

## **TAPE , PLASTIC , AND HELIUM**

All the makings of a balloon !!

On the pad there was always an abundance of tape (good old GI. Green tape) , sheet plastic and of course hundreds of cubic feet of Helium . You know , the stuff that makes balloons rise . Our pad mechanics rigged a pressure regulator the helium tank farm so we could get a supply of helium anytime we wanted it . At first we just would go down and take a breath of helium and everyone would laugh at the “Donald Duck” like sound we would make when we talked . Everyone tried to out do the other guy and eventually someone passed out from too much helium and we decided to stop that before some body really got hurt .

Well there we where with a supply of free helium and nothing to do . That didn't last long . We made balloons . Small balloons , large balloons , and every size in between . We simply took the plastic sheeting , that we had all around , and taped it into a square shape and filled it with helium and there you go , a balloon . At first we made small balloons and they didn't work to good . They weighted to much and there was not enough volume for the helium to make it rise . Not to worry !!! We just made larger balloons . Problem solved . Well not quite . The first one that worked good was done during the day and it was big enough to be seen . There in the sky above VAFB was a UFO !! Fortunately no one saw it and all was well . I worked swing shift almost all the time so we just wait till after dark . True we couldn't watch the balloon very far but it was the “thought that counts” and we thought it was fun . We made bigger and bigger balloons ( like anyone had to tell you that) . It became an almost nightly occurrence . We did count downs and the whole thing . At times we had to stop and do missile things , not that these weren't fun also but we missed our own launches . When ever we could we would do a balloon . Even stayed late to get in a launch or two .

And then ..... We ran out of GI. Green tape . No tape anywhere on the site and supply was out too . The future was dim indeed . Now anyone who has ever been in the service knows that GI's are resourceful . On the night shift we just had a key to the supply shack , no one watched the supplies , and that was a mistake , well not for us . We scoured the supply shack and there in a box , long forgotten was tape , not the good old green GI tape , but 2” wide aluminum tape . Real sticky and just what we needed . That was a glad night . We stayed late and did a launch . As a celebration of our new found source we made a big balloon , the biggest yet ! It must have been 15 foot square and 20 foot long . It looked swell , in it's nice shinny taped seams and all . And another plus , the aluminum tape was lighter and that meant that it would go up faster . A good night made great ! 5 ,4 ,3 ,2 ,1 , launch , it literally flew up into the night sky . Success was ours , we were back in business . We strained to watch it as far as we could and then it was gone . We pick up our stuff and closed up the pad and started to leave . As we approached the site main gate we were meet by a couple Air

Police trucks . We didn't think much of this as they were everywhere all the time . They stopped us , some unusual , but still no trouble . They told us that we would have to stay on the pad as we were in a base wide alert . Still nothing out of the ordinary . We just went back to the pad and prepared to spend awhile waiting for this new irritation to pass . Usually the alerts just last a few minute or at the outside a hour . We waited to be told we could go and waited , and waited . Soon it starting to get daylight .

Now remember that this was in the middle 60's , right at the height of the Cold War . To say folks were paranoid would be an understatement .

Soon the day shift started to arrive and they had supplies , supplies that made it look like we had a long stay ahead of us . We were still clueless !!!!! When the site NCOIC arrived he called a site wide meeting to inform us of this new deal that was taking place . Seems that the coastal radar had pick up something in the night sky . An object of unidentified origin . They had alerted the whole west coast just in case (remember the Cold War was at full swing ) . Jets had been scrambled and everything . OK , something was starting to surface in my mind . What could have been the source of this UFO ? We put our heads together and suddenly all the color drained from our humble faces . Our balloon with all that beautiful aluminum tape , beautiful because it was reflective to light and , and ,and , the thoughts started to surface , reflective to RADAR !

Could it be that the coastal defense picked up our balloon ? I felt sick ! No one had said what they had seen and no one ever did . Soon the alert was lifted and we went our way , us back to the barracks and the day shift to their work . Not a word was ever said .

Later we discovered that all our aluminum tape was missing . Also our regulator on the helium tank farm was gone . The plastic sheet became a supply issue . Just chance ????? I wonder to much for just coincidence . I think that someone knew about the balloons . As long as it was harmless they just turned a "blind eye" and let us have our fun . But the aluminum tape and the timing told a story that no one wanted out . It was never confirmed but I will always wonder . Did our balloon cause a west coast alert or was it just poor timing . Guess I'll never know for sure .

One last thing . We didn't do any more balloon launches . We were a little crazy but we weren't stupid ? Well not to stupid .