

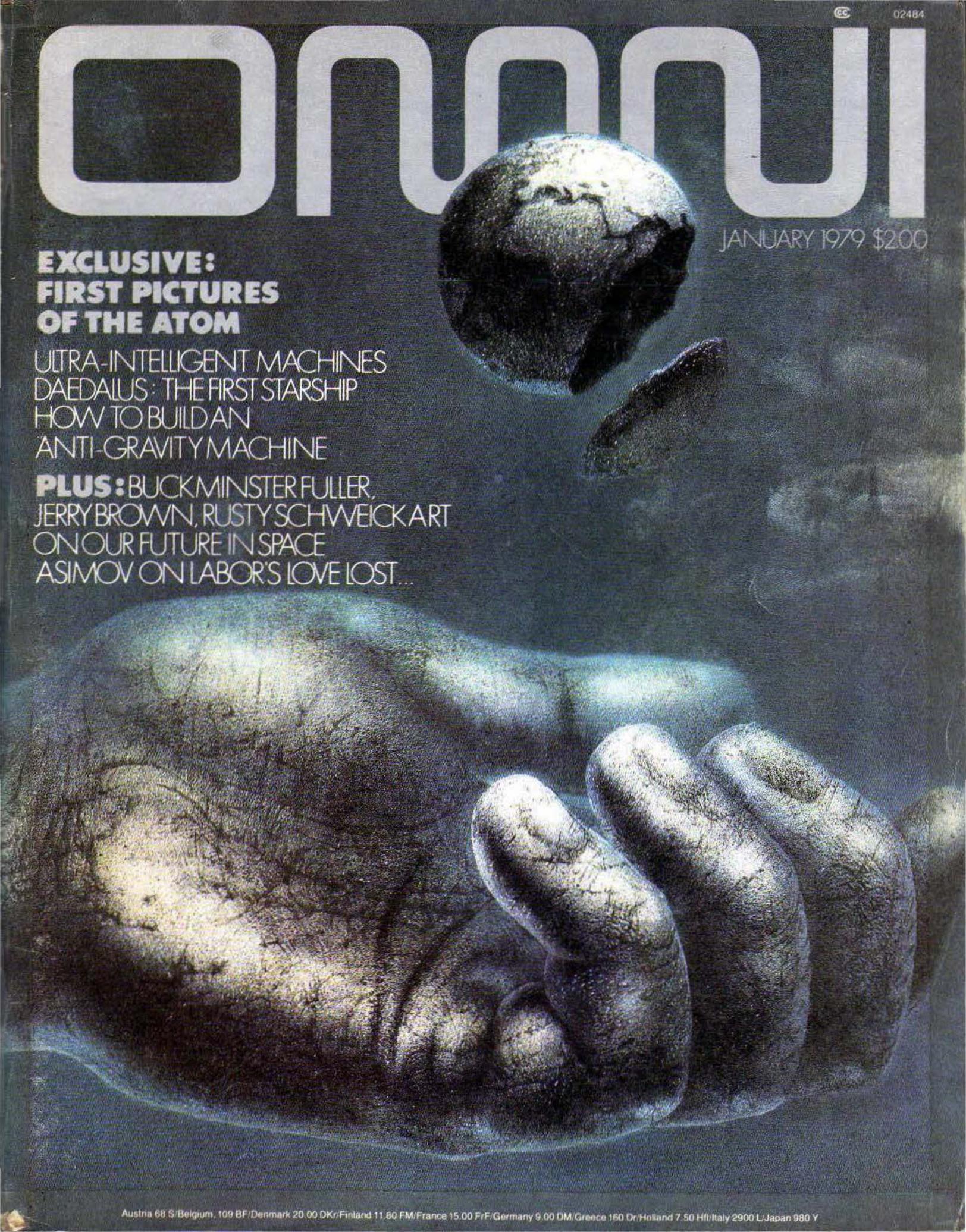
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THE COYNE INCIDENT

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

Something from outer space buzzed an army helicopter one night about five years ago, terrifying the four crewmen inside and nearly causing their deaths. Truly spectacular and unexplainable, the incident seared its way into the pages of UFO history and ignited a controversy whose flames still rage.

