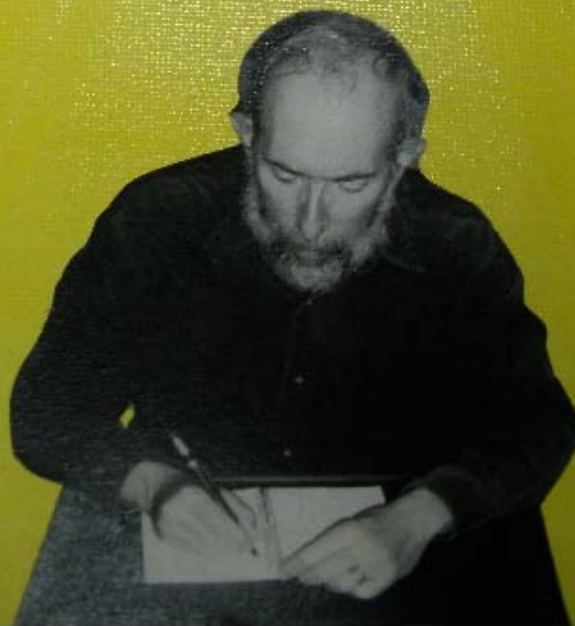


OUTTAKES

OF A UFO

INVESTIGATOR

DAVID HALPERIN



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Chapter 1: Danny Takes Flight

APRIL 1965

The Shapiro family was at dinner Wednesday night when the phone rang.

"Yeah," said Leon. "Yeah. Hold on a minute." He covered the mouthpiece and said to Danny, "It's for you. Somebody named Butch Harrison. Friend of yours from school?"

Danny shrugged. He had never heard of any Butch Harrison.

"You tell your friend Butch Harrison that supertime is not when you go phoning people."

Danny nodded and took the phone. "Hello?"

"Is this Daniel Shapiro?"

"Uh-huh."

"This is Butch Harrison."

"Uh-huh?"

"Butch *Harrison*. From the Sky Rangers Airport."

"Uh-huh."

There was a moment's silence. Then Butch Harrison said irritably, "Look, is this Daniel Shapiro? In – what the hell is it? – Kellerfield, Pennsylvania?"

"Yes," said Danny. "That's me."

"The office gave me your letter. You said you wanted to talk to me."

"Oh, of course." The Sky Rangers Airport was one of a dozen or so small private airports in South Jersey to which Danny had written letters nearly a month ago,

trying to confirm that somebody somewhere had picked up UFOs on radar sometime in the early morning hours of March 3. None of them had bothered to answer.

"Tell him you'll phone him back after dinner," Leon hissed. Anna gazed at him, frightened, unhappy, imploring. Danny held up his hand, palm toward his parents, as if to hold them off for just a moment or two. Some fifty miles away in New Jersey, at the Sky Rangers Airport, Butch Harrison drew in his breath impatiently.

"It's about those reports," Danny said, desperately trying to bring back the facts that were at his fingertips when he'd written all those letters. "That there were radar sightings of unknown objects after midnight last--last--uh, March third. And lights in the sky at the same time."

"Yeah, I know," said Butch Harrison. "You said so in your letter. I was up there. So was Pete Lucci. Don't know what the damn thing was, though. We couldn't catch up with it. Couldn't even get close."

"You went up in an airplane? After -- whatever it was?" Danny saw that Leon was staring at him, a puzzled expression on his face. "It's somebody from the Sky Rangers Airport," he whispered, holding his palm as tightly as he could over the telephone's mouthpiece. "In New Jersey. By Sanford."

"Yeah, me and Pete Lucci. The people in the radar tower in the Camden airport wanted us to go up and take a look, so we did. Not that we saw anything, except for that light. It was in the papers, wasn't it? Pete told me it was."

"The papers had some reports. But they weren't very detailed. And the object *was* picked up on radar? At the Camden airport?"

"Yeah. And at the Air Force base too. Both of them were in contact with us, maybe for an hour, maybe more. Why do you keep asking? Is there some problem?"

"Camden airport has denied it," said Danny.

"*Denied* it? They were on the radio with Pete and me for a goddamn hour, and they *denied* it?"

Denied it, Danny thought; and hung up on me when I asked to speak with the people who were on duty that night. "The Air Force has denied it too," he said.

"Sonofabitch," said Butch Harrison.

Danny looked at his father and mother. Anna still looked scared and unhappy. But in Leon's face there was something new, something he hadn't seen before. Interest, perhaps? Curiosity? He could not concern himself with that now. "What did you say the other man's name was?" he said, reaching for a pencil and a used envelope on the kitchen sink. "Lucci, was it?"

