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AIRMAN

JANUARY 1979

PROJECT UFO



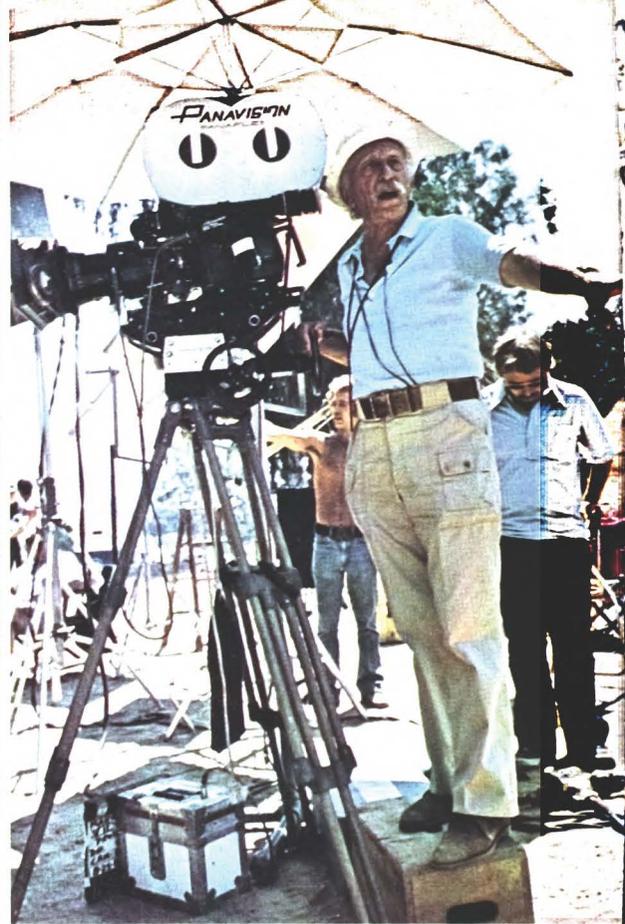


PROJECT UFO

by Capt. Dick Sheffield, photos by TSgt. Bob Wickley, AAVS

The UH-1N rescue helicopter, silhouetted against an expanse of blue sky, hovered 300 yards above a tropical forest clearing as Capt. Ben Ryan and TSgt. Harry Fitz surveyed the small fishing village below and then directed the pilot to ease the chopper onto a sun-parched grassy field. The routine, dust-scattering landing, however, was far from conventional.

Surprisingly, Ryan and Fitz weren't sweating or shaking from what would normally be a hot, vibrating descent. Their uniforms showed no wrinkled wear and tear, and every hair remained neatly in place. Then, too, their crisp dialogue remained audible despite the whirring roar of the helicopter blades.



TOP: Project UFO actors Caskey Swaim and Ed Winter (seated) take a break.
 ABOVE: The actors prepare for a landing in a UH-1N helicopter.
 RIGHT: A camera assistant motions for silence.

There was, of course, an obvious reason for the seeming contradictions. The copter and its Air Force crew had never taken off and therefore never landed. Instead, Hollywood producers had substituted a section of southern California countryside for the village setting, and one of the chopper's doors had been removed so cameras could "get up close and personal."

Ryan and Fitz were imposters, in reality actors Ed Winter and Caskey Swaim, respectively, who weekly portray an Air Force investigation team on NBC's "Project UFO," which premiered last February.

The Mark VII production, created by Jack Webb of "Dragnet," "Adam-12," and "Emergency" fame, currently entertains and educates prime time TV audiences. In addition, there's something "bluer than blue" about the hour-long program that dramatizes actual cases in the Air Force's 22-year investigation of unidentified flying objects.

For many years the study was termed Project Blue Book, but the "coloration" runs deeper. The program's producer, retired Air Force Col. Bill Coleman, conducted press

conferences on Blue Book cases while stationed with the Secretary of the Air Force's Office of Information, at the Pentagon. Ed Winter, who plays Capt. Ben Ryan, served four years as a blue-suit radar technician. And the behind-the-scenes activities are conducted by Maj. Ron Gruchy of the Air Force Office of Information in Los Angeles (AFOI-LA). As the Air Force technical advisor, he has a variety of duties, from arranging for aircraft and proofreading scripts for proper military jargon to ensure that uniforms and personal appearances adhere to standards.

While filming "The Island Incident" episode, for example, Maj. Gruchy arranged for the Air Force helicopter from Detachment 5, 4th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Edwards AFB, Calif., and helped direct its landing on location.

The soft-spoken officer has accommodated producers and directors on hundreds of movies and television programs including "The Six Million Dollar Man," "The Bionic Woman," "Streets of San Francisco," and the recent Irwin Allen bee thriller, "The Swarm."

