

# Close encounters of the enduring kind

**T**hey just won't go away. They hang around up there, year after year, in their saucer-shaped craft, playing tag with airliners and causing inexplicable blips on radar screens. They love to show off, flying in tight formation, or doing 90-degree turns at twice the speed of sound. And every now and then, when they get really bored, they land and treat some lucky (unlucky?) human to a ride. Maybe even whisk him away on a quick trip back to the home planet. These aliens in the UFOs have made themselves a permanent part of our culture.

On Aug. 12 of last year thousands of people in the eastern United States witnessed a spectacular unidentified flying object. One observer saw "a glowing, spiral pinwheel, standing on end and moving on a line from southeast to northwest." Others reported a luminous disk larger than the moon, with a starlike core. None of the witnesses, including many amateur astronomers, had ever seen anything like it. Police departments and radio stations were swamped with calls.

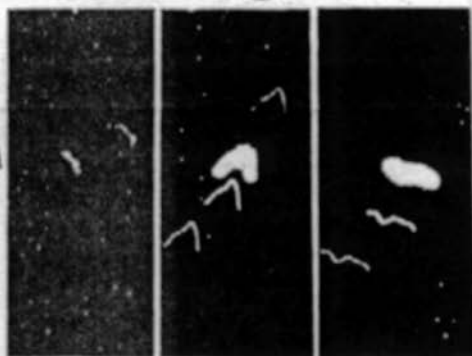
Then, on Nov. 17, the pilot of a Japan Air Lines cargo jet flying over the Arctic Ocean reported being followed for nearly an hour by two strands of lights and a huge "mother ship." The large object was the "size of two battleships," the pilot said, and appeared to be made by a "high technology and intelligence." Blips on a ground-based radar screen seemed to confirm that a craft of unknown origin was in the vicinity of the jet.

Investigations of these two reports are now complete, but before I reveal how two UFOs became IFOs let me put the sightings into context.

## The first saucer story

It all started 40 years ago, on Tuesday, June 24, 1947. Businessman Kenneth Arnold was flying his private plane above the Cascade Mountains in Washington. Nine circular objects, in tight, diagonal formation, passed within 25 miles of his plane. Later, Arnold told a reporter that the objects flew "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water." The next day all America heard about the flying saucers. Within a month, saucers had been reported from every state in the Union and half the countries in the world.

I lived through the excitement. I was 12 years old in January, 1948, when Capt. Thomas Mantell, in a P-51 Mustang, chased a saucer up to 20,000 feet. He lost consciousness and nose-dived into the ground. The headline I remember read something like:



AP/UPI photos  
Ken Chamberlain Jr. made these photos of strange lights in sky over Columbus, Ohio, in 1973. At least 150 others reported seeing the UFOs. At left, Neil Batey with "flying saucer" he found in England in 1967. It reportedly contained two car batteries, a British-made radio transmitter and a beeping speaker.

## "Air Force Pilot Killed Chasing UFO."

Big news for a 12-year-old. For the next six years I read everything I could find about flying saucers. And there was plenty to read: Books and magazine articles by the dozens. The newsletters of UFO societies. The official report of an Air Force UFO investigation.

And so began the cult of UFOs. The cult endures today, as vigorously as ever. I am often asked if I believe in UFOs. The answer is yes. I have seen several UFOs in my life. Anybody who regularly watches the sky is sure to see an occasional unidentified flying object. I remember one night in particular when a bunch of us were standing around in a misty field with a telescope. This thing zipped across the sky from east to west, turned around, and zipped back. Too fast for a plane. Meteorites don't turn around. Whatever it was was unidentified. And flying. An honest-to-goodness UFO.

## The mundane and the mysterious

But did it have an extraterrestrial origin? Not likely. Most UFOs turn out to have a more mundane explanation, and the rest remain simply unexplained.

The spectacular object that appeared over the eastern United States on Aug. 12, 1986, was a cloud of fuel vented from a Japanese satellite launch vehicle. In orbit high above the Earth. Similar clouds have been observed in South America from Soviet launchings from Plesetsk, and in Australia from American launchings from Cape Canaveral. They occur at a particular place in

the launch trajectory. The Japanese rocket test was the first of its kind, and the cloud of vented fuel the first to appear over the United States.

What the pilot of the Japan Air Lines jet probably saw on Nov. 17 was the planet Jupiter, which was very bright at that time and in the same part of the sky as the observed UFO. The Federal Aviation Agency has issued a report of its investigation of the incident over the Arctic Ocean. The FAA was unable to confirm the sighting. A United Airlines pilot in the vicinity of the Japan Air Lines plane saw nothing. The blips on the radar screen that seemed to confirm the UFO turned out to be "split-radar returns," shadows of the plane's primary echo.

Of the thousands of UFOs that have been reported over the past 40 years, not one has passed scientific muster for an object of extraterrestrial origin. But still the cult of the UFO endures. Cultists will not be dissuaded by talk of vented rocket fuel and "split-radar" echoes. They will say that once again conspiratorial scientists have "explained away" something that doesn't fit accepted theories.

I won't speak for others, but inside this typically skeptical scientist there is a 12-year-old boy who wants desperately to believe in the visitors from outer space. He's still waiting for the evidence.

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