"Yeah, Lucci. Pete Lucci. Listen, Mister Shapiro, I don't know who the hell you and your organization are. But if you're some government agency, I'm hanging up this phone right now."

"No, no," Danny assured him. "We don't have any connection with the government. We're a private research organization. Our concern is purely scientific."

"Scientific, huh?"

"Yes, scientific."

"Yeah? Well, then you need to hear our side of it. From Pete and me. And not go believing every cockamamy story those assholes in the radar tower tell you about us."

Danny could hardly believe what he was hearing. "When would be a good time for me to phone you? Talk with you and Mr. Lucci?" He looked at Leon, expecting to see his father's face contort with rage over the prospect of a long-distance phone bill. *No, no, no!* he was sure Leon would shout silently at him. But Leon shouted nothing. That strange new look—perhaps of curiosity, perhaps something more akin to nostalgia—didn't leave his face.

"Phone, hell. Come on out here to the Sky Rangers. We'll both be here all Saturday afternoon. There's a coffee shop. We'll sit there and talk, for as long as it takes."

"Come out there Saturday? I—I don't think I can."

"Why not? You busy? We'll make it another weekend."

"I don't have a car. I mean, I don't drive."

"You don't *drive*?"

"I mean – well, it's like – it's like this." Danny took a deep breath. He had no choice but to say it. "I'm fifteen years old."

Silence at the other end of the line. Danny felt the hot redness in his face, the sweat beginning to drip from his armpits. He wanted to hang up, leave the dinner table, go back to his schoolwork, forget he'd ever heard of UFOs. He could only imagine the rebukes he had in store from Leon and Anna.

"Well, hell," said Butch Harrison. His tone was lighter now, and friendlier. "Why don't you see if you can find somebody to drive you?"

"To drive me? Well, I don't know – I don't think –"

"Danny," said Leon.

"Excuse me a second," Danny said into the telephone. He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece, and looked toward his father.

"Do you need a ride to that airport?"

Danny nodded.

"This Saturday?"

He nodded again.

"I can take you. If you want me to." And, apparently reading the expression on Danny's face, he added: "Ask him what time he wants us there."

For the first time in this conversation, Danny found himself stammering. He managed, though, to arrange with Butch Harrison that they'd meet him and Lucci at the Sky Rangers coffee shop on Saturday afternoon at three o'clock. He managed to describe himself so Harrison would recognize him: thin, medium height, dark brown hair, black horn-rimmed glasses. With *very* thick lenses, he said; and Anna, hearing this, laughed.

Danny hung up the phone. "Well, *me bai-i-i*," said Leon. "You see the advantage of working for the state. I have Saturdays off these days. Can do what I please."

The fine April weather continued into the next Saturday, when Danny and Leon got into the ancient Chevrolet and set out for the Sky Rangers Airport. The

engine started up all right, but then died as soon as Leon put it into reverse and started to back out of the carport. It died again when he backed out from the driveway into Sandy Creek Drive.

"Mom's waving to us," Leon said to Danny. He looked and saw his mother through the kitchen window, in her rocker, smiling gaily as she waved goodbye. They both smiled and waved back.

Leon started the car again and sighed deeply. "Afraid she's on her last legs," he said. "Hanging on by a thread, as it were."

Danny stared at him, alarmed.

"I just hope she's not going to start overheating on us," said Leon. "Once we start going at highway speed."

Good. It was the car he was talking about. Danny settled back into his seat, relieved.

"And I think," Leon went on, "that when the new models come out this fall, that'll be the end of our time with this good old Chevy. Any idea what kind of a new car you'd like us to get?"

"Not really," Danny said.

"No, I don't suppose you would," said Leon. "You don't give very much thought to cars, do you?"

They crossed over into Jersey at Burlington, and continued southward. Danny cast an occasional glance at the temperature gauge, reassuring himself each time that the car wasn't overheating. "All built up, my boy," Leon intoned as he drove. "One development after the next, each with its stores, each with its shopping centers. Did you notice that new shopping center we just passed? Did you? I bet it's no more than a year or two old. And you know what used to be there, before they put up the buildings, before they covered the place with concrete?"

"Trees?" Danny said.

"Right with Eversharp!" Leon said, laughing in that strange artificial way he sometimes had. "Trees. South Jersey used to be woods. Mile after mile of pine trees. And where there weren't woods there'd be farmland. We'd go for drives here, you and Mom and me. Back before Mom got so sick. We used to call these

the wide open spaces. We'd all drive through it together and we'd sing that song about the wide open spaces. You remember that?"

