

BOOK TWO

SUNDAY FEATURES



ON OCTOBER 21, 1978, a young pilot from Avondale Heights was on a flight from Melbourne to King Island over Bass Strait. Conditions were ideal, fine

Strait. Conditions were ideal, fine weather, a mild north-westerly breeze and almost unlimited visibility. At 7.06pm the pilot, Frederick Valentich, radioed Melbourne Flight Service Unit and asked if there was any known traffic in the area. They responded, "no".

At 7.08 Mr Valentich, in his Cessna 182, confirmed a large aircraft, with "four bright lights" was flying toward and around him. "It seems to be playing some sort of game. Flying at speed I cannot estimate," he said. Four minutes later Valentich radioed he was proceeding to King Island with the unknown aircraft hovering above him.

His aircraft, he said, had also begun to cough and rough idle. There was a long "metallic noise" and contact was lost. A massive sea and air search of the Bass Strait area failed to find any trace of the flight. To this day the case remains a mystery.

For centuries apparitions of one kind or another have plagued the earth with seemingly little explanation. In the past 20 years, sightings and experiences with UFOs and or beings have dramatically increased and despite the disproving of many phenomena, interest has not dwindled. Today thousands of dollars are spent each year in unidentified flying objects and extra terrestrial search and research. Serious people investigating serious reports of sightings that, however, more often than not include faulty cameras and saucepan lids.

At 5.15am on a clear Saturday morning in Canberra, a Kambah couple spotted what appeared to be an "object", larger

what appeared to be an "object", larger and brighter than a star but smaller than the moon, in the sky. They quickly videotaped the object thinking little of it at the time. When the video was played back it appeared to be almost round with a "cog-shaped" hole in the centre and "bites" out the top and bottom. A UFO? The couple had no peace. Television crews, radio stations and newspapers kept the phones ringing constantly. There were offers to appear on *Good Morning Australia*, *Mid-day* and *Today* shows. The RAAF was called in.

IN MAY 1984, the RAAF closed its version of the US Air Force's "Project Blue Book" and now investigate only aerial phenomena that they believe may pose a threat to defence and national security.

An investigator from the RAAF asked the couple some prepared questions and took a copy of the videotape. What was this object that was potentially a national

With the hunt for extra terrestrials entering a serious phase in the United States, Charles Miranda looks at the phenomena that has fascinated the world.

threat? A local camera crew from one of the networks discovered that tracking focus of the video camera was out and had caused the elliptical shape in the view lens and the RAAF aborted their investigation.

Cases such as this one are reported fairly constantly in the Press and although many are later disproved they are still taken quite seriously.

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Information Officer of the Parkes Observatory, Rick Twardy, says it is about this time, every year, that they receive reports of UFO sightings. During winter, in the south-west of the sky, two stars, Sirius and Canopus, appear more noticeable than usual, because of the colder air, creating atmospheric effects on them. While they may twinkle brightly and appear to be technicoloured, to some of the public they are starships "communicating" with each other.

This winter particularly the observatories were busy with calls when the planets Venus, Jupiter and Mars seemed to rendezvous in the evening sky forming a triangle only 1.8 degrees wide. A phenomena that happens only once every 120 years.

Rick Twardy says he understands why

people telephone them but really they are only sensitive to a particular area of sky and don't do UFO searches.

"We're not paid to be professionally alert to the whole sky. The defence forces are and radar operators at an airport are but we are not. We could, for arguments sake, have a whole armada of UFOs come up behind us at Parkes and we wouldn't know anything about it."

WHILE the Valentich case is 12½ years old it remains the most famous in the annals of unexplained events and is in fact still being investigated.

The Victorian UFO Research Society was initiated in February 1957 for the purpose of generating discussion and evaluating sightings. President of the society, Judy McGee, said that cases like the Valentich one are ongoing and success can be measured by the extent to which the investigation is carried

measured by the extent to which the investigation is carried.

"The aim of our organisation initially, and I think it still is, is to gain reports, investigate them where applicable and disseminate the information to the public through our medium of our Australian UFO bulletin which comes out quarterly.



