

OPERATION DESERT EMBARRASSMENT

An incident account filed by VRETH-7, Senior Navigator — submitted under protest

THE DESCENT

The approach was routine. We had done it forty-seven times. Drop out of transit, engage the stealth array, slip through the upper atmosphere undetected, and ghost across whatever stretch of desert the mission required. Simple. Quiet. Invisible.

At two thousand feet, the cloaking array developed what OLLO-3 would later call a "minor thermal bleed." The outer hull began glowing. Bright green. Quite spectacularly bright green, as it turned out — visible, per our own instruments, from low orbit.

A police officer was driving directly below us. He had a body camera. It was pointing upward.

The subsequent loss of thrust sent us into a steep corrective arc over the northeastern residential quarter of Las Vegas. We struck the ground at an address on Dorrell Lane, impacted the earth hard enough to leave a crater in someone's backyard, and came to a stop.

Propulsion: offline. Navigation: offline. Personal cloaking: cycling erratically. Distress beacon: transmitted — with, we would shortly discover, a positional error of approximately twelve kilometres.

OLLO-3 looked at the damage report. Then at me. Then at the trampoline six feet to our left.

"Don't," I said.

Our recovery team — stationed somewhere on the surface in the standard black vehicles humans associate with government secrecy — would have received the distress signal by now. The issue was the signal had placed us somewhere near the centre of Las Vegas rather than in a residential backyard three miles away. I opened the channel.

SUBSPACE CHANNEL 7 · ENCRYPTED · 23:49 PDT

● LIVE

[VRETH-7] Recovery Unit. We are down. Residential zone, northeast. Confirm you have our coordinates.

[RECOVERY] Confirmed. Our beacon is placing you near a large pyramid with a light shooting from the top. Are you near the pyramid?

[VRETH-7] That is a casino hotel. We are in a backyard. There are wooden fences. A garden hose. A trampoline.

[RECOVERY] Understood. We are recalibrating. Stand by. [pause] The pyramid has a sphinx in front of it. We are noting this.

[VRETH-7] Our cloaking units are malfunctioning. We need a time estimate.

[RECOVERY] Thirty-five to forty minutes. We are on a road called the I-15. There is congestion.

[VRETH-7] Forty minutes. Understood. Do not stop for anything.

[RECOVERY] Of course. [pause] There is a bus next to us painted with a very large human female. We are not stopping. We are simply noting.

Forty minutes. We could manage forty minutes. We simply needed to remain still, stay close to the fence, and wait for the cloaking units to stabilize. OLLO-3 estimated the repair at thirty seconds.

Reader, it was not thirty seconds.

THE FAMILY

The house was occupied. The family inside had heard the impact — understandably, since we had landed in their yard — and decided to investigate. They came out with flashlights.

I activated my cloaking unit. It activated. Then deactivated. Then activated briefly before settling into a slow, pulsing flicker that I can only describe as theatrical. OLLO-3's unit was doing the same. We

were eight, perhaps nine feet tall, standing against the fence, appearing and disappearing like a pair of very large ghosts unsure of their commitment to haunting.

One of the flashlight beams found us.

There was a moment of total silence — the kind that happens when something has entered a situation that the brain has not yet filed in any existing category. Then they ran. All of them, back to the house, with a speed and unanimity that I genuinely admired. The door slammed. Through the wall I could hear a phone being dialled, quickly and with considerable intent.

They had called the police. The same police officer, as it happened, who had filmed our descent twenty minutes earlier and was presumably still processing that experience.

"In forty-seven visits, I had never needed to run through a Las Vegas suburb at midnight with a malfunctioning cloaking device. That streak ended on April 30th."

— VRETH-7, INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

THE YARDS

We had to move. Staying at the landing site with police en route was not an option. We went over the fence.

The first yard contained a dog. It watched us approach — OLLO-3 was cycling between 40% visible and fully invisible at roughly two-second intervals — processed what it was seeing, and sat down. It did not bark. It simply sat and stared with an expression of deep philosophical resignation. We moved past it carefully. It continued to sit. It may still be sitting.

The second yard had a man standing alone at midnight, playing music quietly on a small speaker. He had his back to us as we came over the fence. OLLO-3's cloak chose that exact moment to fail entirely. The man turned, looked directly at OLLO-3 — nine feet tall, faintly luminescent, caught mid-step in a stranger's garden — and nodded slowly.

"Yeah," he said, and turned back to his music.

We kept moving.

The third yard had a security camera mounted above the door. OLLO-3's cloak was cycling on a 1.2-second interval. In the footage — which we reviewed later through our intercept channels — he appears as a large shimmering shape pausing to avoid a ceramic garden frog. He cleared the frog. I mention this because for a moment it appeared he would not.

SUBSPACE CHANNEL 7 · 00:11 PDT

● LIVE

[VRETH-7] Update. We have been seen. We are moving northeast. Cloaking is intermittent. We need you now.

[RECOVERY] Acknowledged. We are on a road called Flamingo. There is a hotel here that also contains actual flamingos. In the desert. We are—

[VRETH-7] Stop noting things. Where are you?

[RECOVERY] We need a location. Can you transmit?

[VRETH-7] Transmitting draws power from the cloaking units. If I transmit, we go fully visible.

[RECOVERY] Can OLLO-3 navigate by stars?

[VRETH-7] There are no visible stars. There is a sign for something called "All You Can Eat Crab." That is the entire sky.

[RECOVERY] [pause] We can see that sign. We are close. Do not move.

THE RECOVERY

The black vehicle came down the street with its lights off. I located it by its thermal signature and guided OLLO-3 toward it. His cloak was holding at 85% — essentially invisible from a distance, but closer in, something was off. The quality of the air around him was wrong. A shimmer. Like heat off asphalt, but vertical and shaped like a very tall person.

The police unit was one block west, sweeping the street with a spotlight. We had perhaps ninety seconds.

SUBSPACE CHANNEL 7 · 01:44 PDT

● LIVE

[RECOVERY] We see you. OLLO-3 — your left arm is visible. Move the arm.

[OLLO-3] Which left?

[RECOVERY] The visible one. The door is open. Get in. Quickly.

[VRETH-7] Both aboard. Drive normally. There is a police vehicle to the west.

[RECOVERY] Understood. [pause] VRETH-7 – for the record – the pyramid hotel is genuinely impressive.

[VRETH-7] I was present when the original was built. It was larger. Channel closed.

We departed the area without further incident. The cloaking units were repaired the following day. Engineering's post-analysis noted they had been "operating beyond their recommended service interval." OLLO-3 and I agreed, wordlessly, not to discuss this.

FINAL OBSERVATION

I have filed forty-seven visits to this planet without incident. I have observed empires collapse in slow motion. I have watched these creatures invent fire, forget fire, reinvent fire, and then set several things on fire that should not have been set on fire. I have, through all of it, remained undetected.

And then I landed in a backyard in Las Vegas, was seen by a family, a dog, a man with a Bluetooth speaker, two children at a window, and a Ring camera, was guided to extraction by a neon sign advertising shellfish, and had to be talked into the recovery vehicle because my colleague's arm was visible.

The city itself, I will grant, is something. They built it in the middle of a desert, filled it with light until it was visible from low orbit, and then went about their lives as though this were entirely normal. A nine-foot alien flickering in and out of visibility in a suburban backyard barely moved the needle.

I find, in the end, that I respect them for that.

End of report. VRETH-7. Filed under protest. April 30, 2023.

