

UFO ENCOUNTER

SPACE
VOYAGE.
#7 (FIG 1884)

MORE ASTOUNDING UFO
LEGENDS FROM CHRIS MORGAN
AND DAVID A HARDY

THE AIRSHIP WAVES OF 1896-7

WHEN the modern rash of UFO sightings began in the USA in 1947, it was widely believed – even by some UFO ‘experts’ – that this was something new and unprecedented. Various commentators asserted that never before had lights and strange shapes been seen in the sky in any great number – but they were wrong. Not only were such experts and commentators forgetting the foo fighters and ghost rockets of the mid-1940s, (see the accompanying article about them), but they were ignoring the amazing waves of sightings in the US during 1896-7.

Between 1870 and 1910 it is difficult to find a year during which a UFO was not reported somewhere in the world. Due to the greater scarcity of sightings prior to 1870 no traditions had been established. The terms ‘UFO’ and ‘flying saucer’ were unknown. No central agencies existed to record and compare occurrences. As a result, the slightly more frequent sightings of the 1870s were not noticed at the time; each sighting was treated as a separate event and (at best) was given a brief write-up in some local newspaper. (Many of these scattered newspaper reports were uncovered by Charles Fort in the early decades of the 20th century, when he was accumulating details of strange phenomena.)

There was a considerable variation in these early UFOs. Some were bright lights, some were dark, globular objects, a few triangular, a few cigar-shaped, and a couple even resembled the well-known disc-shaped flying saucer. Their geographical distribution was similarly varied, including England, France, Germany (Kattenau), New Zealand and the Dutch East Indies. While there is no such thing as a typical sighting of this period, a couple of examples are worth describing.

In 1873 a tremendously fast-moving UFO circled the town of Bonham, Texas. This was a daylight event in summer time, yet the high speed of the object was such that its shape is uncertain; it may have been globular or even



At the tail-end of a squadron of super-fortresses returning to base after a bombing raid on a German city, two B-17's find themselves playing a bizarre game of 'tag' with a formation of foo-fighters. Copyright © David A Hardy

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cigar-shaped. Seven years later, in July 1880, a large aerial light was seen in the area of St Petersburg (now Leningrad), Russia. Accompanying this main light were a couple of much smaller ones.

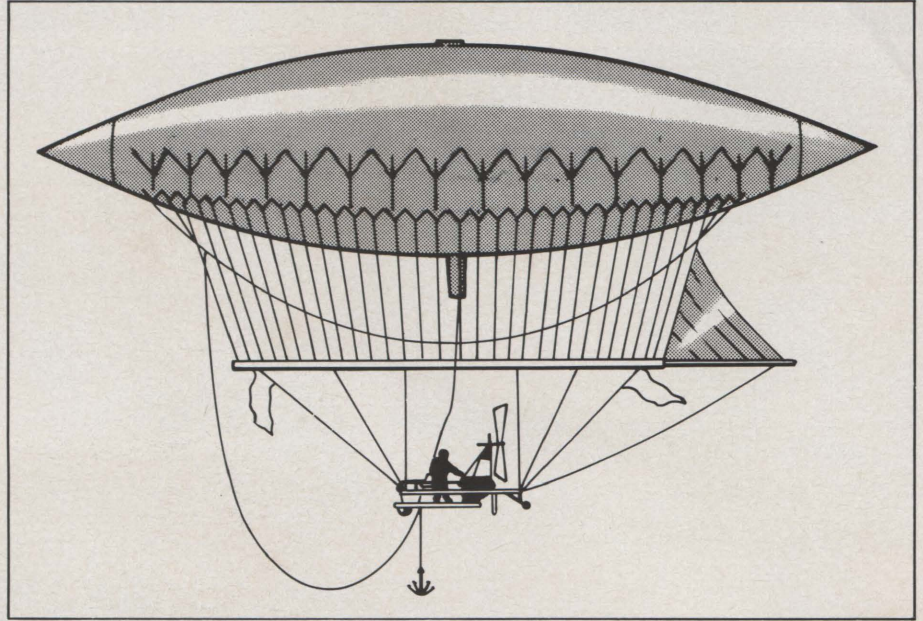
During the early and mid 1890s there was no particular build-up of sightings. Then, in November 1896, UFOs were seen all over California. The first report came from Sacramento on the 17th of that month. A strange light was seen moving in the sky that night. Contemporary newspaper accounts mention quite a few witnesses, some of whom claimed to have distinguished a dark shape above the light. Four nights later it reappeared over the city of Sacramento and was spotted by many people. That same night (21st November) similar flying objects were seen moving over Folson, a city twenty miles east, and over San Francisco Bay, some sixty-five miles to the south-west.

