



• The Childerhose 'UFO' photograph. The line is caused by the binding margin in Klass's book.

The Childerhose UFO:

fact or fiction?

Ball lightning, sun reflectance . . . or hoax? asks Stuart Campbell

it is not registered with the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale in Paris. However Canada's National Defence Headquarters (Directorate of History) drew my attention to a booklet written by Childerhose² and they sent me a copy of a section in which he described the record run and its preparation. This states that the run itself occurred on Thursday, 29 August. In fact that date was a Wednesday. Childerhose states that the run to Vancouver was on the previous Monday (ie 27 August). His account also told me that the record run was organised and led by F/L Ralph Annis. Consequently I tried to trace Annis through Canada's Public Archives.

This search was successful. In December 1987 I received a letter from Col. R H Annis (Ret'd). He had been unaware that the picture had become prominent evidence for UFOs (or some other unidentified phenomenon) and had let Childerhose 'have his fun!' He had not seen Childerhose for many years but referred to his 'penchant for a bit of "leg pulling"'. He thought that the bright object was a natural refraction phenomenon which he had seen several times, but he did not confirm seeing the object at the time the photograph is alleged to have been taken. Although he had seen many copies of the picture he had never seen the original. Nor did he know what type of film or camera had been used. He confirmed that the westward run took place on 27 August (with the record run on 30 August), leaving about 9.00 from Montreal. He was trying to trace Childerhose for a reunion.

Weather data confirm that thunderstorms were reported in the Calgary area on the afternoon and evening of 27 August 1956 (but not on the 29th or 30th). Consequently it can be accepted that the

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photograph of the clouds was taken on the afternoon of 27 August 1956 somewhere over southern Alberta. But the picture is reversed if Childerhose was looking south (and there is no reason to suppose that he was not). Klass confirms that the print supplied to him was as printed in his book and that he did not reverse it. Therefore the picture was reversed by Childerhose (or whoever made the print). Such reversal indicates printing by an amateur photographer who either did not know which way round to print from a slide, or did not care.

Identification of the bright object has proved difficult. In 1968 Klass thought that it was some form of giant ball lightning (BL), a phenomenon he thought accounted for many UFO reports. He accepted Childerhose's account, although he admitted that he wanted to accept it. Nevertheless he thought that Childerhose was unlikely to have taken the trouble to take a photograph unless he did indeed see the unusual object which the picture shows. Klass was impressed by the fact that Childerhose had sought neither personal publicity nor gain from the picture.

Klass has since abandoned his BL hypothesis and in any case the existence of BL is doubtful and no-one else has reported seeing such a giant. Klass has not proposed an alternative explanation for the object but it cannot be a reflection of the sun from (say) an expanse of water since it does not lie in the same direction as the sun. Nor could clouds produce such a bright reflection. It could not be Annis's refraction phenomenon because the object, the aircraft and the sun were not in line. It cannot be an astronomical object because the view is downwards towards the ground.

The picture's unexplained reversal and Annis's comments about Childerhose's sense of humour suggest that the picture is faked, perhaps by projecting a spot of light onto an image from an enlarger. Such a conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the 'object' is placed 'conveniently' in the centre of a gap in the clouds, and also by the lack of the second picture. It is understandable that a pilot would take one picture of a dramatic cloudscape, but not understandable that he would take only one picture of an unusual and perhaps novel phenomenon. Childerhose's claim that he could see the 'object' through clouds is not backed up by pictures, and in any case seems unlikely. Hoax photographs usually come alone and they usually come late! Apparently Childerhose only published the photograph years later when he needed an illustration for an article about 'flying saucers'!

If the object really was visible from the aircraft how is it that he made no mention of it in his 1965 booklet? Perhaps at that time the picture did not exist in its present form. His claim that none of the other pilots recall the incident could be a ploy to imply they really did see it; only their memory is at fault. It seems unlikely that anyone could forget such an unusual sight. One may ask how he drew the other pilots' attention to the 'object' without conversation; one cannot imagine that such an unusual object was not the subject of conversation. The fact that the original slide is not available for inspection is consistent with a hoax, but of course not proof of it. However I suggest that the evidence does point to a hoax.

Apart from those already mentioned I acknowledge the assistance of Ian Anderson of the Pacific Weather Centre in Vancouver. ●

References

- 1 *UFOs-Identified* by Philip J. Klass (New York 1968).
- 2 *Famous Aircraft: The F-86 Sabre* by R. J. Childerhose (New York 1965).

The dust jacket of a book about the UFO phenomenon¹ carried a picture of a bright, apparently luminous object set among clouds. The photograph was also reproduced within the book, with the following caption:

Giant plasma-UFO, nestling below powerful thunderstorm clouds, was photographed in 1956 by Royal Canadian Air Force pilot R. J. Childerhose while flying at 36 000-foot (10 973m) altitude over the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. The object, which resembled a shiny silver dollar, represents a phenomenon not yet catalogued by science. Although it is not possible to accurately estimate the plasma's size, it appears to be at least 50 to 100 feet (15-30m) in diameter.

A copy of the photograph is shown here. It was taken from Klass's book with his permission; Childerhose himself has not been located since 1966 and the original colour slide is not available.

Klass, who discussed the incident in his book, first discovered the photograph as a result of an article on flying saucers which appeared in the 13 November 1966 issue of the *Montreal Star*. The author of the article was Robert J. Childerhose. He claimed that he had taken the picture on 29 August 1956 while flying an F-86 Sabre jet fighter to Vancouver. He was in a flight of four such aircraft which planned to set a new trans-Canada speed record (which two of them subsequently did). In the early evening, just as the sun was setting, they were near 'MacLeod, Alberta' (assumed to be Fort MacLeod), in what Childerhose described as the biggest thunderstorm he had ever seen in North America. He claimed that the cumulo-nimbus extended higher than the aircraft (to 12 200m)! Childerhose was on the left side of the formation when his attention was caught by an object to his left, 'far below his own altitude'. It was visible through a 'hole' in the clouds and seemed to be suspended above some lower cumulus.

Klass traced Childerhose to Toronto, where he was a feature writer for the *Telegram*, and asked him if the object could have been sunlight reflecting off a cloud. 'No' replied Childerhose, 'the sun was beginning to set behind the mountains and was obscured from our view. It was already dark on the ground and the object itself was intensely bright against the deep gloom below'. According to Childerhose, the object was stationary, had sharply defined edges and was 'brighter than the existing sunlight at that time of day'. He supposed that this caused the film to be over-exposed, blurring the edges of the object (but it is not blurred at the right-hand edge). After he had taken the photograph a large thundercloud obscured the object. Despite this he could still see an intense spot of light penetrating the cloud and he took another photograph (not located). The object was in view for about 45 seconds. Childerhose claimed to have tried to call the attention of the other pilots to the object and claimed that the flight leader acknowledged the message by flicking his microphone switch. However there was no in-flight conversation on the subject. He further claimed that, some years later, he had sought the recollections of the other pilots about the incident, but none of them remembered it!

Doubts about Childerhose's account arose when it was noticed that the photograph shows general illumination from the left, ie east if Childerhose was looking south. This is not consistent with it being taken at sunset unless it was a view looking north! Consequently an effort was made to corroborate Childerhose's claim.

I could find no official account of the record run and