

When pilots see UFOs

People have been seeing unidentified flying objects in the skies for years. But when the eyewitness is up there with the UFO, is the sighting more difficult to explain?

by Dennis Stacy

Illustrations by Pierre Mion

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In the late afternoon of November 17, 1986, Japan Air Lines flight 1628, a Boeing 747 with a crew of three, was nearing the end of a trip from Iceland to Anchorage, Alaska. The jet, carrying a cargo of French wine, was flying at 35,000 feet through darkening skies, a red glow from the setting sun lighting one horizon and a full moon rising above the other.

A little after six p.m., pilot Kenju Terauchi noticed white and yellow lights ahead, below, and to the left of his airplane. He could see no details in the darkness and assumed the lights were those of military aircraft. But they continued to pace the 747, prompting first officer Takanori Tamefuji to radio Anchorage air traffic control and ask if there were other aircraft nearby. Both Anchorage and a nearby military radar station announced that they were picking up weak signals from the 747's vicinity. Terauchi switched on the digital colour cockpit weather radar, which is designed to detect weather systems, not other aircraft. His radar screen displayed a green target, a colour usually associated with light rain, not the red he would have expected from a reflective solid object.

Because he was sitting in the left-hand seat, Terauchi had the only unobstructed view when the lights, still in front of and below the airplane, began moving erratically, "like two bear cubs playing with each other," as the pilot later wrote in a statement for the Federal Aviation Administration. After several minutes, the lights suddenly darted in front of the 747, "shooting off lights" that lit the cockpit with a warm glow.

As the airplane passed over Eielson Air Force Base, near Fairbanks, the captain said



he noticed, looming behind his airplane, the dark silhouette of a gigantic "mothership" larger than two aircraft carriers. He asked air traffic control for permission to take his airplane around in a complete circle and then descend to 31,000 feet. Terauchi said his shadower followed him through both manoeuvres.

A United Airlines flight and a military C-130 were both in the area and Anchorage asked the airplanes to change course, intercept the Japanese 747, and confirm the sighting. Both airplanes flew close enough to see JAL 1628's navigation lights, alone in the night sky, before Terauchi reported that the unidentified flying objects had disappeared. The encounter had lasted nearly fifty minutes.

Because it involved an airline pilot and an unidentified flying object that had apparently been captured on radar, the JAL 1628 encounter attracted a great deal of public attention. But UFO reports from pilots — private, military, and airline — are not new to the subject of 'ufology.' One of the best

Above: June 24, 1947: private pilot Kenneth Arnold's report of an encounter gives birth to the term 'flying saucers'.

Left: November 17, 1986: Kenju Terauchi and the crew of Japan Air Lines flight 1628 claim a UFO sighting over Alaska.