California's newspapers made headline news out of these appearances, which were classified as an airship of some advanced type, with a lit-up cabin slung beneath a large, elongated gas-holder. It must be stressed that no powered airships (dirigibles) existed in the USA at that time, though prototypes had been built and tested in France, and such airships had become a common device of fiction. The only fictional example remembered today is Jules Verne's *Robur the Conqueror* (first published in France in 1886), but other authors who were well known in the 1880s and 1890s for their fictional airships include Albert Robida, George Griffith and E Douglas Fawcett.

During the last week of November 1896, there were dozens more reports of lights or of complete airships from towns and cities all over California. Without doubt, some of these were mistakes (a large meteor had been seen to break up over California a few weeks earlier, and this may have led to confusion at a later date) or deliberate concoctions, but others had too many witnesses and were too strange to be dismissed easily.

In particular, there is at least one instance of an airship being seen to take off from the ground (and the witnesses on that occasion were two Methodist ministers). A suggestion was made in a letter to one Californian newspaper that the airship was from Mars, while another local paper reported a claim by two men that they met strange creatures who made off in a cigar-shaped craft. For a week or two the airship sightings were big news, but only in California. From a couple of other states there were isolated claims of UFOs, but these were all quickly forgotten.

The very next month, January 1897, airships – or, at least, lights in the sky – were seen again. At first the renewal of activity was in California, and also in Delaware on the east coast at about the same time. During February and March there were many isolated incidents,



About the time of the UFO airship sightings, real airships like this were beginning to get off the ground; this is the first successful version, a 3 h.p. 'steam balloon' in which Henri Giffard flew from Paris to Trappes in 1852.

particularly in the states of Nebraska, Michigan and Kansas. Swiftly the frequency of sightings grew and their geographical distribution widened. During April and May many thousands of people saw – or claimed to have seen – airships. Reports came from the mid-western states in particular, but also from the eastern seaboard. There were simultaneous sightings from dozens of localities, sometimes in several states. Airships were nearly everywhere, and the whole of the USA was gripped in a fever of excitement!

Inevitably, different witnesses gave different descriptions, but the general consensus was that these aerial craft were large and roughly cigar-shaped, with a metallic sheen. They had propellers and, quite often, small wings and fins, with a ship's body beneath. At night they always showed lights, sometimes very bright and occasionally of several colours. (At Norman, Oklahoma, on April 11th, hundreds of people saw an airship with a bright red light at one end and flashing red lights along both sides.) These ships were highly manoeuvrable and capable of high speeds (100 mph or more), even against the wind. Not only did these craft fly overhead, but many were seen landing or taking off, and claims of meetings with their occupants became common fare in the newspapers of the period. Lost anchors were even recovered from some of the airships.

Generally claims of meetings were unimaginative, with the airship's crew being normal Americans and admitting that they

came from a secret location in another state, and with the anchors being indistinguishable from those used on sailing ships. Only very occasionally were the airships said to have originated outside the USA – or to be extraterrestrial.

As with the modern wave of UFO reports, there were many sceptics ready to dismiss each and every sightings as Venus, meteors, mass hysteria or hoaxes, and there is little doubt that each of these four factors accounts for some of the sightings.

In particular, there were two celebrated hoaxes perpetrated at the height of the wave, in April 1897, and which were accepted as fact for half a century or more. One was in Aurora, Texas, where it was claimed that a large propeller-driven airship crashed and exploded in the early morning of April 17th, killing its sole crew member, "a Martian". The other case was supposed to have happened on a ranch near Le Roy, Kansas, on the night of April 19th. Here a cigar-shaped airship, some three hundred feet long, with a transparent carriage beneath it, roped a two-year-old heifer and flew off with it. Inedible parts of the cow were said to have been found a few miles away next day.

