MAJOR JESSE MARCEL: FOLK HERO OR MYTHOMANIAC?

By Robert G. Todd

The grossly overblown Roswell incident would have remained buried in yellowed newspaper clippings without the "testimony" of Major Jesse A. Marcel, the intelligence officer at Roswell Army Air Field (RAAF) who took the telephone call from Chaves County Sheriff George Wilcox on that fateful Monday, July 7, 1947. Although certain crashed-saucer promoters have attempted to change the date Marcel first heard about the incident in order to accommodate the ever-changing "conventional wisdom," or to accommodate the flawed (or manufactured) "memories" of new "witnesses" as they surface, the fact remains that Marcel himself claimed he got the call on Monday, July 7, 1947.

Sheriff Wilcox presumably informed Marcel that W.W. "Mack" Brazel had ambled into his office with his story of linden-strange debris on the ranch he operated in Lincoln County, well outside Sheriff Wilcox's jurisdiction. According to Marcel, he immediately dispatched Brazel back to the ranch and saw "Wreckage...scattered over an area about three quarters of a mile long and several hundred feet wide." Marcel at first the object -- whatever it was -- hadn't actually struck the ground, but appeared to have exploded in the air and fell to the ground. One has to wonder why Marcel never mentioned seeing the long gouge the object allegedly made in the earth when it supposedly touched down and shed a large quantity of debris, but apparently not enough debris to prevent it from skipping off again only to crash at a second site miles away.

The crashed-saucer promoters have yet to explain this obvious discrepancy.

The debris described by Marcel -- both back in 1947 and decades later -- bears an uncanny resemblance to the debris one would expect to find from a train of weather balloons and radar targets. He described "small beams about three eighths or a half inch square with some sort of hieroglyphics on them that nobody could read." These "beams" looked like balsa wood, but, of course, they weren't balsa wood at all, according to Major Marcel. He said the beams couldn't be broken or burned, and he attributed similarly indestructible qualities to the other bits of debris he saw. The tinfoil (which, of course, wasn't tinfoil at all) was as thin as the foil in a pack of cigarette papers, yet it couldn't be bent or even dented. Marcel claimed that "one of the boys" (never identified by name) went to him and told him that he had tried to dent the tinfoil with a sixteen pound sledgehammer, but it wouldn't dent, a claim Marcel apparently accepted without question, even though he hadn't witnessed the attempt himself. Major Marcel said "it was possible to flex this stuff [the tinfoil] back and forth, even to wrinkle it, but you could not put a crease in it that would stay, nor could you dent it at all."

To hear the crashed-saucer promoters tell it, Marcel's credibility is unquestioned. After all, he was the intelligence officer for the only atomic bomb unit then in existence in the entire world, an "elite" unit of hand-picked men who were chosen for their expertise. But just how reliable was he? To find out, I obtained a copy of his military personnel file, which consists of nearly two hundred pages of material relating to his career in the Air Force.

In his interviews with various Roswell "investigators," Marcel made certain claims about his military service. One of those claims was that he had served in the National Guard both in Louisiana and Texas. Marcel's personnel file confirms that he served as an enlisted man in an infantry company with the Louisiana National Guard from June 1926 to June 1929, and that he was honorably discharged as a sergeant. The file also confirms that he served as an enlisted man in an artillery unit with the Texas National Guard from July 1936 to June 1939, and that he was honorably discharged with the rank of private. The file also shows that, in January 1942, while still employed with the Shell Oil Company in Houston, Texas, Marcel applied for an appointment as a second lieutenant in the "Officers Reserve Corps," and requested assignment to the Air Force Combat Command (AFCC). According to the records, in February 1942, Marcel was recommended for appointment as a second lieutenant in the "Air Force Reserve Corps," for duty with the Army Air Forces." He accepted the appointment and entered active duty in April 1942, just as he had claimed to Roswell investigators. But the personnel file becomes far more interesting when compared against Marcel's more impressive claims about his military service.

For example, Marcel claimed he was an aide to General Hap Arnold, and that it had been Arnold who decided he should go to intelligence school. This claim is false. As already noted, when Marcel applied for an appointment as a second lieutenant, he was still working for the Shell Oil Company in Houston, Texas. When Marcel accepted the appointment and entered active duty, his very first assignment was as a service officer at the Army Air Forces Intelligence School (AAFIS) in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The decision to send him to intelligence school had been made by the Air Force long before Marcel accepted the appointment and before he served even one day in the Army Air Forces. Not only was the decision to send Marcel to intelligence school made before Marcel even entered the service, but it was also decided that, after completing intelligence school, Marcel would be assigned to a combat unit as a "Photo Interpretation Officer," both decisions undoubtedly based on Marcel's employment at Shell Oil where he made maps from aerial photographs. Marcel's claim was a blatant falsehood. Moreover, the nature of his claim does not lend itself to an innocent explanation, except perhaps for delusions of grandeur.

