

LIGHTS IN THE SKY: THE UTAH AIRSHIP MYSTERY, 1917-1918

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The story has a familiar ring. Reports come in of strange lights seen in the night skies of the American West. The mystery lights seem attached to invisible aircraft which move in inexplicable ways for unknown purposes. At first, authorities dismiss the reports as hoaxes and the work of overactive imaginations. They persist and a curious government agent decides to look into the matter. He is drawn into the intrigues of a cultish group and its charismatic leader who claims to have access to advanced technology of mysterious and, perhaps, otherworldly origin. Fearing the original investigator had lost his objectivity, or his mind, other agents intervene and initiate surveillance, interrogation and arrests culminating in a declaration of insanity for the principal suspects. In the end, though, nothing is truly resolved and the lights remain a mystery.

The outline of an *X-Files* episode? No, the “Utah Airship Mystery,” for lack of a better name, is a forgotten episode in the history of Unidentified Flying Objects over the USA. Besides a smattering of articles in the local press, the only real record of the case

lies in the “Old German” files of the Bureau of Investigation, later the FBI. This file, #8000-136072, even lacks a distinctive title; it is simply labeled “Various” like hundreds of others. The file runs to more than four hundred pages, and besides mysterious flying machines and miraculous anti-gravity devices, it records allegations of German spying, the intrigues of assorted Government agents, references to Freemasonry and the Mormon Church, plus hints of madness, the supernatural, the Hollow Earth and marital infidelity. In the end, one is left to ponder whether the principals were, if not spies, then insane, hoaxers, con-artists, religious fanatics or a little of each. Was there something deeper and stranger going on than the mindset of the time could articulate or comprehend? Was there a cover-up and, if so, of what?

The place to begin the story is with the man who first brought it to official attention, Special Agent Leon Bone. A native of Illinois, Bone practiced law in Salt Lake City before joining the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Investigation in 1914.¹ He was a respected member of the local legal community and loyal brother of a Masonic lodge. His membership in that fraternity, as we’ll see, is related to his involvement with the airship mystery. It’s worth noting, contrary to accusations later levied against him, that Bone had practical experience in the realm of intrigue and investigation. In July 1917, he played a key role in the apprehension of Manga Ram, a ‘Hindu secessionist’ wanted for involvement in German-inspired plots.² It is not insignificant that the airship mystery played out against the backdrop of America’s entry into WWI and the spy mania it spawned.

¹ *Salt Lake City Directory*, 1911, 1912, 1915.

² “Arrest Hindu for Plotting Revolt,” *Nevada State Journal*, 12 July 1917, 5.

In early 1917, Bone's office began receiving reports of "aeroplanes" seen—most often only heard—in various parts of the state, usually in isolated locales. The mysterious craft almost always appeared at night and carried powerful lights which played in the air and on the ground. Bone admitted that he, like most others, gave the reports little mind and assumed they were largely "due to imagination."³ His attitude began to change, however when in July he received a fresh report from the sheriff in Moab, a man he knew to be sober and reliable. According to the sheriff, four mystery craft were sighted over the La Salle Mountains, appearing at the same time and seeming to signal each other with lights.⁴ Bone became "intensely interested" in the case and informed his superior in Washington, and former Georgetown Law School classmate, A. Bruce Bielaski. Bielaski authorized Bone to investigate and, if possible, get his hands on one of the craft.

Bone enlisted the aid of the U.S. Attorney in Salt Lake, William W. Ray. Together they paid a visit on Col. Samson Faison, commander of nearby Ft. Douglas, the largest military facility in the region. Bone wondered if the craft might originate from the flying school in San Diego or some other base in the Southwest. Faison "laughed at the idea" and dismissed any possibility of military involvement.⁵ Ray regarded the whole business as "fanciful."⁶ Reports persisted and Bone contacted the War Department asking if anyone there had information that could shed light on the mystery. They knew nothing.

On 6 August, Bone wired Bielaski to proclaim that "In the last few days...I have obtained information which is marvelous indeed."⁷ Bone's attention had been drawn

³ Bureau of Investigation (BI), file #8000-136072, Bone to Bielaski, 6 Aug. 1917, 1. Unless noted otherwise all following references to "BI" documents refer to this file.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ BI, U.S. Attorney William Ray to Attorney General T. W. Gregory, 8 Jan. 1918, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ BI, 6 Aug. 1918, 2.

back to a series of articles recently run in the *Salt Lake Telegram*. The initial one, dated 30 June, made no mention of aerial craft but told of three Salt Lake men who claimed to have invented a marvelous “war machine” that they planned to test on the Western Front in the very near future.⁸ The leader of the trio was identified as John R. van Valkenburg. If the test proved successful, he boasted, he and his associates would hand the device to the U. S. Government. The next piece, which ran on 13 July, identified the wonder weapon as a “sort of airplane,” a “marvelous mechanism which defies the laws of gravity” and capable of ascending to 32,000 feet or even higher.⁹ To put things in perspective, contemporary fixed-wing aircraft rarely operated above 15,000 feet, and even massive zeppelins seldom ventured over 20,000. Altitude sickness (shortage of oxygen) quickly became an issue above 13,000. Van Valkenburg explained that he and his friends carried a supply of air and wore “a sort of fireman’s oxygen mask.” Two weeks later, the *Tribune* ran a third item in which van Valkenburg was reported to have flown to Washington, dined with President Woodrow Wilson and made arrangement to deliver his wonder craft to the War Department.¹⁰

That the paper ran these articles in the back pages suggests the editors placed little credence in them, but they also show that van Valkenburg was neither averse to publicity nor hesitant about making grandiose claims. Despite their astounding assertions, the articles attracted little attention, and even Bone was inclined to dismiss them as mere fantasy. The continuing reports of strange aerial phenomena made him reconsider, and Bone decided to bring van Valkenburg in for questioning. It was Bone, though, who would be caught in van Valkenburg’s net, not the other way around. On 3 August the

⁸ “Three Salt Lakers to Test War Device on Western Front,” *Salt Lake Telegram* [*SLT*] (30 June 1917), 10.

