

It had behaved like a normal aircraft in the way it disappeared from the line of sight.

Here, the experts professed to hope, was something Project Saucer could get its teeth into. The whole flying-saucer mystery might be explained. The first step was to determine whether the object was an aircraft that had been partially obscured by a cloud or whose appearance had been distorted by a rain-storm. Two hundred and twenty-five civilian and military flight schedules were analyzed, and it was found that one other plane, an Air Force C-47, had been near the Eastern airliner at the time the mysterious object was sighted. Conjecture about the C-47 began to appear irrelevant, however, when the Macon ground crews agreed with Chiles and Whitted that the thing they had seen was going much faster than two hundred miles an hour, and so, unless it dawdled around somewhere, wouldn't have taken anything like an hour to get from Macon to Montgomery.

Astronomers went to work on the problem. Dr. Hynek considered the possibility that a brilliant, slow-moving meteor might be the explanation. Various bits of the apparition's description encouraged this notion—"orange-red flame," "cigar-shaped," "a tremendous burst of flame." Unfortunately, the flight schedules of meteors are not available, and Dr. Hynek had no means of testing his hypothesis. "It will have to be left to the psychologists to tell us whether the immediate trail of a bright meteor could produce the subjective impression of a ship with lighted windows," he wrote in a report on his findings. The psychologists expressed the opinion that a meteor could indeed be mistaken for a space ship. Dr. Fitts, the Ohio State psychologist, observed that both Chiles and Whitted were human and therefore as likely to be victims of mass suggestibility as anyone else. Dr. Fitts told me during a talk I had with him that psychologists are used to the fact that even people of high mental calibre often make mistakes about what they see. "Also, I would like to make the point that pilots are trained to instruments," he said. "They grow very dependent on those instruments, and I don't know whether they are necessarily superior observers about them. I do know that during the war, when I was in the Air Force, pilots frequently gave some pretty odd reports of what they'd seen while flying their missions." Chiles and Whitted readily agreed that their report might



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