Journal of Scientific Exploration, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 189–196, 2018 0892-3310/18

BOOK REVIEW

No Return: The Gerry Irwin Story. UFO Abduction or Covert Operation? by David Booher. San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2017. 228 pp. ISBN: 978-1-938398-84-1.

When I was 12 or 13 years old I read a UFO story that set off a four-bell alarm in my head:

A young soldier named Gerry Irwin had a long drive ahead of him before he reached Fort Bliss, near El Paso, Texas. He was returning from leave after visiting family in Idaho and was now about halfway back to base, wending through a remote area of Utah on a cold February evening in 1959. A flash suddenly lit up the sky and the light glided down behind a nearby ridge. His first thought was it might be an airplane in trouble. Right or wrong, the responsible thing to do was to find out for sure, especially in a time before cell phones and at a place with no buildings or traffic in sight. He wrote "Stop" in shoe polish on the side of his car and left a note for any passer-by that he had gone to investigate a possible crash, please notify law enforcement. In his overcoat he climbed the ridge to see where the light had landed.

Later a search party found Irwin unconscious in the snow about a quarter-mile away. For nearly 24 hours he remained unconscious in the Cedar City hospital; no efforts by the doctors could waken him. During this time he muttered something about a jacket on a bush. When consciousness returned he learned that there was no plane crash, also that the jacket he had worn under his overcoat was not found. And he had no memory of anything that happened from the time he set off on foot from his car.

A few days later Irwin was flown to Fort Bliss, where he stayed in a psychiatric hospital ward for several days of observation before returning to duty. All seemed well until he began to suffer fainting spells, first while on base then again in downtown El Paso. Taken to a hospital, he awakened with few memories of the preceding three weeks. A month in the Army hospital followed, where he regained some of his memories and was released, but almost immediately went AWOL and took a bus back to Utah. There he walked miles into the desert straight to where his lost jacket hung on a bush. A piece of paper wrapped around a pencil protruded from a buttonhole of the jacket. He pulled out the paper and burned it without reading it. At that point he seemed to snap out of a trance that had controlled him, and realizing he was in trouble, turned himself in to the sheriff.

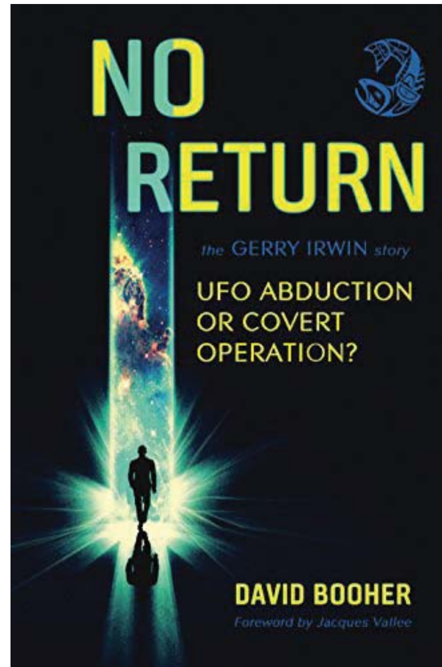
Back on base, he was disciplined then again returned to duty. Soon he reentered the Army hospital for another three weeks of observation, only to be released without the doctors finding anything wrong with him. The day after his release he went AWOL once more, was listed as a deserter at the end of August, and was never seen again.

An account of Irwin's story appeared in *Flying Saucers* magazine in 1962, three and a half years after the events occurred. The article was based on considerable newspaper coverage and extensive investigation by the leaders of APRO (Lorenzen 1962). Ray Palmer's *Flying Saucers* was the only newsstand magazine treating UFOs at the time. Jim Lorenzen and his wife Coral founded the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) in 1952 and it lasted until Coral's death in 1988. This pioneering group took an early and enduring interest in close encounter, occupant, and abduction reports when other respectable research groups shied away from them. Coral and Jim Lorenzen, who had befriended Irwin, invited him into their home, and tried to provide civilian psychological help only to have it thwarted by military authorities. Jim Lorenzen authored the article, and while the UFO connection seemed tenuous, he sensed that something remarkable, something portentous, had befallen this young man. What this "something" was lacked form and definition at that time, but even at my age I shared a feeling that extraordinary events and fearsome causes hid beneath the surface of this strange and frustrating history. But the trail had already gone cold.