⁹ “Mastery of Air Given to U.S. by Salt Lake Inventor,” *SLT* (13 July), 13.

¹⁰ “Flies to Washington in New Aircraft,” *SLT* (30 July 1917), 7, 9.

Salt Lake Evening Telegram ran a piece, “Friendly Aviators Seen in South,” in which Bone confidently assured the public that the airmen were “friendly.”¹¹ What made him so sure?

More to the point, who was John Randolph van Valkenburg? A Utah native, he was a stone mason and tile setter with a well-established reputation as a tinkerer with motors and other mechanical devices. He was a member of the Mormon Church, a Freemason, and to all outward appearances a known and more-or-less respectable member of the community. On 6 August Bone sent Bielaski a report on the interview. Van Valkenburg had appeared at the local police station. Present at the questioning, in addition to Agent Bone, were the chief of police, the chief of detectives and another detective. Van Valkenburg, friendly and garrulous, eagerly explained that he had discovered something that would “completely reverse the operation of gravity” and using this had built a machine that could travel from Salt Lake to San Francisco in only 47 minutes.¹² Besides buzzing along at 1,000 miles per hour, the machine could also remain stationary in midair indefinitely. In fact, asserted van Valkenburg, there was no limit to how fast or far it could travel. The “vital element,” he continued, was a “small controller the size of a man’s hand.”¹³ This miniscule device somehow provided enough power to carry virtually any weight under any conditions. The craft always remained level and was unaffected by weather. Moreover, it required no wings, no engine, nor any fuel in a conventional sense. Stability and propulsion depended on revolving “discs” which “completely reverses the operation of gravity.”¹⁴ The revolving discs, which come up

¹¹ BI, Robert Whitson to A. Bruce Bielaski, Report of 26 March, 1918, 15.

¹² BI, 6 Aug. 1917, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

repeatedly in the story, are an interesting detail because they echo a theme often found in alleged anti-gravity devices such as Viktor Schauberger's vortex powered *Repulsin* of the 1930s and 40s and in the later experiments of Henry Wallace and Evgeny Podkletnov.¹⁵ Whether the discs were part of the "controller" or something separate is never quite clear. The craft could shoot up to 40,000 feet or more, invisibly and almost instantaneously. On the way, claimed the inventor, one ascended through "seven different stratum of air" but at the highest level entered an atmosphere "as on Earth but in a perfectly quiescent condition."¹⁶

Bone admitted his initial impression was that van Valkenburg was "crazy" even though he "appeared normal in every way and answered questions in a perfectly rational and intelligent manner."¹⁷ Van Valkenburg offered to call in his two confederates who, he claimed, could back up his story. These men turned out to be Edward Althoff and Charles Henderson. Both, like van Valkenburg, worked as tile and marble setters and Althoff also was a mechanic and small-time mining promoter.¹⁸ Bone was stunned to see Althoff walk in, a man he had "known intimately for five years" and regarded as "absolutely reliable and trustworthy in every respect."¹⁹ This was because Althoff was Bone's brother in a local Masonic lodge. Bone expected the pair to pronounce van Valkenburg "unbalanced"; instead they corroborated his story "in every particular, even in the smallest detail."²⁰ Among other things, they underlined his claim that the craft

¹⁵ Descriptions of these and other so-called anti-gravity devices can be found in Nick Cook, *The Hunt for Zero Point: Inside the Classified World of Antigravity Technology*. New York: Broadly Books, 2001, and James and Lance Morcan, *Anti-Gravity Propulsion: Human or Alien Technologies?* Bay of Plenty, NZ: Sterling Gate Books (2015).

¹⁶ BI, 6 Aug. 1917, 3

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁸ U. S. Census, 1910, 1920 and BI.

¹⁹ BI, 6 Aug. 1917, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

could ascend so rapidly that it was virtually invisible to the naked eye, and that upon reaching the “7th stratum” one found “the same conditions in the atmosphere as prevailed on earth.”²¹ It turned out they had not one flying device, but five, and they readily admitted that the mystery craft seen over Utah were theirs. Van Valkenburg and his partners preferred to keep the exact details of the construction and operation of their invention secret for the time being but vouched willingness to turn everything over to the government once it was “perfected.” Bone and the other witnesses were “bewildered” by what they had heard but all agreed the men did not seem in the least bit crazy.²²

Just three days later, 9 August, Bone wrote Bielaski again. Further investigation, he asserted, demonstrated that the facts related in his previous letter were “true in every particular” and the Salt Lake trio was in possession of “the most wonderful discovery ever made.”²³ He was absolutely certain that van Valkenburg and his pals were telling the truth. What could have happened in just a few days to induce such conviction? U.S. Attorney Ray later recalled that about the same time, Bone came to him saying that he had something very important to communicate but under strictest secrecy. Bone confessed that he had continued talking to the three men and become convinced that they actually had the invention claimed. Ray ridiculed the idea, but Bone “would hear nothing against them.”²⁴ He met with the trio “almost daily,” and continued to report on the wonders of the fabulous machine, a machine which, by his own admission, he had never actually seen. He contended that the case was not subject to any normal investigation

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 9 Aug. 1918.

²⁴ BI, Ray to Attorney General A. T. Gregory, 8 Jan. 1918, 6.

because “there might be something supernatural about it.”²⁵ Bone even went so far as to issue each man a letter reading:

“To Whom It May Concern:

“The bearer ... is hereby authorized to perform special services for the government of the United States and should be permitted to do his work without molestation or hindrance whatsoever.”²⁶

An unanswered question is whether Bone issued these credentials purely on his own initiative or with the knowledge and tacit approval of Bielaski or other higher-ups. In either case, the action would result in no small trouble for both him and the recipients down the road.

