

# UFO reports in '40s led to hucksters' holiday

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There was a recent spat of news reports about three UFOs that intercepted a JAL cargo jet near the Canadian border and followed it across the skies of Alaska.

According to the pilot, the largest object was about the size of two aircraft carriers, and it was accompanied by two smaller companions. The pilot says that he made a complete circle in the sky, and the UFOs continued to pursue him.

Turning off the cockpit lights convinced him they were not reflections from the windshield. No plausible explanation has yet been set forth.

The story is reminiscent of the flying saucer craze of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

It all began on June 24, 1947, when Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot, was flying over the Cascade Mountains of Washington. As he approached Mt. Rainier, he reported nine circular objects, moving at high speed in a stepped-back formation, passed his plane at a distance of about 25 miles.

Arnold told a reporter they flew as a saucer would if you skipped it across the water. Thus was the term born, and thus the mania began. Soon saucers were reported from all across the nation and in several foreign countries.

It was a hucksters' holiday. Two Tacoma men reported a weird doughnut-shaped craft that spewed forth lava-like rock on an island a few miles offshore.

Pressured to investigate, the Air Force dispatched a B-25 bomber to the scene and found nothing. But on the

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return trip, the left engine caught fire and, although two crew members managed to bail out, the two officers in the cockpit were killed in the ensuing crash. The Tacoma men later confessed that their story had been a hoax.

In January 1948, Capt. Thomas Mantrell was flying his P-51 fighter near Fort Knox, Ky., when he radioed that he was going in pursuit of a round, white object above him. His last message was that he would follow it to 20,000 feet and, if he could get no closer, he would abandon the chase.

Apparently he blacked out at around 30,000 feet and spiraled into the ground.

Naturally, stories such as these only reinforced the hype that UFOs were manned by beings from outer space that had destroyed their pursuers. Pictures of flying saucers, many of which look suspiciously like garbage can lids thrown into the air, repeatedly cropped up in the newspapers and in pulp magazines.

Because there were those who maintained that the saucers were some sort of secret military development, the Air Force was inevitably drawn into the controversy.

At the time, it seemed conceivable that UFOs might be Soviet reconnaissance vehicles, possibly developed with advanced technology obtained from German scientists captured at the

end of World War II.

Consequently, the Air Force initiated a study that involved more than 10,000 UFO reports and lasted more than 20 years. To the disappointment and skepticism of true believers, it was finally concluded that, with few exceptions, the reports could all be attributed to explainable phenomena such as weather balloons, bright celestial bodies, ball lightning or meteors.

But the subject wouldn't go away, and still hasn't, as witness the recent JAL event.

In 1966, at the request of the U.S. government, the University of Colorado undertook a controversial two-year UFO investigation funded by a U.S. Air Force research grant.

The study, called the Condon Report after Dr. Edward Condon, the project manager, was marred from the outset. Attempts by a group of UFO-believers, including one congressman, J. Edward Roush, D.-Ind., were made to discredit the Colorado effort. One result was that the congressman arranged for a fervent UFO-believer — James McDonald, of the University of Arizona — to select a group of six scientists to testify before the House Science and Astronautics Committee, of which the congressman was a member.

Five of the scientists were strongly

pro-UFO, while the sixth, Carl Sagan, was mildly so. Sagan has since become a skeptic.

The object of this lopsided testimony was, of course, to obtain massive funding for more UFO investigations. The effort did not succeed.

In the end, the Condon report revealed little that had not already been said. There were a few instances in which a rational explanation of a UFO sighting could not be found.

But these were nearly all cases that occurred in the early days of UFO mania, and the trail had grown cold. In the vast majority of cases, the sightings could be attributed to perfectly natural phenomena. But the report did little to settle the matter conclusively and satisfied nobody.

As for the recent Alaska incident, it is interesting that the early sensational reports indicated that Air Force radar had tracked the UFOs trailing the JAL jet. In more subdued tones and smaller headlines, it is now learned that the Air Force attributes what was seen on the screen to radar "scatter."

As a personal aside, I am a UFO-sighter myself. In the early 1950s I was a high school student living on a farm near Nevada. The craze was in full swing. One day I looked up and saw this round, silvery thing high overhead.

I wanted desperately to believe in UFOs and, being an amateur astronomer, had a four-inch reflector telescope stored in a corner of my room. I got it and ran outside, focused, and saw — much to my disappointment — a very nice weather balloon with an instrument package dangling beneath.