

# MINNESOTA ATTACK

## UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

**S**erious investigators of UFOs continue to be tantalized. "Believers" have long insisted that careful, thorough scientific investigation should establish the reality of UFOs beyond a reasonable doubt. Most believers bought the UFO mythos in the mistaken belief that such research had already been done. Informed skeptics—as opposed to the far more numerous "disbelievers," who simply deny that UFOs merit scientific acceptance—claim with equal confidence that thorough investigations would actually explain UFO reports as prosaic events. They further maintain that a few cases remain unsolved only because thorough research on them has never been attempted.

At last, a UFO case has been thoroughly investigated. The result is confounding to skeptics and disbelievers alike. Something extremely strange seems to have happened, but no single link in the bizarre chain of events is particularly strange in itself. It could all have been just a bold hoax—or one of the most important UFO cases of all time.

This UFO "close encounter" occurred on August 27, 1979, early in the morning, near the town of Warren, Minnesota. A police cruiser driven by thirty-five-year-old Deputy Val Johnson was damaged during an "attack" made by a "bright ball of light." The encounter reportedly left Johnson senseless for 40 minutes. When he regained consciousness, he radioed for help. He realized that his eyes were injured, his car was damaged, and his dashboard clock and his wristwatch were running 14 minutes slow.

Johnson had been routinely patrolling the deserted roads of Marshall County. It was a clear night. Shortly after 1:30 A.M. he noticed a bright light some distance off the road toward a stand of trees. The light did not illuminate the ground or the trees, and so it could have been much closer and could have been moving. As Johnson drove along the highway, he tried to triangulate the light; he estimated that it was about three kilometers away and about 120 centimeters off the ground (assuming that it was standing still).

Deputy Johnson, suspecting that

smugglers might be unloading contraband flown across the nearby Canadian border, turned down a road leading closer to the mysterious light. Suddenly the object leaped from where it was to a point directly in front of him. "The light raced toward me with fantastic speed," he recounted. "I heard the sound of glass shattering, and suddenly my car was flooded with a fierce, blinding white light. Then I blacked out."

Broken glass was later found on the highway, but Johnson's car had continued along the road for ten more seconds before he slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt athwart the middle of the road. The engine stalled, and there Johnson sat, slumped against the wheel, for more than half an hour.

A tape recorder at the dispatcher's office preserved Johnson's call for help. The shakiness of his voice is definitely noticeable. "[This is] 407, [calling] 400," Johnson radioed. He received a quick reply: "Go ahead, 407." Johnson spelled out his situation in succinct radio code: "Ten eighty-eight, two twenty, five." This means, "Officer needs assistance, five miles down Highway 220." The alarmed dispatcher reassured him: "Ten-four, we'll get someone out there right away." Johnson later described his experience: "Something just hit my car. Something attacked my car. I don't know what happened."

Something had happened, and the police car showed its effects. One headlight was smashed. A small, round dent had appeared on the hood. The windshield was shattered. The red plastic filter on a roof lamp had been broken. Two spring-mounted antennas had been bent nearly half over, midway up their length. Curiously, the damage seemed to be confined to the driver's side of the car.

Johnson's eyes were very sore. Later news stories referred to Johnson's injury as "welder's burns," but these reports were inaccurate. True welder's burns are accompanied by facial sunburn and don't usually cause discomfort until six or seven hours after exposure. They are caused by ultraviolet radiation, which could have pene-



A simple box camera caught this UFO above the home of George Stock, in Passaic, New Jersey.

trated the car's windshield only after it had been shattered. An eye specialist who examined Johnson ten hours after the incident noted that "there was no sign of any disease or damage to the eyes. . . . There was mild conjunctival irritation" (for which a medicinal solution was prescribed). The irritation could have been caused by the bright light, or it could have been due to some earlier exposure to a chemical that made every light seem painfully bright.

The story was so intriguing that Allan Hendry, ace investigator for the Center for UFO Studies, in Evanston, Illinois, flew to Warren the following day. The thirty-two-year-old Hendry, author of the authoritative *UFO Handbook*, began a full-scale, first-rate scientific investigation of the midnight "UFO attack."

After ruling out atmospheric phenomena and aircraft, Hendry had an automotive engineer flown in from Detroit to study the police car. The engineer determined that the damage was caused by external "mechanical force" and that there was "no evidence of unusual heat." The antennas were the most puzzling part: They still were covered by dirt and dead insects and showed no sign of having been hit by road debris. What kind of air blast could have bent two of them in the middle—while leaving a third untouched—so quickly that they did not simply fold over on the springs at their base?

"That there is a single witness in this case is a noteworthy drawback," Hendry has admitted, but he insists that Johnson is not "the type of person who would hoax an incident like this. He is earnestly baffled by the event." The young UFO sleuth adds that similar incidents were reported from all across the Midwest within a few weeks of Johnson's encounter.