Although most savvy production

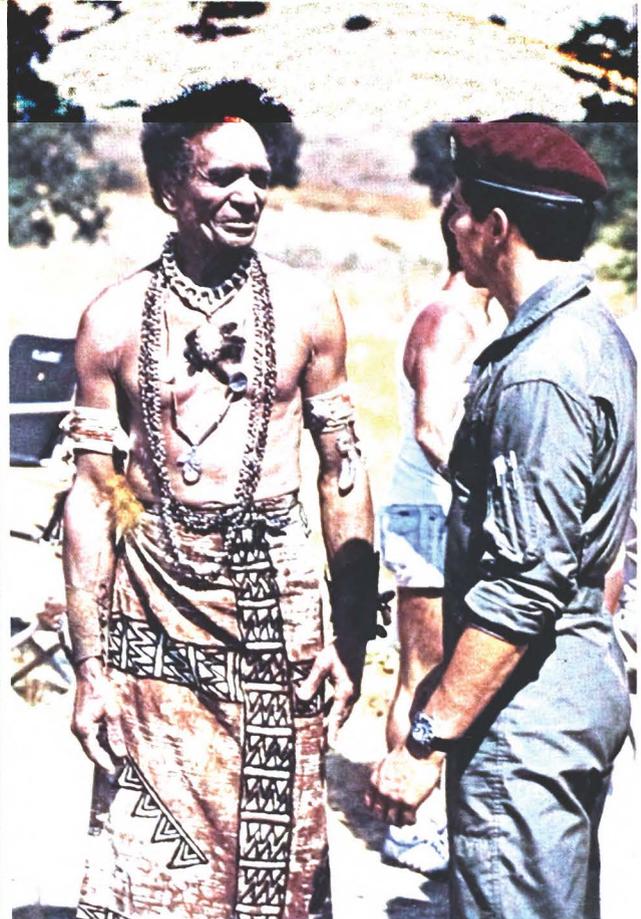
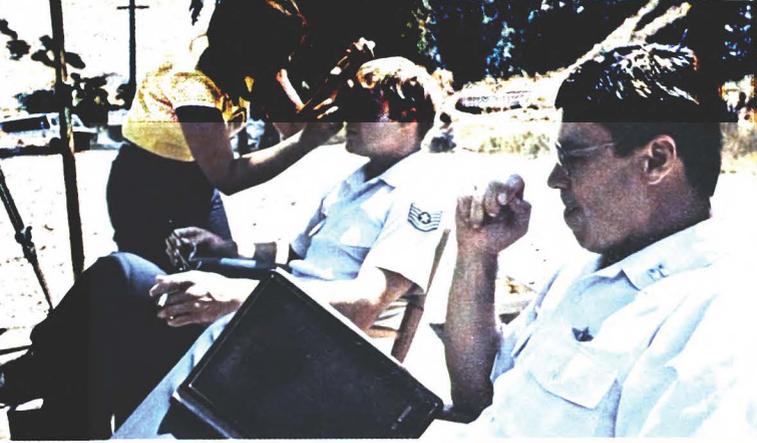
companies know they have someone in town to turn to for advice, companies often film first and ask questions later. "If they call us at the last minute, we'll take a look at the product," said Maj. Gruchy, "but if they haven't used common sense, we don't cooperate if the script's not realistic and it's not in our best interest to support it. Usually there are no credits given to the Air Force, however, so it would be difficult for the viewer to determine if we cooperated or not on production."

On those where assistance is given, Maj. Gruchy "requests changes when they're critical to accuracy. We try not to destroy the dramatics that make the show entertaining. Let them have some theatrical license if the impact is positive."

AFOI-LA staffers also help producers scout locations for filming and arrange for them to visit Aerospace Audio-Visual Service facilities at Norton AFB, Calif., to look for stock footage.

Of course, not every production nor every scene works beautifully.

"In Airport 75," the major recalled, "when I wasn't there, they inserted a nine-second segment that showed



**TOP: Ed Winter studies lines while Swalm's makeup gets attention.
 ABOVE: Producer Bill Coleman (left) discusses set design.
 RIGHT: A pararescueman trades job secrets with an actor turned tribal chief.**

a first lieutenant's bars vertical, and companies have switched to "extras" whose hair was shoulder length. But for the most part it's visibility for the Air Force, very positive visibility."

Those backstage changes sometimes go unnoticed, but the Air Force was definitely in the spotlight during its 1947-1969 search for an answer to the phenomenon of extraterrestrial vehicles.

