

claimed a UFO sighting ten months before his disappearance.

Out of Melbourne, Valentich paralleled Cape Otway before heading over open water for King Island, where he was scheduled to land at 7.28. At 7.06 he radioed Melbourne Flight Service, asking, "Is there any known traffic in my area below 5,000 feet? Seems to be a large aircraft." Ground control asked what kind. "I cannot confirm," Valentich replied. "It has four bright lights that appear to be landing lights . . . (and) has just passed over me about 1,000 feet above . . . at the speed it's travelling are there any RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) aircraft in the vicinity?"

"Negative," answered Melbourne. "Confirm you cannot identify aircraft?" Valentich replied in the affirmative, adding three minutes later, "It's not an aircraft, it's . . ." At that point there was a brief break in the recorded transmission that was later released to the Australian press.

"It is flying past," Valentich continued. "It has a long shape. Cannot identify more than that . . . coming for me now. It seems to be stationary. I'm orbiting and the thing is orbiting on top of me. It has a green light and sort of metallic light on the outside." The pilot then informed air traffic controllers that the object had vanished. At 7.12 he was back on the air, reporting his "engine is rough-idling and coughing." Ground control asked what his intentions were; Valentich said, "Proceeding King Island. Unknown aircraft now hovering on top of me." His radio transmission ended in a jarring, seventeen-second metallic noise. Neither pilot nor airplane has been seen or heard of since. Some have attempted to explain away the incident as a hoax or a suicide, while others have suggested that the inexperienced night pilot, overcome by vertigo, may have turned upside down and seen the reflections of his own lights before the engine of his Cessna failed.

Haines has published a book about the Valentich incident, *Melbourne Episode: Case Study of a Missing Pilot*, and he is in the

midst of another compiling all of AIRCAT's cases. Most are variations on ufology's two major themes: daylight disks and nocturnal lights. The first involves what appear to be objects in the shape of disks, spheres, or elliptical forms. Nocturnal lights normally appear as single, continuously visible white light sources. Sometimes the lights are also detected by ground or airborne radar and, less frequently, accompanied by radio static and brief engine interruption, such as that experienced by Valentich. Most sightings involve two or more witnesses and last slightly more than five minutes, long enough in most cases, says Haines, to eliminate a number of explanations, such as meteors and balloons.

According to Haines, UFO reports made by aircrew and pilots closely parallel those of observers on the ground. "When I started," he says, "the idea was to see whether or not pilots were reporting the same phenomenon. I think AIRCAT pretty well establishes they are."

One case from the AIRCAT files involved a pilot — call him Captain Gray — who had logged more than 21,000 hours in a 31-year career. On July 4, 1981, he was piloting a passenger flight in a Lockheed L-1011 Tri-star, cruising on automatic pilot at 37,000 feet. The flight was bound from San Francisco to New York's Kennedy Airport, approaching the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. The lake below was obscured by clouds, but ahead and above the sky was clear.

Suddenly, from ahead and to the left of the aircraft, a silvery disk "splashed into view full size . . . like the atmosphere opened up," Gray said later. He leaned forward, blurting out, "What's that?"

Appearing at first like a sombrero viewed from the top, the object rolled as it approached the airplane along an arc that carried it toward and then abruptly away from the L-1011. From the side, the disk appeared ten times wider than it was thick, with six evenly spaced, jet black portholes along its edge. A bright splash of sunlight

flared off the top left end of the object. As it disappeared, seemingly in a shallow climb, Gray noticed what looked like the dark smudge of a contrail.

"Did you just see anything?" Gray asked his first officer. "Yes," he replied, "a very bright light flash." The flight engineer, his view blocked, had seen nothing.

The overriding question for ufologists is whether a sighting like Captain Gray's is a natural phenomenon or an object that displays evidence of intelligence. "As a scientist I have to be cautious," says Haines. "But when AIRCAT is made public, I think the technical-minded can read between the lines."

Sceptics would disagree. "I think there are more than enough ordinary stimuli floating around to create the UFO phenomena, the UFO social event, of the past forty years," says CSICOP's James Oberg. "Because of imperfections in human memory and perception, coincidences, and so on, there'll always be a small residue of unsolved sightings. A small percent of airplane crashes, murders, and missing-person cases don't get solved either. But you don't have to invoke alien airplane saboteurs, murderers, or kidnappers to explain them."

Haines reports that Captain Gray was a sceptic before his own UFO confrontation. But afterwards, "there was no doubt in his mind whatsoever" that what he had seen was an extra-terrestrial spacecraft.

Captain Terauchi of JAL flight 1628 was equally convinced that he had encountered an extraterrestrial craft in the skies above Alaska. Sceptics are not so sure, citing the fact that Terauchi had reported seeing UFOs on two previous occasions — and would report yet another sighting the following January, again over Alaska. (He would later explain his second Alaskan encounter as city lights reflecting off ice crystals in clouds.) CSICOP's Philip Klass thinks that ice crystals in clouds played a significant role in the November encounter. He theorizes that moonlight reflecting off the clouds accounts for the initial sighting, and that when the crew later saw Mars and Jupiter, bright in the autumn sky, they assumed the planets were lights from the original UFO. The signal on the onboard radar, Klass believes, could have been reflected by the same ice crystals (although ice crystals, unlike rain droplets, are very poor reflectors of radar energy). The FAA analyzed the ground radar images and concluded that they had been uncorrelated radar signals, a common phenomenon that occurs when a radar beam bounced back from an airplane to a ground station doesn't match up with a separate signal sent by the airplane's transponder.

That pilots, as well as ground observers, have seen something in the skies is undeniable. The question of what they have seen has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. Maybe it never will be. It may even be irrelevant. As Jacques Vallée, who has written several books on the subject, once said, "It no longer matters whether UFOs are real or not, because people behave as if they were, anyway."

#### **Sceptics R Us**

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) was founded in the spring of 1976, during a meeting of the American Humanist Association in Buffalo, New York. The impetus for the group's formation had been provided a year earlier by the publication of *Objections to Astrology* by Paul Kurtz, professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The manifesto had been signed by 186 scientists, including 18 Nobel prizewinners, who feared that the public was confusing astronomy with astrology.

Today Kurtz is chairman of the loosely knit international organization, which holds annual meetings and publishes a 25,000-circulation quarterly, *The Sceptical Inquirer*. The journal is devoted to articles debunking psychokinesis, telepathy, clairvoyance, and other psychic claims, the Loch Ness Monster, astrology, and UFOs. CSICOP Fellows include science writer Isaac Asimov,

astronomer Carl Sagan, Nobel physicist Murray Gell-Mann, and magician James Randi, recent recipient of a genius grant awarded by the MacArthur Foundation.

The UFO subcommittee is led by Philip J. Klass (*UFOs — Identified, UFOs Explained, and UFOs, the Public Deceived*), James Oberg (*UFOs & Outer Space Mysteries*), and Robert Sheaffer (*The UFO Verdict*). The subcommittee consists of about two dozen members who operate as an informal network, exchanging articles about UFOs for information and comment. Some members make themselves available for local media appearances to counteract what Klass calls "the popular view of UFOs as extraterrestrial spaceships."

"We prefer to have sceptics, of course," says Klass, "but we don't require anyone to take an oath of allegiance saying they don't believe in flying saucers. Basically, we're a mutual education circuit."

— Dennis Stacy