Marcel also claimed he had "flying experience" prior to going into the Air Force, and that he had been a "private pilot" who had started flying in 1928. He said he had accumulated 3,000 hours of flight time as a pilot, and 8,000 hours of total flying time. His personnel file, however, does not support these claims. Nowhere on his application for appointment (completed and signed by Marcel in January 1942), or the "Classification Questionnaire for Reserve Officers" (completed and signed by Marcel in February 1942), did he mention any experience as a pilot. He didn't even mention that he had flown in aircraft as a passenger, although he did reveal important information that he had hired himself as a "navigator" and "radio operator" and that he had acted in school and community plays, and had sung in a quartet over radio and at parties. His participation in volleyball, baseball, and tennis was noted in other official records as well, but the closest he came to indicating any civilian involvement with anything airborne was his description of his work for Shell Oil Company, where he made maps from aerial photographs. If indeed he had a private pilot's certificate in civilian life, he never hinted at it in any of the many official forms and other documents he was required to complete or verify throughout his military career. It's almost certainly the case that no one ever prevented him from revealing this information to the Air Force.
future targets or targets of opportunity. The records show that, throughout his entire Air Force career, he had no aeronautical rating whatsoever, not as a bombardier, nor in any other crew position. Both of these requirements required extensive training, and nowhere in his file does it show he received such training, or that he was even considered for such training. Pilots also required extensive training, and, again, the file shows Marcel did not receive that training, nor was he even considered for such training. His Reserve Officer Career in December 1947, in spite of his flying status as "NONE." In another document in the file, dated 19 August 1948, General Ramey specifically stated that Marcel was NOT a rated pilot, a fact Ramey noted would limit Marcel's career in the Air Force.

Nevertheless, it appears that many World War II bomber pilots allowed each member of the crew (including enlisted men) an opportunity to fly the aircraft at least once, so they would be more familiar with the controls should the pilot and copilot become incapacitated. It seems this practice was credited for saving more than one ship and its crew. If Marcel piloted any aircraft during the war, it surely was when the pilot let him fly the plane to familiarize him with the controls. Had the pilot and copilot actually become incapacitated and had Marcel been called upon to save the ship, you could be certain we would have heard about it. That is the only set of circumstances under which Marcel would have been allowed to pilot an aircraft in combat.

As for his claim that he flew as a waist gunner, the records are clear that the wording for that position either. According to the file, Marcel was scored for his proficiency in the use of firearms, and scored an unimpressive 44% with a pistol. The records also show he fired 25 rounds from a Thompson submachine gun, 40 rounds from a carbine, and 20 rounds from a 22 caliber rifle. According to his service record, that was the full extent of his hands-on exposure to firearms. Furthermore, the position of waist gunner was an enlisted man's position, not an officer's position. Even so, bombardiers and navigators also had training as gunners — but intelligence officers did not. Nowhere does Marcel's service record show he had any training as a gunner.

Given the above facts, it might seem downright incredible that Marcel actually claimed he had been awarded five Air Medals because he shot down five enemy planes while manning the waist gun of a B-24 bomber. The official records, however, show otherwise. These records — some signed by Marcel himself — clearly show he was awarded only two Air Medals (one Air Medal and an oak leaf cluster for a subsequent award of the same medal), and that the citations giving the reasons for the awards make absolutely no mention of Marcel's having shot down even one enemy aircraft. In fact, the citations make it clear the medals were awarded because Marcel had flown on enough combat missions for enough hours to qualify for the awards.

While commendable, two Air Medals are not five. In terms of numbers, Marcel claimed he received 150% more Air Medals than he actually received, a significant exaggeration by any reasonable standard. He also grossly misrepresented the circumstances under which the medals were awarded. And, once again, there is no innocent explanation for this rather glaring discrepancy.

There may be a grain of truth to his claims of manning a waist gun, to the extent he was allowed to squeeze off a few rounds to see what it was like, but the claim he shot down five enemy aircraft and was awarded five Air Medals as a result is blatant lie. Five confirmed "kills" (officially called "victories") would have made Marcel an ace, and his achievement would have been noted in his service record in no uncertain terms. It is not.

Marcel also contributed to a misunderstanding regarding his rank. The military ranking system has changed significantly over the years, becoming less complicated in the process. The crashed-saucer promoters never fail to mention that Marcel attained the rank of lieutenant colonel, as if this automatically bestows credibility on anything he had to say. What they don't say (probably because they don't know it) is that Marcel's active-duty rank never rose above major. When he left active duty in September 1950, the highest rank he had attained while on active duty was still major. Marcel told receptive (if not eager) Roswell "investigators" that he was promoted to lieutenant colonel in December 1947, but that — incredibly — he didn't find out about the promotion until he left the service (presumably meaning when he left active duty). Because "They kept me so busy I never even looked at my personal files."