Ray believed that Althoff, on his standing as a fellow Mason, was the main factor in turning Bone into a true believer, but that may not have been the whole story. Bone was learning some rather astounding things from his new friends. To say the mystery craft possessed “very many unusual features” was an understatement.²⁷ The supposed five craft ranged from a single-man, barrel-sized craft dubbed the “Tub” or “Tube” to ones that carried seven or more passengers.²⁸ The operators controlled speed and direction, but not the actual source which powered the discs. As van Valkenburg later described it, the machines somehow “extracted electricity and other elements out of the air,” which sounds a little bit Tesla-esque. The most important factor was that this power was broadcast from a kind of mother ship anchored stationary far above the Earth under the control of a being variously dubbed the “One Above,” “Old Man,” “Superior Power”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ BI, Whitson to Bielaski, 26 March 1918, 5, and “U. S. Arrests Van Valkenburg Witness,” *SLT* (24 March 1918), 10, 13.

²⁷ BI, Whitson, 1 Feb. 1918.

²⁸ BI, 26 March 1918, 3-4.

or “the Adept.” There will be more to say about him further along. If that’s not enough, the lights carried by the craft weren’t just for illumination; they could also function as a kind of Death Ray that “had the power to annihilate all before it” and could “desiccate an army.”²⁹ No wonder Bone thought Washington would be interested; the device could “revolutionize the world” and bring the war to a speedy end. The credit would be his if he could facilitate its acquisition.

Van Valkenburg came up with more fantastic claims. With the wonder-plane at his disposal, he boasted of traveling to Germany, Mexico, California, and Washington, DC along with “remote and heretofore unknown places,” all in a matter of hours.³⁰ Perhaps most astounding, he claimed to have flown straight north for a distance of 32,000 miles to end up in a strange trans-polar land inhabited by a “civilized race much larger and further advanced than we are.”³¹ The entire circumference of the Earth, of course, is just shy of 25,000 miles. This, he insisted, proved that current beliefs about the size and even shape of the Earth were entirely wrong. He later expanded on these comments declaring that “the North Pole is not where it is claimed to be, but...another country lies far north of the supposed North Pole which had the same climate as we have here.”³² Like so much else in the case, van Valkenburg’s point in making such outlandish claims is an enigma. Was this wondrous civilization beyond the limits of any normal terrestrial geography an off-beat reference to the fabled Hollow Earth or something beyond Earth entirely? If no more, the man had a vivid imagination.

²⁹ BI, 8 Jan. 1918, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² BI, Whitson to Bielaski, 4 March 1918, 1.

Van Valkenburg and his accomplices swore that it always had been their intention to turn over the device to the Government though, according the earlier press reports, they already had. This blatant contradiction didn't seem to bother Bone. On 11 August, Bielaski assured him that the "matter will be given immediate attention by military intelligence which will get in touch with you."³³ If they ever did is unknown. In the meantime, Bielaski cautioned Bone to "preserve all facts with utmost confidence and see that everyone who has knowledge of them does the same." Was the veil of official secrecy beginning to lower? Two days later Bielaski sent another message asking if the men would be willing to discuss the matter with a "government expert" and offered to dispatch one at once.³⁴ "Are they willing to state where [the device is] located?" he asked. "If facts [are] true," added Bielaski, the "men should be given government protection." This is likely what impelled Bone to issue van Valkenburg and the others the above letters. The same day, Bone replied to his chief, reporting that the men did not feel an expert was necessary, and they preferred working only with him.³⁵ They did not think they would be in a position to give any demonstration before the beginning of September but hoped to hand everything over in a month or so. All this begs the question that if the trio really had five functional craft and had been flying to the North Pole, Europe and hither and yon, then what did they still need to "perfect"?

On 14 August, Bone dispatched yet another report to Bielaski singing the virtues of "the most marvelous discovery ever known," a craft able to operate in absolute safety" as long as the pilot desired and which required no "gasoline, oil, electricity or engine of any

³³ BI, Bielaski to Bone, "Confidential Matter," 11 Aug. 1917

³⁴ BI, Bielaski to Bone, 13 Aug. 1917.

³⁵ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 13 Aug. 1917.

kind.”³⁶ While van Valkenburg’s invention was not intended to be an engine of destruction, it could be easily adapted for such purpose. Bone noted another mystery aircraft sighting west of Salt Lake ten days earlier where the craft reportedly dipped and dived and moved about “at a very rapid rate” while emitting a “pale bluish light.” Bone’s new pals admitted this to be one of theirs. Of course, Bone himself had seen absolutely nothing.

To no great surprise, September passed without any demonstration and so did October. In early November, Bone reported to Bielaski that he had so far failed to get anything more definite from the men.³⁷ The latter couldn’t say when they would be ready to give a demonstration but hoped to know “soon.” Just a few days before, Bone continued, “circumstances had arisen” which would delay things for at least a few more months, six months tops. In the meantime, they might offer him a personal demonstration, for he had still not seen an iota of actual evidence.

Bone noted another twist. Some days prior, van Valkenburg and partners had paid a visit to Salt Lake City’s mayor, Mont Ferry, to ask for a loan of \$8,000 (more than \$160,000 in today’s money). This initially disturbed Bone, but they quickly explained that they needed the funds because having devoted almost all their time to working on the invention, they had little opportunity to earn a regular living. The trio hit up the Mayor, they claimed, because they thought he would be more amenable than the Feds. Ferry tuned them down, and they made no attempt to press the matter. If it was a con, it was a very inept one. Bone emphasized that it was in their best interests to turn the craft over to Washington as soon as possible. Van Valkenburg and the others reassured him it would

³⁶ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 14 Aug. 1917, 1, 3.

