Bringing UFOs down to Earth

Many reports of UFO sightings come from areas close to geological faults. Far from being spaceships from other worlds, could the explanation of UFOs be much more earthbound?

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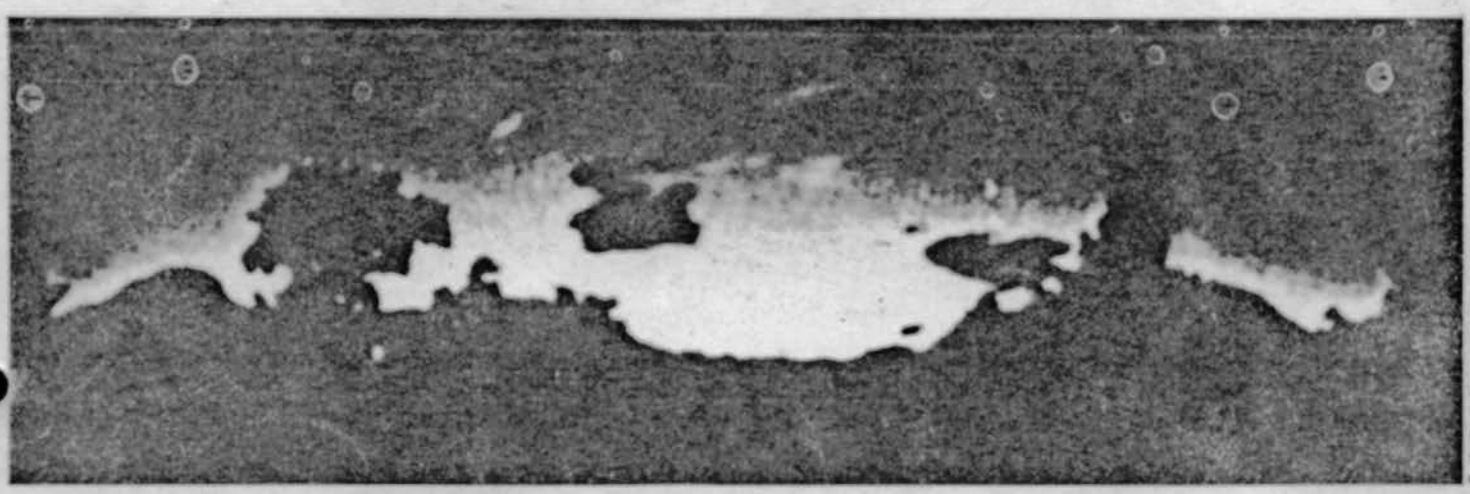

Earthquake light produced during the 1965-67 Matsushiro earthquake swarm, Japan

UFO RESEARCHERS Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington recently appealed for science to view the more serious aspects of ufology with greater leniency, arguing that a potentially new science was being neglected (*New Scientist*, vol 97, p 380). But by its very nature, science as an institution will not view ufology with interest or even toleration until it has built a platform of evidence too solid to be easily demolished. Fortunately the study of UFOs is beginning to yield such evidence, but ufologists have been as slow as scientists to appreciate what is happening.

From their recent work, Randles and Warrington have come to realise, as have a few others including the present writers, that UFOs are not spaceships from other worlds but are propagated by processes ocurring on this one. This realisation leads inevitably to a theory that—after hoax, misperception, and psycho-sociological factors have been allowed for—there is a real core of unexplained atmospheric phenomena which are at the root of UFO reports, and that such phenomena are produced by geological processes—that UFOs are, in fact, "earth lights".

The American collector of anomalous material, Charles Fort, was perhaps the first person to draw attention to the correlation between reports of unexplained atmospheric phenomena and regions prone to earthquakes and tremor activity. But the first serious research was carried out by French UFO investigators in the 1960s. One of them, F. Lagarde, found a distinct link between reported UFO sightings recorded in the 1954 French UFO "wave" and geological faults. Lagarde stated that "UFOs occur by preference on geological faults" and suggested piezoelectricity among other mechanisms as a possible factor in their manifestation.

During a wide-ranging study of Leicestershire between 1972 and 1976, Andrew York and Paul Devereux were able to confirm a similar apparent connection to that noted in France: UFO events reported over 25 years had their highest incidence over local faulting in the county. Population distribution confused but did not destroy the connection. York and Devereux also noted that abnormal meteorological events, collected from more than three centuries of archives, displayed similar distribution patterns to UFOs within the county. Geology and certain types of atmospheric phenomena seemed somehow interlinked.

In 1977 M. Persinger and G. Lafreniere wrote the first book on this geological theory (*Space-Time Transients*, Nelson-Hall) in which they opted strongly for a piezoelectrical explanation (see Randles and Warrington already cited). In 1981, at the request of Persinger, Dr Brian Brady of the US Bureau of Mines carried out an experiment in Denver in which a granite core was crushed in darkened conditions and filmed in slow motion. Afterwards, the experimenters observed lights on the film, flitting out from the decaying core and moving around the rock-crusher's chamber. It was suggested that this was reproducing on small scale the sort of effects that could occur in the landscape. Devereux, McCartney, Merron *et al* have now successfully repeated this experiment in Britain. The lights are easily visible to naked eye observation in darkened conditions and on one occasion a large light was clearly seen in full daylight. The present writers, however, are extremely doubtful as to whether these light effects are produced as a result of specifically piezoelectrical processes, and we shall be proposing an alternative mechanism.

The Warminster sightings

Research continues on the earth lights theory both in North America and in Britain. Britain, possessing rocks from throughout geological time, and with good UFO report collection systems, is an ideal location in which to test the theory. An obvious first trial is to see whether or not the famous UFO centre of Warminster, Wiltshire, can offer anything of interest. From the mid-1960s the Warminster area generated an enormous number of UFO reports. Media interest ensured that the whole Warminster phenomenon became something of a "hype", creating a mass of reports almost certainly resulting from over-eager UFO-spotters misperceiving mundane aerial features or simply fantasising. Nevertheless, behind all this spurious smoke something odd did occur around the small market town. On the face of it, the geology of the area is not promising from an earth lights point of view: it is essentially tectonically passive chalk country. However, study reveals that two isolated faults do run through the town and its environs, including Cley Hill, location of several reported UFO sightings (Figure 1). But the evidence for a link between anomalous aerial lights and