

## EDITORIAL

As all Fortean and *Magonia* readers will be aware, it is not just UFOs that should arouse our scepticism. A recent item in *The Daily Telegraph* (23 June 2000) tells of 'a tranquil Italian village' which is allegedly being terrorised by thieves who climb drainpipes, enter bedrooms and drug the occupants in their sleep before ransacking their homes. 'Almost everyone' in the village of Sutri has been or knows a victim 'put to sleep' with a narcotic spray. It is alleged that last year the gang staged two or three robberies a night and that on some occasions 'they drugged and robbed the occupants of whole blocks of flats'. Curiously, the reporter makes no mention of police comments or investigations. The story seems implausible to me; it reminds me of the Mattoon gasser . . .

---

## PROPELLER-POWERED SAUCERS

Martin Kottmeyer

Early in the morning of 25 August 1952, a gentleman named William Squyres headed off to his job at a radio station in Pittsburgh, Kansas. He was driving his new Jeep station wagon. When he was about a quarter mile from the main highway he saw off to his right, hovering ten feet above a two acre field of grass used for grazing cattle, an unusual craft. It was platter-shaped, roughly 70 feet long, 40 feet wide, and about 15 feet through the midsection. It looked like it was made of aluminium and had several large windows arranged from top to rear. There was a medium blue continuous light inside and he could see in the front window the head and shoulders of a man sitting motionless.

This seems to be the first Close Encounter of the Third Kind in America to make it into the Project Blue Book files. It achieved some added cachet by having made it into the Battelle Institute study as a case with sufficient information and credibility to be considered useful. The more famous Flatwoods Monster CE3K would occur roughly two weeks later. Six days earlier, Sonny Desvergers, a Florida scoutmaster, was knocked unconscious by a ball of red fire aimed from a flying saucer. The Desvergers case would be deemed a hoax, but the charred grass at the scene would remain a loose end for ufologists to play with. This was all happening on the back edge of the massive 1952 Flap that peaked with the famous Washington National radar UFOs in mid-July.

Squyres said there seemed to be a lot of activity or movement in the midsection of the craft. He could not be sure if it was human, but it did not have a regular pattern to it. He was able to view the object for about a half-minute before it began a rapid vertical ascent reaching a tremendous rate of acceleration as it disappeared into the sky.

Left behind in the field there was a sixty foot circle of grass that was pressed down. Some loose grass was laid on top as if drawn in by suction from the vertical ascent. Several witnesses confirmed the presence of matted grass. Samples showed no traces of burning, radioactivity, or other stress. Air Force investigators obtained uniform praise in their search for character references. Local businessmen had known Squyres for over ten years and considered him completely reliable. For those still considering a hoax, it is worth adding that the surrounding terrain was rather rough - ditch, fence, tall weeds - and he had an artificial leg.

Writing some 25 years later, J. Allen Hynek remarked: 'I remember puzzling long and hard over this case, one of the very early ones received by Blue Book.' His initial assessment was that it was a hallucination, but he felt he could not accept it any more. Regardless of the 'level of reality' of the event, he no longer entertained any doubt Squyres had 'a true, tangible experience' (*The Hynek UFO Report*, pp. 200-203).

This would seem pretty impressive. We have here a CE3K with extensive physical evidence probably beyond the ability of the claimant to manufacture. How many other entity cases can you say that about? Yet you won't find this on anybody's best-ten list, past or future. The problem lies in a damnably devilish detail:

'Another identifiable feature was that along the edges of the object . . . there was a series of propellers about six to seven inches in diameter spaced closely together; these propellers were mounted on a bracket so they revolved in a horizontal plane on the edge of the object. The propellers were rotating at a high rate.'

This doesn't sound very extraterrestrial and Squyres himself wasn't thinking in those terms. 'When pressed, he stated that he thought it was probably a new device of the government.' This of course was the favoured idea among those believing saucers were real in the Fifties. Those who wrote books may have felt that saucers were extraterrestrial, but polls showed the public wasn't buying it quite yet. Articles by journalists in major magazines also favoured the idea that saucers were part of some secret weapons project - possibly Soviet, but more probably American.