Originally code-named Project Sign then Project Grudge, the investigation received its Blue Book designation in the early 1950s. The program's objectives under Air Force Regulation 200-2 were to determine whether UFOs posed a threat to the security of the United States and whether UFOs exhibited any scientific information or advanced technology that could contribute to scientific or technical research.

The Air Force defined UFOs as "that which by performance, aerodynamic characteristics, or unusual features does not conform to any presently known aircraft or missile type, or which cannot be positively identified as a familiar object."

The "flying saucer" era generated more than 12,000 sightings, most of

which were attributed to astronomical phenomena like comets, auroral streamers, balloons, satellites, and the planets of Venus and Mars, which Air Force pilots reportedly pursued as UFOs.

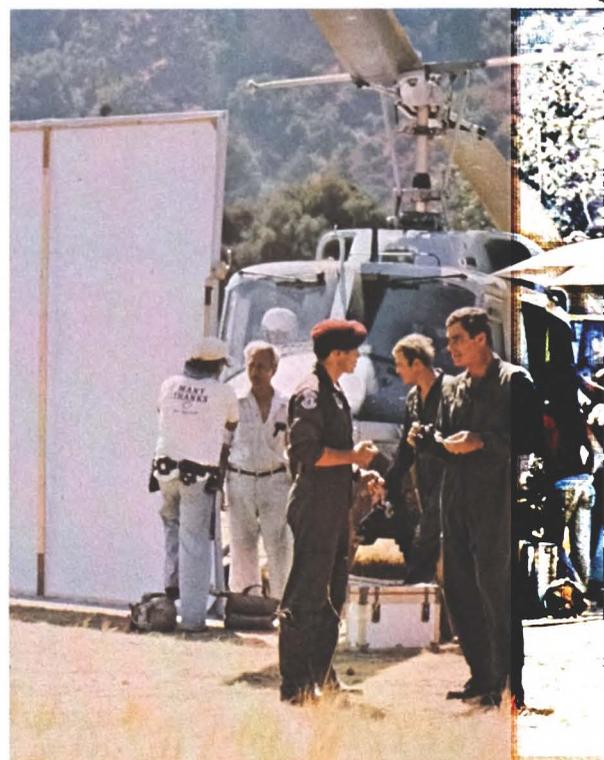
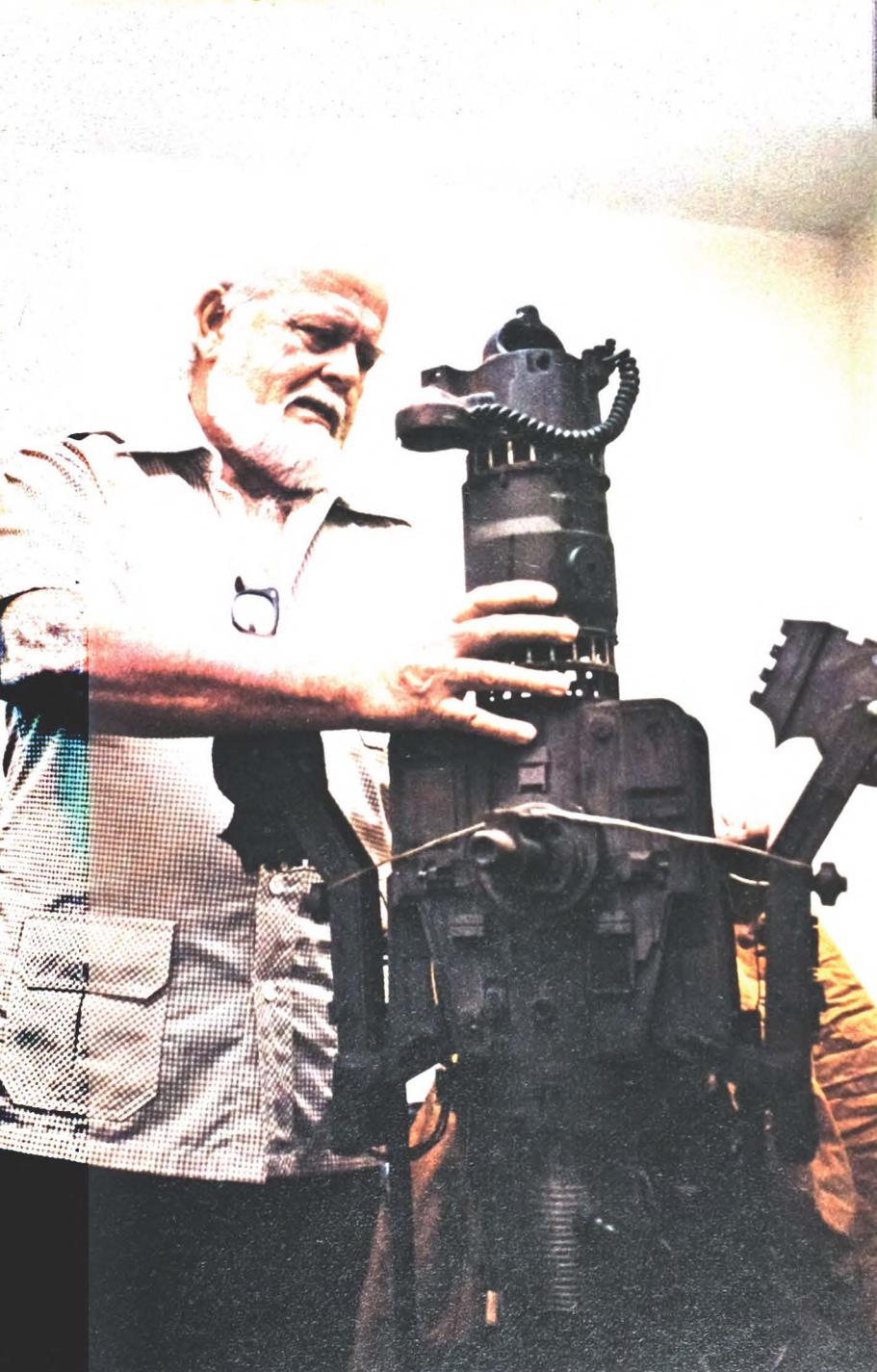
Some sightings were hoaxes. Yet 701 sightings went unanswered, unexplained. One of those took place at Blytheville AFB, Ark., when two "completely reliable" control tower operators and a runway observer witnessed "two oblong-shaped devices" having the appearance of a table platter. The objects vanished with no physical evidence left behind. Conclusion: unidentified.

