

known cases was a sighting by Idaho businessman and private pilot Kenneth Arnold. Flying his single-engine airplane over Washington's Cascade Mountains on June 24, 1947, Arnold spotted nine silvery, crescent-shaped objects skimming along at high speed near Mt. Rainier. They dipped as they flew, "like a saucer would if you skipped it across the water," Arnold told reporters — and thus "flying saucers" entered the popular vocabulary.

Pilots had reported similar unexplained aerial phenomena before, mainly in the form of the Foo Fighters noted by American bomber crews over Europe in World War II. But Arnold's sighting, with its accompanying front-page publicity, struck a jittery, post-Hiroshima nerve in American society and set off a barrage of similar reports. Skeptics believed that every sighting had a prosaic explanation, such as misidentification of stars, planets, or natural atmospheric phenomena. Others thought that there was more to UFOs, that they could even be visitors from other planets.

Following the Arnold incident, the U.S. Air Force was given the responsibility of investigating UFO reports from the United States, first as Project Sign (also called Saucer), then Grudge, and finally Blue Book. Usually understaffed and underfunded, the Air Force programme functioned more like a public relations office than a scientific investigation, according to the late astronomer J. Allen Hynek himself, who served as a consultant to Project Blue Book from 1948 until it was dissolved in December 1969, gradually changed from a skeptic into a believer.

Not even sceptics can deny the subject's popular appeal. A Gallup poll found that 88 percent of its respondents had heard of UFOs. Nearly half of those polled believed UFOs were real, not figments of the imagination or misperceived natural phenomena. Nine percent of the adult population of the United States claimed to have seen one.

Of these claims, pilot reports are the ones that interest Richard F. Haines, a perceptual psychologist who compiles AIRCAT, a computerized catalogue that lists more than 3,000 UFO sightings by aviators over the past forty years. Chief of the Space Human Factors Office at NASA's Ames Research Center in California, Haines is the author of *Observing UFOs*, a handbook of methodology for accurate observation, and the editor of *UFO Phenomena and the Behavioral Scientist*, a collection of psychologically oriented essays on the subject.

AIRCAT's cases include Blue Book's declassified files as well as some Haines collected and researched personally. Before joining the Space Human Factors Office, his research included interviewing pilots about what they had seen peripherally during takeoffs and landings, data that may one day lead to redesign of airplane cockpits. "I was interviewing pilots anyway," he says, "and fell naturally into the habit of asking them if they'd ever seen anything strange."

Haines concentrated on pilot reports for reasons other than convenience. "They have

a unique vantage point simply by being in the air," he says, "if for no other reason than if the phenomenon is between your eyes and the ground, you can calculate the slant range, and you're establishing an absolute maximum distance the object could be away. You can't do that with the object against the sky background.

"Pilots also have available to them a variety of electromagnetic sensors of various kinds onboard the aircraft itself, which can possibly record some manifestations of the phenomenon, such as electromagnetic frequency and even energy content," he says. "They can control the location of their plane so that they can manoeuvre to gain the best vantage point, under some conditions.

"Finally," says Haines, "they represent a very stable personality type with a high degree of training, motivation, and selection. If a pilot comes forward with a strange tale, I give him a lot of careful concentration because he's putting his reputation on the line and maybe his job. He's had to have thought the details out in his mind already, and perhaps eliminated a number of explanations before going public."

He's also likely to request anonymity. Kenneth Arnold, tired of the publicity following his sighting, later commented, "If I ever see again a phenomenon of that sort, even if it's a ten-storey building, I won't say a word about it." The feeling was echoed even in the Air Force. When Blue Book's predecessor, Project Grudge, conducted an informal survey of Air Force pilots in the late 1940s, one respondent said, "If a spaceship was flying wingtip-to-wingtip formation with me, I would not report it."

The UFO phenomenon got its tabloid reputation at least in part because of the saucer-busting of active UFO sceptics. Foremost is the UFO panel of CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (see "Sceptics R Us"). Led by Philip J. Klass, contributing avionics editor of *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, James Oberg, an aerospace writer and a manned space operations specialist, and Robert Sheaffer, a Silicone Valley computer systems analyst, CSICOP exposes hoaxes and uncovers explanations of UFO sightings.

Sheaffer doesn't agree that pilots are

