

BOOK REVIEW

The Project Alpha Papers edited by Peter R. Phillips, Prologue by Lance Storm. The Australian Institute for Parapsychological Research, 2015. <http://www.aiprinc.org/the-project-alpha-papers/>

The electronic archival document *The Project Alpha Papers* is a collection of 18 articles relevant to “Project Alpha,” an intervention designed and executed by the magician James Randi and his confederates. The target of the intervention was the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research (known as the “MacLab”) located at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. This document was originally conceptualized as a book by Michael Thalbourne, an Australian parapsychologist and scholar, but he died before he could finish the task. The erstwhile director of the Laboratory, Peter Phillips, assembled Thalbourne’s material and produced an archive for the website of the Australian Institute for Parapsychological Research, and it is available there. All the articles were written and published in the 1980s, except for an article by Thalbourne, which was delayed until 1995. Phillips produced an eBook, *Companion to the Project Alpha Papers*, which is available at a modest price. This archive is thorough and well-collated; this review will not describe all of the contents but will focus on some highlights, especially those of which I have firsthand knowledge. It will also raise questions as to why Randi’s hoax was not detected earlier, given the many clues, some of which were supplied by Randi himself.

In the companion piece, Phillips describes how the magician James Randi sent two of his confederates (Steve Shaw and Michael Edwards, AKA “The Alpha Boys”) to his laboratory to simulate psychic effects by trickery, suspecting that the staff would not be able to detect fraud without the aid of an expert conjuror. In Phillips’ words, “The laboratory staff was indeed initially deceived, but later took Randi’s advice . . . and went on to do experiments that were free from fraud.” This contention is in sharp disagreement with popular press accounts that featured articles claiming that a pair of neophyte magicians had hoodwinked mature scientists. Phillips attempts to set the record straight, especially in the wake of the 2014 biofilm *An Honest Liar*, in which Project Alpha is prominently featured. Phillips observes that he was not invited to appear in the film.

In his Prologue, Storm observes that Randi offered his advice, suspecting that the MacLab crew would not accept it. “The researchers

were, indeed, deceived at the beginning, but took Randi's advice in the summer of 1981." Under Thalbourne's direction, the "MacLab staff then conducted experiments free of fraud, saw no psychic effects, and ceased research with these subjects in 1982." In the following Introduction, Phillips observes that Thalbourne was "never deceived" and initiated the archive and an accompanying website because he felt his scientific reputation had been unjustly damaged.

In a second Introduction, Phillips pays tribute to James S. McDonnell, founder of an aircraft company in St. Louis that was eventually acquired by Boeing. "Mr. Mac," as he was known, worked hard to establish a parapsychological research center at Washington University, where his efforts met with considerable opposition. Mr. Mac sought the advice of several parapsychologists including myself. In fact, he flew me to St. Louis where I transferred to his private Lear jet for a dinner meeting and a seminar with several of his colleagues. My advice was for the future "MacLab" to focus on one aspect of parapsychology and to do so in some depth. I did not mention macro-psychokinesis (PK) (i.e. major anomalous movements of sizable objects), but this was the eventual choice.

Phillips describes how a committee of university scientists unanimously voted to decline Mr. Mac's offer, causing Mr. Mac to persuade the Chancellor to approach Phillips directly. This led to a spirited debate among members of Phillips' own department (physics), after which a vote was taken with an affirmative outcome. The ensuing lab was named the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychological Research, or "The MacLab." Phillips observes that he was "ambivalent" about situating this lab in the Department of Physics and wishes that "someone more upbeat" had been selected to head the project. (He adds that Mr. Mac was more fortunate with his Alma Mater, Princeton University, where Robert Jahn was able to conduct historic experiments for more than twenty-five years.) The original agreement was to continue the MacLab for five years. However, Mr. Mac's passing in 1980 "ensured that the laboratory in St. Louis would not continue." This statement puts to rest the often-repeated claim that Randi's hoax shut down the lab (in August of 1983); at worst, it may have derailed attempts to get an extension—even though further funds would not have been easily available without Mr. Mac spearheading the efforts.