In 1969, however, after analysis by a scientific team from the University of Colorado and the blessing of the National Academy of Science, Project Blue Book closed with the Air Force position that "no identified flying object reported, investigated and evaluated by the Air Force indicated a threat to national security and no sightings categorized represent technological developments beyond current scientific knowledge, and there has been no evidence indicating that unidentified sightings are extraterrestrial vehicles."

Yet many, from clergymen to politicians, continue to report sightings, and several organizations in the U.S. continue to probe the unknown. In countries such as France, England, Germany, and Japan recurring periodicals are published on the subject, and authors yearly offer explanations and "startling new information" to satisfy the insatiable appetite of UFO buffs.

"I must accept the fact that a lot of intelligent, rational people have seen something," noted Jack Webb. "What they saw, I don't know. The problem, of course, is that there is no hard evidence. It's mostly theory, conjecture, and speculation, but that's what makes the subject so interesting."

And that's why in 1976 when Project Blue Book files were transferred from the Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center at Maxwell AFB, Ala., to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the former Dragnet detective bought the rights to more than 300,000 pages of documents. And after eight months of careful examination by a UCLA professor, Webb decided the subject warranted production "because



space exploration is vital to our future. We've sent wagons across the plains. Now we must look toward space."

Best known for his "true to life" dramas, Webb lured Col. Bill Coleman from retirement to be his technical advisor. Coleman was quickly elevated to producer, a job he said has its anxious moments. "Don't get impressed with the title," said the gray-bearded retiree, "because there's a saying here. Always be nice to the producer, for next week he might be the studio gate guard and

not let you on the lot."

