutionary advancement, the man from the far-flung future was incredibly naive. The slug penetrated the frontal bone region of his enlarged skull off-centre, boring through the elevated brain and exiting messily as it punched a hole wide enough to drive a bus through out the back of Lucas’s cranium, familiarly red blood splattering everywhere. Dead before his exploded head touched the pillow, grey matter dripped down the nape of the lolling chrononaut’s neck, proving that in this case time did not heal all wounds.

At the sharp report of the gunshot the two sentries burst into the reinstated autopsy room, M1 carbines lifted at the ready. Sighting the executed spaceman, brains blown out of his grotesque head, the foremost guard dropped his rifle and fell to his hands and knees, gagging.

Springing off his seat, waving his smoking pistol at the retching man’s offside, Cody bawled, “Secure this room, Airman! Nobody gets in without my say-so.”

Reacting too slowly to deny Grainger entry, the guard barred his nurse from following, using the butt of his rifle to usher her out.

Rushing to the stricken alien, feeling for a pulse already dimming, the mortified physician decried, “What have you done!”

“Defended myself, doctor. The alien became agitated, hostile. I took the necessary action to counter his threatening behavior.”

“By shooting him in the head? We’re talking about a man from another planet, an ambassador come down from outer space. Didn’t simply knocking him out occur to you?”

Returning the discharged gun to his case, Cody clicked the top catches shut. “He began fooling with my mind,” he fibbed, “trying to control my thoughts, bend my will to his own. You’d do well to lower your tone with me, Captain. I am your superior officer. Or need I have you relieved of duty?”

Suitably cowed, Grainger muttered, “But why kill him?”

Constrained by the doctor’s lower security clearance from revealing all, Hub kept close to his chest the fact that the world must never learn the truth behind the ‘alien’s’ existence. Viability of USAF Black Projects as counterthrusts to the Red Menace relied on presidential perception that acquisition of otherworldly gadgetry remained utmost priority to both superpowers. Lucas’s ordinariness would simply be too upsetting, providing the hardliners opposed to Black Ops with the perfect excuse: if UFOs were of earthly origin, the impetus to investigate them and, as a response, spend millions of taxpayer dollars developing revolutionary military hardware would dry up.

Colonel Hubert Cody was not prepared to let such shortsightedness come about. Martyring Lucas as a belligerent spaceman served as the perfect solution, guaranteeing continued funding for the strategically vital YF-12A strike fighter variant of the OXCART program. And there was his personal disappointment to assuage.

Hub’s wartime experiences sparked his initial interest in offworld craft, stemming directly from encountering the mysterious ‘foo fighters’ over the Rhineland in the closing stages of

the Second World War. Convinced that the balls of fiery light, often witnessed in formation shadowing or punching through Allied bomber streams, were of unearthly origin, the intrigued pilot in Cody had been grossly letdown when made privy to the classified explanation years later when operating as an undercover UFO investigator: the *feuerball* was Nazi science at its most inventiveness, the jet-engined metal spheres designed to disrupt the electrical systems of enemy planes and men. Luckily for the Allies, the unimaginably futuristic weapon proved too troublesome to deploy en masse, its firing mechanism too temperamental to work effectively.

But the fireball was proven the product of human ingenuity, not alien technology. Back then, like now, the world at large was better off not knowing the truth. Society needed mysteries to ponder. How else could a government control its populace other than feeding it bullshit?

Huddled over his murdered patient, Grainger made Cody the promise, “Washington will learn the truth of what transpired here.”

“I alone will inform the Pentagon,” decided the colonel, already finalising the alien-attacked-me lie in his mind to dish out to his superiors. *Thank Christ I forgot to press the record button on my Dictaphone. One less mistake for me to erase.* Headed out of the morgue, Cody halted in the doorway, looking back at the angered doctor uselessly balling his hands into fists.

Smiling superciliously, Hub reminded the captain to uphold his oath of service to the Air Force of the United States. “Tell nobody off-base what occurred today. If you blab, a court martial will be your least punishment. The Men in Black will vigorously see to that.

“Remember, Doc: what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”