

Close encounters of the East

By JEFFREY SCHMALZ

New York Times

NEW CASTLE, N.Y. — The public hearing was plodding along routinely at the Town Hall one night last month.

"All of a sudden, a cop burst in yelling: 'The UFO's here! The UFO's here!'" said Peter A. Brandenberg, a 43-year-old real-estate developer. "Everyone jumped up and jolted out. We went flying down the stairs to see this thing, just staring at it."

On a night before that, William A. Pollard was driving along Interstate 84 near Brewster.

"My neighbors said they had seen something," said Pollard, 29, the manager of an automobile service center. "I said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' I never believed in that stuff. But off in a field I saw this gigantic triangle with lights, about 30 feet off the ground — hovering. Then it turned off its lights and shot straight up — straight up. That's when I said, 'Whoa! Wait a minute here.'"

Throughout northern Westchester County, Dutchess and Putnam Counties and western Connecticut this summer, thousands of residents have reported strange objects in the sky — each usually in a V-shape or a circle, about the size of a football field, absolutely noiseless and

outlined in brilliant lights of white, red or green.

At night, the curious sometimes crowd the Taconic Parkway, a prime site for viewing. A hot line has been set up in Westchester to field inquiries. And in shopping centers and at parties, the talk is of a secret weapon or of close encounters.

The state police say the "object" is really five or six small planes flying in tight formation as part of a hoax. Some residents are not so sure. And others say that if that really is the case, authorities ought to put an end to it.

"If it's not a UFO," said Irene Lunn of Mahopac, "I want to know exactly what it is and what it's doing around here. And I want it stopped."

Lunn was among those who reported the most recent sighting, this past Monday night. She was coming home from the supermarket at 9 p.m. with her 5-year-old daughter, Erica, when, she said, "I saw it over a pond on a nearby farm, high enough to just clear the trees, traveling south."

"It wasn't an airplane, it wasn't a helicopter, it wasn't a hang glider," Lunn went on. "There was no sound at all, you could hear the crickets."

She described an object "about three-quarters the size of my house, with an L-shaped structure sus-

pended underneath it."

"It actually stopped over the house," Lunn said. "At one point, all the lights went green, then red, then they went back to a pattern of green and red and white. I felt like it was letting us know it knew we were watching it. That was scary. It went on for about 10 minutes."

The state and local police are flooded with calls every time the objects are seen. Many of the sightings have been reported by police officers on patrol.

One officer, according to Sgt. Kenneth V. Spiro of Troop K of the state police, which is responsible for the area in which sightings have been, followed the object.

"He tracked it to Stormville airport," the sergeant said. "It was a group of light planes. They fly in formation. The undersides and under the wings are painted black, so they can't be seen from the ground. The planes are rigged with bright lights that they can turn from one color to another. It's the lights that give the shape to the UFO."

"The trooper spoke to a couple of the pilots, and they're getting a big kick out of it. There's no violation of the law here."

He refused to give the name of the trooper or of the pilots the trooper spoke to. The airport, a small field in Dutchess County, was deserted the other evening. Neigh-

bors said they had seen no activity on recent nights.

But for many people, questions remain. Some wondered how airplanes could hover over an object or how they could shoot straight up into the air. Others said that they had seen the hoaxers but that they had also seen something different.

"I've seen those jerks five or six times," Pollard said of the pilots flying in formation. "They were nothing like what I saw the first time, nothing like it at all."

Pollard said that "the first thing I saw was rigid — absolutely rigid."

Many residents want a thorough investigation by the Federal Aviation Administration.

"Why would we care about a UFO?" asked Louis Achitoff, a spokesman for the eastern region of the FAA, in an interview. "If the pilot's up there with a clearance and at the right altitude, we don't care what planet he comes from."

Residents were angry when told of the FAA comment.

Pressed for additional comment, Timothy L. Hartnett, the deputy director of the Eastern region of the FAA, said of the hoaxers that there were no regulations prohibiting planes from flying in formation.

"They can fly as close together as they feel safe," he said. And in areas of sparse population, planes

could fly as low as 500 feet, Hartnett said.

In an effort to pull together information, Peter A. Gersten, a criminal lawyer who has made sightings from his Peekskill apartment, has organized a meeting for Saturday at the Henry H. Welles school in Brewster. He has invited

UFO experts and local officials. Among those attending will be Dr. J. Allen Hynek, who is a retired head of the astronomy department at Northwestern University, former associate director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and former consultant to the Air Force on UFOs.

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