

# Ancient Astronauts Modern Mysteries

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## PILOTS AND UFOS

One of the most productive developments of the great flying saucer wave of the 1960s was the creation of a little-publicized organization called the Volunteer Flight Officer Network (VFON). We say "was" because VFON became another victim of the economic recession last June. Headquartered in Denver, Colo., VFON was sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution Astrophysical Observatory and directed by Herbert E. Roth. Its mission was to collect eyewitness UFO reports from commercial pilots. Over 56,000 crew members from 120 airlines representing 57 countries participated in the project.

Old-timers will recall that some of the most spectacular UFO reports of the 1950s came from airline pilots. In several instances, the U.S. Air Force went to absurd lengths to discredit the pilots, even accusing them of drunkenness. The airlines quickly realized that any kind of association with the flying saucer mystery would be harmful to their "image," so pilots were ordered to keep their mouths shut if they did see anything unusual. Some pilots who violated the rule were grounded, even fired. Those were the bad old days.

With the increase in sightings in the 1960s, pilots like Herb Roth realized that the imposed censorship was wrong. Despite the Air Force's denials and machinations, the phenomenon persisted and pilots continued to see things that shouldn't have been there. VFON was founded and made a serious attempt to check every UFO report it received from pilots. Roth collected astronomical tables, listings of the latest U.S. and Soviet space shots, and meteorological records. He soon discovered that a great many UFO sightings could be rationally explained as debris from rocket reentries, meteors, and other natural phenomena. The Air Force had stumbled onto the same thing back in the 1940s and

kept an astronomer, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, on the payroll to find (and sometimes to invent) astronomical explanations for the sightings reported to Project Blue Book. Even when airline pilots and passengers reported seeing gigantic dirigible-like objects with rows of lighted windows, Dr. Hynek and the Air Force somehow managed to blame Venus, flights of white-bellied birds, and weather balloons.

Herb Roth's Volunteer Flight Officer Network was not part of the official explanation system, however. Instead, they hoped to study some true UFO reports. Dr. Hynek joined the "good guys" in 1966 and set up his "invisible college" of scientists interested in the flying saucer puzzle. Pilot reports that could not be positively identified by Roth using his charts and tables were passed along to the "invisible college." Unfortunately, unidentifieds were few and far between.

A total of 382 pilot reports were received by VFON for the year July 1, 1974—June 1975. Not a single one of these proved to be a genuine UFO.

### A SKY FULL OF JUNK

The space age is less than 20 years old but we have managed to turn space into a junk yard. As of May 11, 1975 there were 3,313 satellites, spent rockets, and assorted bits of hardware drifting around up there. The mess includes a very expensive camera and a glove accidentally lost by one of our astronauts. Some of this debris reflects sunlight and can be seen from a great distance. The absence of an atmosphere produces almost unlimited visibility and can also distort distance. An object 50 miles away can seem to be much closer. The crew of an airliner cruising in the rarefied air at 35,000 feet can sometimes see a reflective object 100 miles above them.

Flying saucer enthusiasts gleefully point to the many sightings reported by police officers and pilots, as if these 2 groups were super-reliable and not

inclined to make mistakes in calculating altitude, distance, size, etc. But a common cause for many accidents occurs when pilots mistake a bright star on the horizon for an airport beacon and head for it.

There are, however, many pilot reports which have been verified by radar stations on the ground. And both our astronauts and the Soviet cosmonauts have seen things in the vastness of space which defied explanation. The mysterious "cylinder" sighted by astronaut James McDivitt in July 1965 was also reported by the crews of Voskhod 1 and 2 and in 1964-65. The object was seamless, with no visible windows or hatches.

Most of the Soviet and U.S. space satellites have a military purpose and are made deliberately not to reflect. They can't be seen from the ground or from the air. Some of the earliest satellites were silvery and could be seen from the ground. But they have long since decayed and burned up when they entered the Earth's atmosphere. Today only the Skylab hulk is visible. It seems to flicker because it is tumbling as it etches a straight line across the night sky. If you have been watching bright star-like objects, don't dismiss them as satellites.