One thing seems certain: the encounter of Captain Larry Coyne and his crew, near Mansfield, Ohio, at 11 P.M. on October 18, 1973, is one of the most impressive UFO cases on record. Whether the cosmic visitor was an alien spaceship, as UFO buffs insist, or a bright fireball meteor, as UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass suggests, the fact of the sighting itself has withstood rigorous scientific scrutiny.

A low-flying, northbound helicopter was paced by a strange red light to the east. As the UFO neared at high speed, the alarmed helicopter pilot put his aircraft into a steep dive. The UFO stopped dead overhead, bathed the crew in a green light, and sped off to the west,

changing colors again. Instruments in the helicopter malfunctioned, and the radio was dead. The entire aircraft was trapped in some sort of antigravity vortex and rose thousands of meters into the night sky before the pilot could bring it under control.

So impressive was this case, and so unimpeachable were the witnesses, that the weekly tabloid *National Enquirer* selected it "the best UFO case of 1973." The contest had been hard fought that year, with such powerful competitors as the Pascagoula abduction of two fishermen and a report from the governor of Ohio.

Recent findings have made the Coyne UFO case appear even more impressive. Leading authority on the pro-UFO side is Ohio investigator Jennie Zeidman, whose reports have appeared in the Mutual UFO Network's *UFO Journal*, in *Flying Saucer Review* (published in Great Britain), and in the monthly magazine *Fate*. A major new progress report on the case is being prepared for the *International UFO Reporter*, published by the Center for UFO Studies.

Despite the unarguable facts of the Coyne chronicle, UFO buffs realize that pilots have been experiencing similar UFO near-collisions for 30 years. In 1948, DC-3 pilots Clarence Chiles and John Whitted spotted a cigar-shaped object with two rows of glowing portholes as it whizzed past their aircraft. A similarly shaped UFO flew over Indiana and Kentucky in early 1968; three different aircraft were nearly rammed by a fleet of cigar-shaped UFOs later that same year.

Coyne's UFO was similar, especially in that none of these near misses caused any air turbulence or sound whatsoever.

The Chiles-Whitted case, as even most UFO believers concede, was probably a train of meteoric fragments fireballing across the night sky, cueing the startled pilots into assuming that the lights were portholes and then into imagining an outline of the nonexistent structure. Just such an illusion is documented in the first 1968 case, where a flaming falling satellite seduced an intelligent, levelheaded group of witnesses into seeing an eerily lit, cigar-shaped object pass within 299 meters (1000 feet) of them—when in fact the actual objects were hundreds of kilometers away. A second 1968 case, which unlike the other examples occurred in daytime, led the pilots of three aircraft into thinking they had nearly been rammed when in fact the disintegrating fireball (such as it was, based on other eyewitness accounts and photographs) was hundreds of kilometers away.

The most famous "non-UFO explanation" for the Coyne incident was generated (critics would say contrived) by Philip J. Klass, an editor at *Aviation Week* and probably the world's foremost UFO skeptic. Klass claims that Captain Coyne, like other pilots before him, may have been fooled by a bright meteor possibly from the Orionid shower, which reoccurs annually in the October 18–22 period. While some UFO experts have asserted that the Orionid shower does not produce fireballs, professional meteor specialists report just the opposite. A second bright Orionid fireball appeared over the Midwest an hour before the Coyne sight-



Aerial Phenomenon Research Organization (APRO)

Lenticular cloud formation photographed by an American tourist at Santos, Brazil, in 1967.

ing, and a third, moving in the same direction as the Coyne UFO, was seen all throughout the Midwest on October 18, 1977, four years to the night after the Coyne event (but a few hours earlier, resulting in more witnesses).