³⁷ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 4 Nov. 1917, 1.

happen soon. Bone's confidence in his new friends was unshaken. The men told him "such marvelous things," including how they had discovered an "energy which will absolutely do away with all the present forms of energy such as electrical, gas, steam, etc."³⁸ "I do not dare to tell you all of them," he added, "for fear you will think they are absolutely crazy."³⁹ Bone was firmly convinced that they were neither nuts nor dishonest and attested that others felt the same. Still there is a hint that Bone was holding something back since he admitted that the trio told him things in "complete confidence" which he dared not violate. He concluded by asking Bielaski if money should be given to them "as requested." Requested by whom? It's another suggestion that maybe, just maybe, there was more going on than the surviving record reveals.

In the meantime, Attorney Ray and others were becoming concerned. Ray regarded Bone's letters to van Valkenburg, et al, as a "bad idea from any viewpoint" and was disturbed by his blind faith in the men.⁴⁰ Ray began to wonder if the three had concocted the airplane story as a cover for something else, such as a secret operation to smuggle information to Mexico and hence, to Germany. He also noted that while the men had indeed done little work for months, none seemed to lack for money. Ray's concerns were, arguably, their own sort of fantasy, but it was wartime, and he wasn't alone in his conjectures. Ray and Mayor Ferry approached the local agent of the Secret Service, W. D. Davenport, about undertaking a separate investigation in the hope of getting to the bottom of things. Davenport regarded it as out of his jurisdiction and declined to stick his nose in without the approval of the Justice Department. Ray then turned to Bone's boss, Bruce Bielaski, asking that Davenport be allowed to investigate. Bielaski, who seems to

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁰ BI, 8. Jan, 1918, 6.

have developed some doubts of his own, nixed that, but was willing to bring in other Justice agents “unknown to Bone.”⁴¹

The mystery aircraft and lights kept up persistent appearances across the state, exciting public gossip and speculation.⁴² Ray heard from no less than the local U.S. Marshall that members of his family had seen a strange aircraft flying over Logan, Utah “carrying an unusual light.”⁴³ Ray also had reports from reliable mechanics attesting that they had fabricated “unusual mechanical parts” for van Valkenburg and his pals.⁴⁴ While Ray still regarded their claims as “preposterous,” he more and more suspected the men were creating a fictitious story to cover up something else.⁴⁵

Someone who had come to a very similar conclusion was Salt Lake’s postmaster, Noble Warrum. In mid-December, Warrum visited Ray to complain about van Valkenburg’s and the others’ possession of the letters from Bone which, he alleged, they were using to raise money. Warrum, too, wanted Davenport to investigate, but Ray told him that was out of the question. Not one to be easily deterred, on 20 December, Warrum fired off a letter to his boss, A. S. Burleson, Postmaster General in Washington.⁴⁶ Warrum had two sons in the Army and believed that the same “sinister influence” was at work in Salt Lake City as his boys were fighting in Europe. Van Valkenburg, Althoff and Henderson, he argued, were “all Germans born and bred” (actually, only Althoff was) and were operating in “a mysterious manner.” He found it more than suspicious that they wanted to conduct experiments on an alleged invention

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ BI, Noble Warrum to Postmaster General A. S. Burleson, 20 Dec. 1917, 1.

that “defies gravity and annihilates distance” without any scrutiny from authorities, and completely unacceptable that a federal officer, Bone, was abetting this. Even in Utah, he claimed, there were people “spreading treasonable propaganda” plotting sabotage, and those serving as “dupes to the wiles of the Kaiser’s agents.” Bone, he suspected, was one of the latter. Warrum dismissed Agent Bone as a “guileless little man, of but limited experience in matters of intrigue.” He obviously had been completely taken in by the airship trio and had lost all objectivity. Thus shielded, Warrum added, the three men leave their homes almost every night and “drive high-powered automobiles to some secret rendezvous where they claim they keep their aircraft.”⁴⁷ Warrum admitted that he had no definite idea whether or not any machine existed, why they had taken Bone into their confidence, or what precisely they did on their nocturnal ramblings. However, he was firmly convinced that they had no invention that could defy gravity, that any flying they might be doing was not in the service of the Government, and that it was pointless to entrust the supervision of such men to someone “in their loyalty.” Warrum felt the men had to be fraudsters, insane (though he considered that unlikely), spies, or using the supposed invention as a blind for some “more secret work.” The case, he urged, needed to be taken out of Bone’s hands and entrusted to “real sleuths.” To not do so at once, he warned, risked “impending tragedy” and could result in the whole state illuminated by the “glare of burning warehouses.”

Ray knew both Warrum and Bone. He considered the former “intense” and “intolerant” when it came to the war and its prosecution, but also a friend and a man well-regarded throughout the state.⁴⁸ As far as Bone was considered, Ray acknowledged he

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁸ BI, 8 Jan. 1918, 8-9.

had handled past cases effectively and it was only his bizarre credulity in the present instance which in any way lessened “confidence in his judgment and intelligence.” Still, he did not think Bone was a true detective and a “deeply laid plot” was likely beyond him.

At the same time, Bone continued to pepper Bielaski with more reports of strange flying machines and mysterious lights. On 11 December he forwarded recent news items describing an unknown craft cruising low over the Salt Lake carrying a “strong searchlight,” and another recounting a “mystery airship” seen and heard by thousands of people around Ogden over several nights.⁴⁹ He believed Van Valkenburg and crew to be responsible for all of them. If nothing else, there seemed abundant evidence that something weird really was going on in the night skies of Utah.

