

Weather balloons

by BRIAN LOCKHART

In 1947, something strange happened near Roswell, New Mexico.

An object of debatable origin fell out of the sky and crashed in the desert.

Early reports suggested it was a 'flying saucer,' but those reports were quickly withdrawn.

The term 'flying saucer' was originally coined the same year as the Roswell incident when someone saw a strange object in the sky and referred to it as being 'saucer shaped,' to the media, and the phrase was born.

While reports started going around about this mysterious object in the desert, the U.S. military got involved, which itself is curious because what does the military have to do with aviation failures? That's a civilian agency that handles those things. Even so, once the military was involved, that just heightened the public's curiosity.

The military finally announced that the down object was in fact, a weather balloon.

Ah the weather balloon - the foil for many conspiracies over the years.

Apparently, at one time, there must have been thousands of these things floating around the sky, taking barometric readings and high altitude temperatures because, for several decades, UFO sightings and other phenomena seen in the skies were always attributed to another weather balloon floating unchallenged through the airways.

I guess it never occurred to anyone that having a large balloon bobbing about in open space would be a hazard to aircraft. Even if they did go to heights above which most aircraft can fly, they still have to come down at some point.

Balloons have no method of directing their path - they go where the wind takes them.

I'm not sure if weather balloons are still used. With Doppler radar and satellites that can map weather systems over a huge area, sending up a balloon seems a little old school unless the local Boy Scouts, Cadets, or science club is having a fun experiment.

Weather balloons are back in the news with the discovery of a couple of strange floating objects - one on the east coast and another on the west.

It was quickly determined they were of Chinese origin.

The Chinese claimed it was a weather balloon that was blown off course. That must have been one rather strong wind to take a functioning balloon with functioning electronics from Shanghai to the east coast of North America.

Experts say a relatively low-altitude balloon can observe a lot closer and see more details than a satellite image taken from a few hundred miles up.

It will take no time at all to determine what the balloon captured and what it was looking at once the debris is collected and analyzed.

The question is, what are the Chinese up to? They must have known a spy balloon would be detected and eliminated.

It was decided to shoot both balloons down as they posed a hazard to aircraft - at least that's the official version. The unofficial

version is we don't want Chinese balloons spying on us.

Shooting down a balloon isn't as easy as it sounds. Air-to-air missiles are designed to hit a fast-flying object, not a static target bobbing around in the wind.

As for using bullets, you can't just shoot something down when it's flying over land. The bullets used will fall to the ground, and you don't want to spend 20mm shells landing on your house. The debris from a falling object is also a risk to the public.

And just as I'm writing this, it was announced another object has been shot down over Lake Huron.

While it is interesting to note the Chinese are using mid-20th-century technology in their spying techniques, it should also be noted that it does point out some obvious errors on our part.

How could a spy balloon go undetected by NORAD until it made its way to the centre of the continent?

While NORAD is watching the radar for supersonic ballistic missiles and high-speed military aircraft, they missed the tortoise that was racing the hare. Apparently these balloons were drifting along for some time before someone noticed they were even there.

I'm pretty sure there's going to be some discussions about this at the next NORAD command meeting.

While the middle of Lake Huron isn't exactly a good place to spy on technology, industry or military installations, at the least the guys in some secret office in China had a nice travelogue video to watch for a while.