

HONEST ILLUSIONS

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

One major difficulty in explaining the UFOs seen by honest, sober, clearheaded, and clear-eyed witnesses is: There are hundreds of prosaic and explainable ways in which people can be fooled by their own senses. The stories that come out of those misperceptions are frequently as fantastic as the UFO stories that remain "true." Where can the line be drawn?

The files of J. Allen Hynek's Center for UFO Studies provide good examples of the problems facing UFO investigators who try to differentiate between UFOs and IFOs (identified flying objects) based on the "strangeness" of the eyewitness accounts. On April 29, 1978, ten different people called the Aurora, Illinois, police department to report a UFO. The object appeared to be a saucer flying at treetop level, although size estimates ranged from about eight meters across to "as big as a football field." After hovering motionless, the object then shot off eastward "in the blink of an eye." Several witnesses were badly shaken by the experience.

The plane, which admittedly looked quite strange from certain angles, became a UFO because, according to the report, "the pervasive emotional climate that appears to be surrounding the entire UFO subject succeeds in distorting even the most commonplace sightings into exaggerated miracles." This trap is one that UFO investigators all too frequently fail to avoid when presented with earnest, honest UFO reports.

True believers insist that their phenomenon is real because hundreds of high-quality eyewitness reports and dozens of photographs exist that have not been exposed as hoaxes. But photography expert Robert Sheaffer claims that if this proves UFOs are real, then people have got to believe in fairies, too.

"The evidence for fairies is at least as good as the evidence for UFOs," Sheaffer has written, tongue only partly in cheek. "There are books full of eyewitness reports, and photographs, too."

One of the most ardent pro-fairy spokesmen was noted British author Sir

Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle wrote *The Coming of the Fairies* in 1921, claiming that by all laws of scientific evidence, the existence of little creatures in gauzy clothes, playing panpipes, could not be legitimately denied. Sheaffer, needless to say, is incredulous about fairies, but he has been unable to persuade many UFO buffs not to believe in them.

Philip J. Klass has also been routinely setting off multimegaton detonations among the ranks of UFO believers. Miffed when UFO experts in 1968 ridiculed a serious (and still tenable) suggestion that many UFOs were actually ball lightning, the by-nature combative aviation reporter threw himself into serious investigations of what were regarded as the best classic UFO cases. He often dug up startling (and embarrassing) new evidence, but he has become a pariah among UFO circles.

With the death of astronomer Donald Menzel in 1976, Klass has emerged as the nation's leading UFO skeptic. He spurns the word *debunker*, which connotes knee-jerk dismissals of novel or unorthodox points of view. Instead, he attempts to investigate UFO cases more deeply than might other researchers who have subconscious desires to find actual proof of extraterrestrial visitors. Concentrating only on the generally acclaimed "best cases," Klass has often exposed the superficiality of work done by pro-UFO experts.

In 1977 Klass joined with scientists and educators to form the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, a group that has denounced the easy acceptance by the public of allegedly baseless beliefs in astrology, the Bermuda Triangle, ESP, "ancient astronauts," and other "modern myths." Klass heads a small but potent band of skeptical investigators called the UFO Subcommittee (Sheaffer is also a member). At the very least, this group demands the tightening of standards in so-called scientific ufology. The level of carelessness of many pro-UFO experts has markedly declined, and so progress is being made. **□**



Lenticular clouds, such as this one near Mount McKinley, are key sources of UFO misperception.