



In This Issue

Resolving Arnold

Part 1

by Martin Kottmeyer

The 50th anniversary of the flying saucer phenomenon is upon us, and thoughts time-warp back to the case that started it all, Kenneth Arnold's sighting of nine objects speeding by Mount Rainier on a sunny June afternoon. At the time it was a sensation which made the front page of newspapers across the nation. Faster than any airplane of the era, Arnold's objects were a puzzle that eluded quick solution. The pilots of such craft would have claimed victory in the race to break the sound barrier, but none ever came forward. Officials in the American military denied it was anything of ours. Russian spokesmen denied they had anything to do with it. Reports of flying saucers multiplied in the wake of the mystery surrounding Arnold's objects and never entirely stopped.

For those readers who don't know the Arnold story, here's how it first appeared from the Associated Press:

PENDELTON, Ore., June 25 (AP) -- Nine bright saucer-like objects flying at "incredible speed" at 10,000 feet altitude were reported here today by Kenneth Arnold, a Boise, Idaho, pilot who said he could not hazard a guess as to what they were.

Arnold, a United States Forest Service employee engaged in searching for a missing plane, said he sighted the mysterious objects yesterday at 3 P.M. They were flying between Mount Rainier and Mount Adams, in Washington state, he said, and appeared to weave in and out of formation. Arnold said he clocked and estimated their speed at 1,200 miles an hour.

As Martin Kottmeyer has related to us in an earlier article (["The Saucer Error," May, 1993, V. 1, #4](#)), the news release actually got it wrong; the objects were not saucer-shaped, but rather Arnold had said the objects "flew erratic, like a saucer if you skip it across the water." He said the objects "were not circular," but the reporter apparently misunderstood and thus arose the term, "flying saucer."

Unusual aerial phenomena, all well acknowledge, long pre-date the Arnold case, but his report set fire to a controversy which made it a benchmark in the history of the subject. Whether it should be called a classic or a significant case is a thorny issue dependent mainly on one's perspective. In terms of cultural influence, no case could be more important. In terms of weight of evidence for an extraordinary phenomenon requiring the belief of extraterrestrials or some new set of scientific concepts, the Arnold case sinks below a landscape of multiple-witness cases, physical traces, and photographically documented UFOs. In its initial presentation, the Arnold case was a single witness case with no corroboration. The pilot of a DC-4 that was twenty miles away reported nothing unusual could be seen.¹ Jacques Vallee termed it "by no means one of the best reports."² In a 1965 survey asking UFO groups for the most significant cases, neither APRO or NICAP listed the Arnold sighting.

Even so, the credibility of that single witness seemed good. Arnold was an experienced pilot. Skeptical journalists were readily convinced of his honesty.³ The report he offered doesn't have the taste of a tall tale in the sense that it is devoid of supernatural trappings. .

The speed of the objects isn't merely stretching current aviation wonders; it is bizarrely over double what the fastest planes were doing at the time. It is also pointlessly over-complicated, most particularly in the details concerning erratic motions by the objects and an echelon formation that was backward from that practiced by the Air Force. It is almost as if he is going out of his way to be disbelieved when he has nine objects going at these record speeds. Why not simply report a single snazzy-looking jet on a bullet-straight trajectory rushing past the nose of his plane? That alone would have been enough to grab attention if publicity was the intent.

While there are no grounds to question his sincerity, some ufologists express reservations about the psychology of the man. His unorthodox speculations about UFOs being space animals with the ability to change their density have bothered Frank Salisbury and Ronald Story.⁴ The relevance of this belief to the 1947 sighting has never been articulated however. Others have branded Arnold a "repeater" because of several other UFO sightings he has reported seeing in subsequent years. Particularly notable is a 1952 report of two living transparent UFOs that Arnold felt was aware of him.⁵ This sounds suggestive of a delusion of observation and the possible presence of paranoia. A 1981 interview reinforces this supposition with Arnold expressing beliefs about J. Allen Hynek secretly still being in league with the Air Force and the government being fearful that the idea of UFOs would cause their destruction.⁶ It is reasonably probable that this paranoid cast of thought was rooted in a knee injury which thwarted Olympic ambitions and blew apart plans he had to use his athletic talent to forward his college education.⁷ It is a common syndrome that has been termed "the athlete's neurosis."⁸ Such an incident could inculcate a habit of emotionally-generated misinterpretation.