Twenty years later when I catalogued the UFO abduction cases known by the early 1980s and undertook a comparative study of their content (Bullard 1987), I had forgotten about Gerry Irwin. At some point too late for inclusion in that work, I remembered his case and kicked myself for omitting it: because this story laid out a near-blueprint for the very abduction accounts I was reading, yet happened years before the public learned of any examples. Here in eerie prescience appeared the phenomenology of a mystery yet to come—missing time, amnesia, inexplicable behaviors, compulsion to return to the site, external "control," and PTSD-like symptoms. Gerry Irwin suffered them all, the potential victim of a phenomenon before it even had a name.

By good fortune another reader discovered this story late in 2013, and better still decided to pursue it. The case was colder than that February night from nearly 60 years ago, but David Booher proved to be the right person for the job, a resourceful and tenacious investigator driven by curiosity rather than a preconceived agenda. Thanks to his efforts we now have answers to many of the questions that vexed Jim Lorenzen—and in their place an even deeper mystery.

The original story ended with the startling disappearance of Irwin, but finding the man at the center of the mystery turned out to be almost as easy as looking in a phone book. Irwin was enjoying a vigorous old age in the rural Idaho area where he grew up. He proved to be a genial man willing to meet with Booher and together they conversed at length about his life. Irwin had good biographic memory with one striking exception—the year and a half following his Utah experience. This memory loss was profound. He did not recall writing "stop" on the car, or the note to call police, being flown from Utah to Fort Bliss, his various hospital stays, meeting the Lorenzens, his return trip to Utah, or his court martial for desertion and its aftermath. The gap puzzled both men and directed the investigation toward every source that could fill in this hole.



Newspaper accounts proved informative. So did the APRO files on the case, including Coral Lorenzen's correspondence concerning Irwin with psychologist Carl Jung. Irwin's service records, which contained medical reports on his stays in Army hospitals, filled in many blanks, as did a letter written by Sheriff Otto Fife less than two weeks after the incident. Fife was the first person to question Irwin when the young man regained consciousness in Cedar City, and despite Irwin's sketchy memories, some details are intriguing. According to the sheriff's letter, Irwin described the object as large and shooting out light so that he thought it was on fire; passing overhead and continuing to send light upward from behind the ridge. He climbed the ridge in foot-deep snow expecting to see a burning airplane when he reached the top, and in fact the light grew brighter the nearer he came to the crest. Then he blacked out.

One thing certain was Irwin became all too familiar with hospitals over the five months after that night in February. Several days in the Utah hospital, more days in the Fort Bliss Army hospital, an El Paso hospital when he passed out on the street followed by 32 days back in the psych

ward at Fort Bliss, and finally three more weeks after he returned there at his own request in July—all in all Irwin spent about a third of his time under hospital care during those months. What happened during his stays, what the doctors found and the treatments they prescribed, comprise a clearly significant piece of the puzzle. And his case was truly puzzling: No physical injury or cause could be found. Tests for epilepsy were negative. The Utah doctors said he seemed to be asleep but simply wouldn't wake up. When Irwin entered the Fort Bliss hospital for a second time, a doctor expressed surprise that the soldier did not remember him after only a few weeks had passed. Strange too was Irwin asking, "Were there any survivors?" as soon as he regained consciousness in El Paso, and thinking it was February 20 when it was really March 16.

A part of the story hitherto unknown came to light in Irwin's service records. He went AWOL in July and was listed as a deserter, but he was not lost forever. By his own admission he went to the back country of Idaho in an effort to clear his head, having gotten no help from medical science. This self-therapy in the wilderness worked for him, insofar as he no longer suffered from compulsions or blackouts; and while memories lost during past months remained lost, he suffered fewer bouts of amnesia going forward. Whether he turned himself in or was apprehended remains uncertain, but in October he returned to the Army to face charges. Acquitted of desertion, he nevertheless served seven months in Leavenworth on lesser counts, after which he resumed his duties and remained in the Army until his enlistment ended in 1966.

