

STARTLING

stories

Vol. 32, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FALL, 1954

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STARTLING STORIES. Published quarterly by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1954, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.50; single copies, \$.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In corresponding with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Fall, 1954, issue.
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



Illustrated by
ALEX SCHOMBURG

GROUNDING

By
William Sambrot

*They thought the Colonel
was seeing things—until
they saw them, too . . .*

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MARTIN sat back in his hard desk chair and looked out through the tinted window to where the slim, dartlike jets waited, poised on the sun-washed runways. A red and blue jet swooped down out of the brilliant, cloudless sky and shot along the runway, wheeled and rolled back toward the parking strip. It was the courier ship from Washington.

The colonel frowned, his sunburned face breaking into sharp, diagonal lines. The courier plane was used only in cases requiring utmost secrecy. And always, it brought trouble. Today, it brought trouble for Martin.

He waited, tapping a lean finger on the desk, his eyes distant but not seeing the harsh ridge of up-flung barren mountains, looming clear and incredibly near despite the fact they were sixty miles away—sixty miles of alkali wasteland where only gila monsters moved, scuttling from rock to rock to escape the brazen sun.

Beyond those mountains was Project Breakaway, the Air Force's top secret attempt to fling a dart up high enough and fast enough to break free of earth's clutching gravity. It was Colonel Martin's job to command one group of jets that guarded the approaches to Project Breakaway. It had been a dull job—routine, boring—up until yesterday morning.

It was twenty-eight hours ago, to be exact, that Colonel Martin, Captains Morelli, Sayers and Ryan had sighted and chased the fantastic platelike object that zoomed, wobbled and ducked in circles about them even though, with all coal poured on, they were hitting close to eight-hundred miles an hour.

Morelli, Sayers and Ryan had never come back from that chase. At eight-hundred miles an hour, with visibility limited only by the farthestmost rim of the horizon, under a glaring desert sun, all three had plowed simultaneously into a sun-drenched ridge, a mere nine thousand feet above sea-level—a ridge, it appeared, they'd deliberately headed for and smashed into. How? Why had all three made the same error of judgment? Why had they dropped from thirty-thousand feet to nine thousand in a steep, zooming dive, flying formation, and not once mentioned it over their radio?

Why indeed? These were all questions asked Colonel Martin by suspicious security agents, Air Force Intelligence three-star generals, and, by direct TV hookup, the Air Secretary himself.

But the sixty-four dollar question they asked was: why hadn't Colonel Martin smashed into that ridge too? Good question. Unfortunately, his answer was so bad, it called for the serv-

ices of a trained alienist. They'd flown one in. He'd listened and asked for time. He was getting it.

Martin swung and watched the occupants of the red and blue jet swing down and stride quickly across the hot concrete.

He recognized one of the approaching men as Under Secretary of Air, Saunders. The other was General Breton, on the staff of G2. Regardless of whether or not they considered him insane, they felt that something had happened—something important enough to rate two next in rank to the top commanders.

THEY came in unescorted. He stood at attention until the burly general waved a hand rather irritably, putting him at ease, then he sank down again into his hard seat. Now it would start all over again. The questions, the careful scrutinizing of the plates he'd taken, the hard narrowed eyes, the disbelief—

"In your own words, again," the general was saying, "Will you repeat to Mr. Saunders what you told me over the TV hookup last night?" The general leaned forward and fumbled with the pile of color photographs on his desk. "Are these—the shots you took?"

Colonel Martin nodded wearily, sighed, looked briefly out the window and said in a soft even voice, "Captains Morelli, Ryan and Sayers and I took off at 0800—"

"Who gave permission for the flight?" Saunders cut in crisply. "Is it routine for your people to fly formations around here without some special alert?"

Martin stiffened slightly. "No sir. It was an unauthorized flight. My idea." He moistened his lips. "We are on twenty-four hours alert, of course—"

"A fat lot of good that would do if every group leader took off when he felt like it," the general sputtered, impaling Martin with eyes like blue icicles.

"We are allowed twelve hours a month flight time," Martin said. "I will admit I didn't file a plan or report my intention to take the group up—but that,

sirs, is important in view of what happened." He leaned forward. "I believe—I'm certain, sirs, that we caught—*them*—off guard." He chewed his lips at the sudden veiled look in Saunders eyes. It was plain they considered him mentally unhinged.

They waited, saying nothing, their faces as chill and immobile as marble. Martin spread his big, raw-knuckled hands.

"We took off. I flew lead, as usual," Martin began. "We were up to about twenty thousand and climbing when I ordered an attack pattern. We were doing about six hundred ground speed when Ryan, I believe it was, suddenly shouted over the radio, that something had just made a pass at him. We all saw it at once, after that, a round plate-like object, about thirty inches in diameter, maybe ten inches thick and the color of buffed aluminum. It moved sort of jerkily, wobbling back and forth and occasionally dancing up and down—almost as though it were attached to a string or something."

