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Part 8 - Peculiar Phenomenon: Early United States Efforts to Collect and Analyze Flying Discs

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*If this was the U. S. Army's first attempt to shoot down a flying disc,
where did the disc go? There was no explanation about why the launched 'V-2,'
or modified Wasserfall SAM missile (Hermes A-1), vaporized." - J. Andrew Kissner*

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Trouble in the Desert (cont.)

Crash in Juarez, Mexico, on May 29, 1947

The explosion at Mt. Franklin was witnessed by General Homer and reported by the *El Paso Times* the following day. That explosion occurred more than ten minutes before a *second explosion* at least twenty-five miles further south. General Homer dispatched troops to look for missile wreckage and investigate the first crash site ten to fifteen miles northwest of Ft. Bliss towards WSPG. [Source: Ibid.]

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El Paso Times, El Paso, Texas, May 30, 1947.

America's First Surface-To-Air Missile Strike Against An Unidentified Radar Object?

My sources say it was America's first surface-to-air missile strike against an unidentified radar object (disc) - a target that was possibly crippled by the first explosion and continued to fly in airspace north of Ft. Bliss until it eventually impacted within one mile of the new Buena Vista Airport four miles south of downtown Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, at 7:32 p.m. local time. Elapsed time of the total event was *seventeen* minutes

Maximum engine burn time for either a V-2, or a modified Wasserfall, would not have exceeded three minutes. A three minute burn would have allowed either rocket to travel 125 miles. But the impact crater was 55 miles south of WSPG Launch Row, a distance that would have been covered by the May 15, 1947, "Alamogordo V-2" in slightly over five minutes after achieving an altitude of 80 miles. What caused this May 29, 1947, event to last for *seventeen minutes*?

[Editor's Note: According to the White Sands Missile Range Museum, the Juarez, Mexico rocket crash was a "modified V-2" Hermes II: "The V-2 rocket was the world's first large-scale rocket and was developed by Germany in WWII as a weapon. It had the capability of delivering a 2,000 pound warhead at supersonic speeds to target areas 150 miles away. The Germans fired about 3,600 V-2s at targets in England and on the continent during WWII.

"The architect of the rocket was Dr. Wernher von Braun who based much of his design on the pioneering work done by Dr. Robert Goddard during the 1930s near Roswell, N.M. In late 1945, 300 railroad freight cars of V-2 components captured in Europe arrived at White Sands. From 1946 to 1952, 67 V-2 rockets were fired here. The use of these rockets launched the United States into the Space Age.

"The V-2 provided the U.S. with valuable experience in the assembly, pre flight testing, handling, fueling, launching and tracking of large missiles. The scientific experiments conducted aboard the V-2 gave us new information about the upper atmosphere, gave us our first photographic look back at the earth from space, gave us the first large two-stage rocket and carried the first biological experiments into space.

"Also, an errant, highly **modified V-2, referred to as Hermes II, crashed just outside Juarez, Mexico on May 29, 1947**. No one was injured but the incident prompted White Sands to develop a safety program..."]



Left: Hermes A-1 (Wasserfall) surface-to-air missile. **Right:** V-2 rocket.
Photographs from White Sands Missile Range history.



Hermes A-1 at Launch Complex 33 (national historic site), White Sands Missile Range. Photo provided by Andrew Kissner.

The *El Paso Times* and *The New York Times* both wrote in their May 30, 1947, editions about the Juarez crash. Juarez eyewitnesses reported "a blinding flash of light" followed by a tremendous pressure wave, followed by the appearance of a mushroom cloud. The mushroom cloud excited local rumors that an atomic bomb had exploded. The concussion of the blast was sufficient to crack windows six miles north of the crash site, while an electric clock stopped, apparently due to some blast effect at the El Paso County Sheriff's Office. The ground shock generated by the explosion was felt 35 miles northwest of the impact crater.

An American Airlines pilot landing at the El Paso Airport at 7:41 p.m. said that he saw "the flames and smoke" at his altitude. "If I had been 30 seconds earlier, at the height I was flying, I would have been directly in its path."

Whatever the object had been was not apparent - it was totally vaporized by the explosion. Small shreds of "burned gray metal fused with molten sand and rock," were found around the 50' x 50' x 24' crater. There was no V-2 rocket body at the bottom of the hole. Strangely, there was nothing in the hole except dirt. What crashed and made the hole?

MPs stationed at Ft. Bliss and other U. S. Army personnel from WSPG rushed across the border into Mexico in an attempt to secure the downed object. They were met at the crater by Mexican troops and summarily evicted. Mexico's General Enrique Diaz Gonzalez commanded the Juarez Garrison. Gen. Gonzalez placed Juarez off limits to U. S. Army personnel for several weeks after the explosion. The entire Juarez Garrison's rocket recovery efforts resulted in a small pile of debris that fit on top of a desk.