On September 5, 1967, Flying Officer David Pepper examines a saucer found in Chippenham, Wiltshire, as Sergeant Anthony Richens and Chief Inspector Frank Dummett look on. Five other saucers were found in a line from Somerset to Kent.

"And yes we have had success. If you decide a story is a fake then it's still a success because you discovered that. You rate a success by what you can achieve in it how far you can go with an investigation

how far you can go with an investigation and what there is to examine."

Mrs McGee says the organisation gets a lot of phony calls and for this reason has a pass-on phone-number system, whereby you ring up someone's private residence who then gives you the real phone number.

An offshoot organisation in the ACT, the Canberra UFO Research Organisation, was initiated by Ian Fox two years ago, although according to directory assistance the organisation and Mr Fox are not listed. According to the Victorian society he has "disappeared", along with his organisation it seems.

IN THE United States the search for ET and friends is getting serious with \$100 million being given to the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence Institute in California. In the past 20 years, the SETI program has made about 50 half-hearted attempts to discover alien signals with no success.

This time around they're more confident.

The US Institute will use electronic equipment to sift the information coming in from the worldwide radio telescopes. The overall search will be conducted in two parts: the first concentrating on specific targets (that includes 770 stars nearest the sun) and the other scanning the whole sky. One University of California professor of astronomy and astrophysics believes that in the Milkyway alone there are between 10,000 and 100,000 advanced civilisations.

Deputy director of the Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex, Peter Churchill, said that his complex has in the past taken part in tracking campaigns in support of the SETI program, but was always sceptical of their success. Accord-

always sceptical of their success. According to Mr Churchill "they" (at the complex) are all "pragmatic and sceptical technical people" who don't really believe in the phenomena.

The campaign at Tidbinbilla involved connecting their largest dish to a broadband multi-channel receiver and searching part of the southern sky for "alien" signals. Despite putting together the receiver in the hope of finding ET, they found nothing except that the receiver was of more value as a radio-astronomy tool.

The amount of US dollars being spent on the current SETI campaign was justi-

fied when a recent survey revealed that 80 to 90 per cent of "ordinary Americans" are already sure that alien life exists.

Parkes Observatory in NSW may become involved in the search although details won't be known until October.

Unlike the rest of Australia it seems UFOs don't like Canberra, preferring a more rural setting for their celestial performances. Reports of activity in the region are slim with most sightings being discounted.

On October 30, 1987, the traffic-control tower at the Canberra Airport was swamped with calls from concerned citizens of an unidentified flying object over Canberra. The report was investigated and was found to be a light aircraft advertising Aeroplane Jelly from an advertising circuit board on its undercarriage.

The Canberra Times also receives calls from people believing they have seen a

from people believing they have seen a UFO. Usually they are Mt Stromlo-confirmed space junk returning to earth, other times, such as at the recent Canberra Day celebrations, the RAAF performing a night manoeuvre.

In 1976 there was a report of a "blipping red whirling thing" made by a Chifley boy and regular UFO appearances over Bungendore in October 1977. In the latter, several unexplained lights appeared regularly between 11.30pm and 3am over Bungendore although some believed the lights to be "low flying top-soil carters" known as "night runners".

On the more serious side there was a report made some years ago of a group camping just outside Canberra who saw several balls of light "cutting lines of force" around a greater object of light and the Canberra woman travelling home along the Cooma road who saw a set of bright lights travelling along side of her. As she approached the Burra turn-off the object with lights appeared in front of her and was the size of a house. Frightened, she drove away quickly.

Many sightings don't get reported for it seems UFOs, like politics and religion at the dinner table, is taboo. People are reluctant to discuss their experiences for fear of ridicule or perhaps disillusionment that their mystery was in fact only a weather balloon, space debris or simply nature. For the phenomena that has had US Presidents and other prominent people on its list of witnesses and believers, it will take another whole generation of technology to prove conclusively one way or another.

Until such time governments will still spend money and the world will still remain fascinated with the phenomena that

main fascinated with the phenomena that may or may not really exist. Rick Twardy of Parkes says, "People ask me if I think there's anything out there and I say, 'we don't know but we'd be astonished if there wasn't'."