Phillips never asked my advice as to what aspect of psi would give the most promising results, but observes that it was Robert McConnell, the first president of the Parapsychological Association, who suggested metal bending. Phillips describes his own background in electronics and physics, and how this equipped him to tackle the field of macro-PK. In retrospect, Phillips concludes that psi lies outside the scope of physics, and even outside

of the reductionistic model that many parapsychologists endorse, such as Charles Honorton, who is quoted as saying “If it’s not reductionistic, it’s not science” (p. 18). Instead, Phillips proposes a “two state solution” in which mainstream science would acknowledge that “there are laws beyond those that physics has established—laws, moreover, that science can never fully comprehend. Phillips states that parapsychologists need to abandon their hope of becoming part of mainstream science as it now stands, although they can rightly “expect to be given the kind of respect that scientists normally receive” (p. 18). This perspective is only given a few paragraphs but is so provocative that it deserves to be expanded into a lengthy article. For me, it was one of the most valuable parts of the archive.

Phillips notes that Randi “sent two young men to us, Mike Edwards and Steve Shaw, each claiming to be a metal bender” (p. 22). Actually, the so-called “Alpha Boys” had responded to media solicitations, each independently insofar as the MacLab staff was concerned, but they were already part of Randi’s team. Indeed, Randi approached Phillips once he claimed to have heard about the MacLab’s focus on macro-PK, offering to be of assistance. In retrospect, the proverbial dots were in place but nobody at the MacLab had connected them.

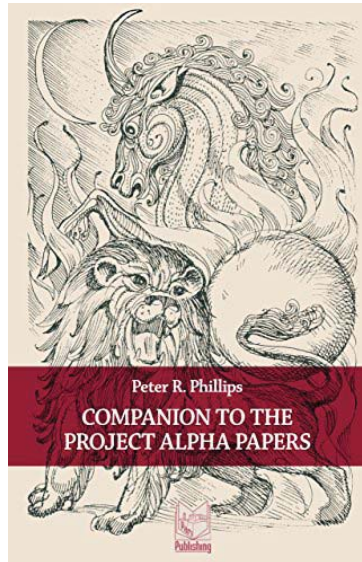
Phillips and his staff began to work with the Alpha Boys informally, so as not to make Type One errors, or false positives, the initial acceptance of phenomena as genuine macro-PK that could subsequently be invalidated. Phillips points out that the alternative would have been Type Two errors, false negatives, incorrectly concluding that macro-PK was absent. Phillips cites a letter from Randi advocating “starting out with essentially loose controls . . . and gradually tightening up” (p. 26). Hence, there were 13 research sessions during three visits, each of them open to possible deception. During this time, the Alpha Boys surreptitiously entered the laboratory at night through an opened window and simulated instances of PK-like phenomena that were discovered by the MacLab staff the following morning. Phillips, upon observing these effects, called upon a colleague to tell him that he had been fooled “by a couple of young rascals who entered by the window” (p. 27). Phillips did not mention this interpretation to the MacLab staff because he did not see “any real motivation” for trick-playing on the part of the “Alpha Boys.” To me, this was a puzzling decision. Even if the motivation was unclear, the behavior—even as an immature prank—should have been communicated to the staff. Frankly, I would have sent the Alpha Boys packing following this blatantly unprofessional incident.

Phillips divides the MacLab’s interaction with the Alpha Boys into two parts. The first led up to the Parapsychological Association convention in 1981, during which “we were primarily trying to find conditions under

which [the participants] could display their abilities.” That meeting was held in Syracuse, New York, and Phillips presented a short videotape of the Alpha Boys’ ostensible PK along with a tape sent by Randi containing similar effects. Phillips introduced the tapes by terming the effects “suggestive” and asking for suggestions on how to proceed. The response of experienced parapsychologists was skeptical. Robert Morris and Charles Honorton told Phillips that Randi was planning a publicity foray with the Alpha Boys as its centerpiece. They did not tell him that they had been tipped off by Marcello Truzzi, who had overheard a discussion by two of Randi’s colleagues. Randi was present at the convention but made no mention of what later became known as “Project Alpha.” The research brief published in the PA proceedings by Phillips and Mark Shafer (a MacLab staff member) used the term “exploratory,” a wise choice because the positive macro-PK results therein were likely fraudulent.

