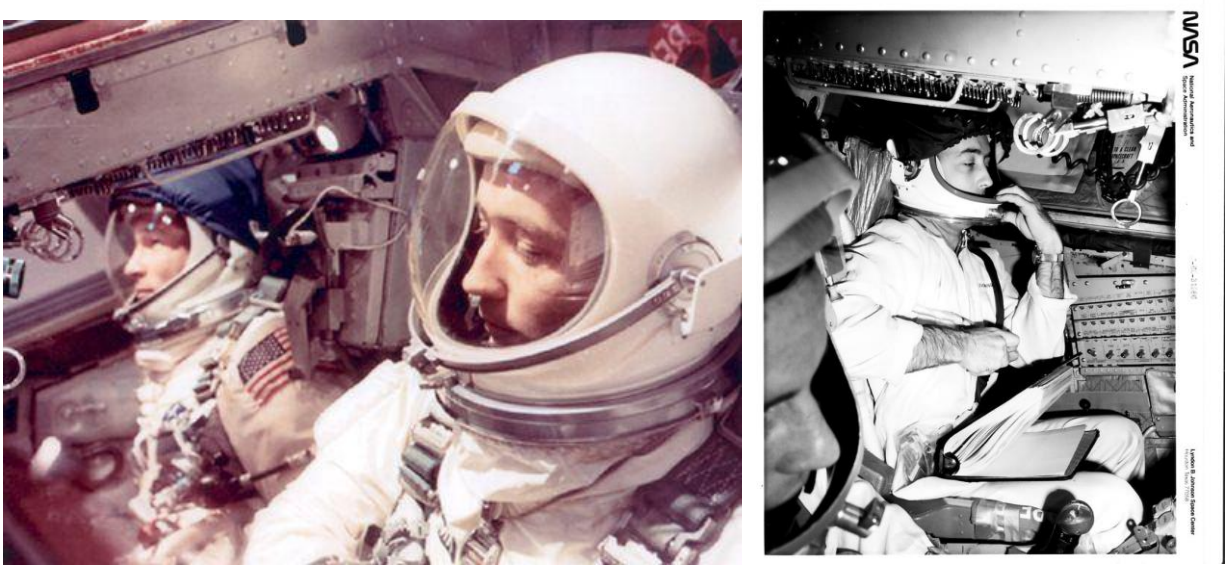
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT -- JAMES A. MCDIVITT

INTERVIEWED BY DOUG WARD -- ELK LAKE, MICHIGAN – 29 JUNE 1999 page 45-47

http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/oral_histories/McDivittJA/JAM_6-29-99.pdf

[illustrations/captions by James Oberg]



Views of James McDivitt [left seat] and Ed White in Gemini-4 cockpit

[snip]

WARD: Your Gemini IV flight had one other occurrence that is remembered by some. And that is a report, from you I believe, that you had encountered an object in orbit whose origins you were not certain of. And of course, the UFO [Unidentified Flying Object] buffs immediately thought you had seen an alien spacecraft.

MCDIVITT: The story of how I became a UFO expert! Well, what happened was that we were low on fuel and the spacecraft was just tumbling through space, end over end and sideways and all over. Ed was asleep. We were taking turns sleeping. And Ed was asleep, and I was doing something in the spacecraft. I looked outside, just glanced up, and there was something out there. It had a geometrical shape similar to a beer can or a pop can, and with a little thing like maybe like a pencil or something sticking out of it. That relative size, dimensionally. It was all white.

And I'd—we had all of our rocket engines shut off. I mean, we had the electronics form shut off. We were a battery-powered spacecraft, so we were trying to save electrical energy. And I immediately reached up and turned on the—pushed in the circuit breakers, because I thought I might have to maneuver around this thing, whatever it was. I couldn't tell how close it was, how big it was. I grabbed a

camera and took a picture. It was just floating there. I grabbed it and took it a picture. I grabbed another one and took a picture.

And then the spacecraft rotated around where I couldn't see it.

