

## **THE ELSINORE GHOST**

In August 1971, a middle-aged skydiver appeared at the Elsinore Paracenter in Elsinore, California, not far from Los Angeles. He was described as 40 to 42 years old, around six feet tall, slim, and with thinning dark brown hair. Amongst the mostly youthful skydiving enthusiasts who frequently made jumps at Elsinore, this man's age made him stand out. On the few occasions he jumped at Elsinore, he curiously wore Corcoran boots, which were jump-boots worn by American paratroopers during the 1940s and 50s. But it wasn't his boots or his age that made him memorable to skydiving legend Lyle Cameron, it was the questions he asked Cameron about how to successfully jump from a commercial airliner.

A constant presence at the Elsinore Paracenter, Cameron was Chairman of the Parachute Clubs of America and editor of *Sky Diver Magazine*. Forty years old in late 1971, Cameron had lived a varied and adventurous life up to that point. Originally from Maine, he dropped out of college to join the Marines and served as a Marine airman during the Korean War. Following his discharge, he made his way to the West Coast, settling in southern California, where he became a member of the Los Angeles Police Department from 1955 to 1962.

As a pioneer in the sport of recreational skydiving, Cameron became a world traveler during the 1960s, competing in and judging international skydiving competitions. His skills even earned him a spot as the technical advisor and lead stunt jumper for the popular TV series "Ripcord", which focused on two skydiving heroes who battled the bad guys. The success of "Ripcord" played a large role in the growth of skydiving as a recreational sport.



Cameron in 1963

Cameron's life was also filled with intrigue. In 1963, one of Jack Ruby's last phone calls the night before he shot Lee Harvey Oswald was to Cameron. The

purpose of this call remains unknown.<sup>i</sup> In the late 60s, due to his extensive world travels, Cameron was recruited by the FBI to act as a Potential Security Informant (PSI), with specific focus being his contacts with Soviets and Soviet-bloc citizens.<sup>ii</sup>

**LYLE HAZEN CAMERON  
IS - R**

**ReLAairtel 7/25/66.**

**For your information Bufiles contain no information identifiable with the "Sky Diver." Los Angeles refer to FD-302 dated 9/1/64, Los Angeles file 45-895, concerning "Jack L. Ruby, aka; Lee Harvey Oswald (dec.), Victim," wherein information is reported on page 39 that one Lyle H. Cameron, 15346 San Bruno Drive, La Mirada, California, was the subscriber to telephone number 521-3169, which number had been called from telephone number HE 5-6315.**

Thus, when Cameron called his local FBI office on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1971, to report a possible contact with the Flight 305 hijacker, his experience as a trusted informant caused agents to place significant weight on the information he was providing. Cameron told agents that in July or August 1971, he talked to a man at the Elsinore Paracenter who closely resembled the sketch. He said that he believed this man had made several jumps at Elsinore during those months.

Although Cameron had conversations about parachuting with untold numbers of individuals over the years, he remembered this conversation specifically because no one had ever asked him about jumping from a jet before. According to Cameron, the man asked him what type of commercial airliner could be jumped, at what speed, and at what altitude. Cameron explained that the safest way to do so would be to jump from the rear stairs. Additionally, Cameron told the man that lowered landing gear and lowered flaps could be utilized to create drag, thus slowing the aircraft down to a speed that would be safe for jumping.<sup>iii</sup>

CAMERON recalled that he talked to this man for approximately ten to fifteen minutes concerning different aspects of parachute jumping and during this conversation the man asked several unusual questions, such as how would one go about jumping out of jets. CAMERON specifically recalls telling the man it could be done if the door of the aircraft opened inward or if it had a rear stairwell that could be raised and lowered. The man appeared interested and they discussed this further, to the point where air speed and drag was talked about. The fact was brought up that full flaps and lowered landing gear would supply the drag needed to exit from a jet.

The man also asked Cameron about the location of jump centers in Portland and Seattle. Cameron divulged there specifically that there was one near Boeing field in Seattle and another just north of Portland. These are likely references to Issaquah Sky Sports and Western Sport Parachute Center in Orchards, WA, respectively.

The man also asked CAMERON where jump centers were located in the northwest. CAMERON told him about three locations in the State of Washington, one by the Boeing Air Field in Seattle, one on the Washington side of the Columbia River, just north of Portland, Oregon, and the other center inbetween. The man was apparently interested, but did not write down the names or locations of those centers.

Cameron advised the agents that if the man had indeed jumped previously at Elsinore, that he should have a registration card on file. He explained that each person who jumped at Elsinore had to fill out a registration card before jumping. If a jumper was a member of the United States Parachute Association, their USPA license number would be on the registration card. Cameron continued, telling the agents that in order to receive a USPA license, an individual must submit a photograph of themselves to USPA Headquarters in Monterey, California.

Two days after this interview, Cameron called the FBI back, claiming to remember another detail. He said that the stranger must have been a smoker of Raleigh cigarettes because he remembered seeing Raleigh coupons in the man's possession. He jokingly told the man that he might be able to save enough coupons to buy a "P.C.", meaning a Para-Commander parachute. Even though Cameron's statement about purchasing a parachute with cigarette coupons was an obvious joke, the FBI still checked with Raleigh to see if they sold parachutes in their Coupon Redemption Catalog. They did not.

Concerning the individual he talked to sometime during July or August 1971, who CAMERON believes could be identical to the subject that hijacked the Northwest Airlines aircraft on November 24, 1971, he recalled that the man he talked to must have been a smoker of Raleigh Cigarettes because he observed Raleigh coupons in the man's possession and remarked to him that he smoked those cigarettes with the coupons and could save enough to buy a "P. C.", meaning Para-Commander type parachute, the kind used by parachute enthusiasts and most sport jumpers.