Phillips’ correspondence with Randi was more extensive than I had realized; it even included a 1980 Christmas card from Randi in a Santa Claus cap accompanied by the message, “You’d better watch out.” Phillips admits that during this first phase of the project, the Alpha Boys “deceived us,” and these deceptions are described in a detailed paper in this Archive. During his discourse, Phillips often breaks the narrative with comments starting, “Dear Reader, you may be wondering . . .” or something similar, making “in hindsight” comments. One of these comments refers to a “physicist of good common standing” who “saw what was going on right away.” The physicist (not a parapsychologist) is not named, nor is the reason divulged why his observations were not taken more seriously. Phillips asked for advice because he felt “unsuited” to “direct this laboratory” (p. 22). It is to Phillips’ credit that his comments are characterized by modesty and a minimum of blame assignment.

Following the PA convention, the second part of the process was initiated. The Alpha Boys were told that the time for exploratory work was past, and that future experiments would be conducted with adequate controls. The macro-PK results disappeared and work was discontinued



in 1982. Phillips chose not to include private correspondence in this monograph, and the decision was probably a proper one. If he had included such documents, he would probably have cited a letter that William Braud wrote to Michael Thalbourne on March 28, 1983, describing a visit that Braud and I made to the MacLab in February, 1982. The joint visit was serendipitous; we had both been invited to the MacLab and simply appeared at the same time, although Braud's time there was longer than mine. In the letter, Braud describes what led to our conclusion that the Alpha Boys were part of a hoax. Braud, through a one-way vision window, observed one of the young magicians manipulate "what appeared to be an invisible thread . . . , tossing the thread over an imaginary object and maneuvering the thread and object with his fingers." I reached my conclusions following interviews with the Alpha Boys, closely observing their body language. In addition, I took notes regarding their statements; one of them claimed that they had been tested at parapsychology labs "all over the country" and that they had been accepted "from a pool of several hundred who had applied." In actuality, they had made brief visits to the New Frontiers organization in Wisconsin and to the psychiatrist Berthold Schwartz in Florida, both of whom were visited by Phillips whose reaction was less than impressive (p. 31). The "several hundred" applicants who responded to the announcements in various periodicals were more like a few dozen. These claims and behaviors were so outrageous one could make the case that the Alpha Boys wanted to be detected, as they were tired of the charade now that stringent controls had been imposed on the experimental sessions.

When the Alpha Boys made derogatory comments about Randi (whom they called "The Amusing Randi"), Braud and I mentioned the possibility that they were the magician's "plants." Here we missed our chance. According to Randi, his confederates had been instructed to immediately admit they were indeed magicians who were working with Randi should anyone have asked them a direct question. We did not ask a direct question, and the Alpha Boys made some humorous comments and then shifted to other topics of conversation. Phillips was not present at the time, but Braud and I shared our concerns with MacLab staff members. One of them mentioned that the manipulation of the imaginary thread was habitual "playacting" that had been noted before, while another one reminded us that there were instances in the history of psychical research in which participants cheated but nonetheless possessed actual psi talents as well. We left the matter at that but were unconvinced that the Alpha Boys had any psi ability whatsoever.

