

Walesville

A true story of the July 2, 1954 tragedy.

Mary Peck put down her copy of Utica's Daily Press and wondered what the world was coming to. At age 79, she had seen a great deal in her life, but all of this craziness about flying saucers and little people from Mars just about took the cake when it came to people's gullibility. All through the year there had been news reports of flying disks, cigar shaped tubes and a variety of saucers in the skies over the United States and Europe. They were calling it the "Great UFO Wave of 1954." And now people in Utica and Oneida County had reported seeing silver bowls in the sky! Silver bowls! Soon they would be seeing milk bottles up there. Too much time on their hands, thought Mary. Not like when she was a young woman and worked all day taking care of her children, helping with the milking and the haying and keeping a garden. All those chores on the farm kept your mind on the ground instead of up in the clouds.

Mary rocked back and forth in her chair and launched herself up to a standing position, tottering a bit, but after a moment she was steady enough to begin the short walk from her living room to the back of the house. As she entered the kitchen, a whining noise began. Sounding like a siren, it grew louder, as if something was approaching. Unsure if the screech came from out in front of her house, she started back toward the living room, then changed her mind and went back into the kitchen to the side window and looked up at the sky.

In the house diagonally across the intersection from Mary Peck, Doris Monroe hummed softly to herself while she laid bread slices out on the counter and plopped on baloney and American cheese as she made lunch for her children. She had called out to them twice now from the backdoor, each time checking on one year old Betty Lou who was playing happily in the small patch of grass a few feet from the screen door. The young mother had worried a bit when the older three left the house and immediately headed down to the creek at the back of the property. But now she could hear them laughing and making their usual noise as they came back and she felt a little easier.

Doris and Floyd were pleased to find this house in Walesville and had moved in just 3 days ago. They came from Franklin Springs, further to the south and were happy they could move in a week earlier than expected when the landlord finished rebuilding the structure ahead of schedule. He had converted it from an old large garage and Doris thought it turned out quite nice. The home was near a small general store where the kids could get cokes and sit on the steps in the afternoon and it was much closer to Floyd's job at the foundry in Westmoreland. Everything inside the house was new because of the renovation. The family would have more room here and the kids were thrilled with the creek and surrounding countryside. They were also closer to shopping and doctors in nearby Whitesboro as well as other family amenities.

The whining sound Doris had begun to hear a moment ago now got so loud she could no longer hear her children coming back from the creek. Outside the back door, Betty Lou began to cry and scream. Doris ran across the kitchen and flew out the door, looking around the yard and then up at the sky.

About twenty minutes before and ten miles from Walesville, Bill Atkins had barely lifted his F94 fighter jet off the runway at Griffis Air Base when the Ground Control Intercept Officer cut in on the flight's mission controller and directed the 24 year old Lieutenant and his radar man, Lieutenant Hank Coudon, 26, to fly due north to intercept an

unidentified aircraft. The ordinary training flight had just become a real mission.

While Hank began to work the radar controls, Bill swung the nose over from east to north and pointed the plane at the Adirondack Mountains. As the fighter jet gained altitude, the pilot could see the edge of Lake Ontario come into view and he adjusted his heading to 310 degrees. The Strategic Air Command at Syracuse and Rome's ground control radar were guiding him to the unidentified craft. In the back seat, Hank was waiting for his screen to light up with the bogey.

"It's ahead," said the radar man.

"I see it," said Bill. "It's a C-47 and it's Canadian. We're not at war with them yet, are we?"

The Douglas C-47 "Skytrain" was the workhorse of armed forces around the world, carrying 7,500 pounds of freight or 28 fighting troops into combat. The planes, known as DC-3's in civilian aviation, remained in service among the Allies and airlines for many years.

Bill and Hank called the C-47's tail numbers into Mission Control and advised of the obvious friendly status, never knowing why the Canadian transport plane had been unable to identify by radio. They turned back toward Rome, each quietly happy to have not met a Russian MiG. But the GCI officer gave them a further assignment. Yesterday's UFO reports, like those Mary Peck had just been reading about in her morning newspaper, were believed by the Air Force to have been caused by a deflating weather balloon as it slowly dropped down through the atmosphere over central New York from where it had been seen at 20,000 feet by a Mohawk Airlines pilot. The F94 and its crew were ordered to find and investigate the unidentified flying object. They were told it might look like a silver bowl.

Meanwhile, Stan Phillips and his wife Florence had left work on this first day of what promised to be a beautiful weekend. The couple worked as teachers at the Rome State School, where classes were held year round for the mentally disabled young residents. The staff was free to leave at

noon on Fridays in the summer and the couple planned a picnic and swimming that day at Hinckley Reservoir with their 11 year old son, Gary, who was waiting for them to come home and pick him up. Gary had spent the morning with a neighbor in the tiny village of Hecla. After stopping for Gary, they drove east to Westmoreland where Stan bought charcoal at the local Agway store. From there he had a choice of routes and could either drive out Cider Street and through Oriskany or go out Stone Road through Walesville over to Marcy and then north to Hinckley.