Let's state the obvious. No craft like this was flying in 1952. The Air Force contracted something vaguely similar called the Avrocar that was eventually built and completed in 1959. It was developed in secret but the design was declassified in 1971. It involved a single fan in the centre, it was much smaller - 18 feet diameter by 3 feet thick, was test flown in California only, and was completely unstable above an altitude of 3 feet. It was deemed unsuitable for high-speed flight. (1) It is flatly impossible for Squyres to have been watching an American-made flying saucer.

No saucer nowadays sports such an array of propellers. UFO historian Loren Gross phrased the paradox more universally: 'Propellers just are not reported on UFOs.' (2) Emphatically, no craft piloted by Greys or other species of aliens has even reported this feature. Nor does it seem likely any ever would. From an aeronautical standpoint, it is a nightmarish design. The turbulence from such an array of propellers would promise problems of stability and control. Engine failure of any sort - e.g. a bird hitting a propeller blade - would cause instant disaster with little time for diagnosis and solution. Charitably, one can say it shows a whimsically inventive visual sensibility, but one unconcerned with safety.

The Squyres case is the most impressive example of a UFO with propellers. It does not stand alone. A month later, on 26 September 1952, a gentleman named Carlo Rossi, in Italy, had a similar close encounter of the third kind. The drawing in the press shows a man wearing an aviator's cap with goggles worn atop it looking out of a circular hole on a blister atop a flying disc. A round glass window is resting open beside the opening. The shape of the craft is basically flat like a hockey puck. Above it is a Christmas tree of helicopter blades. The bottom blade is roughly the same diameter as the disc, the next above is about two-thirds in size, and above is a third one smaller in the same proportion. It very faintly recalls Landell's Screw Airship of 1863 (Bullard, T.E. *The Airship File - Supplement Two*, 1990, p. 98). Beneath the disc is a cage-like compartment and a system of three-bladed propellers that spins parallel to the plane of the disc. It seems even more whimsical and improbable than Squyres's report. With the top blades all smaller than the disc, the airflow would all be directed down on to the disc and then flow horizontally outward. Could such a thing even fly? What about the stresses involved in blades creating turbulent airflow through which lower and larger blades must spin? You'd never get me into such a contraption (Boncompagni, Conti, Lamperi, Ricci, Sani. *UFO in Italia*, Corrado Tedeschi Editore (France), pp. 138-43).

There are lesser examples hiding in UFO catalogues. In Bloecher's study of the 1947 Wave, you can find the case of Mr and Mrs Gordon Nielson of Waukesha, Wisconsin. Returning home on the evening of 6 July 1947, both saw a saucer-shaped object 'with a propeller on front, larger than the saucer itself'. They saw a cub plane apparently giving chase, but it was easily outdistanced by the saucer. On the same evening, Mrs Clarence Lesseson near Minneapolis, Minnesota saw a disc-shaped object about the size of a ten-inch plate flying over her house at tree-top level. It had a propeller, but instead of up front like the Nielsen's it was on the rear edge. (3) A standard ETH argument holds that if cases share obscure details, that demonstrates the reality of both cases. Two cases on the same evening share this oddity of a saucer with a propeller. Media seems an unlikely explanation. There were no propellers in the Arnold news accounts. This would seem to be yet another argument in favour of the reality of these absurdities, if one takes care to regard the front to rear switcheroo as irrelevant which it could conceivably be.

Bloecher's report includes more ambiguous examples like a multiple witness case in which Mr Harry Hoertz of Akron, Ohio saw 'a light with a propelling device'. (4) There's also a pair of cases where the craft is all-propeller and no saucer. (5) It needs to be emphasised that this was not in any

sense a major trait of early saucers. Jet and rocket propulsion is much more on display in 1947 with over three dozen cases including details like blue flames, fiery tails, and vapour trails. This makes more sense for cutting edge aviation in the post-war period than propeller-driven saucers.