On the positive side of the ledger, paranoia is frequently associated with enhanced perception and could be regarded as grounds for trusting the basic validity of the experience.⁹ We may accept he saw something and reported it accurately, but his interpretation of it and the choice of which details are important might be skewed. What he was looking at may not be identical to what he saw. Arnold's initial belief that the objects were secret experimental aircraft is bizarre on the face of it. Besides the impossible speed for the era, you would not expect an experimental craft to be flown in a group of nine and for all of them to display erratic motion. You would expect one craft with perhaps a conventional plane tagging along to keep an eye on it. If it was aiming for new speeds, the introduction of erratic fluttering motions sounds suicidal. It also makes little sense to test a craft near Mount Rainier, a tourist spot and major landmark, if you want it to remain a secret.

The issue of what Arnold was actually looking at has spawned a sizable literature and invites the comment that Arnold's must be the most solved case in ufology. Regrettably, I am not saying it is the case with the most loose ends snipped clean, but that more solutions have been offered for the Arnold case than any other.

ATIC, Blue Book, William K. Hartmann (a co-author of the Condon report) and Ian Ridpath argued Arnold was looking at a group of conventional aircraft that was closer than Arnold thought and possibly seen through a mirage layer to account for the skipping motion that Arnold reported.¹⁰ The problems with this idea include the fact that the DC-4 pilot didn't notice this group of planes, the fact that none of the pilots came forward to clear things up on learning of the ruckus they caused, the unconventional formation, and the absence of visible tails.

Donald Menzel suggested the objects were billowing blasts of snow ballooning off mountain ridges.¹¹ Captain Ruppelt of Blue Book rejected this as impossible because you just don't get powder snow low in the mountains in June.¹²

Martin Gardner has twice suggested the objects were balloons.¹³ This ignores the flat side profile drawn by Arnold. Arnold reported the air was very smooth traveling that day, which seems inconsistent with the undulatory motions he described.

Richard J. Reed suggested orographic clouds.¹⁴ Since these tend to stay motionless, the large angular distance traveled by the objects is hard to account for. So, too, the angular velocity cannot be explained. These objections also apply to notions involving wave clouds and detached mountain top mirages.¹⁵

Menzel tried again in his last book with the idea that Arnold might have been tricked by water droplets on the airplane window.¹⁶ This overlooks the fact that Arnold explicitly states he rolled down the window to get a better look at the objects.¹⁷

Otto Billig proposes that Arnold was suffering a regression suggestive of reduced personality cause the undulations of the objects indicate the surfacing of serpent imagery like that common to religions.¹⁸ Such an analysis is contradicted by Billig's own mythography which says undulations signify benevolence. Arnold explicitly felt the objects to be a threat, a bother, and disturbing.

Paul Devereux proposed Arnold saw earth lights.¹⁹ This would mean the objects would be emitting light. This is inconsistent with Arnold's description of the objects as forming a "black-thin line" when silhouetted against snowy mountain ridges. He also indicated that he saw the sun reflected off the objects from time to time. It is also difficult to imagine how earthlights could maintain an unconventional formation for over a minute without scattering or merging due to electrical charges.

Stuart Campbell has proposed an exotic scheme involving mirages of distant mountains. Easily the funniest detail is the necessity for Arnold to confuse Mount Rainier and Mount Adams with Pinnacle Peak and Lookout of the Tatoosh Range even knowing they are roughly half as big.²⁰

Extraterrestrials begin to look pretty good at this point. They at least could potentially account for the exotic speed which otherwise seems impossible for the era. The undulations which Arnold warned would have killed a human pilot might be acceptable to an alien biology. Gerald Heard, for example, proposed the notion of some super-bee evolved in the hostile environment of Mars.²¹ One might question if insect physiology truly would be more resilient in high gee maneuvers, but the more attractive point could be that insects might be psychologically predisposed to fly in erratic ways and this could undermine presumptions that no intelligent being would fly in such a bizarre fashion. One could perhaps even point out that, though it took close to two decades before close encounters with them began showing up, some people have reported insectoid beings in UFOs.²² A preference for traveling in groups could also be attributable to bug psychology, albeit the echelon formation seems problematic. Is this, then, a good resolution to the paradoxes of the Arnold report?

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Praise the Lord and Pass the Skepticism!

A Report on a *Center for Inquiry* Workshop

by **Bob Ladendorf**

With some 80 skeptics and interested individuals filling the partitioned room at the Ramada Plaza Hotel near Chicago's O'Hare airport, Tom Flynn, director of the Center for Inquiry-International in Amherst, New York, set the tone for two-day workshop by decrying the "paranormal hucksterism" and "cultural contagion" prevalent today, particularly in UFO followings such as the "Heaven's Gate" sect's suicide.