The two listeners exchanged glances. It was obvious what they were thinking, but Martin went doggedly on.

"I ordered the men to break formation but to remain at thirty thousand and keep it in sight. I put my ship on auto-pilot—I carry a camera and I wanted to get some shots. I did, about twelve color pix, aiming directly at the thing. I couldn't possibly have missed."

GENERAL BRERETON snorted and handed the developed prints to Saunders. Saunders examined each one, his brows lifting higher and higher. Finally he handed the pictures to the general and turned to Martin.

"Those pictures are utterly blank," he said quietly. "They show nothing but blue sky and a distant horizon. How do you account for that?"

"I can only say," Martin replied, "that the camera doesn't lie. I've taken too many shots with that camera not to know that it's in top condition. It couldn't—and didn't lie. *There was no*

flying disc in front of us."

"No!" The general frowned and sat up with a jerk. "First you tell us this story of an object darting and weaving about your formation—an object four men see and give chase. An object that led three good pilots to their death—and now you say there was no object!"

"It's the only explanation I can give for the way in which Morelli, Ryan and Sayers hit that peak," Martin said patiently. "As I say, my ship was on auto-pilot. I was shooting away—and at all times, *that disc was directly in front of me.*" He stopped and looked at the two to see if they caught the significance of what he'd just told them. They hadn't.

"Don't you understand—the others kept up a running commentary, each saying that the disc was directly in front of him—and all the time, unknown to me—they were in a steep dive and simultaneously, they hit that peak at nine-thousand feet."

There was another long silence, broken only by muffled sounds from the field outside—the chugging of fuel trucks, shouts of mechanics, the occasional crackling hum as a jet was fired up.

"Then it is your contention," Saunders said, "That each of you was suffering from a hallucination—a mirage, in fact. A mirage which took the form of a flying disc and which caused three trained pilots to fail to notice that they were losing altitude and heading directly into a mountain peak. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"It was not a mirage," Martin said. "It was a deliberately implanted impression."

"Explain yourself," the general said hoarsely. He exchanged a swift glance with Saunders.

"The disc suddenly wasn't there—after the others had hit, I imagine. I don't know for sure—but suddenly, the thing just sort of—turned off. It wasn't there. I looked around and saw the pillar of smoke far off to my left and rear but no following ships. I swung

around and tried to contact my men. No result. I went over the spot where the fires were and recognized them immediately as—the remains. I contacted the base. While I was hanging around up there, I had a lot of time to think. I realized then what I've already told you—that each of the men thought the disc was directly before him. Each followed it—to his death. I wasn't operating manually—my auto-pilot—” he smiled strangely—“isn't susceptible to—hypnotic suggestions—so it flew a straight course—at thirty-thousand.”

“You believe that you—and the others—were hypnotized into thinking you were seeing a flying disc. Is that it?” the general said dryly.

“I believe that we caught someone—some *thing*—off guard when we took off on an unannounced flight,” Martin said with firm conviction, ignoring the sudden reaction they showed. “I'm sure we were heading in a direction where some secret lay—without sufficient advance warning for whatever holds that secret to cover up. I'm positive we were hypnotized—lured away just like a mother quail pulls the broken wing stunt to get a dog away from her nest.”

“Doesn't that explanation strike you as unbalanced, to say the least,” Saunders said slowly. “What person could possibly have such powers—or devices, to hypnotize four men flying thirty-thousand feet above the earth at eight-hundred miles an hour?”

“No power on earth,” Martin said softly. “The Panamint Indians won't go near those mountains.” He gestured to the tinted window and beyond, to where the great range of jagged mountains gleamed luridly orange and purple under the slanting rays of the desert sun. “They have positive beliefs—not legends—about beings from other worlds who dig in the hills for shining metals . . . Who have great ships that fly. Beings who can make a man who comes too near die of thirst even though he carries water at his belt. Beings who can control the minds of men.” He hesitated. “That's why they named

those mountains—the Superstitions.”

“I'm afraid you'll have to find a better explanation than that,” the general said stiffly.

“You have the written reports of the radio men on duty,” Martin said. “They all heard Ryan, Morelli and Sayers talking. They back up every word I've said. You asked my opinion and I've told you. Someone—something, didn't want us snooping around when they weren't prepared for it—and they simply drew us away by means of delusion or mind control of some kind.”

“We've photographed every inch of this entire corner of the state,” the general said. “You have stated that the camera doesn't lie. We have observed nothing unusual in any of the many excellent photographs made of the area you flew over yesterday.”