The official records show that Marcel was indeed promoted to lieutenant colonel in December 1947 — in the Air Force Reserve. Despite his active rank, his active-duty rank was still major. Nobody walked around saluting him and calling him "Colonel."

As for his claim that he didn't find out about the promotion until after he left the service, it was an outright lie. Not only did he know about the promotion, but he specifically requested and was granted it in a 29 December 1947 letter to his commanding officer of the 509th Bomb Group. By letter dated 20 November 1947, Marcel was informed he had been appointed a lieutenant colonel "in the Officers Reserve Corps," and was further advised that the appointment would be cancelled if he did not accept it by signing the oath of office "within a reasonable time." Marcel signed the oath on 1 December 1947, thereby accepting the appointment officially. Marcel claimed he had kept his son so busy that he didn't find out about the promotion until he left active duty in September 1950, almost three years later.

It appears Marcel felt the faithful niner lies about his background. He told Roswell "investigators" that he had a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Wisconsin, a master's degree in mathematics from Washington University, and an advanced degree in mathematics from Wisconsin State University and Louisiana State University (LSU).

The forms Marcel filled out himself prior to entering active duty show that he claimed he attended LSU for one year. On one form he said he had been "special student," while on another he said he had taken non-credit courses in mathematics. Physics and English. On records dated later, the one year at LSU grew to one and a half years, with no obvious explanation for the discrepancy, aside from the fact that the information had to come from Marcel himself. There are no records in the file that show the Air Force made any attempt to verify his attendance at LSU. When I wrote to LSU to verify Marcel's claim, they informed me they could find no record of him, although they did find the records for his son. A second search produced the same results.

Marcel claimed he completed work on his bachelor's degree at the Georgia Washington University, and that he had in fact received a degree. Yet, when I wrote to the University, they confirmed he had completed no degree. And, once again, a second search produced the same results.

No attempt was made to contact the other universities he claimed he attended, although there is no indication he ever lived in Wisconsin, Ohio, or New York where he would have had the opportunity to attend these universities in person. When he left active duty in September 1950, he apparently returned to Louisiana where he was self-employed as a television repairman. None of the records in Marcel's personnel file in the records dating as late as June 1958 when he was discharged from the Air Force Reserve, long after he left Washington, D.C., and returned to Louisiana. By 1950, he apparently returned to Louisiana — where he was self-employed as a television repairman. None of the records in Marcel's personnel file in the records dating as late as June 1958 when he was discharged from the Air Force Reserve, long after he left Washington, D.C., and returned to Louisiana. — show he attended any college, except for that one and a half years at LSU which Marcel himself had characterized as non-credit.

During a December 1979 interview with Bob Pratt, then a reporter with the National Enquirer, Marcel was asked how long he stayed at Roswell following the Roswell incident. He said he was transferred to Washington, D.C., the "latter part of 1947," where he said he was given a lengthy title of some kind. But, according to the official record, he was transferred to the 509th Bomber Command Wing at Walker Air Force Base (AFB), Roswell, New Mexico, until 16 August 1948, when he was transferred to SAC headquarters at Andrews AFB, Washington, D.C. That was more than a year after the Roswell incident had taken place. We'll never know for sure whether Marcel was lying, or
just badly confused. Whatever the cause, the crashed-saucer promoters use Marcel's erroneous statement to suggest that, contrary to what they might have expected if Marcel had really goofed on the Roswell incident, his superiors immediately promoted him and transferred him to a position of even greater responsibility. It sounds good, but the timing is off by about a year.

At SAC, Marcel was given the title of Chief, Technical Trends & Development, Allen Capabilities Section, Intelligence Division, Headquarters, presumably the lengthly title he had alluded to during the interview with Bob Pratt. Marcel remained at Andrews AFB until 9 November 1948, when he transferred -- along with SAC headquarters -- to Offutt AFB, Nebraska, where he held the same title. On 20 December 1948, he again transferred, this time to the Technical Branch, Washington (part of Headquarters Command) in Washington, D.C., where he was made the officer in charge of the "War Room, Intelligence Branch, Operations Division, AFOAT-1." AFOAT-1 (100th Special Weapons Squadron) was responsible for operating the Long Range Detection Program (LRDP), which was intended to alert the United States to atomic explosions that occurred anywhere in the world, especially in the Soviet Union.

Marcel furnished Pratt (and others) with details of his assignment at AFOAT-1. In fact, he made the rather astonishing (and equally impressive) claim that, when AFOAT-1 detected the first Soviet atomic explosion in 1949, Marcel himself had to write a report on it. "In fact," he claimed, "I wrote the very report President Truman read on the air declaring that Russia had exploded an atomic device." Marcel's statement was preposterous. No documentation has surfaced to support Marcel's claim of making the report. Marcel has also made other claims that are false, such as his claim that he was a member of the notorious "Black Baggers." No evidence has been found to support this claim.