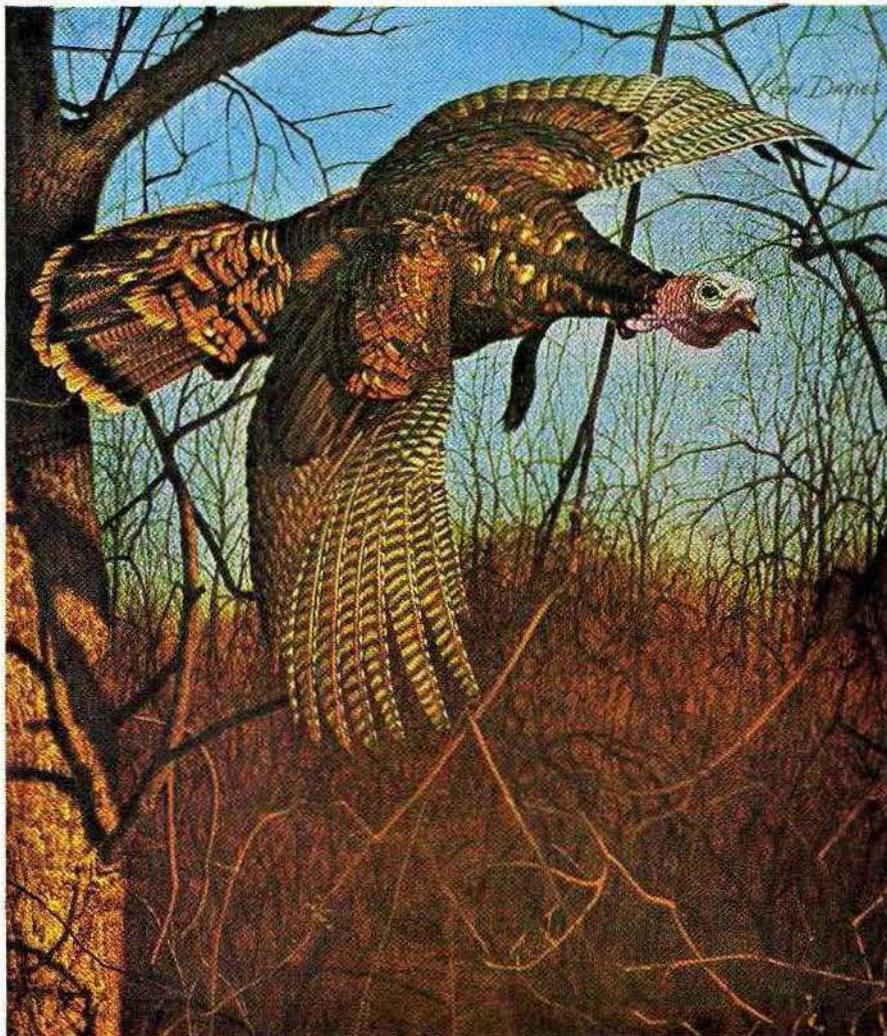
Although Klass's conclusions have been almost uniformly rejected by leading pro-UFO researchers, several of his subsidiary observations have been quietly verified. Failure of the radio following the encounter is now attributed to the helicopter's low altitude, causing hills to block transmission (on Klass's request, Coyne tried the radio at the same location on a subsequent flight and confirmed this), as well as to a too rapid switching of frequencies by a panicked radio operator. The "mysterious rise" of the aircraft has also lost its miraculous flavor.

This levitation is now attributed to the pilot's action of instinctively pulling back on the control stick as soon as the perceived danger of collision had passed. Diving toward the ground, impact was imminent within seconds had this not been done. Later, the crewmen could not recall doing exactly what experienced pilots should have done without thinking about it. Records show that other pilots under stress in similar life-threatening incidents fail to remember what subconscious reflex actions they took. But since the helicopter later responded immediately to Coyne's handling of the controls, once he noticed the rise and acted to correct it, there is no evidence of external force associated with the UFO.