Shortly after the New Year, Agent Robert Whitson from the Bureau of Investigation’s L.A. office arrived quietly in Salt Lake City. Acting on Bielaski’s orders, he met with Ray at the Hotel Utah where the latter laid out the basic facts of the airship case as best he could. Ray reiterated his suspicion that van Valkenburg and his cronies were using the aerial invention as some sort of camouflage. Ray noted that the men had obtained “small sums of money” from two or three local people, but as the money had been given voluntarily it would be difficult to charge them with fraud. Ray and Whitson called in Secret Service’s Davenport, and together they hatched a theory that the airship bunch was transmitting information to Mexico by plane or wireless. Bone was kept out of the loop entirely. While never directly stated, the idea seems to have been that so long as van Valkenburg and the rest believed they had Bone’s protection, they would not be on the lookout for surveillance by other agents. However, Whitson’s operational security

⁴⁹ Bone to Bielaski, 11 Dec. 1917.

seems to have left something to be desired. He learned that the suspects, and Bone, somehow learned they were being watched by early February.⁵⁰

Whitson, his assistant Camden Riley, and four other agents would spend the next two months digging into the “Aeroplane Case” and generating almost daily reports which constitute the bulk of the Bureau file. The results were sometimes surprising but ultimately inconclusive. The three suspects met almost nightly at the Newhouse Hotel, and they were not alone. The first significant discovery was that Van Valkenburg, Althoff and Henderson were only the leading members of a larger group. One of the first confederates pinpointed was Paul Valtinke, a German-born geologist and musician. Another was John Giese, likewise German-born and a local mining expert. Their involvement excited Whitson’s suspicion that the whole thing was a nefarious plot of the Kaiser. A third associate was George Tolemie who had recently purchased a ranch near Green River in the southern part of the state, an area where most of the mystery aircraft had been spotted.

On 31 January, Agent Riley interviewed Dr. F. J. Curtis, a friend of Valtinke who agreed to become a confidential informant. To Curtis, Valtinke expressed great admiration of van Valkenburg and Henderson and hailed them as the “discoverers of a new science.”⁵¹ He also opined that “this is either the greatest fake or the greatest truth the world has ever seen.” Later, Whitson personally interviewed Valtinke, who repeated the story of the device being started with discs which “revolve and in some way overcome or counteract the force of gravitation.”⁵² He also reiterated that the discs could not be started by the men but by the “superior power.” Like Bone, while Valtinke had

⁵⁰ BI, 4 March 1918, 3.

⁵¹ BI, Dr. Curtis Report to Agent Riley, 31 Jan, 1918.

⁵² BI, Whitson to Bielaski, 4 March 1918, 4.

actually never seen the device, he unquestionably believed in it. Valtinke cryptically dropped that he and others in the group were being “shadowed by Mormon agents.”⁵³

The last remark touches on what may be the strangest and least examined aspect of the case, what William Ray later dubbed the “ridiculous religious phase.”⁵⁴ Astrology appears to have played a part. Van Valkenburg and the others demanded Bone supply them details of his place and time of birth before they would consider him for membership.⁵⁵ At the center of the business, though, were the alleged spiritual/mystical agendas of the Adept, the machine’s inventors and others trying to get control of it. The Adept, a.k.a the Supreme Power, the One Above, the Old One, the Old Man, the Fountainhead, etc, not only controlled the airship’s power but also subjected his followers to rigorous spiritual and physical tests. He seemed to possess outright supernatural qualities, including the abilities to fly without aid of the machine and assuming the forms of dead friends and relatives. By some accounts he could make his chosen ones “invulnerable” to bullets and other dangers.⁵⁶ The Adept had a larger, vague plan of which the airship and its mysterious power were only a small part. To Dr. Curtis, Valtinke gushed that the new invention was nothing less than a sign of the “coming millennium.”⁵⁷ According to Giese and van Valkenburg, the Adept’s ultimate goal was to bring about a “brotherhood of man.”⁵⁸ For this reason, it seems, the Old Man balked at turning over the invention to the Government because he did not intend the “power” to be used for military purposes. Under later questioning, van Valkenburg insisted the Adept

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ BI, File #8000-168238, Ray to Attorney General Gregory, 2 April 1918. This file relates specifically to Leon Bone.

⁵⁵ BI, #8000- 136072, 26 March 1918, 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 Feb. 1918, 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1918.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 March 1918, 2.

“was material but can live independently of earthly wants.”⁵⁹ He even had a name, Nels Olsen, a detail we will look at more closely a little further on. In a conversation with another of Whitson’s informants, Paul Valtinke explained that the power at the disposal of the Adept and his chosen was the “same known to Moses and Christ” and the same as used to “build the pyramids.”⁶⁰ Valtinke also noted that van Valkenburg and the others espoused an “unusual” interpretation of the Bible, especially the Book of Revelations. He had no doubt that “these men communicated with some other world.”

Then there were the Mormons. Van Valkenburg was a member of the Latter Day Saints faith as were others in the group. Nevertheless he and Giese told of how they and four others had met representatives of the Mormon Church who were after exclusive control of the craft and its power. The negotiation apparently did not go well, and van Valkenburg boasted that he had enough to “destroy” the Church and its leaders if they pressed their claim. Paul Valtinke told an informant that the Mormon Church hated van Valkenburg and his accomplices “like poison, for it has much to do with Mormonism.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, van Valkenburg later told Whitson that he was the “chief detective” of the Mormon Church’s current leader, Joseph F. Smith, but warned that Smith would never publicly acknowledge it.⁶²

It’s hard to know what to make of these remarks, and there is no indication that Whitson made any effort to follow up. The connection, if there is one, may lie in semi-apocryphal Mormon beliefs concerning the many worlds of God’s creation and their

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 1 Feb. 1918, 1, 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶² BI, 26 March, 1918 , 12. Joseph F. Smith (1838-1918) was a nephew of the Church’s founder, Joseph Smith Jr.

celestial inhabitants.⁶³ Central to this was the star or planet Kolob, held by some to be the literal seat of the Heavenly Father and home to an extraterrestrial civilization with a close connection to Earth's. Perhaps someone imagined van Valkenburg's machine as a message from Kolob or even a means to reach it.