His conclusion is essentially inconclusive. We just don't know what caused the "attack," but we have eliminated all the most reasonable possible causes. So it was a "genuine UFO," whatever that proves. But it was not nearly so impressive as UFO magazines and newsletters subsequently portrayed it.

Nevertheless, at least one other explanation for this is still plausible: deception. As skeptics soon pointed out, the scientific evidence clearly showed that all the car's damage could have resulted from human action. As one cynic noted, if such damage had occurred outside a pool hall or on a ghetto street, there never would have been the slightest doubt that somebody had vandalized the car. The odd thing about this event was only that it allegedly occurred on a deserted highway.

Philip J. Klass, aviation writer and author of two skeptical books on UFOs, told *Omni* that he has charted all of the reported damage and compared it with all possible forces—including those found in science fiction—that might have been involved. Basing his conclusions on the careful research of the Center for UFO

Studies—where he is hardly a favorite character—Klass says that only human action could account for all the circumstances of the case, including the 14-minute discrepancy on the two timepieces. But whose?

Skeptics stress that nothing in the case rules out the possibility that Johnson either concocted the story, perhaps to account for damage from some unauthorized use of the official vehicle, or was the innocent victim of someone else's prank. The investigators' failure to eliminate this explanation marks the continued failure of UFO experts to establish the authenticity of their subject of special interest.

The uncharacteristically thorough research on this case has been valuable in narrowing the prosaic causes that could account for at least one UFO sighting. It will be difficult to duplicate. This kind of research is expensive. Klass's thesis that no extraordinary cause need be invoked to account for this or any other UFO report

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has not yet been disproved. But the Minnesota case stands as a fine example of how any such refutation must be documented.

"I would have killed someone if the UFOs had told me to do it." Those words weren't found in some confession magazine. They are from the real-life drama of a UFO cult, a well-meaning young "believer," a pile of lawsuits against would-be rescuers, and the white knight of cultist "deprogramming," Ted Patrick.

It all began with an ordinary UFO sighting one night in January 1973. Thomas and Susan Kolb, a young couple from Kiel, Wisconsin, saw an orange flashing light "as large as a house" move slowly across a field near their home.

The Kolbs contacted a local UFO enthusiast, who went to their home to hear about the case and to tell them about other encounters. They soon joined a study group, the UFO Education Center, in Appleton, Wisconsin.

They had unwittingly stumbled on a renegade sect of the old George Adamski cult, originally founded 40 years ago in

California. UFOs played no part in the cult's original dogma, but they were quickly absorbed when they achieved notoriety in the late 1940s. Members of the cult claimed to communicate by telepathy with Orthon, a great scholar living on Venus, who supposedly was a reincarnation of Jesus. The planet Earth, the group claimed, was in mortal danger—they didn't specify what it was—and could be saved only if a few selfless people submitted to Orthon's will. Money helped, too.

Thomas Kolb was not very impressed, but Susan swallowed it all. She worked two jobs to help support the group and eventually moved into the headquarters to save money, snatching meals from the refrigerator when she could. In her spare time she did typing, ran the mimeograph machine, and answered the telephone.

"It got to the point where we weren't interested in UFOs anymore," she recalls. "We were completely obsessed with the philosophy of Orthon and with spreading that philosophy."

A month after Mrs. Kolb moved into the UFO Education Center, a rescue party, led by her father and husband, broke down the front door and carried her off. She escaped from them and signed complaints of false imprisonment against the men. The charges were eventually dismissed, and the would-be rescuers turned to professional help: Ted Patrick.

Patrick is one of the country's most famous deprogrammers. He specializes in rescuing cultists and reversing their brainwashing, as he considers it. Since his endeavors involve carrying people off and holding them until they recant, Patrick has occasionally run afoul of kidnapping and false-imprisonment laws.

Late in October 1977 Patrick went to Wisconsin and took on the job of rescuing Mrs. Kolb from the UFO Education Center. Over a four-day period, for which Thomas's parents paid several thousand dollars, Patrick succeeded in breaking the cult's spell.

In the following months Susan Kolb traveled with Patrick on the lecture circuit, speaking to church groups and TV audiences. She does not particularly want to see any more UFOs.

That first UFO, which started it all back in 1973, turned out to be a neighbor's lighted tractor, plowing late at night.

Reputable UFO groups regard the affair of the UFO Education Center with embarrassment now that they realize it was not just another club of harmless crackpots. (There are many, and they should not reflect on responsible UFO associations.)

Such bizarre activities seem to flourish in the absence of reliable information, and they demonstrate the public's intense interest in all aspects of the UFO phenomenon. As in any field where mystery reigns, charlatans who promise certainties can prey on naive enthusiasts. **□□**