Pro-UFO investigators evidently agree, as written by Zeidman in the MUFON *UFO Journal*: "There is no physical evidence to indicate that the . . . climb or apparent radio malfunction were in any way a product of the object's proximity." And one should also note that there is of course no real evidence of even the object's proximity—it *could* have been a hundred kilometers overhead.

The key objections to Klass's Orionid fireball hypothesis are threefold: first, total duration of the helicopter crew's observation of the UFO may have been too long for it to have been a fireball, which

CONTINUED ON PAGE 139



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would last a minute or two at most; second, the crew reported seeing a sharply outlined structured object; third, the reported overhead stop of the UFO could not have been accomplished by any natural object. Now, all of these objections are admittedly based on the testimony of startled and frightened crewmen, and Klass has tried to make the most of the known unreliability of similar testimony from other pilots under similar circumstances. But the four crewmen are astonishingly consistent in their accounts, requiring parallel misperceptions, if such they are.

According to Zeidman's reconstruction of the encounter, based on many hours of interviews with the crewmen, the incident covered a period of more than five minutes. Klass is the first to admit that such a duration would absolutely rule out his "fireball" hypothesis, so he disputes it as strongly as UFO believers want to accept it. Captain Coyne's first recollection of the incident, which psychologists would testify is probably the most accurate estimate, was that it had lasted "about a minute"; the time span has lengthened over the years, reaching 330 seconds last year before falling back to Zeidman's figure of 300 seconds. Attempts to restage the encounter have not resolved this critical point, and the dispute continues.

The crew's physical description of the object is less ironclad, especially in light of similar misperceptions reported by other pilots, mentioned earlier. The green color of the objects *may* have been a color distortion through the green sun visor along the top of the canopy: Coyne initially reported watching the object over him through the canopy but later amended his account to place the object more in front of him. The red object seen earlier may have only been a radio-tower warning light.

As to the stopping of the UFO directly over the helicopter, that item too has grown over the years. Although the crew now speaks of the UFO "stopping dead" for as long as ten seconds, the original reports claimed only that it "hesitated momentarily" for a second or two at *most*. Klass, in probably the weakest link of his fireball hypothesis, theorizes that the lingering fiery trail of the meteor may have illuminated the cabin for several seconds, leading the men to *assume* that the UFO had stopped. Another possibility hinges on the fact that the men were on a moving, pitching aircraft that, just at the moment the UFO passed overhead, probably pulled hard out of a dive and began to climb: a slight lurch of the helicopter to the left could easily have given the impression that the fireball had indeed "hesitated momentarily."

But these are only theories, and sometimes half-baked ones at that. Ultimately,

they are ordinary possibilities of things known to have happened in the past to other pilots, which must be weighed against the extraordinary alternative: involvement of a genuine UFO.

Several years after the event, in response to a newspaper publicity campaign, a group of ground witnesses surfaced. A woman and four youngsters reported having seen the UFO circle the helicopter that night. This development seemed to provide the clinching proof of unexplainability, as the fireball hypothesis was apparently extinguished. So eager was the UFO community to believe this story that writers were quoting the new testimony as evidence months before anything but its bare existence had been announced.

But Klass (together with a few other her-



While hiking in Peruvian Mountains, Augusto Arrenda photographed unusual airborne disc.

etic UFO experts such as David Schroth of MUFON) claims that the alleged ground testimony does not really corroborate the Coyne UFO account; instead, it grossly contradicts it, casting even more dispersion on its authenticity. The UFO's given position was at least eight kilometers (five miles) from the helicopter's flight path, as reconstructed by Klass from the pilot's own account. Also, the flight direction and maneuvers of the UFO were completely at variance: the crew said the object proceeded westbound after the flyby, while the ground testimony alleges it reversed course back eastwards.