"A little," said Danny.

"Hope you do remember," said Leon. "Because they're all gone now. All the wide open spaces. Most of them, anyway. You see any wide open spaces here now?"

"Uh-uh," Danny said. He gave this answer because it was obviously the one Leon was looking for. As far as he was concerned, the whole area still looked rural enough.

"There were lakes here too," said Leon. "One time we stayed by a lake. You, me, and Mom. We took out the rowboat the next day. You must have been two years old then. You remember any of that?"

"Mom told me about it."

"Oh, of course," said Leon sourly. "I'd forgot. Mom tells you everything." And he said nothing more for a long time.

Signs for the Sky Rangers Airport began to appear along the roadside, and they found the place without too much trouble. It was 2:47 by Danny's watch when they pulled into the parking lot.

"You're Shapiro, right?" Pete Lucci said to Danny as he and Leon stepped into the coffee shop. Actually, it was Butch Harrison who said this, but Danny thought at first it was Pete Lucci because he naturally expected Pete Lucci to be the one with the dark curly hair and not the blond crew cut. But it turned out to be the other way around; and when Danny said, "And you're Pete Lucci?" both men laughed, and Butch Harrison said, "I look like I ought to be Pete Lucci, right? But that's Pete. I'm Butch." They were both husky young men, in their mid-twenties.

"I'm Leon Shapiro," said Leon. "I'm Danny's father."

Leon pulled out his wallet when they reached the cash register. "Nah, nah," said Butch Harrison. "This is on us. You're our guests. *Real* nice of you to drive Danny out here, Mister Shapiro."

They all had coffee. "Well, fire away, Danny," Butch Harrison said when they had all sat down. "What would you like to know?"

"One thing I'm a little confused about," said Danny, fishing out a ball-point pen and opening his small blue notebook. "How many objects were there? The newspaper stories spoke of several UFOs, but you mentioned only one light."

Harrison and Lucci both began to answer at once. Lucci quickly fell silent, though, and let Harrison give Danny the details of the episode, nodding his confirmation at key points. Danny had more questions. As the men spoke, the full story of the Sky Rangers UFO sighting began to take shape. Leon sat silent, listening closely.

Neither Harrison nor Lucci, nor anyone else who had been at the Sky Rangers airport after midnight on March 3, had actually seen more than one object. The people at Camden airport, however, had had up to three unidentified blips on their radar screen at any one time. The objects, whatever they were, seemed to be moving around in the skies in the vicinity of Sanford. So someone named Ken Seagroves, with whom both Harrison and Lucci were distantly acquainted, had radioed the Sky Rangers to see if there was anyone around who wanted to take a plane up and have a look.

The object was clearly visible from the ground, Harrison said. It was a kind of orangey-red, egg-shaped light which seemed to jump about irregularly in the night sky. Harrison remembered that it was a little before one in the morning when he and Lucci had climbed into Harrison's plane and taken off after it.

"For a minute there," Harrison said, "we were scared we were gonna catch it."

"Or it was gonna catch us," said Lucci; and all four of them laughed.

"It looked like you were gaining on it?" Danny asked.

"Gaining isn't the word," Harrison said. "It got so close to us, so fast, that we figured it had to be coming at us. We figured, if we were Martians or something trying to catch us some specimen earthlings, we might do just what they were doing. Hang out in the sky, just high enough to get people curious so somebody'd be dumb enough to come up to see what we were. And then we'd nab 'em. Know what I mean, Mister Shapiro?"

Leon nodded. "But it looks like they didn't nab you," he said.

"No they didn't. What do they do then but make a hundred and eighty degree

turn, zoom right off, till they're so far away they're just a tiny little point of light. I said, 'Pete, we're not gonna be able to catch them, if anything we'll just get ourselves killed trying.' So we radioed Seagroves we were coming back down, the Camden boys could chase them if they wanted. He was pretty pissed but there wasn't nothing he could do about it."

"Except lie about the whole thing a couple weeks after," said Lucci. "Say they never got anything on radar." He shook his head. "Pisses me off, what some people will do."

"The object was pretty high up, you think?" said Danny.

"Way up," said Harrison. "About like this." Lifting his hand, he pointed to a light fixture in the ceiling of the coffee shop.

A disagreeable thought crossed Danny's mind. Harrison had earlier spoken of the UFO as being in the south, and now it appeared that it had been fairly close to the zenith. Hadn't Arcturus been in the south, near the zenith, in the early morning hours of March 3? He'd studied his star chart pretty carefully; he was pretty sure he remembered that. And Arcturus was supposed to be orange-colored, not that the stars ever were the colors the books said they were supposed to be. He raised this possibility gingerly, so as not to insult the two pilots, who surely had seen Arcturus once or twice before.