Still, propellers were plausible. A few Earth-based secret weapons had involved them in then recent experience, i.e. WW2. (6) The Nielson-Lesseson coincidence may derive from parallel reasoning following shared premises and the fact that there were 157 cases on that date to play with. (7)

Project Blue Book offered no explanation of the Squyres case. (8) Neither shall I and I happily offer my vote for it being one of the ten most unexplainable cases in my library. In saying this, I am only saying that all solutions fail in some fashion with the evidence available to us. I concur with Gross, the timing looks hinky, but I can't work up a solution that I'd be comfortable with. (9) It is thoroughly useless as evidence for the ETH or any other theory. It has some nice morals, however. The look of UFOs has changed enough to say the Squyres case is tied to its era. It is hard to imagine such a propeller-driven saucer appearing today. It also a salutary lesson in how the standard arguments used to support the reality of saucers get weird conclusions when applied consistently with no role for broader frameworks of interpretation. Whatever else one may care to say about Squyres's experience, the, as Hynek said, 'level of reality' it appears rooted in is a negative un-.

## References

1. Blake, William. 'The Avro VZ-9 Flying Saucer', *Skeptical Inquirer*, 16, 3, Spring 1992, 287-291
2. Gross, Loren. *UFOs: A History: 1952: August*, 66
3. Bloecher, Ted. *Report of the UFO Wave of 1947*, II-16
4. *Ibid.*, III-1
5. *Ibid.*, II-17/18
6. Ford, Brian. *German Secret Weapons: Blueprint for Mars*, Ballantine, 1969
7. Bloecher, I-10
8. Gross, op. cit., 72
9. Gross, op. cit., 66, 68, 72

---

## LITERARY CRITICISM

Reviews by Peter Rogerson

**Nigel Watson (contributing editor).** *The Scareship Mystery: A Survey of Phantom Airship Scares 1909-1918*, Domra Books, 65 Constable Road, Corby, Northamptonshire NN18 0RT, 2000. £9.95

**David Clarke.** 'Scareships over Britain: The Airship Wave of 1909', in *Fortean Studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 39-63

At the turn of the 20th century visionaries began to dream that the new science of aeronautics would bring universal peace on the Earth by love or fear. Love because as people travelled more they would get to know each other as human beings and no longer as sinister foreigners; fear because the destructive power of aerial bombardment would render war unthinkable.

The popular reaction, however, as these studies show, was far less idealistic. As aviation moved from the being a promise to being a reality, the skies became ominous, filled with menaces. Mysterious enemy aircraft and airships were being seen everywhere. These outbreaks, the scareship panics, are the subject of *The Scareship Mystery*.

The publication history of this book might well be one of the longest and most tortuous on record, taking almost fifteen years to get into print, as publishers turned it down in favour of Heinz 57 varieties of new age nonsense. In it Nigel Watson, and his colleagues David Clarke, Granville Oldroyd, Mr X, Robert Bartholomew and Thomas 'Eddie' Bullard examine these phantom airship epidemics from 1909 to 1918. David Clarke has updated and greatly expanded his contribution to this collection, in his article in the latest *Fortean Studies*.

What emerges is the first complete portrait of the 'scareship' or phantom airship waves yet produced, waves in which strange or ambiguous lights in the sky were reported as airships or aircraft often possessed of amazing powers. These waves began in 1909, with outbreaks in Britain, New Zealand and the United States. At first there was quite a distinction between the reportage in Britain and New Zealand, where the scareships were interpreted as German (or in New Zealand, also perhaps Japanese) spy planes, harbingers of wars to come, and in the US, where a more light-hearted, optimistic theme, the amazing inventions of one Wallace Tillinghast, prevailed. The wide Atlantic and hopes of neutrality managed to keep the sense of oppression at bay.

The airships returned in 1912-13, and as tension spilled out into war, they became merged into a general war panic within Britain, and spread through the English-speaking world, surfacing in English-language communities in South Africa (rumoured to come from the German territory of South West Africa, now Namibia) and Canada (where they were rumoured to have come from the United States). As the war progressed the scareships came to the United States; the Atlantic was no longer wide enough.