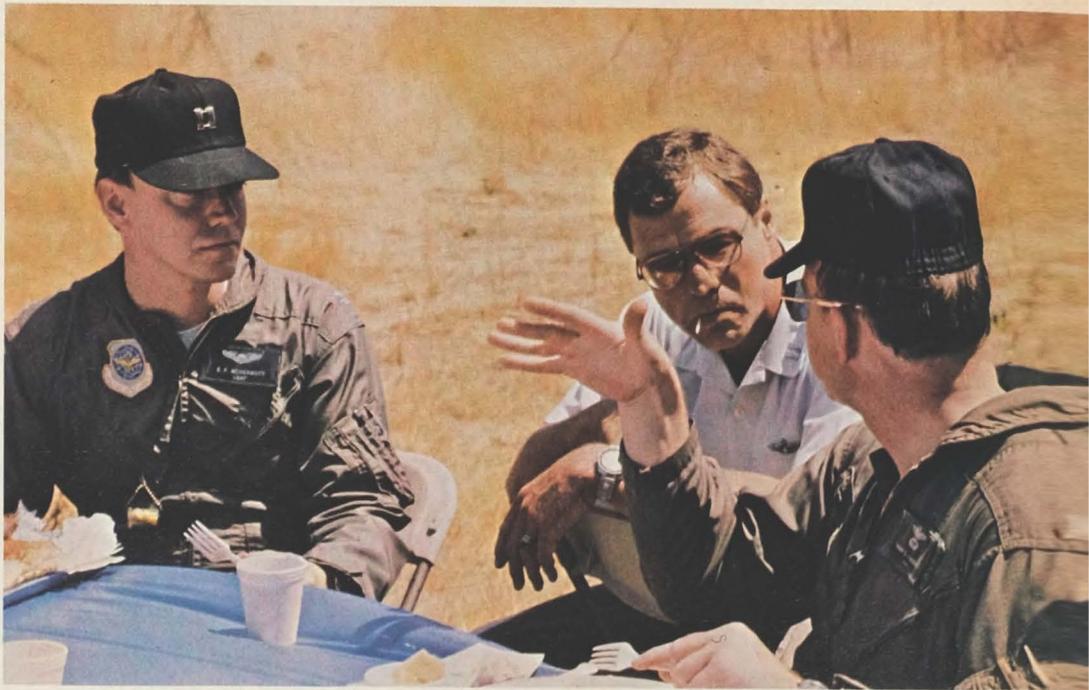
A command pilot who saw a UFO in 1954 while on a flying mission, Coleman knows the subject well but maintains his objectivity. "I am not a skeptic and I am not a believer," he said.

"The Air Force position was often misunderstood," he noted. "Our mission was to determine if sightings posed a threat to the U.S. and if they represented technological knowledge unknown to the U.S. We made the point that we do not deny the existence of extraterrestrial life. It

would be stupid to do so."

An order issued by the Inspector General to all base commanders in 1959 exemplified the Air Force's attitude. "Unidentified flying objects," the directive read, "sometimes treated lightly by the press and referred to as 'flying saucers,' must be rapidly and accurately identified as serious business in the ZI (Zone of Interior). There's also the inherent responsibility to explain to the American people through public information media what goes on in their skies."

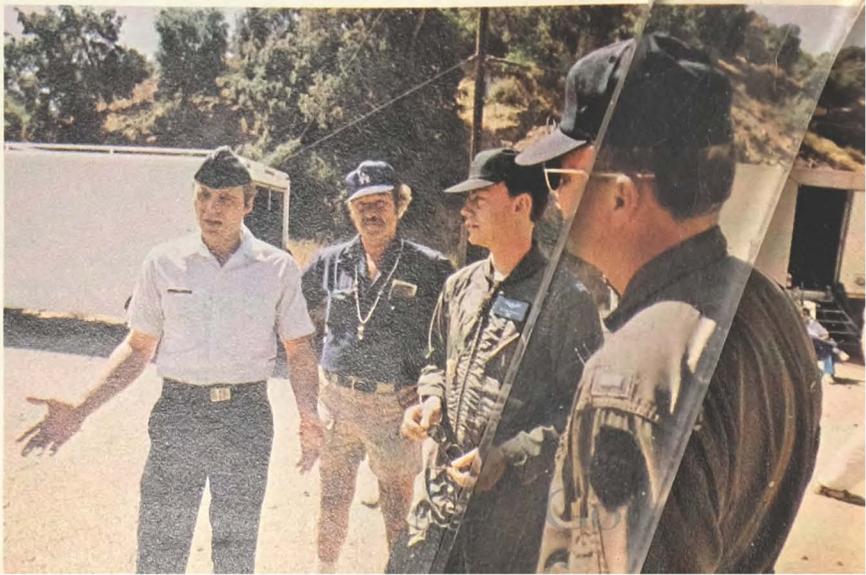
According to Coleman, who was



CLOCKWISE (from far left):
Producer Coleman examines a prop. Actors rehearse a scene. A make believe sky (left) is used in a helicopter scene. Copter crew members Capt. E.P. McDermott and 1st Lt. B. Schreiber advise Winter on a scene. Discussions continue during breaks between filming sessions.



TOP: Director Bob Leeds makes camera adjustments for a helicopter interior scene with actors Swaim and Winter.
LEFT: Rehearsing an indoor scene.
BELOW: Swaim explains to Capt. McDermott and 1st Lt. Schreiber how it all fits together.



once chief Department of Defense spokesman for Blue Book, the project was more than just a two-man team hopping throughout the country from its home base in Ohio as portrayed in the television series.

