



UFO UPDATE

SECRET CONFERENCE AT MIT:

Despite an oath of silence, abduction attendees spill the beans



Despite the drama and obvious heartbreak of their stories, UFO abductees have long been mired in disrepute. From the small, slit-eyed aliens to the surgical theaters in starships, the horrors abductees describe have become objects of derision and the butt of jokes.

That's why when Massachusetts Institute of Technology physics professor and UFO advocate David Pritchard decided to hold an abductee conference, respectability was key. As part of his game plan, he even arranged to hold the conference at his home institution, that hallmark of science and technology, MIT. But in what may have been a tactical error, last summer's MIT abduction conference was declared a secret before it even began.

One of the reasons, of course, was MIT's refusal to be labeled a conference "host." In the true MIT spirit of academic freedom, the university placed no constraints on the subject matter of gatherings sponsored by faculty members. On the contrary, MIT provided, at cost, a host of support functions, from registration to food and housing. However, one strict requirement was that the gathering not be called an MIT conference, but rather, "the conference at MIT."

Before attendees were accepted for registration, in fact, Pritchard had them sign an oath pledging to call the conference just that. And while he was writing a formal oath, he added some requirements of his own. Foremost was the stipulation that attendees promise not to discuss the proceedings with outsiders or reporters, or for that matter, in any public forum at all. The restraints, Pritchard told attendees, were necessary to "encourage discussion." Presenters could "speculate wildly," then carefully edit their contributions so that they "appear judicious and restrained in print."

But despite all efforts to maintain secrecy, the event was barely over before accounts began circulating among UFOlogists by word of mouth, on computer bulletin boards, and at flying-saucer conferences

around the world. UFO newsletters and magazines in North America and Europe carried reports. And in all these forums, the meeting was referred to as "the MIT abduction conference" after all.

The details of the conference, say attendees, ranged from the mundane to the bizarre. A number of papers addressed dry research techniques, from methods of hypnosis to models for questionnaires. Others outlined the latest evidence for alien visitation, including the case of New York condo abductee "Cathy," who says she was beamed to a starship from the windows of her high rise, and South American witnesses allegedly forced to have sex with crew members from UFOs. Veteran California UFOlogist and conference attendee James Harder even distinguished between two types of aliens. "Camp B aliens, the less experienced and far less careful, are recent arrivals and may treat humans much like we treat animals under study," he explained. "Camp A aliens, on the other hand, have been around for a long time," and are "much more likely to display a benevolent attitude."

Some conference details even leaked out on national TV when abduction researcher Budd Hopkins told viewers that "four extraterrestrial implants are being verified in university labs." The implants, he explained, helped aliens track the movement and behavior of "tagged" abductees. The claim was disputed by Pritchard, who, after studying some of the implants, called the evidence "totally unconvincing."

With a yen for respectability, Pritchard promises to release published conference proceedings any day. "I hope it will present a comprehensible and scholarly overview of this phenomenon," he says, "one that is broad and balanced enough to attract some competent, skilled people into the field." The published proceedings, he adds, will hopefully counterbalance "single-author books, which do not necessarily present a balanced view."

—JAMES OBERG and lodging at cost.