

U.F.O. FILES: THE UNTOLD STORY

Though officials have long denied that they take 'flying saucers' seriously, declassified documents now reveal extensive Government concern over the phenomenon.

By Patrick Huyghe

The Defense Department message bears the classification CONFIDENTIAL. "Subject: Suspicious Unknown Air Activity." Dated Nov. 11, 1975, it reads:

"Since 28 Oct 75 numerous reports of suspicious objects have been received at the NORAD COC [North American Air Defense Combat Operations Center]. Reliable military personnel at Loring AFB [Air Force Base], Maine, Wurtsmith AFB, Michigan, Malmstrom AFB, [Montana], Minot AFB, [North Dakota], and Canadian Forces Station, Falconbridge, Ontario, Canada, have visually sighted suspicious objects.

"Objects at Loring and Wurtsmith were characterized to be helicopters. Missile site personnel, security alert teams and Air Defense personnel at Malmstrom Montana reported object which sounded like a jet aircraft. FAA advised 'There were no jet aircraft in the vicinity.' Malmstrom search and height finder radars carried the object between 9,000 ft and 15,600 ft at a speed of seven knots. ... F-106s scrambled from Malmstrom could not make contact due to darkness and low altitude. Site personnel reported the objects as low as 200 ft and said that as the interceptors approached the lights went out. After the interceptors had passed the lights came on again. One hour after the F-106s returned to base, missile site personnel reported the object increased to a high speed, raised in altitude and could not be discerned from

"I have expressed my concern to SAFOI [Air Force Information Office] that we come up soonest with a proposed answer to queries from the press to prevent overreaction by the public to reports by the media that may be blown out of proportion. To date efforts by Air Guard helicopters, SAC [Strategic Air Command] helicopters and NORAD F-106s have failed to produce positive ID."

Numerous daily updates kept the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed of these incursions by U.F.O.'s in the fall of 1975. Representatives of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency as well as a handful of other Government desks received copies of the National Military Command Center's reports on the incidents. One report said that an unidentified object "demonstrated a clear intent in the weapons storage area." Though Air Force records show that the C.I.A. was notified several times of these penetrations over nuclear missile and bomber bases, the agency has acknowledged only one such notification. Subsequent investigations by the Air Force into the sightings at Loring Air Force Base, Maine, where the remarkable series of events began, did not reveal a cause for the sightings.

Despite official pronouncements for decades that U.F.O.'s were nothing more than misidentified aerial objects and as such were no cause for alarm, recently declassified U.F.O. records from the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and other Federal agencies indicate that, ever since U.F.O.'s made their appearance in our skies in the 1940's, the phenomenon has aroused much serious behind-the-scenes concern in official circles. Details of the intelligence community's protracted obsession with the subject of U.F.O.'s have emerged over the past few years with the release of long-withheld Government records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Though these papers fail to resolve the U.F.O. enigma, they do manage to dispel many popular notions about the U.F.O. controversy, as well as give substance to a number of others.

Official records now available appear to put to rest doubts that the Government knew more about U.F.O.'s than it has claimed over the past 32 years. From the start, it has been convinced that most U.F.O. sightings could be explained in terms of misidentified balloons, cloud formations, airplanes, ball lightning, meteors and other natural phenomena.

But the papers also show that the Government remains perplexed about the nagging residue of unexplained U.F.O. sightings, which amount to approximately 10 percent of all U.F.O. sightings reported. Do they pose a threat to national security? Are they just a funny-looking cover for an airborne Soviet presence? Even the possibility that these unknowns could be evidence of extraterrestrial visitation has been given serious attention in Government circles.

While official interest in U.F.O.'s has long been thought to be strictly the concern of the Air Force, the bulk of whose records has been open to public view for nearly a decade, the recently released papers on U.F.O.'s indicate otherwise. The Departments of the Army, Navy, State and Defense, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and even the Atomic Energy Commission produced U.F.O. records over the years. Many of these agencies still do, and many of their documents remain classified. But it is the C.I.A. that appears to have played the key role in the controversy, and may even be responsible for the Government's conduct in U.F.O. investigations throughout the years.