The actual division of labour in the book is as follows. Nigel Watson contributes the most papers, on the New Zealand invasion of 1909, the USA airship of 1909-10, two chapters on the 1912-13 British airship scare, the 1914 South African mystery plane scare, and scareships in the USA 1914-1918. As mentioned above David Clarke contributes the chapter on 1909 in Britain, Granville Oldroyd on 1914 airship rumours on Britain, Mr X on the wartime scares in Canada, while Robert Bartholomew and Eddie Bullard provide a sociological summary. All the articles are to a high standard, and I am sure would do professional historians proud.

The authors are, of course, ufologists and Fortean, and it is to an extent from that perspective that the book is written, (David Clarke's revised paper in *Fortean Studies* aims to be more general and to marry ufological and wider historical concerns), Nigel and his colleagues tracing the use of this material in ufological writing. At first only the most dramatic events, chiefly from 1909 survived. Mr Lethbridge, the Punch and Judy man, and his alleged landed airship and crew being the prime example, being featured in the books of Charles Fort and then reprinted in inaccurate forms in a variety of UFO books. The first 'serious' look at the airship reports in Britain was by the psychologist and ufologist Carl Grove who produced a catalogue of airship reports in *Flying Saucer Review*. These were still treated as isolated anomalies, to an extent divorced from the background. Grove was a supporter of Aimé Michel, and tended to interpret the airship reports as part of the process by which 'Magonia' sought to manipulate human history. In Grove's case, as with Michel, it was never quite clear whether this 'Magonia' was meant to be a physical alien technology, or an alias for God.

Nigel and his co-workers eschew such interpretations, and opt by and large for psychosocial interpretations, most notably those of rumour theory and of moral and social panics; wherein all sorts of vague and ambiguous stimuli are perceived and remembered according to a template of the fears of the time. They point out that rumours of strange things seen in the sky, both menacing and promising, have a long history. They also note how many of the themes which are now commonplace in ufology; vague dream-like encounters, alleged men in black, ambiguous 'physical evidence', the reports of lights exhibiting 'falling leaf motion' (autokinesis?), or bright stars and planets being perceived as lights or searchlights on dark objects, etc.

The idea behind the scareship mystery, the enemy in the sky, possessed of a superior technology mutated into the modern ETH/UFO legend in basically the years between 1947 and 1952. It must be remembered that the original flying saucer panic of 1947 was concerned less with Martians than with fears of superior Russian technology. Through the writings of people like Keyhoe this Russian threat became transformed into the Martian threat, and the Venusian promise. These ideas, however, did not spring up newly formed from Keyhoe's breast; as far back as 1897 a small minority of people sought extraterrestrial (i.e. Martian) explanations for strange lights in the sky, and Nigel brings to our attention a correspondent in the *Otago Daily Times* (New Zealand) of 19 July 1909, who formulated perhaps the first space brothers theory, older and wiser Martians making peaceful visits in their atomic powered spaceships.

Reading through these reports and stories, one gets something of the sense of the unity of the deep imagination, whether expressed in dreams and visions, lies and hoaxes, lacunae in perception and memory, or in more conventional channels.

These are excellent contributions to ufology and history alike and meet really high standards. Given the time that has elapsed since *Scareships* was first written, a second edition would be welcome shortly. Or perhaps Nigel and David could collaborate on a *Timewatch* TV documentary to get a wider audience?

---

## LETTER

I thought Nigel Watson's review of the Exwick conference was turgid to say the least - everyone knows 'Nicholas' Redfern is referred to as Nick - and he seems to have been taken in by most of the nonsense uttered by the speakers. Worst of all he displays his ignorance of ufology by saying the original UFOIN/NUFOIS files were lost. NUFOIS handed all the files over to Philip Mantle in the late 80s or early 90s. They languished in my filing cabinets for a while before coming to rest in the MUFORA archive in Manchester, where they remain freely available to anyone who wants to see them.  
Andy Roberts, Brighouse, West Yorkshire

---

**MAGONIA Monthly Supplement.** Letters and short articles welcome. Letters will be considered for publication unless otherwise indicated. Please send all contributions to the Editor: John Harney, 27 Enid Wood House, High Street, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 1LN UK ☎/Fax: 01344 482709 e-mail: harney@harneyj.freeseve.co.uk