By the end of May, 1897 the airship wave was clearly diminishing, and in June only a single incident was noted. This was in Texas, and has particular interest because two airships were seen together in the same place at the same time. That may have marked the end of the US sightings, but there were several reports from Europe and Canada in later

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months of the year.

After this unprecedented activity in the skies things were quiet for a decade or so, with no more than a sighting or two per year from different parts of the world, just as it had been from 1870 to 1895. This changed in 1909, when there was a spate of airship sightings over Britain. In March, April and May of that year there were at least forty-three reports of (mainly) large, dark, cigar-shaped airships, carrying searchlights. They disappeared and then, in July, August and September the same year, were seen frequently and widely over New Zealand.

While these sightings occurred after the testing of the first German Zeppelins (1902), those were experimental craft of extremely limited range and manoeuvrability; it is most unlikely that they could have flown over Britain in 1909 and totally impossible that they could have reached New Zealand.

Many of the airship sightings of 1896-7 and 1909 may be dismissed on the grounds of being (as mentioned earlier) Venus, meteors, mass hysteria and hoaxes. Yet there remain such good sightings (clear views of lights and superstructures) witnessed by as many as 10,000 people at one time, that one is forced to believe in their existence. Why, though, did these UFOs almost always take the shape of airships rather than that of flying saucers?

A possible answer is contained in the theory of UFOs propounded by Frenchman Bertrand Meheust. He noted that the silvery flying saucers seen since the late 1940s closely resembled the alien spacecraft featured in science fiction stories from the 1930s and earlier.

This led him to suggest that science fiction authors might have been influenced in their choice of spacecraft by the pressure of extraterrestrial forces, for the purpose of preparing mankind for the flying saucers to come. One can extend this theory to include the appearance of powered airships in the science fiction of the latter part of the 19th century, and the subsequent appearance of such airships in the skies of America during the 1890s. This may not be very plausible, and it does nothing to explain the transition from airships to flying saucers, but what other explanation is there?

FOO FIGHTERS AND GHOST ROCKETS

DURING the mid-1940s there occurred two DUFO waves. Although they must be counted as part of the modern sequence of sightings, these phenomena were substantially different from more recent UFOs in several respects.

The first of the two waves (1944-5) was named 'foo fighters', the second (1947) 'ghost rockets'. In neither case were the later-to-become-familiar flying saucer shapes seen, nor did either wave receive much publicity at

the time. In particular, it was never suggested by contemporary observers that either foo fighters or ghost rockets were of extraterrestrial origin. Also, there were sufficient similarities between the two types for them to be dealt with together in this article: in particular they manifested themselves almost entirely in the skies of Europe, and they were both believed, at the time, to be secret experimental craft, developed by European nations.

Foo Fighters

Foo fighters were relatively small balls of fire, white, yellow, orange or red in colour. Appearing usually in small groups, they followed some US bomber and fighter aircraft on missions over Germany in the later stages of World War II. Their name was given to them by US pilots. It may be derived from 'feu', the French word for 'fire', or it may (as suggested in *The Encyclopaedia of UFOs* edited by Ronald D Story) come from the Smokey Stover comic strip which often contained the catch-phrase 'where there's foo, there's fire'.

Obviously it is difficult to be precise as to the size of a ball of fire or circular light, since its distance is not easy to judge, especially at night when the majority of sightings were made. Most witnesses estimated foo fighters as being from a few centimetres to several meters in diameter.

They seemed to play with aircraft, accompanying them for a few seconds or a few minutes at a time, yet possessing much greater speed (up to 500 mph) and manoeuvrability, so that they could fly circles round any US Air Force plane. Foo fighters were able to appear and disappear at will, and they never registered on radar. At no time did they make any move to attack or otherwise threaten any US aircraft or aircrew.

The first recorded foo fighter sighting came on the night of 23rd November 1944, by the crew of a B-29 bomber patrolling the River Rhine near Strasbourg. A group of eight or ten orange balls of lights closed with the aircraft, moving at a very high speed; after vanishing, reappearing, and staying with the aircraft for a few minutes, they winked out of sight.

During the rest of November and throughout December of 1944 there were similar sightings, particularly along the Franco-German border, but also deeper into Germany. B-17 bombers seemed particularly prone to being followed by foo fighters. Many reports were filed by members of aircrews, and the phenomenon was the subject of much gossip at air force bases, though the sightings were not immediately made public. (Lengthy magazine and newspaper articles about them did appear in 1947 in the wake of the first modern flying saucer sightings.)