Sponsored by the Center for Inquiry, the workshop, "Secrets of the Supernatural," in mid-May featured extensive sessions by Joe Nickell, author and Senior Research Fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP); a media panel headed by WGN radio personality Milt Rosenberg; a talk by Andrew Skolnick, news editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*; and a brief lecture by Walter McCrone, who performed the lab work on the Shroud of Turin proving that the "blood" on it was actually tempera paint made up of red ocher and vermilion.

The workshop touched on the surreal at times when members of the Baptist women's organization meeting on the other side of the partition started singing and chanting occasionally. At one point, the singing was so loud that Skolnick fought back by shouting out his slide show talk so that they could hear him!

Throughout the workshop, participants were shown dozens of slides illustrating the investigations conducted and discussed by Nickell, who wrestled with an allergy. He began his talk with his "cut" rope trick that he had recently performed on Bill Maher's "Politically Incorrect" show, putting everybody at ease as they sipped coffee.

Nickell mentioned a current investigation of a haunted lodge, then returned to his first major investigation of the MacKenzie House in Toronto. He solved the mysterious sounds heard in it by pointing out that a publishing firm only a few feet away from the house had a creaky staircase that could be heard in the MacKenzie House. One theme that Nickell hit on was that of fantasy-prone individuals, who have been found to more readily believe in paranormal and pseudoscientific matters than those who are much less so.

Following his comments on photo fakery, Nickell discussed the classic "Two Will Wests" case of mistaken identity (actually they were probably identical twins) in 1903, which helped to spur the use of fingerprinting. In the midst of his presentation, the Baptist women began chanting "Praise the Lord!" followed by singing, clapping and stomping ("If you want to [unintelligible] , clap your hands, clap your hands!")

After the West case, he talked about spontaneous human combustion, effectively stating alternative explanations for it involving the melting of body fat triggered by smoking and alcohol, as well as one that probably started after the woman knocked herself out on an oven door. His detailed analyses of the circumstances surrounded the burnings were convincing. A brief review of the Peruvian Nazca lines and his involvement in physically making lines there with string again provided rational alternatives to supernatural explanations.

Lunch followed, along with a fund-raising appeal that netted more than \$15,000 for the Center's activities by the end of the workshop.

On Sunday, Nickell continued with a description of his "Weeping Icon Kit," consisting of items such as capillary tubes and lab paper (nearby Schiller Park featured a house with a window supposedly showing the Virgin Mary just a few days before the workshop); discussion of the famous Polaroid "ghost" photos that were hoaxes; and an explanation for the "crystal tears," which Nickell duplicated by putting Herkimer diamonds under his eyelid (see his article on that in the May-June issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*).

On the day before, Nickell, Flynn, Skolnick and Rosenberg formed a panel to discuss the responsibility of the media. The panel members each talked at length on different topics, such as the deceptive photo from a Los Angeles newspaper indicating in a caption that gang members shown with guns were frightening the community when, in reality, they were turning in their guns for money!

In his talk on mystical medical claims, Skolnick examined the circumstances surrounding his encounter with Wayne Jonas of the controversial federal Office of Alternative Medicine when he was told to sit down after asking a probing question at a press conference. Skolnick also reviewed a number of cases of medical fraud.

Perhaps Milt Rosenberg's wry advice in answer to the last question asked of the media panelists Saturday summarized the aim of the workshop: "Go thou and commit more skepticism!"

From the Chairman

ALERT ALERT ALERT ALERT ALERT ALERT

Hopefully, I've gotten your attention now. As you may have heard in the news, the State of Illinois is proposing new educational standards, including science standards. What you probably have not heard is that pressure from certain groups has been such that "evolution" appears **nowhere** in these standards!

The full story is a rather long one, but I'll summarize here. The initial draft that went out for public comment a few months ago had no mention of "evolution" in them. Public comments overwhelmingly said to put it in. The comment review committee did so. Then the state superintendent appointed an "external review team" to go over some parts of the standards. They decided to strike the word "evolution" again and make any reference to it rather metaphorical. Many of the elements of evolution education are included, but they are worded in such vague language that a teacher would be hard-pressed to know exactly what s/he is supposed to teach!

Malcolm Levin, Ron Larkin, and I attended the State Board of Education meeting on the 18th of this month, where the newest version of the standards was presented to the Board. Ron and I gave public comments to the Board at the end of the meeting (we were the only people to do so) and emphasized the importance of teaching evolution and not bowing to pressure from anti-evolution groups. Those presenting the standards to the Board several times emphasized that they wanted the standards to be clear. We pointed out that using wishy-washy language in describing what to teach in this case was just the opposite of that stated goal.