Front Page, *El Paso Times*, May 30, 1947, detonation crater in Juarez, Mexico, after May 29, 1947, WSPG launch.

Two Mexican pilots landed their plane shortly before the object detonated. They reported seeing a flash of light that temporarily blinded them. The light was followed by a deafening explosion. Several spectators at the crash site were interviewed by a local reporter. The eyewitnesses said they thought that a "piece of the moon" had fallen out of the sky. If this was the U. S. Army's first attempt to shoot down a flying disc, where did the disc go? There was no explanation ever given about why the launched "V-2," or modified Wasserfall SAM missile (Hermes A-1), *vaporized*.

Col. Turner at WSPG did not see the Juarez crash site, but he told the press: "There were no explosive materials in V-2s. If any fuel had remained in the rocket, which was highly unlikely, it would have simply burned." But there was no fire in the crater. A brush fire started spontaneously by the heat of the explosion scorched the surrounding desert. [Sources: *El Paso Times* and *The New York Times*, May 30, 1947.]

Juarez, Mexico, Rocket Failure and Vaporization Blamed on Gyroscope Failure

An effective cover story was immediately provided to the press and public that another V-2 launched from White Sands Proving Ground had gone astray, experienced a total gyroscope failure, flew 180 degrees off course and crashed in Mexico. Interestingly, the Technical Director at WSPG and spokesman for the V-2 program, Herbert Karsh, immediately left WSPG due to a "family illness" after it was announced that a V-2 had gone off course into Mexico. In addition, Col. Turner immediately left for Washington, D. C. and did not reschedule his return to WSPG until June 9, 1947.

It was never learned what the security detail dispatched by General Homer found at the site of the first explosion on the west side of the Franklin Mountains east of Anthony, New Mexico - *twelve minutes before* the explosion in Mexico.

Newspaper Editor Saw "Two 1st Magnitude Stars" When Juarez Rocket Veered Off Course

Three days after the Juarez crash, the editor of the *Las Cruces Sun-News* reported that he and his neighbors were eyewitnesses to part of the event:

"We were caught in an undesirable circumstance Thursday night when just by chance, we looked toward the Organ Mountains in time to see the 'modified

V-2' rocket that caused so much excitement a few moments later by landing near Juarez, Mexico, climb into the air. It seemed to slant a little to the south, in contrast to the normal almost vertical flight path.

"The vapor trail a V-2 leaves gives the rocket a 'toy' sky rocket appearance for a few seconds. Then the vapor trail ended, but in the gathering dusk, the orange colored exhaust could be seen and followed for a long time. The rocket climbed high, almost straight up until it seemed to be nearly over Las Cruces - actually, it was many miles east of the city - then turned to the south."

Perhaps that turn to the south was because the launched rocket was a modified Wasserfall SAM missile in the Hermes program, which unlike V-2 rockets, were *remotely steered* to their targets by a ground crew after launch.

The *Las Cruces Sun-News* editor continued:

"At that instant, as the rocket, its exhaust resembling another bright star, drifted past two first magnitude stars and the moon, we realized something was wrong, that a news story of top importance was in the making. We weren't alone in seeing it. Dozens near our residence could be heard shouting to members of their families and friends to come out and see the rocket.

"We were wrong about one thing, however. The long period (comparatively) we could see the exhaust of the rocket made us believe a new type of missile was being tested, not a V-2 which burns less than 70 seconds. Since details of the rocket's construction are secret, however, it is possible some American alterations to the German V-2 make for a longer burning period and consequently, a greater range.

"We aren't making any apologies for the Army - it can usually take care of itself, but the fact that two V-2s have gone astray recently (May 15 and May 29, 1947) is no reason to condemn the guided missile program or to worry over the possibility that one of them may land in Las Cruces. In the first place, firings are watched carefully and malfunctions are usually noticed almost immediately." [Source: *Las Cruces Sun-News*, June 1, 1947.]

According to the Astronomy Department at New Mexico State University, the sun went down on May 29, 1947, at 7:06 p.m. local time. So the western sky would still be bright at 7:16 p.m. when the *Las Cruces Sun-News* editor said he saw "two first magnitude stars." His eyewitness observation is about one month before the national headlines that pilot Kenneth Arnold saw "flying saucers" on June 24, 1947, and others saw them in northwestern New Mexico. The two New Mexico Navajo reservation eyewitnesses also thought they were seeing a star, but it was broad daylight. Then after watching the "star" for awhile, it began moving and disappeared over the horizon to the southeast, proving it was *not* a star.

Wild V-2 Rocket 'Invades' Mexico; Backtracks in a White Sands Test

NEW YORK TIMES
May 30, 1947 p.1

By HANSON W. BALDWIN
Special to The New York Times

FORT BLISS, El Paso, Tex., May 29—A wild German V-2 rocket, launched from the Army's White Sands proving ground in New Mexico, fell tonight near the Mexican town of Juarez, just across the border from El Paso, alarming residents of this area. No casualties were reported.