Rather, several teams with "roving credit cards" investigated sightings. "We had carte blanche to use whatever facilities we needed within DoD," Coleman explained. "We could request any base to perform investigations for us, plus we had scientific consultants we could call in on a case-by-case basis." The most renowned was Dr. Allen Hynek of Northwestern University who was hired to "weed out" obvious cases of astronomical phenomena like meteors, planets, twinkling stars, etc.

The residue of unsolved cases and other problems subjected the Air Force to some barbed criticism. One writer called the service the "society for the explanation of the uninvestigated" and claimed the Air Force was guilty of insufficient information and insufficient follow-up.

Author Robert Loftin, in his 1968 novel *Identified Flying Saucers*, thought the Air Force received "undue criticism," but also added that "the debunking of UFOs has resulted in a loss of prestige for the Air Force. They have used swamp gas as the solution to so many UFO sightings that in some circles they are referred to as the Hot Air Force."

Coleman absorbed some of that criticism. "We were often criticized for covering up and lying," he recalled, "but my response to that was and still is today that we did not lie. Our policy was to tell the truth. Now we may not have told all because it involved national security, but we did not lie. For example, policemen saw the lunar escape module test long before the LEM landed on the moon, but for obvious reasons the sightings were left unexplained at the time."

The Air Force also had its supporters, among them the Senior Avionics Editor of *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, Philip J. Klass, often called the "Sherlock Holmes of UFOlogy."

"I had heard the frequent charges by UFO zealots that the Air Force and the government had positive evidence of extraterrestrial visitations but was withholding it from the public," wrote the author in his 1974 publication *UFOs Explained*. "As a journalist and member of the Washington Press Corps, I found this

charge patently ridiculous. It was simply impossible that hundreds, if not thousands, of military and government personnel could sit on the biggest secret of many centuries for even a month, let alone for more than ten years."

The debate, however, continues today, heightened a little by the television program "Project UFO." And according to Coleman, whose active hands seem to paint abstract pictures as he talks, the TV series adds fuel to the fire, but it's much more than entertainment.

"People in government have been concerned that 'Star Wars' and 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' would cause a rash of sightings," he said, "but that hasn't happened because I think through our show, people are seeing how the Air Force conducted its study of what people saw. I think people are more careful in making observations."

Project UFO doesn't take sides either. "Some people said they saw saucers and some said they saw people from outer space," elaborated Webb. "We show saucers and the hardware and people tell about what they saw."

In "The Island Incident," for example, Capt. Ryan and TSgt. Fitz fly to the mythical island of Toratupa in an Air Force helicopter to investigate a Honolulu headline that read: "Prominent South Pacific M.D. Sees UFO."

The American doctor and three island fishermen had seen something near the volcanic isle's beach. The sighting was described to the Air Force investigators this way: "Suddenly a white ball of light descended toward the ocean about a quarter-mile off shore. The object halted its descent about 200 feet above the water. The inverted saucer, 60 feet in diameter, hummed and flashed its multicolored lights."

Later, during a studio filming session in Hollywood, Capt. Ryan provided an explanation for what the doctor and natives witnessed.

"What you may have seen is one of nature's rarest phenomena—ball lightning," Ryan said to another actor in the scene. "Although we're not exactly sure how ball lightning is formed, we do know that it can appear immediately after lightning."

And that's how the sighting was partially explained in script 4021. There's no question that Project UFO continues to exhibit Webb's trade-

mark—accuracy—and reflects his deliberate effort to portray characters as professionals.

"The programs are related from the point of view of the Air Force, because many people felt they were trying to cover something up," explained Webb, "and there's been an understandable mistrust of government because of Watergate and CIA investigations, but I want to trust my government, my Air Force, my police department. We're showing that they don't have a saucer or little green men stashed away."

Project UFO is not a defense of the Air Force any more than Dragnet defended the Los Angeles Police Department, the actor-producer noted. "I honestly believe the Air Force doesn't need defending. What they need is to have someone explain exactly what they do."

The program has done just that—educate and inform in addition to entertain. And there's been no related hysteria similar to that which followed the public panic of 1938 after Orson Welles broadcast H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds" that told of a Martian invasion of the earth.

"After the first show I got about a dozen calls," recalled Webb about the premiere episode that placed 15th in that week's Nielsen ratings. "But nothing resembling an epidemic, certainly no hysteria."

Producer Coleman explained why. "We're trying to improve people's ability to observe," he said. "One of the common traits among sightings is that people are more awed than frightened. I've known people who had cameras with them, but never took one photograph."

Yet during each episode Capt. Ryan and TSgt. Fitz professionally pursue reality. They're like cool, objective detectives. According to Ed Winter, Capt. Ben Ryan is "a bright, curious scientist who's very pragmatic and certainly not frightened by UFOs. He's intensely curious about them and wants to find out whether there are any."

