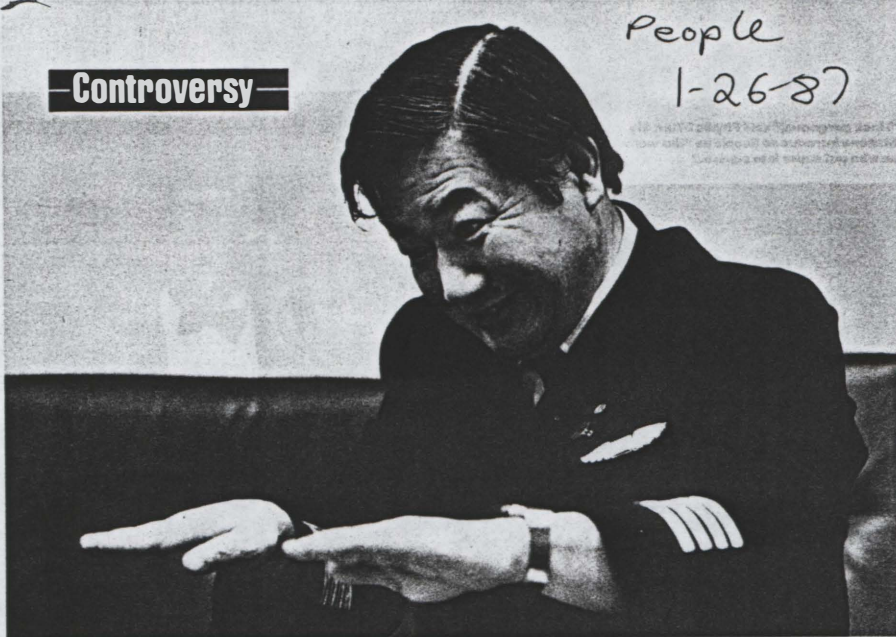


Controversy



At Anchorage airport Terauchi demonstrates how a giant object maneuvered to fly in formation with his plane.

THROUGH THE ALASKAN DARKNESS KENJU TERAUCHI, A 747 PILOT, IS PURSUED BY A UFO—OR SO HE CLAIMS

As the Japan Air Lines 747 cargo jet winged through the night skies over northern Alaska last Nov. 17 there was no hint of anything out of the ordinary. For the three-man cockpit crew of flight 1628, the leg from Reykjavik to Anchorage was a routine milk run, though the hold was brimming with cases of Beaujolais for the Japanese market. Then around 6 p.m., with the plane cruising smoothly at 35,000 feet, Capt. Kenju Terauchi, 47, sighted "two columns of light" piercing the darkness about a mile ahead and some 30 degrees to his left. "I thought it might be a military aircraft," he recalls, "so I radioed Anchorage flight control to ask, 'Is there another plane near here?' Anchorage replied, 'The only traffic is you.'"

As for the pilot's account of the bizarre events that followed, Steven Spielberg could hardly have scripted it better. "Suddenly the lights came to within 500 to 1,000 feet of the plane," says Terauchi, who saw "two dark cyl-

inders with row after row of spinning amber lights, one row spinning in one direction, the next in the opposite." These were no ordinary lights—"They were incredibly bright but cast no shadow," he insists. "I was sure it wasn't another plane; it moved so quickly that I realized it was not something human but had to do with very high technology, very high intelligence. I thought it might be a UFO."

A JAL flier with 19 years experience, Terauchi was astonished at the spectacle, yet says he felt no fear. The twin cylinders "flew in formation, and I realized they had better control of their craft than I did, so there was no fear of collision." He watched mesmerized for three to five minutes as the UFO sped ahead and disappeared. In its place the pilot saw two white, fluorescent-like lights perhaps eight miles away. He flipped on his weather radar and got a faint blip on his screen. Gradually Terauchi's 747 overtook the apparition and, against the glow of Fairbanks' city

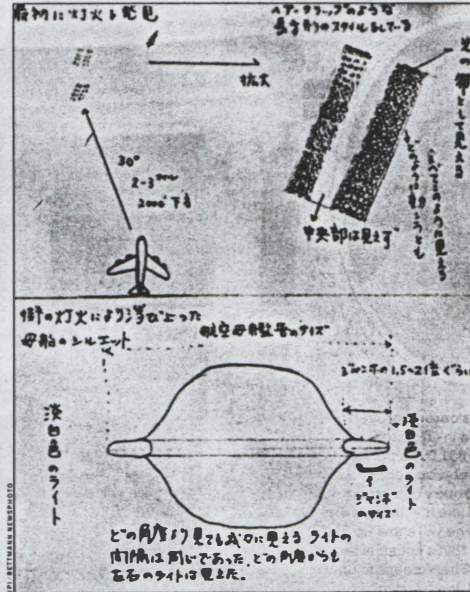
lights far below, he glimpsed a startling silhouette—a giant ball "the size of two aircraft carriers" with protruding lights and a light band through the middle.

Since Anchorage air controllers had registered a radar target near flight 1628, they called for a backup radar check from the regional military control center. The U.S. Air Force controllers reported seeing a blip similar to Terauchi's, but called back a minute later to say the signal was gone. Terauchi nevertheless received permission to make any course changes "needed to avoid the traffic." As the 747 flew a 360-degree turn, says Terauchi, the UFO "followed along in the same beautiful formation." Finally, at 6:53, all sightings ceased, and flight 1628 proceeded to land in Anchorage without further incident.

Officials from the Federal Aviation Administration's Anchorage office and JAL promptly launched an investigation. Far from providing a reassuring

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Photograph by Rob Stapleton



Terauchi's drawings of the UFO showed the twin cylinders (top), and the giant ball dwarfing his 747 (located under rim on right side).

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explanation, the probe has served only to deepen the mystery.

The customary explanations of supposed UFO sightings—special climatic conditions, refraction or reflection of light from another source—have all been suggested but none seems appropriate. What about the radar signals? The Air Force can't vouch for what Terauchi saw on his weather radar and now attributes its own brief blip to "electronic clutter," possibly a radar echo.

More intriguing is what Terauchi's crew, copilot Takanori Tamefuji and flight engineer Yoshio Tsukuda, saw or didn't see. Both sighted a peculiar light tracking their plane, but neither witnessed the closer encounters with the UFO. The pilot's suggestion that his crew was too busy with flight duties seems curious and, still more perplexing, news reports suggest there was minimal cockpit chatter of the "What-was-that?" variety.

The FAA has discounted the possibility that Terauchi might have hallucinated the whole experience due to fatigue or the influence of drugs. And no one has accused the crew of taking illicit sips from the cargo. Although the

crew was not tested, the FAA solemnly reported that "crew members were not influenced by drugs or alcohol."

Ultimately the issue hinges on the credibility of Captain Terauchi, a one-time Japan Air Self Defense fighter jock and a pilot with an impeccable record. No one could suggest a reason why he might want to invent a cockamamie yarn and risk professional ridicule. Terauchi contends that other pilots have seen things in the skies but don't report them because doing so is bad for one's career.

To date the FAA takes the position that while Terauchi is a responsible pilot, there is scant evidence to corroborate his strange sighting. But the captain is not done with UFOs. Just last week, flying a similar cargo mission from Europe to Anchorage, he said it happened again. "Please record this," he radioed air traffic control excitedly, lapsing partly into Japanese. "Irregular lights, looks like a space ship." This time there were no unexplained radar contacts, though Terauchi's cockpit companions (a different crew from flight 1628's) again were uncertain as to what, if anything, had happened. The FAA will investigate. Watch this space.

—Written by Dan Chu, reported by Nancy Faber

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