

CSU Oral History Project

Dr S. Zankerman Transcript

Edited by: Tim Dion

December 16th, CY 18

1 Interview with Dr Zankerman

This is the transcript of Dr Simon Zankerman, transcribed for the CSU Oral History Project by Carol Hendrickson.

Hendrickson: Hi Dr Zankerman. As you know, we set up this interview to record and document your memories of The Change.

Zankerman: Thanks Carol, thanks for setting this up, we all could use a chance to tell our stories. Its cathartic in some ways.

H: Ok, lets start with the day of The Change, March 17'th 1998. What were you doing.

Z: Well first off, I've never liked the term "The Change". The March event was likely caused by a large exotic solar flare. We have measured some unusual affects of associated with this event, but term "The Change" brings about too much mystical baggage.

Ok, let get to the story. I was working on some research at home...

H: The for the Physics lab?

Z: Oh, yes, I should explain. I was doing my Post Doc at CSU on... let say some aspects of Quantum mechanics. The details are a bit complex.

H: Well, for the record, can you give us some background.

Z: Ok, Dr Osborn received funding to search for particles called Strangelets. These are a type of heavy quark. Our research proposed a novel way to detect these particles through a kind of measurable quantum interference.

H: So, you were at home...

Z: Yes ... it started strangely.

H: Go on.

Z: Well Margery Smytha called¹ me from Pine Mountain² as she seemed confused. She was convinced that I had just talked to her.

H: Can you tell me exactly what she said. It will help your memory of events if you tell it like a story.

Z: OK she started excitedly, "Simon, you were right, our gamma is off the off the chart, and our soft Xs are starting to scale!"

I was confused, I had no idea what she was talking about. I said, "Marge, slow down. What Gamma are you talking about?"

She said, "Our ISG Gamma, you just called me and asked me to check."

I stammered for a bit. She must have confused me with somebody else. But then my curiosity caught up with me.

"Whats the count" I asked her.

"Its 10^2 and rising." she said, "It looks big."

She meant a solar flare, This would be bigger than the 1989 flare. It would cause massive blackouts and broken equipment. I did not have much time I had to make a decision to drive to Pine Mountain or out to campus. I would never make it to Pine Mountain in time, I decided the Physics Lab was my best bet.

H: Why is that?

Z: At the time, I wanted to get some data, I was about to miss the biggest solar flare of the century. I had to swap all the sensors to run off battery power.

H: Ok back to Margery.

Z: So I asked, "Marge did you call New York?"

Every Physicist and Astronomer with a travel budget was at a High Energy Conference in New York.

She said, "No... not yet."

I said. "Find the red book above the control station. It has a section on solar flares, follow the procedure. Call KEK in Hawaii to confirm your reading, then call NOAA. I am going to run out to campus, I will call you when I get there."

H: Is that exactly what you did.

Z: Yes, I literally jumped into my car and drove like a madman to campus. I drove onto the quad and abandoned my car on the lawn. I raced to the QMC Lab and check our ISG Gamma sensor. It was 10^3 and rising.

H: What does that mean?

¹With a telephone, a kind of prechange voice tube.

²Observatory

Z: We were being hit with a massive gamma ray event. Likely a precursor to solar flare.

H: What time was that?

Z: About 5:50 pm.

H: I called Marge. I said, “Marge, this is going to be big. Did you get a hold of anyone.”

She said, “KEK confirmed our reading, the line was busy at NOAA.”

Something started to spook me at that point I said, “Listen Marge, if we see 10^4 reading, I want you to gather everyone and go to the basement. Stay away from anything metal.”

She was becoming concerned. “Why?” she asked.

I told her, “In a massive flare, the magnetic tail of the Earth extends out for millions of kilometers. When the flare passes, the tail collapse and zaps the earth with a trillion volt potential. Every piece of metal is about to generate lots of RF³.”

This was getting serious. I called Campus Safety.

“Look,” I said, “This is Dr Zankeman in Physics, we are about to get hit with a large solar flare.”

“Sir,” the watch captain asked, “Have you been drinking? We have a report that you drove your car across the quad. Please stay where you are, we are sending somebody out.”

“No,” I yelled into the phone, “You don’t understand, we need to shut down the power and unplug everything!”

In retrospect, I was not making much sense.

“Ok, calm down Doctor, can you tell me where you saw the flare and who fired it.”

I slammed the phone down, I was wasting time.

I called The Ritz in New York, after wait, I got Dr Osborn.

“Simon, I guess you’ve seen the gamma.” he said, I could hear physicists shouting the background.

“It’s big, Steve,” I said, not waisting time.

“We already have reports of aurora off Long Island. Simon, we don’t have much time, can you check my SQUID?”, he asked.

I literally hit myself with the phone. “I will call you from your lab,” I slammed down the phone and ran for his lab. He had a Superconducting Quantum Interference Devices set up to test for magnetic monopoles, a kind of exotic particle.

I burst into his lab after fumbling the keys. I checked the reading and called him.

³Radio Frequency radiation.

“Steve, its 2766 counts!” I yelled into the phone, “Holly crap!”

There was a very long pause. I could hear the chaos in the background quiet.

“Ok, listen carefully Simon,” He said gravely. “There’s a Faraday Cage in the basement lab and some lead blanks in the X-Ray lab. Take some food and water, you don’t have much time. I am going to find my wife.”