Aloft in the F94 jet, the two young lieutenants sped south through the open sky toward Rome while they looked for a weather balloon resembling a silver bowl. Hank got a blip on his radar screen indicating a target below them about 30 degrees to starboard off their line of travel. Bill backed off on the throttle, nosed over and rolled off to the right to see if he could eyeball the object. It did indeed look like a silver bowl. He backed off the throttle more to drop down directly toward it for a better look.

The official Air Force account is sealed for unknown reasons, but the USAF Project Blue Book UFO Report (Case 19-B - Walesville) published in 1976 says the crew believed the object was a weather balloon at an altitude of 8,000 feet, but when they dropped down for a closer look, the cabin temperature abruptly shot up and the fire warning light lit on the instrument panel. UFO enthusiasts have maintained that the object fired a blast of heat at the F94. The pilots said simply they presumed a catastrophic engine fire had erupted and that it would soon engulf the plane. They testified they stayed with the plane as long as they safely could before Bill ordered Hank to eject. Bill then quickly followed his radar man out of the plane.

Without a pilot, the jet rolled over and headed to earth at Walesville. It came screaming in across the farm fields and the creek, missed the center of the intersection by about 100 feet and slammed into a huge old elm tree, ripping itself apart. The wings tore away and catapulted toward the road. The engine separated from the airframe and described a huge arc before hitting the ground,

where it kept going. The fuselage, now a ball of fire, plunged through the roof of the newly renovated home. Doris had unfortunately re-entered the house. No one knows why. Hers was the last body found of those killed in the carnage that summer day.



Betty Lou saw her older siblings coming back from the creek as the sky screamed down at her and she ran from the patch of grass toward the boys and her older sister. She doesn't remember the plane hitting to this day, but a piece of it, or maybe it was a piece of the house, tore a deep laceration up her leg from ankle to thigh. The man from the general store saw her tumble and fall. He ran over to the house as it burned furiously and carried her back to the safety of the store, unknowingly jumping over one of the air-ground rockets the Air Force would later find.

Stan and Florence and Gary were passing the elm tree in their Chevrolet just as the plane hit. A wing full of jet fuel shot from the plane and ignited into a fireball that seemed to chase the Chevy into the intersection, where it caught up and exploded, engulfing the car and rocketing it into the front of Mary Peck's house. Mary, standing in her kitchen in the back of the house, staggered and fell backward in shock as her living room erupted and a wall of flame rushed down the hallway to her in the kitchen. Mary jumped to her feet and ran out the back door. Stan and Florence and their son Gary died in the fiery car wreck in what had been Mary's living room.

Lieutenants Bill Atkins and Hank Coudon parachuted safely to earth, a few miles away.

Doris' three older children, returning from the creek, survived along with Betty Lou. They saw

the entire panorama of destruction as it unfolded. The plane hitting the tree, the debris destroying their house, the screams of their mother, their baby sister cut down, the Chevy erupting in a ball of flames and shooting into Mrs. Peck's living room and the huge jet engine as it tore up the earth and plowed toward them and stopped just in time. They would never trust the sky again.

Floyd returned from work and stood all afternoon by the smoking pile of rubble that had been his new home, waiting for the firemen to find his wife, which they did in the evening, just as a cool breeze began moving across the fields and the sun was going down. It was Doris' favorite time of the day. Out beyond the creek and down low in the deepening blue sky hung a dim silver bowl.

I was ten years old that summer. I can't imagine what he was thinking, but my father took my older brother and myself to see the aftermath of the crash the next day. I will never forget it. The smoke and flames had mostly died out. People ... gawkers like us ... were milling around the destroyed homes. The Chevy sat burned to a crisp where Mary Peck's living room had been. The police didn't rope anything off back then.

A man who I was told was Mary's son stood guard over her partly destroyed home. The living room was never re-built, but the rear half of the house was later remodeled into a finished home. Doris' and Floyd's home was never rebuilt. The corner lot is still empty of any building, over fifty years later..

For a few months after the crash, I would shudder whenever I heard a jet flying low over our neighborhood back in Utica, a frequent occurrence 12 miles from an Air Base during the Cold War. One morning a jet engine's roar was so loud I was convinced we were about to be hit and I ran out of the house. Into the garden, I think. Go figure.

But the Chevy ... I'll never forget it. Lying near the car by the side of the road was a woman's skirt. It was grey and prim, like a teacher would wear. I suppose it couldn't have been Florence's. I don't know how it got there, I just remember it.

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