Finally the rockets warmed up. The electronics warmed up. Remember, these were the Dark Ages. It takes a while to warm up! And so, by the time they got to where they'd worked, I didn't have any attitude indicators. We had all the instrumentation shut off, too. So—and we were looking at the black sky; I had no reference whatsoever. So, I tried to fly the spacecraft back down to where I thought it was. And I never did see it again.

The fact that I could see it was—pretty much meant to me that it was in our orbit. If it was in a different orbit, we would've—going 18,000 miles an hour, it would've went by us so fast that we'd have never seen it at all. I had no idea whether it was a little thing up close to the window or it was a big thing out a little bit further. It could've been the size of the Empire State Building for all I knew way out there. But I'm sure it was in the—in our orbit and it probably was a piece of ice that had fallen off the spacecraft someplace. Or maybe a piece of Mylar that had come out from behind the thing and come up in front.

Image of Gemini-7 from Gemini-6 [December 1965] showing aft end with mylar covering and tangle of dangling straps from stage separation, showing area where McDivitt thinks a small piece broke loose and drifted past his window.

Nothing ever showed up on the photographs. I reviewed them all. They were probably out of focus and I didn't have time to adjust anything. I didn't—I couldn't adjust the F-stops or the range or anything. I just

grabbed the cameras and took a picture. So, anyway, that was it. And—but I got to be a world-renowned UFO expert over that!

The thing that really exacerbated the problem was when we got back to—when the film got back to Houston, we were still out on an aircraft carrier. They printed up all the EVA film, which was of great interest because nobody had ever seen an EVA before, and had a huge press conference. All that stuff was shown at the press conference. Some reporter wanted to know about the UFO. NASA said they hadn't printed all of the photos.

They would print them later that night. He hung around and eventually they got them all printed. And I understand—many years later I figured this out, or at least I think I figured it out, this guy and a photo tech went through all the photos; and they picked out one that looked like a bunch of spacecraft from some foreign planet. They were disc-shaped things with a tail. I think there were three or four of them in an echelon formation. And then that got printed someplace. I never did see it until years and years later, when I started getting all these requests to appear on UFO shows.

NASA released this "McDivitt UFO" photo prior to asking McDivitt to verify it.

I went back and then I saw what the thing was. And really what it was, was a reflection of the bolts in the windows. The windows were made up of about three or four or five panes of glass, so that if one got broken we still had some pressure integrity. And these little things, when the Sun shined on them right,

they'd multiply the images off the different panes. And I'm quite sure that that's what this thing was. But anyway, I became a worldrenowned expert in UFOs. Unfortunately.

WARD: So, to the best of your knowledge at the time and years later, there's nothing abnormal or unusual—

MCDIVITT: No. There's nothing unusual about this at all. It was just—it's sort of like John Glenn talking about the fireflies. I mean, those were just pieces of ice crystals that were falling off the spacecraft. And the same thing with this. It was just something that I'm sure came off the spacecraft.

WARD: Well, one of the things that with increasing experience in spaceflight and the extreme lighting conditions and so on that has come clear over the years is that a lot of times things that you might think are large objects far away really are, as you point out, small objects that are very close—

MCDIVITT: Oh yeah. They could be right up here in front of you. They could be right on the outside of the window.

WARD: —and, therefore, would be out of focus in any camera picture you tried to take and wouldn't show up.

MCDIVITT: Absolutely. Yeah. As a matter of fact later on, on Apollo 9, there was a big Mylar balloon up there, I forget what they called it, Echo, I think it was. They wanted to know if we wanted to see Echo. It was out at, like, 800 or 900 miles. And we said, "Oh yeah, let's look at that." So, we got the spacecraft oriented around in a certain direction, and I had a six-power telescope in the left-hand window of the spacecraft. And Dave [David R.] Scott went down in thelower equipment bay. He had to use a 28-power telescope down there. And so, they finally said, "Okay, it's coming up in the sight now." And Dave said, "Oh yeah, I've got it." He had the telescope tracking it with the computer. And so, I looked out there and, "Oh yeah," I said, "I can see it." And Rusty was sitting over in the other window and he didn't have anything, and he said, "Oh yeah, I can see it, too!" So, we were looking at this thing probably near 1,000 miles.