The Roswell Incident, written by Charles Berlitz and William Moore and published in 1980, the authors lead the reader through the Roswell incident. Although Berlitz made no mention of the incident in the United States, he has been identified as the author of the story. The Roswell researchers have also been able to identify the debris. It was definitely weather tracking device..." he said.

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Way” made the prognostic leap to the conclusion — expressed in a March 7, 1995 letter to Prof. Charles B. Moore, formerly of the NYU Balloon Group at Alamosordo — that “Rawin targets would have been available to the 509th because of that.” The question remains, of course, whether this is the remains of something picked up on the Brazel Ranch. It seems logical, based on the fact the 509th participated in Operation Crossroads, they would have had access to the rawin targets.

Incredibly, what “Wrong Way” was saying was that radar targets were used during Operation Crossroads. Since the 509th Bomb Group participated in Crossroads, they would have had access to radar targets (as though the targets were standard issue equipment for A-bomb groups). And since Robert Porter’s testimony clearly suggests that the radar targets were used in the area around the aircraft going to Fort Worth, it must have been a radar target the 509th took out of their own stock of radar targets, so that it could be flown to Fort Worth where General Ramey could use it in place of the “real” Roswell debris.

It’s always interesting to see the pathetically desperate lengths to which the crashed-saucer promoters will go to avoid the obvious conclusion that the debris recovered from the Foster Ranch did indeed consist of weather balloons and radar targets.

Precise wind information was needed during atomic tests for a number of reasons, not the least of which being concerns for the safety of observers. Without accurate wind information, it would have been impossible to predict where radioactive fallout might come down. Radar targets were specialized weather equipment that afforded accurate measurements of wind direction and speed. They were not necessary to deliver atomic bombs to their targets, and they certainly weren’t necessary to detonate atomic bombs once dropped on their targets. Contrary to what “Wrong Way” would have us believe, radar targets were not standard-issue equipment for atomic bomb groups, which had no use for them.

Marcel also claimed he got shot down once, on his third mission. Not only did he claim he got shot down, but he also claimed that, when he bailed out, his main parachute malfunctioned and failed to open. He said he bailed out at eight thousand feet and fell six thousand feet before he got his reserve parachute open, leaving him a margin of error of only two thousand feet. When Bob Pratt asked Marcel if everyone survived, Marcel said, “All but one crashed into a mountain.” One gets the feeling Marcel would have claimed he had been one of the men who died when he crashed into the mountain, if he thought he could get away with it. Apparently it would have taken a discrepancy that obvious in nature before certain of the crashed-saucer promoters started doubting Marcel’s veracity. Marcel’s personnel file does not confirm his claim of being shot down, nor does it dispute it. But considering his other fanciful claims, there is no doubt.

Given Major Marcel’s documented inclination toward Walter Mitty-like fantasies, and his propensity for making wildly exaggerated claims, coupled with his embarrassment over having made a stupid mistake back in 1947, any statements he made in connection with the Roswell incident are virtually worthless, except to the faithful who will continue to cling to Marcel as a knight in shining armor. In the State of New Mexico, Paul Davids did his level best to turn Major Marcel into a folk hero who blazed the trail to the “truth” about the Roswell incident. But the truth is that Major Marcel was a mythomaniac who was responsible for the brouhaha back in 1947, and without whom the Roswell story would never have lived again in the 1980s and 1990s. Clearly Marcel had a problem with the truth.

In Marcel’s “testimony,” we see the origins of every sensational claim being made about the Roswell incident, repeated and embellished by “witnesses” — real and imagined—who have “discovered” long-lost footnotes. Although the original reports did not mention the recovery of bodies, his face-saving claim that the debris was “not of the Earth” certainly opened the door for others to make that claim. Marcel primed the pump of sensational claims, and it’s been gushing ever since.

The Roswell incident has emerged as a myth of such power and allure that it is no longer in anybody’s best interests to seek to control. The Roswell profits from increased tourism. The supposed Roswell “witnesses” get their two hours of fame, and immortality in the history books. The Roswell “investigators” garner the adulation of their peers (assuming they have any), and the royalties from book and movie deals. The UFO “organizations” enjoy a new respectability they otherwise haven’t been able to achieve after nearly forty years of worthless “research.”

It’s time the fanatical true believers (if indeed that’s what they are) started questioning the accuracy and veracity of the “testimony” of these people. They are using the Roswell case to give their speculations a veneer of respectability. They pervert the Roswell incident, using it to make it appear as though they have witnessed something that cannot be explained by the physics of our planet.


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Happy Holidays!
FROM THE "STAFF" OF
The Cowflop Quarterly

Comments, suggestions, complaints and gripes should be directed to
Robert G. Todd.

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