



Some time ago I had an interesting encounter with a strange object while flying my 1947 Model 35 Bonanza. The airplane was owned by my father, who flew it for more than 20 years and retired from flying when he encountered trouble passing his medical exam. Knowing the good condition of the airplane, purchasing the airplane from my parents was an easy decision.

After lots of lessons, I received my private pilot's certificate and was enjoying a simple flight from Indianapolis to Evansville, Indiana, to visit my mother and father. I was looking forward to working on an Instrument rating and had recently purchased a new ADF receiver.

The airplane has long had the required instrumentation for IFR flight, however, the previous ADF receiver was more than ancient and had become unreliable. I was happily cruising at 4,500 feet near Loogootee, Indiana, about half of the way to Evansville. I was far away from any airports or major cities and was enjoying checking out the recently installed ADF receiver.

Many pilots have asked why anyone would buy an ADF receiver in this, the day of GPS. Well, at the time, it was required to demonstrate an ADF approach for an instrument check ride. (This rule has since been changed to allow GPS.) Anyway, it was a VFR day and all was going smoothly. I decided to take some time to learn the controls on the new ADF and to browse for some AM talk radio stations.

Being far from any high traffic areas and safely cruising at 4,500 feet, I was spending more time looking at the ADF dial and less searching for traffic than would normally be wise. I was using headphones, but had the audio from the marker receiver still selected on the cabin speaker from a recent instrument lesson. As I was tuning for AM radio broadcasts and looking down at the panel, I began to hear what sounded like a middle marker tone rising slowly in intensity. I am not sure if it was coming from the marker receiver on the cabin speaker or if it

was on the ADF channel. I presumed it was an outer marker from a nearby airport, and thus looked up from the panel to see if I could spot the airport below. It was at this moment that I saw what looked like two black spheres tethered together by a wire.

One sphere was above the airplane and another below. To this day, I am not sure if I imagined the wire or if it was truly there. The spheres were directly above one another and I thought there indeed was a wire! My heart rate jumped when the object passed the left wing at a speed that made me feel it was less than 10 feet off the wing tip and the wire exactly at my altitude. Since I was not sure what the object was, I didn't know what its size was. I was unsure how close I had come to possibly snagging the left wing on a wire.

As the object passed, my head turned rapidly to follow the object much like an Indy car spectator. I was trying to see the object behind the airplane and was considering turning around to get a second look. At that time I realized I needed to look forward to check for traffic.

As I turned to look forward, a second identical object, also at my altitude and also causing a marker receiver tone on the speaker flashed by almost as close as the first. The tone from the speaker faded as I passed the object. I almost turned back to get a second look at these objects. At the time, I was so frightened that I wanted only to get far away from the strange spheres.

Like most relatively green VFR pilots, I was too shy to contact Indianapolis Center from the air. If I were to encounter this object now, I would not hesitate. If under an instrument flight plan, I might even demand an inquiry!



1947 Model 35: More than 50 years old—and still looking good.

I have since told this story to several pilots and even mentioned it later to flight service to see if they could tell me what it was. I had thought it was most likely a weather balloon, however, flight service indicated that no balloons were known to have been released in that area and that their balloons do not linger at one altitude but rather rise rapidly to great altitudes.

The other item that has led me to believe that this was not a weather balloon is that the apparently tethered spheres were both the same size—maybe five feet in diameter each. Weather balloons are usually one large balloon on top and a small instrumentation box on the bottom. I feel confident that the objects were of terrestrial origin. Do any readers know what this might have been?

I have since completed my instrument rating and have seen no more strange objects. I wonder how such an encounter might end under IMC conditions. Since this strange encounter, I learned to keep looking for traffic (whatever kind) even when cruising smoothly far from any city or airport.