Between scenes, the handsome Winter described the investigators' uniqueness.

"It's one of the few times when the two leads of a show actually think," he said. "They just don't ram cars through doors or kill people. They're actually professionals who are involved with primarily an intelligent problem, not a violent one."

Each actor occasionally relies

upon his military experience. "And I try to add the human element," said Winter, who played a lawyer in "Adam's Rib" and the by-the-book intelligence officer, Col. Flagg, in "M.A.S.H." "We all had those times, officers and airmen alike, when we were absolutely silly and there were those times when we functioned as a crack unit."

Swaim, a North Carolina country boy at heart with a twang and sense of humor to match, added, "The military experience I had with the Army helps with the bearings, especially in those situations where NCO awkwardness is expected."

The blond, ex-soldier believes the program also erodes the stereotype

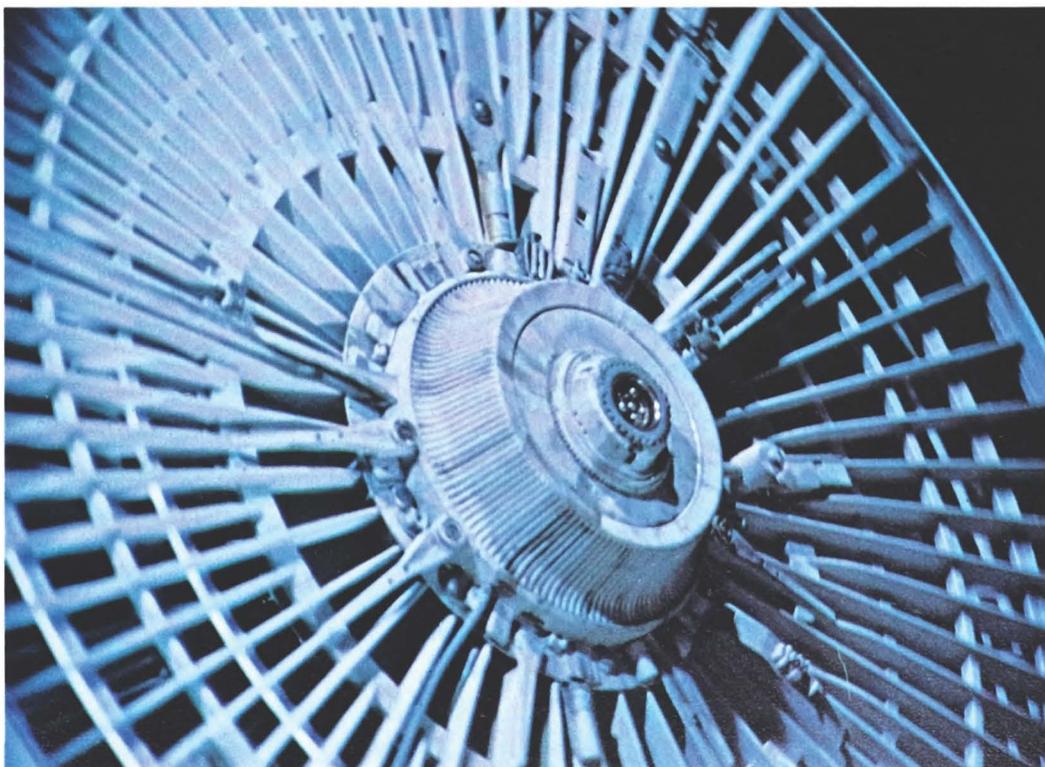
of NCOs. "Most people who haven't been in the military think NCOs are dumb, but they're the guys who run things and educate the young officers," he said.

Certainly Ryan and Fitz (Winter and Swaim) don't represent the Air Force, but millions of television viewers think they do and their spit-and-polish appearance establishes a very positive image. Their uniforms are professionally laundered, ironed, and brushed prior to each shooting day, thus making Ryan and Fitz recruiting poster perfect.

But Project UFO presents definite challenges for the producers because the facts are not black and white.

Said actor Winter of his role as Capt. Ryan, "For a man of science to be caught up in such a vague, nebulous search must drive him crazy. We never find any answers, nothing really concrete. Right now it's open to any theory. It's an intellectual chess game and conversation item."

And although the Air Force is no longer an active player, it remains an interested spectator—one with a story all its own, one to be seen and believed. (EDITOR'S NOTE: As this issue of AIRMAN went to press, TV network officials announced that the "Project UFO" series would be cancelled. The series, most likely, will be shown in rerun.)



from beginning to . . .