"Who said the UFOs were Arcturus?" Harrison demanded.

"The Philadelphia *Inquirer* quoted that from the 'experts,'" said Danny. "The reporter didn't say who the experts were."

"The geniuses of the newsroom," said Harrison. "Wish one of those geniuses was in the plane when that thing came flying straight at us. He wouldn't be making genius talk. He'd be down under his seat, peeing in his pants."

"The reporter I talked to wasn't such a genius," Danny said. "He kept calling Arcturus a planet. When I told him it was a star and not a planet, he said, 'Sir, did you phone to demonstrate your knowledge of astronomy?' And when I tried to explain, he said, 'Sir, I suggest that you and the rest of you flying saucer nuts all go knock your thick heads together. Then you'll see more stars than you can count.' And then he hung up on me."

"Sheesh," said Harrison, shaking his head. "That's one hell of a way to talk to a kid. Isn't it, Mister Shapiro?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," said Leon.

"Really pisses me off," said Harrison.

"Pisses me off too," said Lucci.

Lucci looked at his watch and saw it was nearly five o'clock. He pushed away from the table and stood up. "Thanks for the coffee, Butch," he said. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Shapiro. Danny, you keep chasing 'em."

Chasing what? Danny thought. UFOs, no doubt. But he wasn't entirely sure that was what Lucci had meant.

"I guess we'd better be going too," Leon said. "We've got a long drive. And Danny's mother is home waiting for us."

"You really gotta run, Mister Shapiro?" said Butch Harrison. Leon hesitated. Harrison went on, "Seems to me, if you got some time, you and Danny might like to go up in the plane with me. Just for a ride. You spend so much time driving to the airport, it's a shame if you never even get into the air."

Danny said nothing, tried to keep his face pure of any expression. "Well, that's mighty kind of you," said Leon. From the tone of his voice, Danny could tell his father was pleased and excited. "I don't believe Danny's ever flown in a plane. Have you, Danny?" Danny shook his head no. "Would you like to?" said Leon.

The three of them walked to Harrison's airplane, through a field bathed in the late afternoon sunshine. It was turning a bit chilly; you might need a coat by the time it got dark. The sky was a pure deep blue, so dry and clear that the daytime moon shone vivid white in the southwestern sky, though it was still hardly more than a crescent, hardly even halfway full.

"Who wants to sit next to me?" Harrison asked, climbing in behind the controls. Danny deferred to his father. "No, no," said Leon. "You sit there, Danny. I'll sit behind you. I've been in the pilot's seat a few times." He said to Harrison, "I did a bit of flying when I was in the service. Back during the war."

"Is that so?" said Harrison. "Were you in the Air Force, Mister Shapiro?"

"Army Air Corps, they called it back then. But no, I wasn't. Just the regular Army. But they taught a lot of us to fly, back then."

They all fastened their seat belts. Harrison switched on the engines. The racket

was terrific. Danny wondered how Harrison and Lucci had communicated with each other that March night, as they climbed in pursuit of a UFO that was about to turn and pursue them. They taxied down the runway, then launched themselves, more abruptly than Danny would ever have expected, into the sky.

The ground fell away rapidly. The trees, buildings, automobiles became almost at once tiny and toylike beneath them. The airport's main building reminded Danny, for just a moment, of that miniature toy house made of Lincoln Logs or possibly American Bricks that he'd built and unbuilt a thousand times during those endless afternoons in his grandmother's living room while his mother lay sick upstairs. Then it became too small even for that, just one tiny red hotel on the great Monopoly board that spread beneath them. Somewhere by the horizon, a distant lake glittered in the sun.

Their right wing dipped suddenly. The plane wheeled sharply. Danny again felt, for a few seconds, the thrilling rush of ascent in his stomach and his genitalia. The moon lay directly ahead. They climbed steeply toward it; as though Harrison had decided, without telling them, to fly away altogether from the earth and set his course for the moon. Danny felt it leaping toward them out of the blue.

Gentlemen, Danny imagined Harrison announcing over some loudspeaker, mankind's first ever journey to the moon is underway.

He turned around to look at his father. Leon sat with his head back, his face set in an expression of anticipated or perhaps remembered ecstasy. His eyes were half shut. His mouth was slightly open, his tongue pressed expectantly against his lower teeth, as though sensing the approach of some enormous nipple filled with milk all for him.

Disconcerted, yet strangely pleased, Danny did not stay to watch. He set his face forward again, and lost himself in the moon's looming countenance.