

# ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS, MODERN MYSTERIES

By John A. Keel

## PHANTOMS IN THE SKIES

### HAUNTED AIRPLANES

A private pilot is cruising 6,000 feet over North Carolina in a single-engined four-seater plane, enjoying the sunny cloudless day. His engine is purring flawlessly and all his instruments indicate that everything is O.K. Suddenly he feels a tap on his shoulder and he almost jumps out of his seat belt because he knows he is alone in the plane. Glancing back, he is startled to see a balding, middle-aged man in a gray suit in the rear seat. The pilot's blood turns to ice.

"Land this plane immediately," the stranger orders in a husky voice.

"What! Who are you?" the pilot manages to choke.

"Land this plane *immediately!*" the stranger repeats.

"Where . . . where did you come from? This is impossible!"

"*Land this plane right now!*"

Barely able to think, the frightened pilot spots a small private field below, cuts back on the throttle and begins to descend. As he approaches for a landing, the plane's engine suddenly coughs and a horrendous clatter erupts from beyond the fire wall. A tendril of black smoke curls from under the cowling. The pilot frantically cuts the engine and glides in for a perfect landing. Safely on the ground, he turns to question the stranger. *But the back seat is empty!*

Later a sober-faced mechanic tells him, "It's a good thing you decided to land when you did. Your engine threw a rod. A few more minutes and you would have been in real trouble."

Who was the mysterious stranger? Can airplanes be haunted? Now that we are more than 70 years into the Air Age, tales of haunted airplanes are becoming more and more common. Ghostly apparitions have taken to the air. Unlike the ghosts that haunt old manors on the ground, our air-bound

ghosts have thus far been friendly and helpful.

While a few ghosts have been supposedly highly mobile, most have been trapped in a single place, doomed to wander forever through the rooms of an old building or among the tombstones of a cemetery. However, documented reports of haunted ships now fill many books and there is a rapidly expanding lore about the eerie phantoms who have appeared suddenly in automobiles and alerted the drivers to impending danger. Tales of phantom hitchhikers are currently enjoying popularity. These odd characters usually deliver a religious message to the driver and then suddenly disappear.

So it is not too surprising that these same kinds of phantoms are now beginning to ride in airplanes.

### THE GREMLIN PHENOMENON

But pilots have been carrying unexpected passengers since the 1920s. When aviators in that era had inexplicable problems with their primitive equipment they invented the word "Gremlin." They blamed their troubles on the little green men of the sky. They never saw the mischievous little fellows, of course, but when their compasses began to twirl uselessly or their bulky, heavy experimental radios malfunctioned they had to blame someone. The pioneering science-fiction magazines of the period, notably Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, were reaching into hitherto unexplored realms of the imagination and populating the universe with BEMs (bug-eyed monsters), little green Martians, and disc-shaped flying machines. (Many of the illustrations in those early magazines featured flying saucers almost identical in design to those reported by eyewitnesses 20 years later). The Gremlin concept probably was

started by some pilot who was also a science-fiction aficionado.

During WW II the Gremlins came into their own. They suddenly became real to the thousands of brave men engaged in the brutal air war over Europe. The massive bombing raids on Hitler's Third Reich were living nightmares. Our lumbering bombers flew through sub-zero temperatures at 30,000 feet, the savage winds lashing through the open gun ports at gunners and crewmen bundled in heavy flight suits and gloves, their faces covered with oxygen masks. Nazi fighter planes and antiaircraft barges ripped at the bomber formations mile after mile. Allied losses were staggering. Thousands of those planes became flying tombs, seared by uncontrollable fires, disintegrating in mid-flight. Holes appeared almost magically in fuselages and wings. Crewmen were ripped apart by 50-caliber bullets and cannon shells. The emotional strain on those who survived was almost unbearable.

In that frigid, oxygen-starved environment some men began to see strange things. During debriefing sessions they actually described tiny beings striding their wings, wrenching holes in the fragile metal skin. The Gremlins turned up inside the aircraft and jammed machine guns, glued themselves to bomb bay doors and prevented them from opening, sawed away at control cables and communications lines, and poked leaks in oxygen tanks.

