

SPACE ENCOUNTERS

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

Scarcely a UFO book, movie, or magazine appears today without making some passing reference to the incredible notion that "our astronauts have seen UFOs." This is perhaps so because some of the most exciting, most intriguing UFO stories on record are based on reports made by astronauts. The new McGraw-Hill *UFOs: A Pictorial History* offers a double-page spread of a UFO photo taken from *Apollo 11*. Johannes von Buttlar's *UFO Phenomenon*, last year's best seller in Germany and now in an English-language edition, has a giant foldout of a *Gemini 7* "twin UFO." Maurice Chatelain's *Our Ancestors Came from Outer Space*, which contained a chapter devoted entirely to UFOs seen in space, was a popular success in France and is now an English-language paperback. Speeches made by UFO buffs in the USSR provided material for UFO headlines in the *National Enquirer* late in 1979, but the same stories were subsequently denounced by *Pravda* as "sensationalist inventions"—virtually a testimonial to their authenticity, considering the spokesman. That same week fringe ufologist Bob Barry was telling a convention near Cape Canaveral that the secret UFOs following our astronauts were really angels. A cult in California insists that they were merely ethereal inhabitants from another plane of existence who offered to help save the crippled *Apollo 13* moonship.

These and other tales have been passed from one author to another over the years, growing in strangeness with each retelling. However, few UFO experts, if any, have made the slightest attempt to substantiate or repudiate them.

And that's a pity, because careful examination of the original records does suggest that astronauts have seen many things they did not expect and could not identify. The most famous of these encounters involved *Gemini 4* pilot James McDivitt in 1965, but there were other notable cases associated with *Gemini 7*, *Gemini 11*, *Apollo 12*, and *Skylab 3*. A complete search of the UFO literature turns up dozens of additional reports. The

question is: How many (if any) are true unidentified flying objects?

The central issue confronting UFO investigators is whether these sightings were fundamentally different from what might ordinarily be expected on "routine" astronaut missions. It has been shown that visual stimuli associated with manned spaceflights, such as discarded pieces of the spacecraft, flaking fragments of insulation or ice, cabin debris, nearby satellites, reflections and glares, and film faults, are responsible for a large proportion of the UFO reports attributed to astronauts. Widely publicized "UFO photos" from *Gemini 12* and *Apollo 10*, for example, merely show cabin debris drifting out of an open hatch, or ice chipping off a rocket thruster. A "saucer," allegedly photographed on *Mercury 7*, turned out to be only a visual-tracking balloon ejected from the capsule. The infamous "snowman UFO" of *Apollo 11* was merely a movie test sequence that happened to include prominent window reflections (the story was embellished by a hoaxed voice transcript and by

some artful photographic retouching).

But McDivitt's UFO story seems to be different. The graying former astronaut and retired Air Force general is now an executive of a Chicago firm. His manner is sober, straightforward, and low-keyed, belying the sensational implications of his airborne encounter.

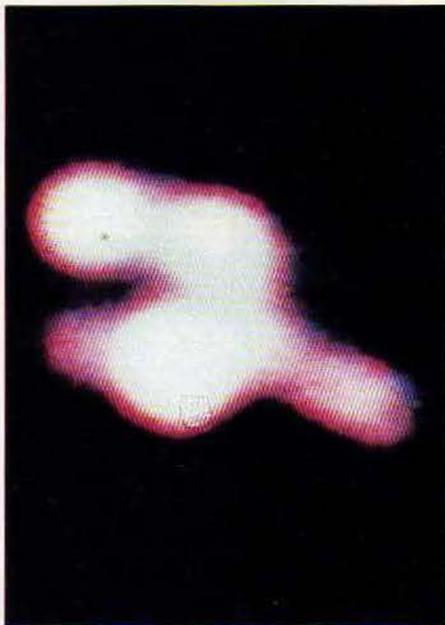
During the second day of the four-day flight (June 3–7, 1965), while his copilot was asleep, McDivitt chanced to glance out of his window. Suddenly he caught sight of a "beer-can-shaped object" drifting nearby (he has never specified how large it seemed, or whether it was tumbling). Surprised, he got a camera and took several pictures. Then he reached for the ship's controls, fearing a collision. He lost sight of the object in the glare of the sun and couldn't find it again.

McDivitt remained singularly unimpressed by the sighting. Even now he maintains that it was probably only a booster rocket from some other man-made satellite. Although McDivitt was willing to talk freely about it, there is no record that he ever filed a formal report with NASA or with the Air Force's Project Blue Book UFO study.

Whatever it was, the object caused some puzzlement at Mission Control, in Houston. The Air Force satellite tracking center in Colorado reported that no other satellites were nearby. Puzzled officials soon had other problems with which to contend, however, since the space race was then at its height.

The excitement returned when a NASA audiovisual technician in Washington, D.C., released what he thought must have been the photographs McDivitt took. Several frames of movie film showed a blob of light with a tadpolelike tail. When McDivitt checked the flight film, he concluded that the UFO image, like so many others, had not developed clearly. He asserted that the image in the "tadpole UFO" photo did not resemble the object he had seen but was rather a test exposure showing sunlight reflecting off the edge of a cabin window.

