

Pilot encounters with UFOs

Study challenges secrecy (and denial)

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BACK IN JANUARY, Agence France Presse reported that a Siberian airport was shut for 1½ hours while a luminescent unidentified flying object hovered above its runway. Although it's hard to imagine such an event taking place in the industrialized United States, a compelling October 2000 study by a retired aerospace scientist from NASA-Ames Research Center shows that similar incidents have occurred in America's skies over the last 50 years. "Aviation Safety in America — A Previously Neglected Factor" presents more than 100 pilot and crew reports of encounters with unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) that appear to have compromised aviation safety.

Author Richard F. Haines, formerly NASA's chief of the Space Human Factors Office and a Raytheon contract scientist, is chief scientist for the National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena (NARCAP), a research organization founded last year. In stunning detail, pilots and crew describe a range of geometric forms and lights inconsistent with known aircraft or natural phenomena. Bizarre objects paced aircraft at relatively near distances, sometimes disabling cockpit instruments, interrupting ground communications, or distracting the crew.

The data include 56 near-misses. Impulsive responses by pilots to an approaching high-speed object can be hazardous; in a few cases, such violent evasive reactions injured passengers and flight attendants. However, Haines states that there is no threat of a collision caused directly by UAP "because of the re-reported high degree of maneuverability shown by the UAP." While flying over Lake Michigan in 1981, TWA Capt. Phil Schultz saw a "large, round, silver metal object" with dark portholes equally spaced around the circumference that "descended into the atmosphere from above," according to his hand-written report. Schultz and his first officer braced themselves for a mid-air collision; the object suddenly made a high-speed turn and departed.

Veteran Japan Airlines 747 Capt. Kenju Terauchi reported a spectacular prolonged encounter over Alaska in 1986. "Most unexpectedly, two space ships stopped in front of our face, shooting off lights," he said. "The inside cockpit shined brightly and I felt warm in the face." Despite the Federal Aviation Administration's determination that he and his crew were stable, competent and professional, he was grounded for speaking out.

In 1997, a Swissair Boeing 747 over Long Island just missed a glowing, white, cylindrical object speeding toward the plane. According to an FAA Civil Aviation Security Office memorandum, pilot Philip Bobet said that "if the object was any lower, it may have hit the right wing."

Ground-systems operators have also been affected by UAP. "The element of surprise means a decrease in safety because it diverts the attention of air-traffic controllers that should be focused on landing planes. That is a danger," says Jim McClenahan, a recently retired FAA air-traffic-control specialist and NARCAP technical adviser. "Aviation Safety in America" does not attempt to explain the origin of these mysterious objects. But Haines writes that hundreds of reports, some dating back to the 1940s, "suggest that they [UAPs] are associated with a very high degree of intelligence, deliberate flight control, and advanced energy management."

In the 1950s, pilots and crews reported seeing flying discs, cigar-shaped craft with portholes, and gyrating lights, all with extraordinary technical capabilities. Documents show the unexplained objects were considered a national security concern. By order of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, commercial pilots were required to report sightings and the un-

authorized release of a UFO report could cost them 10 years in prison or a \$10,000 fine.

To keep this information from the public, officials ridiculed and debunked legitimate sightings, angering some pilots. According to the Newark Star Ledger in 1958, more than 50 commercial pilots who had reported sightings, each with at least 15 years of major airline experience, blasted the censorship policy and denials as "bordering on the absolutely ridiculous."

These pilots said they were interrogated by the Air Force, sometimes all night long, and then "treated like incompetents and told to keep quiet," according to one pilot. "The Air Force tells you that the thing that paced your plane for 15 minutes was a mirage or a bolt of lightning," he told the Star-Ledger. "Nuts to that. Who needs it?" As a result, many pilots "forget" to report their sightings at all, one pilot said.

According to a 1952 Air Force Status Report on UFOs for the Air Technical Intelligence Center, pilots were so humiliated that one told investigators, "If a space ship flew wing-tip to wing-tip formation with me, I would not report it." The vast majority of sightings by American pilots are still not reported. The media perpetuate the censorship and ridicule, handicapping the collection of valuable data.

In contrast, other countries are openly investigating the impact of UAP on aviation safety. A 1999 French study by retired generals from the French Institute of Higher Studies for National Defense and a government agency with the National Center for Space Studies examined hundreds of well-documented pilot reports from around the world. The study could not explain a 1994 Air France viewing of a UAP that instantaneously disappeared as confirmed by radar and a 1995 Aerolineas Argentinas Boeing 727 encounter with a luminous object that extinguished airport lights as the plane attempted to land.

"Aeronautic personnel must be sensitized and prepared to deal with the situation," the report states. They must first "accept the possibility of the presence of extraterrestrial craft in our sky." Then, "it is necessary to overcome the fear of ridicule."

In 1997, the Chilean government formed the Committee for the Study of Anomalous Aerial Phenomena (CEFAA) following publicly acknowledged observations of unidentified flying objects at a remote Chilean airport. Both the French group and Gen. Ricardo Bermudez Sanhuesa, president of the CEFAA, have made overtures to the U.S. government for cooperation on this issue, with no response. General Bermudez, and Air Force Gen. Denis Letty, chairman of the French group, said in recent interviews that the Haines study has international significance and should be taken seriously.

Brian E. Smith, current head of the Aviation Safety Program at NASA-Ames, agrees. "There is objective evidence in pilot reports of unexplained events that may affect the safety of the aircraft," he says. "Yet getting people to take an objective look at this subject is sometimes like pulling teeth." Indeed, the Airline Pilots Association, our largest pilots union, and the Flight Safety Foundation, describing itself as "offering an objective view of aviation safety developments," ignored NARCAP requests for a response to the study. In phone interviews with this reporter, representatives dismissed the report out of hand after glancing at the executive summary.

However, such dismissals may soon lose ground. Next Wednesday, John Callahan, former division chief of the Accidents and Investigations Branch of the FAA, will disclose FAA documentation and subsequent CIA suppression of the Terauchi encounter over Alaska. Callahan will be joined by more than 20 other government and military witnesses, and dozens more on videotape, at a National Press Club briefing to challenge official secrecy about this subject.

Retired United Airlines Capt. Neil Daniels, whose DC-10 was forced into a left turn because of magnetic interference of cockpit compasses by a brilliant UAP, is among the many who want change. "The energies out there are absolutely profound," he says. "I think we need to know what they are."

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