Whitson pieced together his bits of information in a steady stream of reports to Bielaski. The three principle suspects were part of a group of nine all supposedly chosen by the Adept to lead something called the "first movement."⁶⁴ Whitson was a bit surprised to find Agent Bone was one of the elect. The latter constituted the inner circle of a still larger group that numbered as many as twenty-two. Their main meeting place was Roosevelt Hot Springs near the small railroad town of Milford, some 180 miles southwest of Salt Lake. Aside from its relative isolation, the special significance the hot springs or Milford had for the "aeroplane men" is another mystery. Whitson offered his opinion that Bone was an "innocent dupe" but totally compromised as an investigator and ought to be transferred elsewhere to protect him.⁶⁵ Whitson also thought he was on to something fairly big and that investigation could take months or a year or more. The simplest course, he proposed, given the time and difficulty of proving any criminal wrongdoing, would be to have the men declared insane and institutionalized. In that case, the Government's role "need never be revealed."⁶⁶

Since John van Valkenburg seemed the pivotal figure in the whole business, Whitson determined to find all he could about him. While van Valkenburg had his loyal

⁶³ For a variety of opinions and interpretations of the Kolob matter, see, e.g.:

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Pearl_of_Great_Price/Abraham#3,

<http://business.gorge.net/zdkf/kufol/kolit.html>, and <http://newscape.com/mormon/mormons5.htm>.

⁶⁴ BI, 26 March, 1918, 6.

⁶⁵ BI, 10 Feb. 1918.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

admirers, detractors were not hard to find. One was a neighbor, George Q. Morris, who described him as “ignorant, dishonest, brutal and domineering” and a “habitual liar.”⁶⁷ Another was John Tew, brother of Irma Titus, a woman with whom van Valkenburg turned out to be having an adulterous affair. Tew recalled van Valkenburg telling him that he had “overcome gravitation” and had “received his power on the Nevada Desert” from some unseen source.⁶⁸ He allegedly told Tew that the flying machine was kept at Ft. Douglas and that he, Van Valkenburg, had been a secret service agent for over thirty years, showing both the letter from Bone and some sort of badge to prove it. Van Valkenburg also claimed to have demonstrated the contraption to Government experts on the East Coast (just as he claimed in the previous summer’s press articles), and added a juicy detail about its powerful light’s ability to melt a mountain of rock “like so much molasses.”⁶⁹ Moreover, he noted that in addition to the Government in DC, the Mormon Church owned an interest in the marvelous device. Tew also mentioned that van Valkenburg told him and Mrs. Titus that he was divorced; he was not. This briefly gave Whitson the idea of arresting van Valkenburg on adultery charges, but that too was dropped.⁷⁰ Another detail was that Tew had a draft age son. Van Valkenburg told the young man not to worry about registering because he could get him a job in the secret service. This casual promise would have serious repercussions.

Whitson also took a keen interest in Edward Althoff, “alleged to be the brains of the outfit.”⁷¹ As a man of some means, Whitson also imagined Althoff to be the financial mainstay of the conspiracy. In search of proof, Whitson spread the tentacles of his

⁶⁷ BI, Morris interview, 27 Feb. 1918.

⁶⁸ BI, Statement of Tew, 27 Feb. 1918, 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁷⁰ BI, 25 March, 1918, 2.

⁷¹ BI, 4 Feb. 1918, 7.

investigation back to Los Angeles where Althoff was visiting his parents. Local Bureau agents grilled the elder Althoffs and ransacked their home for clues, but turned up nothing. Althoff's father could only offer that his son was working on "some great invention" and this or other issues had brought him to the "verge of a nervous breakdown."⁷² In the end, aside from his peculiar faith in Van Valkenburg, there was nothing to indicate Althoff other than "honest and loyal."⁷³

Whitson finally pounced on 11 March. Agents and police burst into van Valkenburg's home and arrested him in bed. The arrest of Henderson immediately followed, and 20 March it was Giese's and Valtinke's turn. Subsequent interrogations added more strange pieces to the puzzle. Under questioning, van Valkenburg stuck to his story of flying the mystery craft from Salt Lake to Frisco, but cut the time to a mere 32 minutes.⁷⁴ His young daughter stepped forward to claim she had accompanied him. He also maintained his tale of consulting with persons in the War Department and having lunched with President Wilson. He repeated his account of travelling to a wondrous civilization beyond the North Pole which brimmed with "advanced science and industry," adding that its advanced race possessed "large heads" and viewed gold as a worthless commodity.

Van Valkenburg explained that the "aeroplane" was originally the invention of Nels Olsen, mentioned, above, seemingly identical with the Old Man and the Adept. Van Valkenburg's confiscated correspondence made numerous references to "Nels" but seemed to contain nothing specifically to or from him.⁷⁵ There were, in fact, several Nels

⁷² BI, Special Agent in Charge C. L. Keep to Whitson, 13 March 1918.

⁷³ BI, 8000-168238, "Memorandum for the Attorney General, 5 April 1918.

⁷⁴ BI, #8000-136071, 26 March 1918, 3-4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-30.

Olsen's living in the region between 1900 and 1920, all Scandinavian immigrants.⁷⁶ One was a farmer and teamster residing in Milton, a little burg across the Wasatch Mountains from Ogden. He was born around 1862, making him only a few years older than Van Valkenburg. Another, Nels N. Olsen, same age, had farmed in Beaver County, which put him in the vicinity of Milford and Roosevelt Springs. More "old manish" were Nels C. Olsen, born 1855, of Sevier County and, most ancient of all, Ole Nels Olsen, born 1833, who resided in Brigham City. If any of these were the Adept, there is no outward indication, not any obvious connection to Van Valkenburg. All were still alive in 1918, but there is no sign Whitson sought out any of them.

Be that as it may, van Valkenburg insisted that he was the only one to ever speak directly with the Adept/Old Man who lived in a "center of power," a kind of "giant aeroplane," in what we would now call a stationary orbit high above the Earth.⁷⁷ The Adept conveyed "messages" to him, Althoff and Henderson, each of whom passed them on to another three, who each communicated with another three, and so on. Out of these the Old Man had chosen the first nine, though exactly for what is never unexplained. Van Valkenburg stubbornly insisted that he and the others were doing their best to perfect a much larger version of the machine that they would present to Washington. He bitterly complained that "government meddling," doubtless including his arrest, was delaying its finalization.

