

U.S. has tight grip on secret UFO file

By WARD SINCLAIR
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WASHINGTON — The U.S. government says it keeps no records on unidentified flying objects, because they don't exist. But 131 secret documents about UFOs in the files of the National Security Agency have become the subject of a legal battle.

Would the documents disclose startling details about the flying saucers, or UFOs, that more than 10 million Americans claim to have seen? Would disclosure compromise NSA's sophisticated eavesdropping techniques? Is it all buncombe? Or is it all too frightening to contemplate?

Apparently only NSA can answer those questions and NSA refuses to talk. NSA's reticence is being challenged in court.

Eleven months ago, a U.S. District Court judge here, Gerhard Gesell, held that the documents were so sensitive that their release might endanger national security. Gesell did not review the documents. His decision was based on a 21-page top-secret affidavit given him by NSA.

The battle last week reached the U.S. Court of Appeals, where a small organization known as Citizens Against UFO Secrecy, arguing for release of the documents, told a three-judge panel that the government cannot have it both ways.

If UFOs do not exist, attorney Peter Gersten of New York told the court, then Uncle Sam has nothing to hide. If they do exist, then we may be in big trouble — and we ought to know about it. But NSA's lip stays buttoned.

"The government position is that UFOs are not a threat and that the government does not study UFOs," Gersten told the appeals panel.

If the panel does not order disclosure, he said, Gesell at least should be directed to review the 131 UFO documents and decide for himself just how sensitive they are.

Arguing for NSA, attorney Cheryl Long said there is no way the documents, no matter what they show, could be released

without exposing and compromising the intelligence-gathering techniques of the agency, which include global electronic snooping and code-breaking.

Citizens Against UFO Secrecy's appetite for government documents was whetted by the 1978 release of Air Force and CIA reports on UFO sightings that were deemed to have no national security implications. Ground Saucer Watch, a Phoenix-based UFO monitoring organization, forced the release through freedom-of-information suits.

Those documents revealed that in October, November and December of 1975, reliable military personnel saw objects hovering around nuclear weapons storage sites, aircraft alert areas and missile control complexes at installations across the northern United States.

In some instances, as radar sightings of the objects were made, Air Force fighter planes were sent in pursuit, although the records gave no indication that the fighters fired on the intruders.

Citizens Against UFO Secrecy and the Fund for UFO Research, based in Mount Rainier, Md., brought a witness to Washington to tell his story at a news conference.

Stephen Eichner, a now-retired sergeant who was on duty when a strange object hovered over the Loring Air Force Base ammunition dump in Maine, described in some detail what he saw in 1975 and said that officials at the base tended to discount his report.

Eichner told how he and fellow airmen had seen a football-shaped reddish orange object, three or four car-lengths long, hovering over the Loring dump. He said the object suddenly vanished, then reappeared some distance away at the end of a runway.

Numerous other visual and radar sightings were made at Loring. Air Force planes were scrambled in a luckless attempt to track down the object. The Air Force generally theorized that the object was an unidentified helicopter.

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