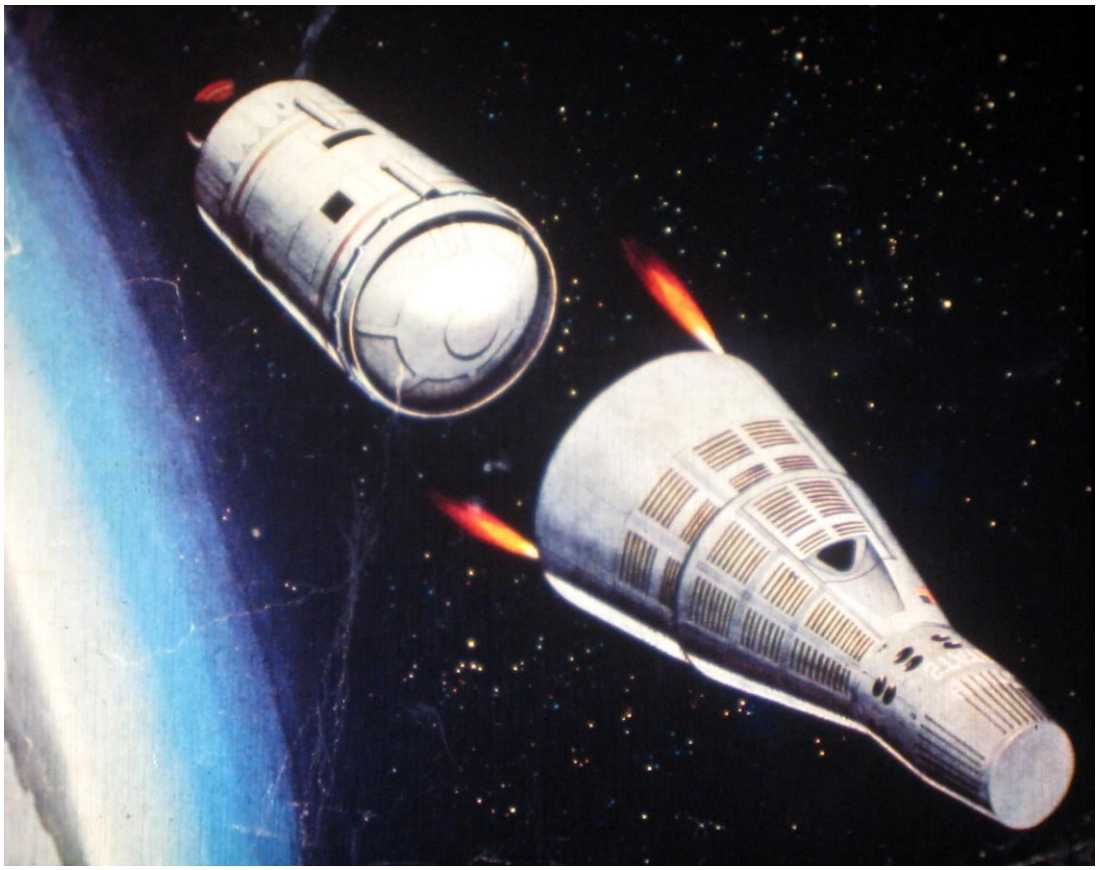
And later on in the flight, they wanted to know if we could—if we wanted to see the ascent stage, which we put in this huge orbit around the Earth. And it was coming down, and it was some thousands of miles away. They wanted to know if we wanted to see it. "Oh yeah, let's see if we can find it." So, we put the orbit into our computer and had our telescope track it. And we could see it. Now, we were using a 28-powered telescope, but we could see it out at some number of thousand of miles.

WARD: This was your Apollo booster?