The lack of newspaper stories at the time is easily explained. There was, in 1944, no flying saucer tradition into which these foo fighters

could be fitted. Then again, sightings were being made as part of Allied thrusts into Germany, details of which were a closely-guarded secret, with information being released only sparingly, through official channels: USAF pilots were discouraged from chatting to the media about their work. The third, and perhaps most important, reason for the lack of publicity was that foo fighters were believed (perhaps officially) to be a secret German weapon.

Witnesses had provided such good descriptions of foo fighters that all possible explanations involving natural phenomena had been ruled out. It is tempting to dismiss foo fighters as reflections of searchlights or fires on the ground, but one can presume that US aircrew were far too experienced to make mistakes of this nature. Also, ball lightning, although in a similar size range to foo fighters, never behaved in such a strange manner.

The long duration of some sightings (up to seventy-five minutes) and the way in which a group of foo fighters would zoom up to an aircraft then match its speed and direction for tens of miles, staying in perfect formation, suggested an intelligence at work. It was never suggested that foo fighters were manned, but that they might be remotely-controlled reconnaissance devices. Their failure to register on air- to ground-based radar was, of course, due to some new technological advance.

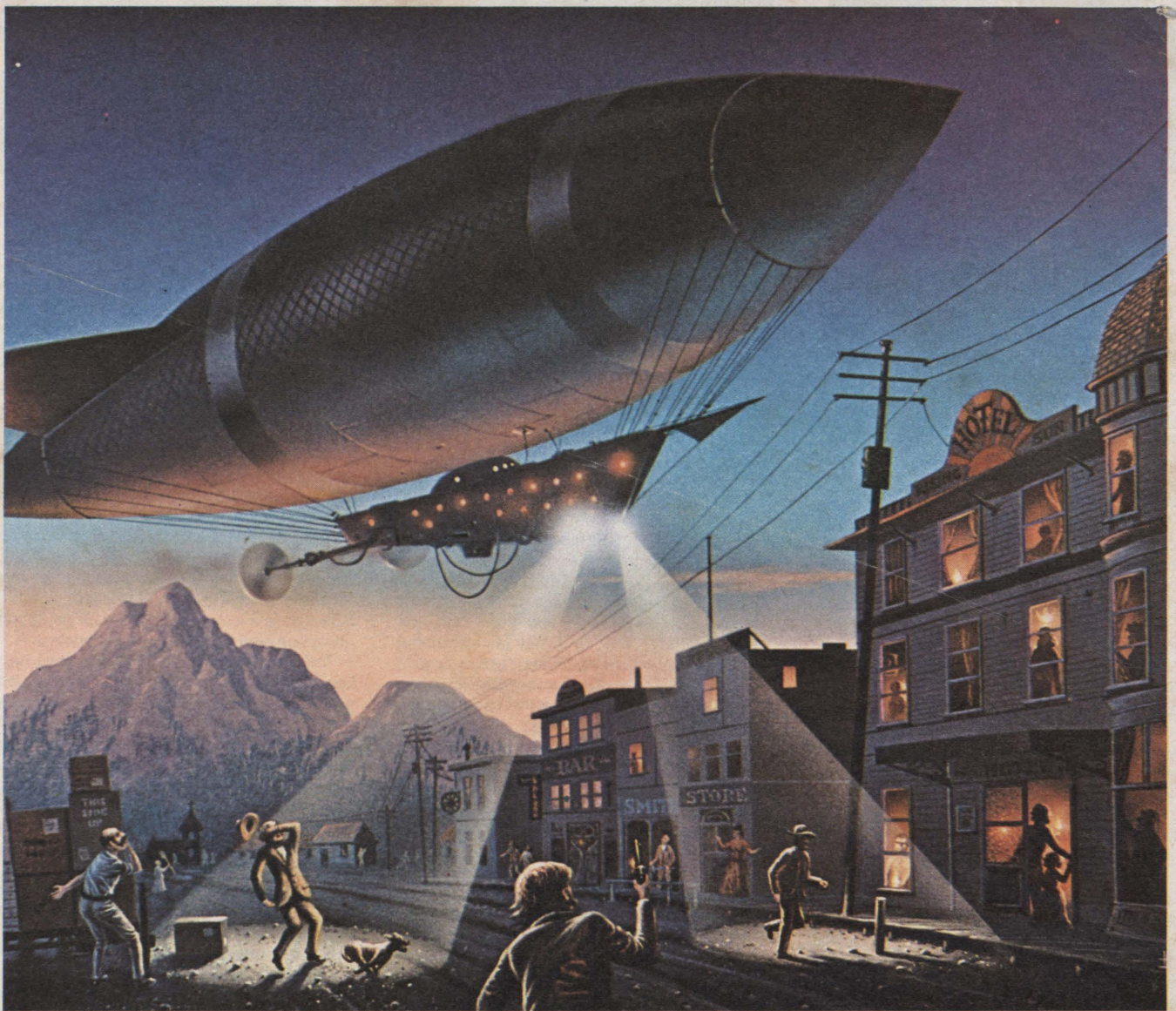
The widespread acceptance of foo fighters as German secret weapons is emphasised by their alternate name - 'Kraut fireballs' - and this theory seemed to have been conclusively proved when, in early 1945, Allied forces took over areas of Germany just to the east of the River Rhine, and the foo fighters suddenly vanished from the skies of Europe.