Some say the UFO phenomenon can be traced back to nearly 600 years before the birth of Christ. That first sighting of an unidentified flying object, which a National Aeronautics and Space Administration engineer has compared to a specially designed

spacecraft NASA tested at Langley AFB, Va., in the 1960s, is revealed in a modern translation of the Holy Bible, chapter one of Ezekiel.

Now it came to pass in the 30th year . . . when I was in the midst of the captives by the River Chobar, the heavens were opened, and I

saw the visions of God . . . And in the midst thereof the likeness of four living creatures: And this was their appearance: there was the likeness of a man in them. Everyone has four faces, and everyone has four wings . . . Now as I beheld the living creatures,

there appeared upon the earth by the living creatures one wheel with four faces . . . The wheels also had size, and a height, and a dreadful appearance . . . And when the living creatures went, the wheels also went together by them; and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were also lifted up with them.

It is apparent that Ezekiel "experienced" a vehicle shaped like a wheel, but his sighting was not the only one prior to the 20th century. People were tortured during the reign of Charlemagne in France for reporting accounts of "encounters with tyrants of the air." Author Erich Van Daniken questioned in his book *Chariots of the Gods* whether astronauts visited earth 40,000 years ago.

Sightings continued through the Middle Ages, often with religious overtones. A more recent example is the controversial "Miracle of Fatima" that occurred in 1917 when thousands of witnesses saw what they described as "the sun moving out of its position, coming close to earth, wobbling, moving to and fro, and then retreating to its original position." Even hardened sailors aboard the naval ship *Siberian* witnessed at the time a sphere of fire rise from the ocean and fly off against the wind.

These are fascinating accounts, potent material for anyone's imagination. But the subject of UFOs didn't become an official government concern until the late 1940s when the Commander of Air Materiel Command (which at that time included intelligence), Gen. Nathan F. Twining, recommended the formation of a classified study to identify the unidentifiable objects.

The investigation was initially called Project Sign, then reorganized into Project Grudge and, in 1952, the largest recorded year of both sightings (1,501) and "unidentifieds" (303), officially named Project Blue Book.

For the next 17 years Air Force

investigators pursued the relationship of UFO reports to "threat analysis" and the "problem of technological surprise."

Sightings were categorized as material objects (balloons, satellites, aircraft, etc.); immaterial objects (lightning, reflections, and other natural phenomena); astronomical objects (stars, planets, and sun, etc.); weather conditions, and hoaxes.

At the termination of Blue Book, however, 701 sightings remained unexplained. The Air Force decided to discontinue its investigation, but not before two outside scientific agencies conducted an analysis. First, the University of Colorado prepared a report entitled "Scientific Study of UFOs," based upon Blue Book records and cases. The report was subsequently reviewed by the National Academy of Sciences to "provide an independent assessment of the scope, methodology, and the findings of the Colorado study as reflected in the report."

The academy panel, which included professors from Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of California at Los Angeles concluded, in part, that "the report recognizes that there remain UFO sightings that are not easily explained. The report (University of Colorado) does suggest, however, so many reasonable and possible directions in which an explanation may eventually be found, that there seems to be no reason to attribute them to an extraterrestrial source without much more convincing evidence."

The Colorado study concluded "that about 90 percent of all UFO reports prove to be quite plausibly related to ordinary phenomena, that little if anything has come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that has added to scientific knowledge, and that further extensive study of UFO sightings is not justified in the expectation that science will be

advanced thereby."

With Blue Book termination in 1969, AFR 200-2, which established the program, was rescinded. All documentation regarding the investigation is now on file with the National Archives and Records Service, 8th and Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20408, and is available for public review.

Out of the business for nearly 10 years, the Air Force, nevertheless, remains linked with current sightings, and its bases throughout the country receive a continuous flow of letters on the subject.

A paragraph of the Air Force's official fact sheet on Blue Book explains that "in view of the considerable commitment of resources in the past and extreme pressure on Air Force funds at this time, there is no likelihood of renewed involvement in this area."

Officials at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, where Blue Book investigators maintained their offices, tell inquirers that "base personnel no longer receive, document, or investigate UFO reports. Persons wanting to report a UFO sighting should contact a private or professional organization or a local law enforcement agency if public safety is endangered."

In 1977 President Carter asked NASA to look into the possibility of resuming UFO investigations. After studying all the facts available, NASA decided that nothing would be gained by further investigation. The Air Force agreed.

There are a number of universities and professional scientific organizations, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, however, that have considered UFO phenomena during periodic meetings and seminars. In addition, Gale's Encyclopedia of Associations (Edition 8, Vol. 1, pp. 432-33) lists private organizations interested in aerial phenomena.

Like Ezekiel, it seems, people are still waiting for a definitive explanation. ➡