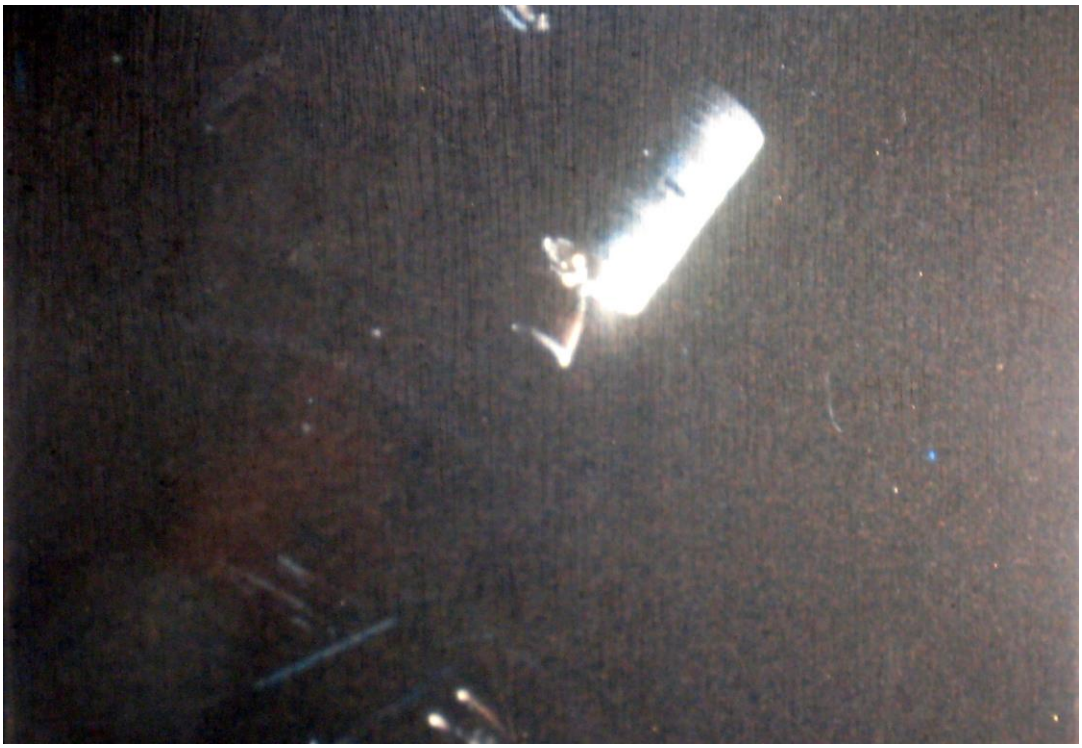
MCDIVITT: Yeah. It actually was the ascent stage of the lunar module.

WARD: Oh, okay.

MCDIVITT: Which was not very large.



Gemini separates from booster; photo of booster from Gemini-7



WARD: When you were on your Gemini flight, one of the other objectives was to rendezvous with the upper stage.

MCDIVITT: Right.

WARD: That didn't really work out.

MCDIVITT: No. That was a—we didn't use our head on that ahead of time! That was sort of an ad hoc thing that we put on when we did the—when we were going to do the EVA, we wanted to have something to EVA around. And so, we were going to have Ed fly over there and take a couple of pieces of metal off of it. But we made two fatal mistakes: one is that we put two lights on it—two flashing lights instead of three. If you take a cylinder and put two lights on it, you can see both those lights only in one position, when you're perpendicular to the lights. As soon as it shifts around a little bit, one of the lights is obscured. So, you never see more than one light, or hardly ever see more than one light.

And it's very difficult to fly formation with one flashing bright light. So, as soon as we got into the dark, we had no depth perception on it whatsoever.

The thing that really caused the problem, though, was the fact that the upper stage had a—when it shut down, they left a vent open on it to vent the propellant on it, which acted like a small rocket engine. And when we backed away from it and did our inertial measurement unit alignment, the rocket started maneuvering away from us. So, I had to curtail the alignment to get back down close to the rocket. And then as we went into the dark, it continued to maneuver around. And it didn't have any stabilization anymore, so it could be going this way at one time and this way—some other way some other time.

And so, I had to chase it around in the dark with only one light visible. And it just—I mean, there was no way to tell how far away we were. So, we finally gave up on that. I was concerned that we were going to have a collision between our spacecraft and the rocket. And since it wasn't that vital a part of the mission, I just let it go.