“Sir, you should make for the Amish country.” I said, suddenly understanding.

“Yea, me and 20 million other people. Look Simon, its been an honor working with you...”

Then static washed over the line.

H: What happened next?

Z: I broke into the X-Ray lab with a crowbar and grabbed three lead blankets and ran to the basement lab and hid in the Faraday cage. Two cops from Campus Safety found me cowering under a heap of blankets, raving like a complete lunatic. I had locked myself inside the cage. They went off to find some bolt cutters.

H: And what is a Faraday Cage?

Z: Its just a grounded metal cage that shields electrical fields. We had a very good one for conducting RF research.

H: And The Change started?

Z: Yes, but I am not sure I can rely on my memories. Very large electric fields can do some strange things to our brains. We don’t understand all the affects, but it can be very much like electro shock treatment.

H: Do you think everybody who lived through the change had this affect?

Z: Yes, that and radiation poisoning and hysteria. Radiation poisoning looks very much like the symptoms of starvation. This could also account for most of the so called mystical effects we have seen post Change.

H: Ok next what.

Z: The phone in the lab rang. I had to answer it. So I opened the cage and picked up the phone. It was Marge.

She said, “Simon, I just wanted to say good by.” she was crying.

I ask, “How did you know I would be in the basement lab?”

“You told me five minutes ago, this is kind of a bad time to be an ass, you know,” She said sarcastically.

“Whats the count,” I asked.

“Its 10^4 and rising. Soft X is starting to climb.”

“I always loved you Simon,” she said.

“I ... ”, the line went dead. I wished I had called my Mom.

I scurried back to my cage. Then it started.

H: I know this is very hard for most people, but can you tell me about the even itself.

Z: Well it seemed to take forever. I saw a lot of light, probably from optic nerve stimulus overload. I remember hearing screaming. I realized in some disjoint way that it was me. Then I started hallucinating.

H: Can you tell me more, if its not too hard?

Z: Yes, well I saw lots of Saint Elmo's Fire, but I was seeing through the lead blankets. I could see through the walls. I could see students two floors up in the Computer Lab. I saw other things; wolves, deer, ravens, and owls. And then I saw angels, demons, and dark beasts. Finally, I saw a thing I call Cthulhu, it ate the world whole.

I woke some time later, it must have been hours. My watch had stopped, time seemed wrong. Everything smelled of ozone and burnt insulation; there was still enough St Elmo's Fire to see. I made my way to the stairs.

I bumped my way into the computer lab. When I stumbled in the students screamed at my sudden appearance. I was glowing with St Elmo's Fire; I was charged. Stupidly I grounded myself with a sink faucet, which just about killed me from the discharge.

In the dark we organized a triage. There were few injuries, mostly nose bleeds and ringing ears. I explained that we had been hit by a massive solar flare; most of the world was now without power. We were on our own, completely.

I told them to stay out of the sun for a few days.

H: Why was that?

Z: The flare would have destroyed the ozone layer for a while. We should have seen nitrogen oxides form in the upper atmosphere. Smoke from burning cities made observation difficult those first few days.

H: Now, we have some questions about an email ⁴ message ...

Z: Oh yea, that email, it must be a fake, I don't remember sending it.

H: Your roommate, Vince Clark, claimed that you two sent emails back and forth that night. He says that you told him to print Roger Greenstone's dissertation, and keep it safe. You told him you were going to Pine Mountain and the "mother of all solar flares was coming".

Z: Look, I don't know. Maybe I had some memory loss from the event. Maybe Vince had some lapses too. We all did.

H: Also, what about your car?

Z: It was stolen or towed, I might have left it running. After the March event no cars ran, so we didn't spend much time looking for it.

H: But didn't it turn up on the road halfway to Pine Mountain?

⁴Email was a kind of prechange heliography

Z: Really? I had not heard that.

H: Dr Zankerman, one last question, did you get or make any other phone calls that day?

Z: Nope. At least not that I remember.

2 Notes from CSU OS Day Book: March 17, 1998

10:30 Phone, SA Farruk Reno FBI, RE Rental Van

12:30 SA Farruk, onsite with Sec Obm

15:30 Vandalized vending machine HUM 124. OS10 RSP.

17:40 Vehicle on Quad (Red Honda LC2589-OR) Dr Zankerman. OS10 RSP.

17:50 Report of flares on campus SCI 320, Dr Z. irrational, OS10 & OS12 RSP.

18:00 X-Ray lab SCI 320 B&E. OS10&12 On.

18:05 Dr Z Locked in cage SCI13B. County MHS ETA 20m. OS10& 12 On.

18:20 (approx) All power down, radio down, phones down. Starting DR& R protocol.

18:30 (approx) large jet crash in town.

3 Pine Mountain Gate Log: March 17, 1998

16:15 Light Snow Fall: 36 deg, wind 15 SW.

16:30 E:GWT205 OR unreg, Zankerman⁵

17:45 L:PWD305, L:MVE290

17:50 Left post, staff request.

4 Personal Note, Susan Zankerman, March 1998

[Recovered from 124 Vesta Road, Red Bluff CA. Xing Expedition, CY 22]

Bill,

Simon called, he said something about flares. Do we need flares? Please call him when you get in, I think he's been drinking.

-M

⁵Entering