Frustrated UFO researchers bemoan the likelihood that there were numerous other people who saw the flaming object but did not bother to report it. The American Meteor Society estimates that it receives reports on less than one meteor in ten; indeed, the fireball the same night of the Coyne incident passed over populated regions of Pennsylvania and Ohio but was officially reported by only one per-

son, an airline pilot (who, it must be said, recognized it for what it was)

Numerous embellishments of the case have appeared over the years. Coyne reportedly claims that Dr. J. Allen Hynek of the Center for UFO Studies told him that the UFO was also seen and photographed by the Skylab astronauts; Hynek denies having said this, since there were no astronauts on Skylab at that date. Pulp monthlies have conjured up fantastic images of alien "tractor beams" dragging terrified airmen into the sky. Coyne suddenly recalled, several years after the event, that his compass had been spinning wildly the following day and had to be replaced—but no maintenance reports have been found.

Jennie Zeidman's confidence in the strength of the Coyne UFO case has been expressed in warnings to some colleagues who privately still question some aspects of her analysis. Such heretical doubts, she asserts, are dangerous symptoms of being "suckered into worship of that arch-con-man Phil Klass." As for Klass's fireball misperception theory, Zeidman considers it a dead issue: "I predict Klass will now change his tactics and claim the case is a hoax, that the four army men were lying."

Klass laughs off that suggestion: "I have never doubted the integrity or reputation of the men. What I have doubted is their ability, under a life-threatening nighttime emergency, to accurately interpret and recall the sudden brief visual inputs which they perceived."

While the average airline passenger may like to think that pilots are "trained observers" with excellent powers of recognition of midair phenomena, UFO investigators have discovered just the opposite to be true. Klass, then, is not alone in questioning these abilities.

Writing in the *Hynek UFO Report* (Dell, 1978), pro-UFO spokesman Dr. J. Allen Hynek of the Center for UFO Studies observed that "... surprisingly, commercial and military pilots appear to make relatively poor witnesses ... but it should come as no surprise that a majority of pilot misidentifications were of astronomical objects." One possible reassuring explanation for this failure is that all their flying experience has conditioned pilots to interpret fragmentary visual glimpses in terms of nearby aircraft-sized structured objects, since these would naturally be of primary concern.

None of this diminishes in any way the amazing character of the Coyne UFO encounter. Something that behaved just like an alien spaceship might be expected to behave was reported by four credible witnesses; the stimulus must have been something truly extraordinary. Such reports in the past have turned out to have been honest misperceptions, but there are features of this case much harder to explain. The Coyne UFO flies on, one of the best on record.

UFOs are reported from all over the world, with major "flaps" occurring periodically in Latin America, Western Europe, Japan, and elsewhere. Even Russia has been host to UFO encounters, some of which have been typical of reports elsewhere, and some of which have been unique.

One of the strangest Russian UFOs ever reported was seen near Leningrad about a year ago. In the predawn darkness of September 20, 1977, early rising residents of the industrial town of Petrozavodsk watched an awesome spectacle in the eastern sky.

A giant glowing "jellyfish" hung high in the air, with luminous tentacles hanging down to the ground. It slowly drifted northward, changing shape and size, with a bright point of light at its center.

TASS, the official Soviet news agency, carried the story the next day. The manifestation was labeled "an unusual natural phenomenon," in line with official Soviet policy of denouncing "flying saucers" as only a profitable fantasy concocted by the unscrupulous greedy capitalist news media.

Soviet scientists suggested that the 'jellyfish' could have been a decaying satellite burning up in the atmosphere. Readers were assured that no man-made activities could have been responsible.

But Western reports gleefully and unambiguously labeled the sighting a UFO. Combined with similar reports from the Leningrad area and from across the Finnish border, the 'jellyfish UFO' story made numerous wire services and broadcast news programs.

More sober observers of the UFO scene were not too impressed, however. At the privately funded Center for UFO Studies in Illinois, researcher Allan Hendry was reminded of similar American reports that turned out to be night time rocket launches. This suspicion was confirmed by analysts on the UFO Subcommittee, a subdivision of the skeptical "Committee

for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal," who were able to identify the UFO with the glowing exhaust plumes of a rocket carrying the Cosmos-955 spy satellite.