Today there are approximately 1 million licensed pilots in the U.S. and 150,000 private airplanes. Many millions of miles are flown each year by the airlines, the military, and the private pilots. The 382 sightings reported to VFON represented 4,266,507 miles of unduplicated air route coverage. This means that an average of 11,000 miles had to be flown for each report. And none of the reports proved to be of a genuine unidentified. In other words, you have to fly 11,000 miles before you are apt to see a puzzling but identifiable object in the sky. How many miles must you fly before you come upon a genuine UFO?

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# ANCIENT ASTROS

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## HOW TO SEE A FLYING SAUCER

Modern astronomers rarely look at the night sky. They deal mostly with time exposure photographs taken with complicated instruments. So it's not strange at all that only a few astronomers have seen a UFO. They just haven't been looking for them. The same is true of pilots. The modern pilot is confronted by a mind-boggling array of instruments and gadgets, and he is primarily concerned with going from Point A to Point B. He pays more attention to his instrument panel than to the world outside his windows. In addition, most light planes have terrible visibility—the view from your automobile is better. In some of the older planes the pilot sits in the rear seat and can only look out of the side windows and guess at what lies ahead. An unidentified flying object could circle a small plane and never be noticed. Perhaps this actually happens because remarkably few pilots have reported sightings.

Of course there have been some really spectacular pilot reports. Remember the helicopter in Ohio that nearly collided with a huge unidentified object in October 1973? There are many others, but not enough. When you consider the many millions of miles being flown each year the number of pilot reports is infinitesimal. If you cataloged all airborne reports you would probably find that they number less than 2,000 in the past 25 years.

If our skies are filled with flying

saucers why have so few pilots encountered them? The greatest number of sightings by far are made by people in automobiles, not airplanes. Furthermore, the majority of those cars were parked at the time of the sighting! So if you want to see a UFO you would have a better chance if you parked your car in some remote lover's lane.

However, if you insist on renting a plane for your UFO hunt you should stay between 5,000 and 10,000 feet. Most pilot sightings take place at this altitude. Sightings above or below this range are very infrequent. Since most airliners cruise at 30,000 feet or higher this may be why the pilots of VFON saw so few actual UFOs.

### UFOS FROM EARTH?

Why are high altitude sightings so rare while low altitude sightings have become commonplace? If UFOs were vehicles coming into our atmosphere from outer space our astronauts would probably have encountered traffic jams. If little "scout ships" were launched from gigantic "mother ships" in the upper atmosphere we should have more evidence from high altitude planes and radar stations. For some reason the phenomenon never produces enough evidence to support the impressions of the earthbound witnesses. The data suggests that UFOs are basically a low altitude phenomenon and that the objects are traveling from one point to another near the surface of our planet. They are not coming to us from the far side of the moon or from a distant stellar system. They are coming from a point very close to Earth, if not the Earth itself.

A major in the Royal Australian Air Force reported an unusual sighting off the coast of the island of Tasmania in 1942: "At 5:50 p.m., of a lovely sunny

evening, we were flying some miles east of the Tasman Peninsula when, all of a sudden, there came out of a cloud bank, a singular airfoil of glistening bronze color. I'd say it was around 150 feet long, and about 50 feet in diameter. It had a sort of beak at its prow, and the surface seemed burred, or rippled, or fluted. On its upper surface was a dome, or cupola, from which I seemed to see reflected flashes as the sun struck something, which might or might not have been a helmet, worn by something inside. The other end of the airfoil finned out into a sort of fin. Every now and again there came from its keel greenish-blue flashes. It turned at a small angle toward us and I was amazed to see, framed in a white circle on the front of the dome, an image of a large, grinning Cheshire cat!

"The damn thing flew parallel to us for some minutes, and then it abruptly turned away and, as it did so, it showed 4 things like fins on its belly-side. It went off at a hell of a pace, turned and dived straight down into the Pacific, and went under, throwing up a regular whirlpool of waves! Just as if it had been a submarine."

Herbert Roth has nothing in his VFON files to top that Australian report. He seems, instead, to have proven the very thing he was trying to disprove. The Volunteer Flight Officer Network was organized to collect some first-rate UFO reports by highly reliable pilots and crews. While airline crews did see hundreds of strange things in the sky each year, almost all of them were man-made or natural.

Yet we still don't know who or what pursued that helicopter over Ohio, or dove from the sky into the ocean off Tasmania. ★