The rocket was launched from the desert firing site at Tularosa Basin, forty-four miles from El Paso. It soared into the night sky, but, instead of arching northward into the desert, it backtracked, roared southward over El Paso and fell with a loud explosion somewhere south of the Rio Grande.

The rocket, twenty-eighth in a series of test firings that the Army has been conducting during the past year, had been scheduled to have been fired at 11 A. M. today,

but various mechanical difficulties postponed the firing until 4 P. M.

A party of Army officers, headed by Lieut. Gen. Leonard T. Gerow, commandant of the Army's Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and including Maj. Gen. John L. Homer, commanding the Army's Anti-Aircraft Artillery and Guided Missile Center at Fort Bliss, was on hand to watch the spectacular take-off.

The giant forty-six-foot rocket, weighing more than fourteen tons fully loaded at take-off, sputtered and sparked and shot irregular flames out of its Venturi burner, but refused to budge from its launching platform. The twenty-five-ton thrust of the powerful rocket motor which lifts the giant missile, the largest rocket man has

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ERRATIC ROCKET FALLS IN MEXICO

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yet built, did not operate, and not even the first propulsion was fully effective. The "shoot" was called off, General Gerow took off in his plane for Fort Leavenworth and General Homer and this correspondent returned to Fort Bliss, on the outskirts of El Paso.

At about 7:20 P. M., the fort and the towns of El Paso and Juarez were shaken by a great explosion. Investigation revealed that the rocket, which normally blasts out a crater seventy-five feet wide

and thirty-six feet deep, had landed somewhere near Tepyac Cemetery, about two and one-half miles from the center of Juarez, long a favorite resort city for tourists.

Lieut. Col. Harold R. Turner, commanding officer at White Sands, the nation's principal proving ground and experimental center for giant rockets, revealed that the V-2 had been fired at 7:15 P. M. after considerable trouble.

The proving ground personnel had seen that the flight was not entirely normal but expected the rocket to fall somewhere in the vast desert reservation.

It was the first rocket of the twenty-eight fired which actually "backtracked" or soared in the wrong direction, although one rocket some weeks ago fell not far from the town of Alamogordo.

Front page story, The New York Times, May 30, 1947.

Lt. Col. Harold R. Turner, commanding officer at White Sands Proving Grounds, N. M., left El Paso for Washington Friday after a German V-2 rocket went out of control Thursday night and crashed in a blazing explosion across the Mexican border. The rocket landed three miles south of Juarez, on a desert knoll. No injuries were reported.

Before leaving, Colonel Turner announced a new device, now being prepared, that would bar accidents like Thursday's near-tragedy. It would keep a rocket from getting off course by failure of equipment, or through human error, Turner said. He is due to return to White Sands June 9.

At White Sands, officials Friday said the rocket was tracked until it fell below the radar-tracking level, and that the flame and smoke

Mexico City (U.P.).—Raymond Geist, first secretary of the U. S. Embassy here, Friday visited the Foreign Ministry to express the U. S. Government's regrets over the explosion of a V-2 rocket in Mexican territory Thursday night.

From the blast were seen at the Proving Grounds 40 air miles away.

The rumbling explosion, caused by the impact at terrific speed, was heard in Anthony, N. M., and other points 20 miles away from the landing site.

The V-2 firing was experimental and confidential. No special instruments were said to have been carried. All that remained of the four-and-a-half-ton missile, when the first of a mob of curious spectators flocked to the 50-foot wide pit, were twisted bits of metal, burned an ashen gray.

Several El Pasoans watched the vapor trail of the rocket, curling through the sky seconds after 7:30

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Army Officers Investigate Rocket Crash

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p. m., when it was launched at White Sands. Many reported seeing a brilliant flame in the darkening sky and a mushroom of smoke that started wild rumors of an atom bomb. Two witnesses told of seeing the flame and smoke four seconds before they heard the blast.

Veterans of the Battle of Britain saw the explosive noise was as frighteningly terrific as when a loaded V-2 dropped.

An American Airlines pilot, bringing a plane in for a landing at 7:41 p. m. Thursday, told of seeing the flames and smoke from the rocket. "If I had been 30 seconds earlier," he said, "at the height I was flying, I would have been directly in its path."

Army ordnance officials and civilian technicians working on the rocket project returned to White Sands Friday to complete their investigation and make an official report of what may have become an international incident.

Herbert L. Karsh, White Sands technical director, also left El Paso Friday, reportedly because of family illness.

The accident could have been avoided, Colonel Turner said, if a technician had pushed a button cutting off the fuel when a faulty gyroscope sent the rocket off its course. The device now being completed, he said, would have nothing to the judgment of a man, or of several men.

Front page, *El Paso Times*, May 31, 1947.

Continued in **Part 9** - Trouble All Over the World
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