Since the rare predawn launch had been made from the top secret Plesetsk space center a few hundred kilometers from the scene of the sighting, TASS officials had at first been unaware of the true explanation. When informed, they had been bound by security regulations from revealing it.

The matter rested for several months, since most leading UFO groups accepted the 'secret rocket' explanation. The case seemed forgotten except as an embarrassment to Moscow for inadvertently advertising a Soviet military space secret.

The jellyfish UFO returned suddenly to life last March, borne (reborn?) by headlines on the front page of a weekly tabloid. "First UFO to Inflict Damage on a City!" screamed the *National Enquirer*, as it related the discovery by reporters Bill Dick and Henry Gris that the UFO had broken windows and drilled tiny holes in paving stones all over hapless Petrozavodsk. Moreover, the UFO had returned repeatedly since its first raid.

Skeptics attributed the reports of physical damage to the well-known effects of popular hysteria, since as it turned out the 'jellyfish UFO' had struck sheer terror into thousands of witnesses. But UFO groups, contemplating the new evidence (or reports of evidence—nobody could be found who had actually seen the damage, since it had all been confiscated by the secret police), wavered in their prior endorsement of the 'secret rocket' explanation. One new version, published in a UFO magazine, asserted that the secret rocket had actually exploded over the city, showering the area with fragments that caused the reported damage.

The 'UFO Subcommittee' stood fast with its 'secret rocket' theory (and the rocket had been going away from the city, not

over it), dismissing the damage reports as understandable rumors and exaggerations. Reporters Gris and Dick, who had obtained their data from Russian UFO experts in Moscow but who had never actually visited the site of the damage, claimed to have more details—but they would not be revealed until a new book was completed. TASS, attempting to make up for its original slipup, has clamped down a curtain of secrecy over all aspects of the event.

Nearly a year after the jellyfish UFO's flight, another "official" Soviet explanation was published, breaking a longstanding news blackout. The verdict from scientist M. Dimitreyev was oddly familiar to observers of the American UFO scene. As best as Western experts could determine, the Russian scientist was claiming that the UFO had been "swampsky gas."

According to Dimitreyev's theory, backed up by voluminous calculations and technical gibberish, the glowing clouds in the sky were just luminescent smog that allegedly came from nearby industrial areas such as Petrozavodsk. That would probably be a greater miracle than a real flying saucer, cynical observers suggested, and it reminded UFO experts of the infamous Michigan UFOs in 1966, which were labeled "swamp gas."

But the much-publicized "scientific explanation" of the jellyfish UFO may be taken as real evidence of continued popular anxiety and interest inside Russia concerning the original incident. The government is clearly even more anxious to have people stop thinking about the event lest they figure out what it *really* was.

The whole issue of flying saucers inside the USSR is a hot potato for the Soviet government. There is a great deal of popular interest in the topic since the Russians follow their own space program quite enthusiastically and are fascinated by science fiction and theories of extraterrestrial civilization (which naturally will all be commu-

nistic). But the government's drive to wield a monopoly on public ideas has led to an official aversion for such wild subjects, since it became clear in the 1960s that Soviet "UFO experts" did not believe official Soviet explanations any more than Western UFO specialists believed official U.S. government explanations. These Russian UFO buffs are tolerated but not allowed to publish, so a UFO "underground" complete with *samizdat* newspapers has sprung up.

The incident has entered the pantheon of UFO myths, although its legitimacy remains to be established, considering it had TASS as a father and the *National Enquirer* as a stepfather. While the more serious pro-UFO groups remain unimpressed, and the 'UFO Subcommittee' claims to have exorcised it with skeptical press releases, the Russian jellyfish UFO has all the qualities for becoming another UFO superstar. ☐



Freeze-frame of the famous Rudolph Negora UFO encounter near Yugoslav border in 1971.