MARTIN smiled briefly. “You observed nothing because they were ready for you. It wouldn't be much of a job for them to camouflage, if they're prepared in advance. I imagine they intercept every message in and out of here.”

“You make it sound very plausible,” the general said sourly. “But we're looking for something besides words.”

Martin rose and his lean figure towered over them. “I held this out because I wanted you both to understand what line of reasoning made me go back. I sound insane because, of course, what I've said isn't pleasant for human minds to accept.”

He brought out a large composite, constructed of carefully joined-together aerial photographs pasted on a board. “Yesterday, after I saw the smashed ships, and while I waited for the base to confirm, I went back over the route I'd taken while following the will-o-the-wisp disc—on auto-pilot. This time, I shot downwards—at the earth.” He slid the composite around so that it faced the two men. They came erect, eyes glittering, staring down at it.

“I didn't mention this over the TV hook-up last night, or to any of the

interrogators for reasons already given. I wanted to make certain only the highest echelon would see this." He handed the general a powerful magnifying glass. "Those ships must be a good thousand feet long, don't you think?" He laughed softly, a thin, triumphant sound that filled the room. "Who'd think that spiders—like those—could make such machines."

Saunders and the general stared grimly at the fantastic shapes and objects that were frozen in sharp clarity on the magnified photos. Great rounded buildings, connected with long, dully-gleaming walks. And here and there tall needle-pointed ships rested on broad concrete-like bases, their slender snouts pointed up towards the blue sky, while about their bases swarmed creatures that were squat and broad and many-limbed.

The two men looked at him, then turned once again to their scrutiny of the composite, their faces impassive, unchanging. Martin opened the desk drawer and piled half a dozen thin negatives near the general's elbow.

"Here are the negatives," he said. "You can see—they're genuine," he said.

"Genuine," Martin echoed. "And they grounded me because they thought I was insane!" He flashed a white grin. "But I won't be grounded after this—and neither will the rest of us, because not a hundred miles away, sirs, is the answer to everything—everything we've ever wanted to know. Project Breakaway?" He laughed aloud again. "Kindergarten stuff to them!"

"Perhaps they're not interested in teaching—kindergarten," Saunders said slowly. He gave Martin a piercing glance. "A most remarkable job, Colonel. Lucid thinking. You're to be congratulated."

"Thank you," Martin said. "I'm glad it convinced you."

"So much so," the general said, "That we'll have to leave with it immediately." He stuffed the negatives and composite into a briefcase. They shook

hands, exchanged a few more congratulatory words, then stepped out the door. Beyond them, he saw the alienist, Major Elliston, at the end of the hall. They shut the door quietly and Martin stared at it, a faint crease between his eyes. He licked his lips, swallowed once or twice and drew a deep, shaky breath.

THE door opened and the major came in. He looked curiously about the room. "Had the radio on?" he asked. "An awful lot of conversation in here, it seemed."

Martin sank into the chair, looking over at the sparkling pitcher of cool water on the sidetable. "Funny you should ask that," he said vaguely. "Didn't you recognize—"

"Better get ready for the big brass," the major interrupted. "And for God's sake, if you insist on that story about being hypnotized, at least make it a little more plausible than the one you told me—" He stopped and looked out the window. "Here they come now."

Martin whirled and stared out the green-tinted window overlooking the runway. A red and blue jet streaked along, wheels down, hit, bounced and braked to a stop. It wheeled about, flashing under the late sun, and rolled up to the parking strip.

"Another courier ship!" Martin murmured. "But, I don't—"

"Another—" the major looked curiously at him. "What do you mean, 'another courier ship'? That's the only one today—and one's too many, if you ask me."

Dry tongue scraping over dry lips, Martin stared at him, then back to the familiar red and blue jet. He swung and looked down the line of parked jets, straining to see the other red and blue which had landed over an hour ago. There was no red and blue jet there.

"Here they come now," the major muttered. "Holy cow! Saunders, Under-Secretary to the old man, no less. And General Brereton—G2." He turned to Martin. "Better give it to

them straight—" He broke off, seeing Martin's burning eyes in his drawn gray face, hearing the sudden strange rattling breath as he pawed weakly through the empty desk drawer.

"Negatives. Composite," Martin croaked. "Gone. *They* took them, and I never guessed!" His hands trailed limply and he fell across the desk, bounced and rolled onto the floor.

With a single bound the major was at his side.

"Good God! It's unbelievable!" he gasped.

He stared in horror at the dry lips, the swollen black tongue. In the space of seconds the hard young man was a limp scarecrow whose lips cracked and moved in a dry-as-dust whisper. The major bent his ear close to the withered mouth, listening.

"Water." The words were faint in his ear. "For heaven's sake—water."

The major reached up and lifted the big pitcher of cool water off the side-table. "Here, colonel, drink. Here's all the water you could want."

But already, it was too late.