That was not quite the end of the phenomenon, though. Foo fighters had disappeared from Europe, but they appeared briefly, in 1945, over the Pacific Ocean, shadowing some US aircraft flying missions over Japanese-held islands. Their descriptions and behaviour exactly matched those seen above the Rhine. There were rumours after 1945 that Hitler's rocket engineers had developed immensely fast flying saucers as a weapon even more deadly than the V1 and V2 rockets. Some of these saucers, with swastika markings, were supposed to have been seen over Berlin in April and early May of 1945.

Nothing was ever discovered after World War II to prove or disprove any of these theories, and the nature of foo fighters remains a mystery to this day.

Ghost Rockets

Early in 1946 another wave of strange objects disturbed the skies of Europe. Apparently metallic and cigar-shaped, they were seen by many witnesses to fly at high speeds, emitting some sort of bluish rocket exhaust from the tail and yet making no sound at all. They were



It is 1897, and the respectable inhabitants of a sleepy American mid-western town are shocked to be awakened at dawn by the unprecedented sound of motors – coming from the sky!. Copyright © David A. Hardy.

given the name 'ghost rockets'.

Sightings were generally made from the ground, by day or night, and the wave seems to have begun in February of 1946, over Finland. Sometimes the ghost rockets were taken for meteors. The descriptions of witnesses generally make them about three metres long, flying at a speed of about 500 mph (occasionally much more slowly, occasionally very much faster) and at a height of 300 to 1000 metres.

Although most examples flew a straight course, a few were reported as altering direction or even exploding (silently!) in mid air. After some such explosions the ground below was searched for debris, and fragments of dark-coloured metallic slag were recovered (though there is no certainty that these were in any way connected with the ghost rockets). Even when exploding they seemed to be harmless, and there are no records of them causing any damage to life or property.

From May to August of 1946 ghost rockets became common over Sweden, Finland and Norway, with more than a thousand reported sightings. As in the case of the foo fighters, there was no suggestion of an extraterrestrial explanation; most observers, and the governments of the countries affected, were convinced that ghost rockets were experimental craft launched by the Russians. Although relations between the USSR and the European nations were very friendly in 1946, it was known that the Russians had occupied German rocket sites at Peenemunde and might well have gained sufficient information from there to start up their own rocket programme.

So worried were the governments of Scandinavian countries by the ghost rocket sightings, that they imposed security clamp-downs on reports of sightings from July 1946 (in Sweden), and August (in Norway and Den-

mark).

Later on, during 1947, there were a few sightings reported from central and southern Europe, with a slow but noticeable geographical shift towards the south, month by month. The most southerly reports came from North Africa, Greece, and, in September, even India. By then the wave was petering out, and scattered reports from other parts of the world during 1948 are sufficiently isolated not to be included in the same group.

No firm evidence for the origin or nature of ghost rockets was ever put forward, despite official investigation by the Swedes and other European governments. But it is an interesting fact that the official files of that 1946 Swedish investigation have never been made public. Considering the large number of sightings it looks very much as though an explanation was discovered and is still being concealed. *