[snip]

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Further reading

"History of Orbital Rendezvous", crew report, Gemini-IV re-rendezvous failure (June 1965) [1.5 meg]
http://www.jamesoberg.com/GT4-crew-report.PDF

"History of Orbital Rendezvous", Gemini-IV re-rendezvous failure, perspective from Hacker and Aldrin
http://www.jamesoberg.com/GT4-results-Aldrin-contrib.PDF

Gemini 1 0f 3, GT-4 and GT-5 http://www.jamesoberg.com/gemini_1of3_thru_gt-5.pdf

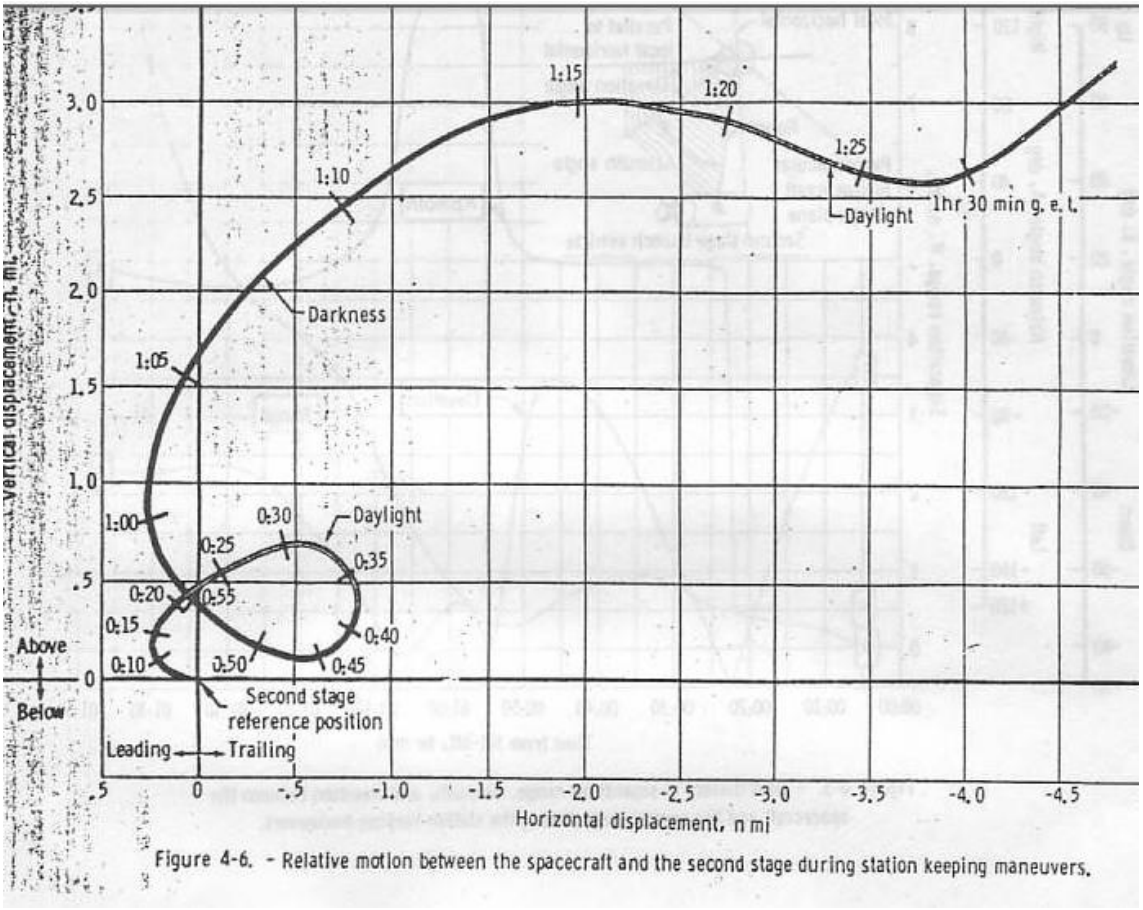

Figure 4-6. - Relative motion between the spacecraft and the second stage during station keeping maneuvers.

Actual relative motion of Gemini-4 with respect to booster during attempted re-rendezvous. After Gemini-4 separated, it could have drifted back unexpectedly, leading to McDivitt's sighting, as suggested by NORAD analysts, who provided this Gemini photo of a beer-can-shaped object, the Titan-2 upper stage nearby.