My own involvement with Project Alpha was not over. The Institute of Noetic Sciences had asked me to lead a group of its members to Brazil and Peru in early 1983, where we visited historic sites, claimant mediums, and

psychic claimants. Before arriving in Peru, a local shaman, Francisco, had asked for the birthdates of each member of our troupe. Upon meeting us, he gave us each a small sculpture crafted from tinfoil and a short statement, in Spanish. Almost everyone received a very pleasant and positive forecast, but mine read "Misunderstanding. Disgrace." A few days later, on our flight back to the United States, a member of our group walked to my seat and excitedly told me, "Stan, you are quoted in *The New York Times*!" She showed me the February 15th article, included in this monograph, titled "Magician's Efforts to Foil Scientists Raises Questions." Following my visit to the MacLab and in light of Braud and my conclusions, I suspected that Randi might discontinue the project at any time. Before I left for South America, I left a message with Robert Van de Castle, the public relations director of the Parapsychological Association (PA) (of which I was the then current president). I told him to release the letter to any journalist who wanted a statement from me or the PA about what was later called "Project Alpha." My memo duly noted that Phillips and the MacLab staff had never made unequivocal claims about the veracity of the Alpha Boys, and that their current research protocols were designed to guard against fraud. I also reiterated my long-standing insistence that magicians with expertise in close-up legerdemain be consulted whenever parapsychologists investigated macro-PK.

William Broad, who wrote the article for *The New York Times*, did not consult the PA nor did any of the other journalists who covered the story. To the contrary, Broad claimed that I had written Randi a letter calling the project a "magnificent experiment which was much needed." Obviously, I could not have written this letter because I was abroad at the time. I complained to the newspaper, and on August 16, 1983, it published my statement that I had been misquoted. But the damage had been done. I received a number of letters from prominent PA members condemning me for such an inappropriate comment. Fortunately, some of these letters began by stating, "If this quotation is true," leaving open the possibility that it was an error. According to Phillips, Broad claims he obtained the quotation from Randi (not an example of first-class journalism) and concludes "its true origin remains a mystery." However, I have in my possession a letter (March 28, 1983) from Randi in which he acknowledges that the statement was made by Mark Shafer, and apologized "for the error and trust that you will forgive it." The Peruvian shaman had been right. Misunderstanding. Disgrace.

Phillips is correct in stating that I wrote an account of Project Alpha for the *Newsletter of the Association of Humanistic Psychology* (AHP). But he is wrong in stating that I wrote it for the benefit of the PA membership,

as few of them read the *Newsletter*. Instead, I wrote it for AHP members. Furthermore, I checked its accuracy with both Phillips and Randi, and each of the protagonists agreed that my account was correct. In fact, Phillips cites some items from my article in his introductory material. My document is included in this archive under the title “The Randi Caper” (Krippner 1984).

In William Braud’s previously cited 1983 letter, he made it clear that neither of us felt the Alpha Boys were legitimate “psychics,” and were not even examples of “psychic claimants” who sometimes “cheated”—as one staff member suggested. I still have my notes from that visit. I also have a press release from September 1, 1981, in which Phillips and Shafer noted that Steve Shaw’s performance had been “inconclusive,” and a letter from Phillips to me from May 20, 1983, bemoaning the report that some parapsychologists knew about the hoax and even “supported” Randi. I have no evidence concerning the latter claim, but, as noted earlier, some parapsychologists did know about the hoax and I have no idea why they did not immediately fully inform Phillips.

As I was the President of the Parapsychological Association at the time, a few PA members wrote me angry letters regarding Randi’s unethical behavior and that he may have violated federal laws. Evan Harris Walker wrote me, on March 5, 1983, “If these allegations are true, as some of these activities involved interstate communications and travel, they would constitute violations of federal laws.” However, Phillips notes in the archive that Randi is not a member of any organization that would consider his actions illegal or unethical. For this reason, I declined Walker’s request that I instigate legal action. In addition, I knew that that the PA lacked financial resources to take this route with an outcome that would have, at best, limited value. It is also why I used the term “caper” instead of “hoax,” when I wrote my newsletter article.

The 1983 convention of the Parapsychological Association was held at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. As President, I had introduced a resolution (which was approved) that parapsychologists, when dealing with ostensible macro-PK, have a magician present or enlist his or her services as a consultant. Randi was present at the conference and invited John Beloff, the well-known Scottish parapsychologist, and myself to his nearby home for dinner. Before dinner he impeccably performed a card trick that shook Beloff visibly, although I took it in stride. When I returned home, I consulted my collection of books on sleight of hand and also talked with Dr. Arthur Hastings, a PA member and a talented magician. I wrote Randi a scenario telling him how I thought he had performed the trick. He later told me that I had “almost figured it out” and that he would never perform that trick for me again or I would fill in the missing piece. Quite a compliment!