The Board is taking a second round of comments on the standards for the next 3 weeks (by the time you get this newsletter). You may get a copy of the proposed standards by calling the Board at 217-782-4321 or by downloading them from their Internet web page (www.isbe.state.il.us). If you want to send in comments, you may send them to:

Illinois State Board of Education

Attention: Lynn Haeffle

100 North First Street

Springfield, IL 62777

One area they felt was underrepresented was parental comments, so if you are a parent, make sure you let them know! If you want to contact me for more information, please feel free to do so, either by phone or e-mail (both are on page 2). If you do send in comments, I would appreciate it if you also send a copy to us here, just so we can keep a file of information that we know was sent to the Board. (Please remember, however, that I am the only one who can actually speak for REALL.)

I'd like to extend my gratitude to Ron Larkin and Malcolm Levin for coming to the Board meeting and helping out on such short notice (Ron had half a day's notice, Malcolm had a few hours).

Meeting News

On another note, we'll be having a speaker at our next meeting, which will be **Tuesday, July 1, 7 p.m.** at the Lincoln Library. As the second in our series of media presentations, Jeff Ignatius, staff writer for the *Illinois Times*, will be speaking to us on "**The Right to Be Wrong: The Media's Responsibility to the Marketplace of Ideas.**" He will be defending the media's reporting of "alternative" viewpoints, even when they might be wrong. As some examples we are familiar with, he will discuss the *Illinois Times* article that claimed HIV doesn't cause AIDS, articles on homeopathy and alternative medicine in general, etc. His viewpoint is that the media has a responsibility to report such ideas in the interest of the vital marketplace of ideas. We often complain about the way the media covers such topics, so now is our chance to hear their side of the story and ask the tough questions we've been wanting to ask. I hope to see a large turnout for this meeting, as I think it's a very important one!

From the Editor

With the 50th anniversary of the Roswell incident and Heaven's Gate sect's suicide dominating the paranormal news in the past few months, it's shaping up to be the Year of the UFO. With another potential Hollywood UFO blockbuster on the horizon -- *Men in Black* -- the unending UFO reports are likely to continue.

Our lead article this month -- you guessed it -- is about UFOs. This one by frequent *REALL News* contributor Martin Kottmeyer reviews the original sighting of UFOs by Kenneth Arnold and presents alternative explanations in this Part 1 of a two-part article.

This issue also features a brief report by me on a Center for Inquiry workshop in Chicago. If you've never attended a regional or national skeptics meeting, you might consider it in the future. It's a wonderful time to learn about many critical issues from experts in their fields and to share ideas and concerns with fellow skeptics. My report will only give you an inkling of the information that can arm you in questioning and analyzing claims of the paranormal and pseudoscience.

In Case You Missed It ...

by **Bob Ladendorf**

Recent news and sources of interest, with brief summaries and a rating of the content:

1 = Pro-skeptical; 2 = Leaning skeptical; 3 = Neutral, presenting sides equally; 4 = Leaning paranormal or pseudoscience; 5 = Pro-paranormal or pseudoscience.

- **"The New Creationism: Biology Under Attack."** Barbara Ehrenreich and Janet McIntosh. *The Nation*, June 9, 1997, pp. 11-16. Slams the academic left for "secular creationism," which denies that "...any biologically based commonalities cut across cultural differences." **Selected quote:** "The new creationism is not simply a case of well-intended politics gone awry; it represents a grave misunderstanding of biology and science." **Rating: 2**
- **"More are seeking treatment for sexual addiction."** Karen Thomas. *USA Today*, May 14, 1997, p. 5D. Basically a printed infomercial for the Sierra Tucson treatment center for sexual addiction. Sole source for information in the main article and two sidebar articles is Carol Ross, "senior sexual recovery therapist" at the center. No scientific basis is given for the treatment of "sexual addiction." Cost for treatment is \$600-\$700 a day. **Selected quote:** "One of the fastest growing populations seeking treatment: doctors, nurses and clergy; professions with governing boards. 'They come to us saying, 'Help me, I'm about to lose my job,'" Ross says." (Editor's Note: Remember that *Seinfeld* episode about the lusty dentist and assistant? You better watch out!) **Rating: 5**
- **"To bee or not to bee? : Many doctors warn against apitherapy, but some pain victims swear by it."** Holly Ramer (AP). (Springfield, Illinois) *State Journal-Register*, June 9, 1997, p. 15. Bee sting therapy cures all sorts of ailments, advocates have claimed. One woman gets about 100 stings a week for her multiple sclerosis. **Selected quote:** "Such stories trouble Patricia O'Looney, director of research and medical programs at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, which is funding a study that involves injecting laboratory animals with purified bee venom. "The difficulty with any of these reports is that they're anecdotal,' O'Looney says. "The individuals or physicians who claim there's a benefit haven't followed up with the proper scientific studies." **Rating: 3**

Masthead Information

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The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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