Despite McDivitt's disavowal of it, the picture appeared in dozens of UFO



Enlargement of *Gemini 11*'s 1966 UFO sighting.

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publications, and eventually NICAP (National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena) selected it as "one of the four best UFO photographs ever taken." Prominent UFO proponent Dr. James Harder, director of research for APRO (Aerial Phenomena Research Organization), considers the photograph proof of a plasma propulsion field surrounding the UFO.

Besides, there happens to be a plausible identification of the object McDivitt actually saw. Earlier in the flight he had been trying to fly formation with his own Titan second-stage booster rocket, which coincidentally is shaped very much like a beer can. It stayed within a few kilometers of the *Gemini* spacecraft for many hours afterward before disappearing into the darkness.

Observers have suggested that McDivitt noticed the Titan stage again and was startled by its appearance in an unexpected sector of the sky. The astronaut's visual acuity was, by his own account, impaired by dirt on the windows and by severe irritation caused by a urine spill a few hours earlier in the flight.

McDivitt does not believe his UFO was nothing more than his booster. He claims he knew what his booster looked like and that this object, though similar, was not identical (although his copilot, Ed White, had al-

ready reported seeing the booster without at first recognizing it). The sighting remains "unexplained" (even to the superskeptical Condon Committee), which, of course, by definition makes it a genuine UFO.

Incidents occurring during other spaceflights remain intriguing even while their connection with UFOs is tenuous at best. A satellite was photographed by astronauts on *Gemini 11* in 1966, and the Air Force identification of it as the Russian *Proton 3* was mistaken. So which satellite was it, and why the "mistake"? An ordinary photograph of a double sun glint off the nose of *Gemini 7* was retouched in Japan to show "two glowing UFOs," a counterfeit case that has appeared in books by several more reputable UFO authors. The *Apollo 12* astronauts, on their way back from the moon in November 1969, were perplexed by a light between them and Earth that was widely publicized as a UFO. It turned out to be the reflection of the moon off the Indian Ocean while still in darkness. Former astronaut L. Gordon Cooper, who believes in UFOs, has vigorously denounced the UFO stories associated with his flights and has initiated lawsuits against reporters who, he asserts, have misquoted him.

Meanwhile astronauts in *Skylab* saw a small, pulsating, red light that they thought to be a tumbling satellite. Although three out of four photographs they took showed it to be a point source of light, the fourth one showed a strange squiggle shape that

might conceivably have been caused by a film fault, a sticking shutter, a window imperfection, or any number of other reasonable possibilities.

There are even UFO stories associated with the Soviet Union's secretive space program. Late in 1978 a strange tale was published in Argentina that described how a top Soviet military official had disclosed that the *Salyut 6* space station had been surrounded by UFOs earlier that year and that cosmonauts Yuri Romanenko and Georgi Grechko had photographed them.

Though most observers dismissed this report as gossip, it later turned out to be true—somewhat. Early in 1979 Grechko told a Soviet news correspondent about what had really happened: A radio call from Moscow Mission Control alerted the two cosmonauts to be on the lookout for any objects flying formation with the *Salyut* spacecraft; the ground official referred to them as "flying saucers," but the cosmonauts believed he was joking. Yet when they looked out their porthole, they saw several round, white objects. Indeed, the ground official had been joking: The objects were trash bags that the cosmonauts were routinely jettisoning through an auxiliary air lock. "The objects stayed nearby until we changed course," Grechko later recalled. The most amazing aspect of this case, though, is that the Argentinean gossip was based on an actual occurrence in low Earth orbit.

Finally, many ufologists in the United States have reluctantly abandoned the "astronaut UFO stories," however attractive and useful the tales may have been in winning converts. Dr. J. Allen Hynek, whose *Edge of Reality* (1975) contained a detailed three-page list of such space encounters, repudiated the list a few years later when he discovered that no one had ever corroborated any of the cases. Dr. Garry Henderson, of General Dynamics, in St. Louis, who has been quoted as claiming that all our astronauts saw and photographed UFOs, recently issued a denial that he had ever said or believed any such thing. Timothy Green Beckley, editor of *UFO Review*, admitted in 1979 that none of the encounters had ever happened, but he scolded UFO skeptics for trying to spoil the stories for the public.

But the "astronaut UFO cases" can still play an important part in any assessment of the UFO scene. The layman has always had difficulty in determining the reliability of UFO books and magazines currently on the market. At last people have a useful yardstick: If the UFO publication is replete with exciting accounts of astronauts encountering UFOs, and if the publication includes purported NASA photographs of UFOs, there is a strong indication that the author either doesn't know, doesn't care about, or doesn't want readers to know the truth behind, these tales. The same therefore probably goes for the other UFO stories in such publications. That's the real lesson of "astronaut UFO" mythology. **DO**