Some possible solutions to Irwin's strange story already suggest themselves: Did he fake it? He was due back on base the same day he was driving through Utah, so he would arrive AWOL and thereby had motive to contrive an excuse. But the prospect of peeling a few potatoes and cleaning some latrines looks minor in comparison to the trouble his hoax, if it was a hoax, actually caused him. He stood to gain little and lose much. Then too, he kept up the ruse for months and deceived multiple doctors in an act so convincing that it surely deserved an Oscar. Or maybe he was "bucking for a discharge." His commanding officer seems to have thought so, and took such a dim view of mental problems in soldiers that he promised to make Irwin's life miserable. Moreover, Irwin wanted to stay in the Army. He had an excellent prior record and built an excellent record subsequent to Leavenworth, rising in rank to sergeant, entrusted with running a division radio school in Germany, commanded a reconnaissance patrol truck, and went to Austria as an instructor for American communications equipment. As a civilian he worked as a technician for Kodak and was promoted to a supervisory position. The whole course of his life contrasts so sharply with

his “forty miles of rough road” in 1959–1960 that a hoax seems wholly out of character.

Was he suffering from some deep psychological problem? Amnesia, blackouts, and trance-like behavior point that way, and an Army psychologist reported Irwin was hostile, argumentative, and paranoid during his second stay in the psych ward. Carl Jung offered ambulatory automatism, wherein someone suffering unconscious dissatisfaction with a situation may escape by forgetting a former life and starting a new one, as a possible solution for Irwin’s condition. The Lorenzens noted that he had become nervous and stammered as his memory lapses and hospital stays continued, while Irwin himself became sufficiently alarmed at his deteriorating mental state to request a third hospital confinement in July. Despite all these indications, Irwin’s hostility owed more to frustration over doctors unable to treat his condition and unwilling to take it seriously, than to elusive psychological causes. Moreover, the very characteristics noted by the psychologist are also characteristic of PTSD. Without doubt Irwin’s bouts of amnesia and inexplicable behaviors were psychological problems. The more important question is, did psychopathology cause them, or were they the effects of something else?

A matter worth remembering is that the government carried out mind- and behavior-control experiments during the 1950s. The CIA’s MKUltra program was perhaps the most notorious of these efforts, using soldiers, prisoners, and mental patients as human guinea pigs, voluntary or otherwise. The tools of the trade included drugs like sodium amytal, insulin, and LSD, electric shock, and hypnosis. Such experiments went on at Leavenworth. Any ties to Fort Bliss are uncertain, but Booher uncovered some disturbing clues among Irwin’s hospital records. His doctors gave him sodium amytal more than once and apparently learned no new facts about the Utah incident, but Irwin made strange claims about a “special intelligence” that had instructed him to reveal nothing. His memories also seemed to be “wiped clean” sometimes on an almost day-to-day basis. “Truth serum” and related drugs can do more than detect lies. They can also be used to erase memories, either wholesale or on a more limited scope, and make subjects more susceptible to suggestion. For information on mind-control experiments, see Booher (pp. 44–49, 146–148, 176–178) and Project MKUltra (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_MKUltra). Post-hypnotic suggestion might also program a subject to take instructed actions while in a trance or fugue state. I usually hit the “off” button at the first hint of a conspiracy theory, but Booher’s evidence and arguments build a case that is circumstantial yet too plausible to dismiss out of hand.

If Irwin served as a “psyops” subject, he was likely an unwitting victim,

and any such "treatments" he received stayed off the record. This theory explains his striking lapses of memory, his entranced return to Utah, perhaps who instructed him to burn the paper in his jacket, and his personality change from a first-rate soldier into an erratic one. This situation he did not understand provided reason for his anger and frustration, also drove him to escape for self-preservation's sake once he realized he was going in and out of hospitals and getting worse instead of better. A suggestive case can be made for mind-control activities, but did they serve as primary or secondary drivers behind Irwin's story?

Irwin's problems did not begin in the psych ward of an Army hospital. They began that night in Utah when he climbed a ridge to see if an aircraft had crashed. He passed out near the crest and wasn't fully himself again for a year and a half. Irwin stated several times to his doctors that he thought the fiery object was responsible in some way for his condition, and maybe with good reason. The jacket that Irwin said he wore under his overcoat was not found by the search party, nor was he wearing it when he reached the hospital in Cedar City. He returned to Fort Bliss with no idea what happened to it. On April 18 he felt a compulsion to return to Utah, hopped a bus to Cedar City, and walked several miles into the desert along Route 14 and straight to the bush where his jacket hung. Only this site was not where he saw the object and lost consciousness. That place was along Route 20, some 40 miles to the northeast. The sheriff and the newspapers confirm the Route 20 site as the place where Irwin and his car were found, yet somehow the jacket reached a spot far removed and Irwin walked to it without conscious awareness of its location.