Cameron once again contacted the FBI on December 9th, perhaps beginning to second guess himself about the motivation behind the stranger's questions. He stated that he had just been looking through an August issue of *Look* magazine and noticed an advertisement showing a parachutist jumping from a jet aircraft. He

speculated that maybe this image had inspired the questions that the stranger had asked him.<sup>iv</sup> The advertisement Cameron was referencing was a U.S. Army recruitment ad featuring a lone paratrooper jumping from a C-130.<sup>v</sup> It may be worth noting that the C-130 is not a jet.



In an attempt to find another witness to back up Cameron's claims, copies of the sketch and descriptive data about the hijacker were displayed to numerous individuals who had spent considerable time at Elsinore. This group included pilots, jumpmasters, riggers, mechanics, a dispatcher, and the owners of the jump center. However, none of them were able to remember seeing anyone similar.

Desperate for any leads about the mystery man, 12,000 registration cards at Elsinore were reviewed by agents Edward A. Romanoff and James A. Pond. They were specifically looking for the cards of men who had jumped at Elsinore since 1969 who were 35-55 years of age, 150-190 pounds, and 5'8 to 6'1.<sup>vi</sup> Searching within those parameters, the agents found 433 cards that matched their criteria.

Cameron helped narrow that number down even further when he remembered that his interaction with the stranger definitely occurred in mid or late August 1971. This allowed the agents to focus on the flight records of jumps made during that specific time frame. These flight records contained the last names of the jumpers on each flight, the altitude from which they jumped, and the name of the pilot. A review of the August flight records revealed the names of thirty-one individuals who were also on their list of 433. Sixteen of the thirty-one were eliminated after Cameron and the Elsinore staff stated that they personally knew the men and that none of them resembled the composite sketch.<sup>vii</sup>

The remaining fifteen individuals were all singled out for a detailed investigation, which included in-person interviews and also secondary interviews with their known associates. These men came from a variety of backgrounds and occupations, indicating the broad appeal and popularity that skydiving was enjoying in that era. Among those interviewed were a drug store clerk, a caterer, an FAA crash site investigator, a construction worker, a hotel manager from Wyoming, and even a Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs officer. All fifteen were eliminated for a variety of reasons, with most being able to provide solid alibis from their workplaces for the day of the hijacking.

With all their persons of interest being eliminated, agents Romanoff and Pond were no doubt discouraged that such an intriguing lead had turned out to be a bust. Nevertheless, as part of their due diligence, they provided a packet containing the 10,000 serial numbers of Cooper's ransom to the Elsinore Paracenter. Cameron also agreed to publish the sketch and the full FBI description in the next edition of *Sky Diver Magazine*.<sup>viii</sup>

Not long after the hijacking, in January 1972, Cameron was unceremoniously ousted as the National Director of the USPA by a 17-2 vote of their Board of Directors. He had found himself in hot water after making accusations that the U.S. Parachute Team were involved in illegal narcotics. The Board also voted to strip Cameron of his ranking as an international skydiving judge.<sup>ix</sup>

The 1980s saw Cameron move to Honduras and start a company called Tam Air that provided charter flights throughout Central America. He also sponsored a small drop zone where he packed and sold parachutes. Unfortunately, on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Cameron was flying a Cessna with three passengers when it lost power over Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Attempting to make a hard landing on a road, the aircraft crashed, killing Cameron and two other passengers.<sup>x</sup>

Over half a century later and with Cameron himself no longer around, what is to be made of the fact that the cards failed to find the mystery man? Perhaps Cameron was mistaken about the man actually jumping at Elsinore. If he had never jumped there then he wouldn't have had a card on file. Or could Cameron have made the whole thing up? Indeed, a skeptic may find his story too good to be true. Claiming to remember that the man possessed Raleigh cigarette coupons is such a specific detail that it almost seems a bit too convenient.

However, what would be Cameron's motivation to fabricate his interaction with this man? He seemingly gained nothing from submitting the tip and due to his

previous work with the FBI he would know that lying to agents was a criminal act. Also, the effort the Bureau invested into chasing the lead was a clear demonstration of their confidence in Cameron as a reliable source. So, for the FBI's part, they had no reason to suspect that Cameron wasn't being sincere in his retelling of the encounter.

Though nothing came from the FBI's search for Cameron's mystery man in December 1971, the lead still remains tantalizing. Amateur investigators, who colloquially refer to the man as the "Elsinore Ghost", are stuck with questions that are likely to remain unanswered. Did Cameron make the story up? Did he embellish a real encounter he had? Was he entirely honest in his recollection and the man's questions merely coincidental? Or is it possible that the hijacker of Flight 305 actually sought out Cameron for advice and that Cameron inadvertently provided him with the blueprint for his escape?

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Abrams, *Birdmen, Batman, and Skyflyers*, pg. 168

<sup>ii</sup> Lyle Cameron FBI File, 12/14/1971, Los Angeles FO to Director FBI

<sup>iii</sup> Volume 64, pg. 333

<sup>iv</sup> Volume 64, pg. 394

<sup>v</sup> *Look Magazine*, August 24, 1971, pg. 46-47

<sup>vi</sup> Volume 64, pg. 357

<sup>vii</sup> Volume 64, pg. 395

<sup>viii</sup> Volume 64, pg. 365

<sup>ix</sup> *Parachutist*, February 1972, pg. 4

<sup>x</sup> Bill Ottley, "Lyle Cameron: The Man and the Legend", *Parachutist*, October 1993, pgs. 29-34