There were no real Gremlins, of course. The damage was being done by enemy bullets and flak. But a complicated psychological process was at work. The perceptions of men teetering on the brink of insanity were inventing an alternate explanation, another frame of reference, for all the horror around them. Little green men in funny peaked

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# ANCIENT ASTROS

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caps seemed more harmless and less threatening than bursting shells and whining bullets.

Gremlins were not seen in the Pacific war, perhaps because the air war there was different from that in Europe. Pressurized B-29s were used over Japan instead of the wide open B-17s and B-24s over Germany.

After the war ended, the little green Gremlins vanished. Pilots still used the term Gremlin to explain malfunctions of their equipment but we didn't hear anymore about little green men until the late 1940s when the fictitious flying saucers of *Amazing Stories* suddenly became real to millions and began landing in remote farm fields and isolated areas.

It is unfortunate that no behavioral scientist took an interest in the Gremlin phenomenon and examined the flying eyewitnesses of the war. We might have learned something important about the reaction of the human mind under stress. Such a study might even have given us some clues concerning the still-to-come UFO phenomenon.

Perhaps some of the warning phantoms who appear in autos and airplanes are not really ghosts at all. Perhaps they are some hidden part of ourselves, generated by some psychic instinct during times of stress. We unconsciously sense an impending collision or engine failure and then our mind constructs an entity to alert us because a warning simply transferred from the unconscious to the conscious mind might be ignored. (How many times have you ignored a strong "hunch" that later came true?) Like the Gremlins of the 1940s, the entities exist only because our minds have reasons for wanting them to exist.

## THE AIRLINER GHOST

When our unconscious mind senses danger it seems logical for it to construct an entity we would pay attention to, like the apparition of a deceased friend or relative. This apparently happened in a case reported in the highly respected newsletter of the Flight Safety Foundation, June 6, 1974, a journal read by professional pilots and aviation officials.

"One of the flight attendants on this particular trijet," the report begins, "was in the lower gallery of the jumbo when, in the course of her duties, she happened to glance into the glass window of one of the ovens or meal heating units. There, looking out at her (or was it a reflection?), was the face of the flight engineer who had lost his life in the Everglades crash of one of the airline's trijets several months earlier. He had been below, checking the position of the jumbo's nose gear, when the big trijet slammed into the marsh.

"The mystified and not startled flight attendant 'went topside' and asked another stewardess to go below. She did . . . and verified what the first girl had seen. They then asked the flight engineer to go below. He did . . . and he not only saw but he talked to the vision or ghost if you will, who said, 'Watch out for fire on this airplane.'

"Shortly thereafter, that airplane (flight number 618) was in Mexico City when a problem developed in one of its three engines. The flight crew asked for and was given permission to make a two-engine ferry flight to the airline's maintenance base for an engine change.

"On takeoff from Mexico City's airport, nearly a mile and a half above sea level, a fire developed in one of the big jumbo's two remaining engines. The engine had to be shut down and it was.

Only through the flight crew's almost unbelievable expertise in handling the big jet were they able to come around and land safely on one engine, never having gotten higher than 400 feet A.G.L. [Above Ground Level]."

Turning a jumbo jet 360 degrees with only one engine at an altitude of 400 feet is a suicidal maneuver, especially in the thin air at Mexico City. (Remember, the airport is a mile and a half above sea level.) The odds were that the plane would stall and crash. But it didn't. In commenting on this case, the *Flight Safety Foundation Newsletter* seriously asked if maybe something more than the "flight crew's almost unbelievable expertise" might have been involved.

Three people saw the apparition in the glass door (perhaps because all three were confronting the same unknown danger), and the flight engineer actually spoke to it. The crew were undoubtedly more alert because of the warning and were better prepared to deal with the fire than they might have been if the apparition had not appeared. It took the form of a dead man they had all known and so they responded to it.

Would they have responded in the same way if it had taken the form of a little green man or Abraham Lincoln? Probably not.

The moral of all this is quite simple: when our unconscious minds try to deliver a message to our conscious minds we should listen. ★