A search of van Valkenburg's home turned up what seemed to be Mormon pamphlets discussing the coming of Jesus Christ to America as well as a wide array of

⁷⁶ U.S. Census data, 1900, 1910, 1920.

⁷⁷ BI, 26 March 1918, 3-4.

books and clippings, including one titled “How They Built the Pyramids.”⁷⁸ For a man who could claim only six months of regular schooling, he appeared rather well-read. The clippings, of course, included many on the recent aircraft sightings.

Based on this, Agent Whitson came up with a theory as to how van Valkenburg had concocted his fantastic story. Whitson noted that many bits of the tale seemed to echo elements in two recent books by Arthur Train and Robert Wood, *The Man Who Rocked the Earth* (1915) and *The Moon-Maker* (1916).⁷⁹ The former’s plot revolved around a mysterious scientific genius, “Pax,” who used his “Flying Ring” aircraft and other super weapons to force warring humanity out of its evil ways. The “Flying Ring” also featured in the second book where it was used by Earth scientists to help divert a deadly asteroid. The “Ring’s” ability to ascend almost instantaneously and invisibly sounded identical to the alleged abilities of van Valkenburg’s machine. It’s also worth noting that the Hollow Earth/polar opening tale, a much exploited theme for decades, had recently received a fresh shot in the arm with Marshall Gardner’s *A Journey to the Earth’s Interior* (1913). If that wasn’t enough, popular author Edgar Rice Burroughs used the same idea, minus the polar hole, in his *At the Earth’s Core* (1914).

Interrogations of Althoff, Giese, Henderson and P. B. McKeon, the last a resident of Roosevelt Hot Springs, yielded other curious tidbits. Althoff, Giese and McKeon all emphasized that while they unquestionably believed in van Valkenburg’s invention, none had ever so much as seen it, much less ridden in it. Althoff, however, was certain that Henderson had, and Henderson admitted to this, adding that not only had he flown with

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

van Valkenburg but with the Adept/Old Man as well.⁸⁰ This directly contradicted van Valkenburg who had been adamant that only *he* had ever flown or had direct dealings with the Adept.⁸¹ When asked by Whitson to explain this discrepancy, van Valkenburg calmly insisted that Henderson both “had” and “had not” ridden in the machine.⁸² Van Valkenburg also stuck to his story of flying on a night when he had been under double surveillance and no one had noticed him doing any such thing. When Whitson insisted that his story was simply impossible, van Valkenburg replied “it is true nevertheless.”⁸³

Henderson interpreted such statements as *prima facie* evidence of insanity and compelled both van Valkenburg and Henderson to undergo examination by three psychiatrists. The latter came up with the rather bizarre verdict of selective insanity: the pair was “paranoiac” but only when it came to the matter of the alleged aerial invention. Otherwise, they were perfectly sane.⁸⁴ Based on this dubious diagnosis, Whitson had Henderson committed to the state mental hospital in Provo, but decided to put van Valkenburg on trial for impersonating a government agent. As for Giese and Valtinke, being non-US citizens, he obtained presidential warrants and interned them at Ft. Douglas as dangerous enemy aliens.

Whitson was obviously grasping at straws. He admitted to Bielaski that the investigation had turned up not the slightest shred of evidence to show anyone was “operating for the benefit of the enemy.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, he still thought it conceivable that “the enemy” might have found some way to exploit the affair to their advantage, and

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3, 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁴ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 4 May 1918.

⁸⁵ BI, 26 March 1918, 46.

he was going to proceed on the assumption that said enemy was using the airplane flap “as camouflage for their activities.” In other words, having found no evidence of German involvement, he was still going to pretend he had.

The weakness of Whitson’s case was obvious to Leon Bone. He complained to Bielaski that Henderson’s commitment was absurd, but if he was to be institutionalized for telling a story why hadn’t van Valkenburg and Althoff been sent to the loony bin for telling exactly the same one?⁸⁶ The criminal charge against van Valkenburg was also shaky since Bone’s letter gave him at least some claim to be working for the Government, and Bielaski had not disavowed Bone’s action. It was doubtless for such reasons that in May van Valkenburg’s trial was suspended by a summary judgment of insanity and he was remanded to join Henderson in Provo.⁸⁷

He did not remain there for long. In June, the hospital abruptly pronounced both he and Henderson “cured” and they walked out free men. However, van Valkenburg’s troubles weren’t over. U.S. Attorney Ray immediately filed a new charge of draft obstruction based on van Valkenburg’s advice to the Tew boy, noted above. Under the recently-enacted Espionage Act, this could carry a thirty year prison term or even a death sentence. The prosecution did not proceed, but perhaps the point had been made: Van Valkenburg needed to shut up and quietly fade away.

Was some sort of cover-up going on? Was the prosecution of Van Valkenburg and the incarceration of the others intended to intimidate and silence them as opposed to bringing genuine malefactors to justice or, least of all, getting to the bottom of the airship mystery? Bone may hint as much in his correspondence with Bielaski. Contrary to the

⁸⁶ BI, 8000-168238, Bone to Bielaski, 19 March 1918, 6.