No one other than Irwin saw the jacket or the paper he said he burned. This lack of evidence casts doubt on his whole account of the return to Utah, though his presence in Cedar City was no fake since he turned himself in to the sheriff. He had no other apparent reason for going to Utah and spent no more time than he needed to walk to and from the site. A second possibility is that he was manipulated by mind control to seek an imaginary jacket, perhaps as nothing more than an experiment. A third option advocates the primacy of experience: that an aerial craft like a helicopter carried him from the Route 20 site to the Route 14 site, and there he left his jacket on a bush with a note before being returned to the original site. Searchers found no other footprints in the snow but Irwin's, so no second party on the ground could have transported his jacket. The mysterious intelligence that compelled his return trip to Utah might belong to government agents who realized he had seen something he should not have seen, and sent him back to destroy whatever compromising evidence the note with the jacket contained.

The hoax solution for both the jacket episode and for the whole Irwin

story may best satisfy the skeptics. It is safe and conventional, but it leaves many questions unanswered. An appeal to psychological causes, or even to the more audacious psyops solution, may gain favor with others. Here again some parts fit while some do not. The flying object solution can explain the misplaced jacket, but the idea that a chance encounter with a helicopter turned Irwin's life upside down is hard to swallow. He suffered unconsciousness and amnesia even before he entered a military hospital, and manifested the characteristics of traumatic stress that his treatments may have exacerbated, but do not seem to have originated. Perhaps psyops operatives flew along remote roads and swooped down on hapless travelers to inject and torment them, but some parameters of possibility apply here, and such a scenario seems quite out of bounds.

Another kind of flying object offers a final possibility—an unidentified flying object, not in the neutral sense of an unrecognized conventional object but a UFO, a mysterious unknown that nevertheless manifests recurrent properties. This kind of object could account for the lighted object Irwin saw. It could have swept him away and back again; it would give him reason to leave the note in his jacket as a memorial of the event. All else that followed—the blackouts, amnesia, compulsions, the hidden agency intruding into his life, and the symptoms of traumatic stress—have become familiar aspects repeated in what we now call UFO abductions. Incomprehensible then, this sort of experience now has a name and a home. We can wonder if the Army wanted to "cure" Irwin of claiming to see a flying saucer, or to erase the memory of a UFO experience. We can also appreciate the criticism that "UFO" has come to mean a magical fiction that can adapt to explain anything, but counter to that at least in Irwin's case, we have an independent set of effects that reappeared in the Barney and Betty Hill abduction and many more to follow. Out of all the alternatives, only the UFO narrative covers all the bases.

Any summary of David Booher's cumulative evidence and argument can amount to no more than a pale shadow. A review can do feeble justice to his painstaking research, and only by a full reading of the book can the reader appreciate the force of the case he builds. The author got to know his subject, to understand Gerry Irwin as a person. He dug up documents and records long-lost and heretofore unexpected, looked at them from multiple angles and interrogated their possible meanings for the overall story. The writing is engaging and lucid, the thinking clear and rational, with no beating the drum for a pet theory. How to interpret the findings is left up to the readers; they can understand Irwin's case, UFO abduction, and the relationship between the two in whatever terms they choose. What matters here is to establish a solid scaffolding of facts, inferences, and theories from

which sound conclusions can follow. No final and iron-clad solution emerges from these long-removed events—there is a "fog of life" as confusing as the "fog of war"—but after the components of this remarkable story are weighed and examined, the answer that best makes sense turns out to be the most extraordinary. It wins by points rather than by knockout, and is sure to send the doubters running toward a hoax or psychological alternative; but the case for a unitary phenomenon between Irwin's experience and UFO abductions, whatever they are, is hard to escape.

No Return is an exemplary case investigation and a model for careful argumentation amid abundant and sometimes contradictory evidence. I hope other investigators will profit from the author's example, and that David Booher will get fired up over other mysterious anomalies and continue the fine work he accomplishes here.

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