More to the point, Beloff and Randi discussed a young man who claimed to be able to bend metal objects in a sealed cube. Initially, his attempts seemed to be successful, even though he “worked” on the metal at his home. Beloff’s associate Deborah Delanoy later wrote (1987) “The cube appeared to be intact, and we could not detect any obvious tampering. . . . Subsequently, the cube was sent to Mr. Randi for examination. Mr. Randi returned the cube, saying it had definitely been dismantled and reassembled. Upon further study of the cube . . . the method of reassembly . . . appeared most evident. . . . An identical . . . cube . . . was subsequently procured and sent to Mr. Randi for ‘fraud-proofing’. . . . Mr. Randi also sent another ‘fraud-proofed’ item.” The research participant “never did succeed in bending either of these objects” (p. 248). At this point, Randi mentioned that John Taylor, a mathematical physicist at Kings College, London, had asked for Randi’s help in designing a foolproof tube for an investigation he was carrying out with boys who claimed that they could bend metal. Randi then announced (to the best of my recollection), “This is the successful conclusion of Project Beta. Investigators of paranormal phenomena have finally asked my advice, intending to follow it.” In an August 18 letter to me, Randi wrote “I’ve sent a test protocol off to John [Taylor], and will be preparing a set of tubes for him shortly. It will be interesting to know the result of his test with his new subject. Sometime later, Randi informed me that he had never heard from Taylor, who, in the meantime, had lost interest in parapsychology and debunked its accumulated data. Beloff and his colleagues, as noted above, followed Randi’s advice and duly reported the results.

There had been rumors about “Project Beta” for several months, and many parapsychologists feared that their laboratory would be the next target. After Beloff and I informed them of Randi’s announcement, they probably breathed a sigh of relief.

Of course, Phillips had asked for Randi’s advice, but Randi did not think his suggestions had been taken seriously. In a July 10, 1983, letter to me, he stated, “Phillips only tightened controls AT MY SUGGESTION after the Syracuse convention. Up until then he had ignored my caveats and suggestions, but upon seeing the reaction to my videotape in conjunction with his, he was rightly alarmed, and called back for revision the written report he had issued, inserting the modifiers ‘apparently’ and ‘ostensible’—as well as others. The “controls against trickery were tightened when I INSISTED on showing him evidence against the validity of what he had observed!” This account does not contradict what Phillips wrote in his Introduction to the archive but, if accurate, does provide a somewhat different perspective.

So what can be said about Project Alpha after all these years? The

purpose of Phillips' archive was to vindicate Michael Thalbourne and in that task it succeeds. It presents a plausible rationale that macro-PK could be investigated at first with loose controls and if promising results resulted then the controls should be tightened. It also belies Martin Gardner's claim that "magicians are the enemy of parapsychology." Marcello Truzzi and Randi himself said the opposite. However, it does call for vigilance. When Randi or someone of his fame (and/or infamy) enters the scene, the controls should be tightened promptly. Phillips' behavior was thoroughly professional, but was not always fully cautionary, something he infers in his frequent comments to the readers of the archival material.

Readers of this archive can reach their own conclusions, but at the very least they will find the narrative, and the accompanying documents, provocative. They will also realize that Randi is essentially an entertainer, as his film biography described him—"an honest liar." Parapsychology is a multidisciplinary field and no one person can cover all of the bases on such a complex phenomenon as psi. Indeed, psi researchers need all the help they can get, and sleight-of-hand artists will often find a role that they can play better than anyone else.

STANLEY KRIPPNER

References Cited

- Delanoy, D. L. (1987). Work with a fraudulent PK metal-bending subject. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 54:247-256.
- Krippner, S. (1984). The Randi Caper. *Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter*, July, pp. 20-21.