

Mother Earth's flying saucers

SHORTLY before midnight on December 30, 1978, a freight plane took off from Wellington, New Zealand, for a regular newspaper delivery run to Christchurch. The pilot and co-pilot had unusual company—a team from a local TV station. The last time the plane had flown this route, the crew had spotted brilliant lights that seemed to follow their flight path, sometimes hovering motionless and then speeding furiously, sometimes reflecting off the sea or illuminating the land like searchlights. The TV team hoped to capture these unidentified flying objects on film.

About 25 minutes out of Wellington, the lights appeared, brilliantly lighting the sky. At the same time, radar screens at Wellington recorded mysterious blips, as though something was flying in tandem with the plane. The TV film showed later that the other light sources in the night sky—city reflections, rising stars—were far less bright than the objects which the radar operators described as "weird."

On the return journey, ground control confirmed that the brilliant lights and the mystery blips were at the same height and angle. The phenomenon now varied from bright white to dim orange light and its erratic path still seemed to follow the plane. Cameraman David Crockett thought he saw "a brightly lit bottom and a sort of transparent top" within the lights.

On the ground, researchers looked for rational explanations—Japanese fishing-boats' lights, secret aircraft, sightings of Jupiter or Venus, meteors, city lights or simply a hoax. None seemed reasonable. The lights sometimes remained still (unlike

meteors) sometimes appeared over the sea (unlike city lights). The fishing fleet was 170 miles south-east of Christchurch, well off the plane's route. The American magazine International UFO Reporter reviewed the evidence and declared it "a photographic record of a truly mysterious event."

The Wellington UFO might have remained a mystery, but for an intriguing encounter between psychologists and physicists which has now produced the first workable general explanation of UFOs. The mystery lights in New Zealand, can be explained, not as visitors from outer galaxies, but as products of a mysterious process on Earth which physicists are just beginning to observe and understand.

Psychologists at Laurentian University in Canada who were studying odd and unpredictable phenomena began searching for links between such events. Their computer studies showed a statistically significant correlation between unidentified flying objects and minor earthquakes. In their hunt for an explanation, the psychologists contacted the US Bureau of Mines in Denver, Colorado, where Dr Brian Brady was studying underground rockbursts. He had simulated in the laboratory the strains that break rock apart.

When quartz-bearing rock broke up, he noticed balls of light—short-lived, but as intense as lightning. The luminescence from a single crack under a laboratory glass would last only for micro-seconds, but in that time it might streak away, hover and then move again following the energy source in the rock-

break. What Brady was watching could have been tiny UFOs.

His work, still unpublished, shows how the light is produced. Where rock cracks, "it has to prepare itself," he says. Laws of thermodynamics are suspended. Matter implodes, instead of exploding, and enough energy forms to dissolve the usual bonds between ions and electrons. The implosion forms a hole in the rock, followed by shocks and strains and a growing failure along a fault line. The minor version is a cracking fragment of quartz—but the full-scale version is an earthquake, accompanied by what the Chinese already call "earthquake lights."

Brady has showed that seismic activity can indeed produce the energy for mystery lights.

He points out that cracks in rock like quartz—whose struc-

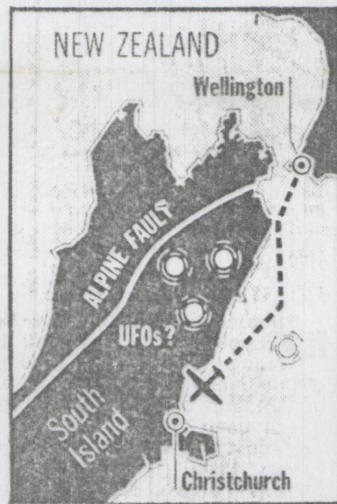
ture is not perfectly symmetrical—can produce an electromagnetic field around the electrons and ions, "a kind of magnetic bottle which give shape to the light." Rock becomes ionised like the air during a thunderstorm, so that electricity can travel through what is usually a barrier. And energy in its "bottle" can move and even grow, as long as there is a source, like the spreading fractures along the great fault-lines of the earth. The resultant light-ball can spin as it moves, which might account for the characteristic dome-shape above and below the UFO which led to the name "flying saucers."

The theory is plausible, and it is more than conjecture: physicists have seen the light caused by rockbreaks, and they know that electromagnetic fields do form on the surface of earthquake areas. Spectacular UFO sightings are reported from California, which is split by the San Andreas Fault.

Brady looked again at the New Zealand sightings, just to see if his theory would explain them. He laid geological maps alongside the flightpath of the freight plane, and realised that the plane had been flying parallel to one of the earth's great fault lines, the Alpine Fault. If UFOs really are products of rockbreaks in the earth, the flight path would be an ideal place to view them.

Not everybody is happy with Brady's theory. Since his ideas became public, he has had several furious phone calls. "It seems," he says, "that people just don't want you to take away the chance that there's some Big Daddy out there in the sky."

Michael Pye



Flying along the fault line