⁸⁷ “Airship Expert Now Facing Charge of Insanity,” *SLT* (3 May 1918), 13., “Airship Inventor Deemed Crazy,” *SLT* (14 May 1918), 1, and “Valkenburg Judged Unsound,” *Ogden Standard* (15 May 1918), 3.

claims of Whitson and others, Bone insisted he was never a convert or dupe of van Valkenburg, but cultivated him and the rest in hopes of finding out what, if anything, lay at the root of their fantastic tale. Bone never abandoned his conviction that the men were neither crazy nor crooked and that they had *something*, even if not the fantastic device claimed. If allowed to continue, he told Bielaski, he would have gotten van Valkenburg to put up or shut up and found out what was going on. He noted, for instance, that van Valkenburg had always spoken of a “fourth man,” never named (presumably Olsen, the Adept), who did most of the piloting of the machine, but whom Whitson had failed to identify, apprehend or even ask about. Whitson’s ham-fisted actions, Bone complained, only succeeded in ruining any chance of getting at the truth.⁸⁸

Could that have been the whole point, whether Whitson knew it or not? For what it may be worth, Valtinke claimed “two forces at work” regarding the airship, one for and one against, and that “there is another branch of the Government” opposed to the invention.⁸⁹ He also claimed that in January van Valkenburg and Henderson spent several hours meeting with “two men from Washington.”⁹⁰ What of the Military Intelligence people who Bielaski once told Bone would be getting in touch about the case? Did they lose interest or simply go about things their own way?

If anyone emerges a victim or scapegoat in the Airship Mystery, it is Leon Bone. In March, Whitson warned him that he was “in a precarious position” and likely to face “serious trouble.”⁹¹ Once the “aeroplane affair” went public, Bone came under increasing criticism for his relationship to the alleged conspirators and/or madmen.

⁸⁸ BI, #8000-168238, Bone to Bielaski, 19 March 1918, 4.

⁸⁹ BI, #8000-136072, 1 Feb. 1918, 8 and 4 Feb. 4.

⁹⁰ BI, 4 Feb. 1918, 4.

⁹¹ BI, Bone to Bielaski, 14 March 1918.

Noble Warrum resurfaced to praise Whitson's efforts and condemn Bone as a man totally compromised by his belief in the men. Warrum suggested that Whitson remain in Salt Lake to pursue an investigation "only half finished" while the disgraced Bone should be shuffled off to Los Angeles in his place.⁹² Others singing the same tune were powerful Senator William H. King and U. S. Attorney Ray who agreed that Bone had lost all public confidence and should be immediately transferred out of the division. Bielaski reluctantly agreed, but noted that Bone had always acted in the best interests of the Government and, even if misguided, had hardly been the only one to think van Valkenburg and his pals actually had something. Beyond that, Bielaski felt that Agent Bone was the victim of a "semi-political" campaign to silence him and drive him out of Salt Lake City.⁹³ However unfair that was, his position there had become untenable. In May he left for his new post in Los Angeles.

Bone, for his part, never stopped drawing Bielaski's and others' attention to the ongoing reports of unexplained aircraft and lights. On 15 March, for instance, he relayed the report of Salt Lake lawyer George Constantine who recounted how the night prior he and six neighbors had seen a strange light in the western sky "which moved rapidly across the sky and appeared to be an airplane."⁹⁴ Bone also cited a Logan resident who a few weeks before, along with others, witnessed "a strange aircraft at night which had a powerful light" and which "looked very much like a beetle flying through the air." Even Whitson, who had initially dismissed any of the sightings as genuine, came to acknowledge that people were seeing something. Of course, since he insisted that van Valkenburg and his fellows were fraudsters or insane, he could offer no explanation as to

⁹² BI, #8000-168238, Warrum to Burleson, 21 March 1918.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Bielaski to Gregory, 5 April 1918.

⁹⁴ BI, # 8000-136072, Bone to Bielaski, 15 March 1918.

who or what was behind it. Bone's point was that regardless of the truth or falsehood of van Valkenburg's claims, strange things were flying around over Utah, and if the arrested men weren't piloting them, then who was? This was and remains a legitimate question and the undeniable, unsolved mystery of the story.

As noted, Bone moved to Los Angeles and remained working as a federal investigator until at least 1930. By 1920, Edward Althoff had also relocated to LA, and a couple of years later, so did John van Valkenburg and his whole family. Althoff died in 1974 in El Dorado, California, still a loyal member of a Masonic lodge. The 1930 Census shows van Valkenburg as retired or unemployed and living with his wife, married daughter and son-in-law near Echo Park. He died two years later. What secrets he, Althoff or others may have taken to their graves, we will never know.

It seems impossible to accept van Valkenburg's bizarre story at face value; there is too much in it that defies physics, geography and basic logic. The simplest assumption is that he was a fantasist, con man or hoaxer, and it is arguably silly to give his tale any serious consideration at all. Still, why was van Valkenburg so amazingly, inexplicably, convincing? If he was running a con, it was a poor one; certainly he might have gotten better results with fewer absurdities. If a hoax, the question, as always, is why? Did he simply relish attention? Did his friends take vicarious satisfaction by professing faith in his outlandish claims? Or, did someone in Washington or elsewhere get their hands on whatever van Valkenburg invented or stumbled across, and then ensured that he was thoroughly discredited and silenced? Conversely, was van Valkenburg and his improbable tale just a red herring to distract attention from the real source and nature of the mystery craft and by sheer outlandishness make the whole matter look ridiculous?

Who would or could want to do that? The more imaginative, including some Ufologists, may see more sinister forces at work. Was the Adept, assuming he existed, really who or what he claimed to be? Were van Valkenburg and the others themselves dupes of persons or entities who mesmerized and misled them so that they might mesmerize and mislead others?

There is also a superficial similarity between van Valkenburg's fantastic flying machines and his attendant secret society and the mid-19th century "Sonora Aero Club" described in the cryptic drawings and writings of Charles Dellschau.⁹⁵ Of course, Dellschau claimed that his crafts' anti-gravitational effect was obtained by something dubbed "NB gas," and the deadly secrecy of his supposed society stands in sharp contrast to van Valkenburg's public chattiness. Or had Dellschau's mysterious NYMZA, the secret society behind his secret society, adopted different technology and different rules some sixty years later?

In the end, there were only the lights in the sky, and they weren't talking.

⁹⁵ See: Dennis G. Crenshaw and Peter Navarro, *The Secrets of Dellschau*. San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books (2009), and <http://www.keelynet.com/gravity/aero8.txt>.