

REG 15 DEC 30 1973

M - 250,261

S - 515,710

Analyses of flying saucers, from 'able' to 'zowie!'

By CHARLES FOSTER RANSOM

Flying saucers haven't gone away yet, at least from people's minds, in spite of years of effort by the Air Force and assorted scientists to poohpooh them.

A recent Gallup Poll found that 11 per cent of the adult population think they have personally seen an Unidentified Flying Object, and 51 per cent think UFOs are real and not imaginary, hoaxes or misperceptions of natural objects. These percentages are sharp increases since 1966.

UFO reports come in waves, and many reports are demonstrably misperceptions of common things: a bright shooting star, a high-flying weather balloon caught in the jet stream, etc. Some are probably hysteria — especially the many "contactee" cases, where a person claims to be selected by beings from outer space to give the world a message.

Four recent books bracket the present state of the public mind, from "Able" to "Half-baked" to "ZOWIE!"

J. Allen Hynek is Able. He is the longtime chairman of the department of astronomy at Northwestern University and was scientific consultant to the Air Force UFO study for 20 years. People used to ask him to name a good book on the subject. Last year one came out: his own: "The UFO Experience; a Scientific Inquiry" (Regnery).

Over the 20 years, Hynek changed from a complete skeptic to a man who believes there is a real UFO phenomenon with many uniformities which should be studied seriously. He thinks previous studies inadequate, including his own, and especially the two-year, \$500,000 study done for the Air Force by a University of Colorado group headed by Edward U. Condon.

The Condon report came out early in 1969. Condon concluded that not all sightings could be explained naturally, but most could, and that UFOs were not worth further study. Other scientists in other chapters of the report expressed different views, with supporting facts. But the report was so long, and released a day later than Condon's, that few got beyond Condon's conclusions.

Condon took 90 of some 25,000 reported sightings. Three-quarters of them could be explained away, and Condon brushed off the others.

Hynek went through thousands in his 20-year stint, threw out most of them for lack of enough facts, threw out many more for having witnesses he did not trust, threw out still others for not having at least two witnesses.

But he still ended up with hundreds of sightings of high "strangeness" in what they thought they saw, related by what Hynek considered reliable witnesses: aviators, law officers, engineers.

Typically, Hynek's UFOs were objects apparently at least 30 feet across, flying with speeds, fast turns and hovering maneuvers far beyond the ability of any known man-made craft. UFOs left characteristic burn marks on the ground, he reports, which is reminiscent of the burnt circles found in soybean fields in north central Iowa a few years back.

"Close encounters" by reliable, multiple witnesses were rarer. But Hynek checked out a number of those, and even cases in which occupants resembling humans or elves were seen briefly through windows or on the ground near the craft, but Hynek is still suspicious of reported "humanoids."

Intelligent life elsewhere in the solar system is unlikely, and the nearest stars are many trillions of miles away. But many scientists now think there are life-bearing planets somewhere in our Milky Way, and Soviet astrophysicists are seriously monitoring what may be radio signals from space.

New this year is a book by Donald F. Keyhoe, a retired Marine Corps hero who has been writing on UFOs for years. He long headed an organization gathering evidence about them. His new book is his fourth on UFOs: "Aliens From Space: The Real Story of Unidentified Flying Objects" (Doubleday).

Keyhoe's book is sensational, where Hynek is trying hard to be factual on a sensational subject. Keyhoe thinks the Air Force knows a lot more than it tells about UFOs, and that its poohpoohing and Condon's are part of a deliberate policy of secrecy enjoyed by the Central Intelligence Agency, because the CIA fears the nation would panic at the truth.

To Keyhoe, the truth is that beings from outer space far more advanced technically than humans are reconnoitering the earth, just as men have reconnoitered the moon and Mars lately — perhaps with a view to eventual colonization or conquest.

Hynek has a chapter debating whether the Air Force investigations he had to live with were so sloppy because the command thought the project all nonsense — or whether the government had a real probe going on secretly. He concluded the command thought UFOs nonsense, though some pilots did not.

The idea of the Air Force keeping so gigantic a secret for decades is harder to believe than the flying saucers themselves. Put Keyhoe down as half-baked.

But Keyhoe himself says, "Most UFO occupant stories are obvious hoaxes."

Now come two "ZOWIES!"

Erich von Daniken's "Chariots of the Gods" came out in his native Germany in 1968, in the U.S. in 1970, in a Bantam paperback in 1971 and now claims over 3,500,000 copies in print. Daniken has a sequel out, too.

Daniken runs through myths, legends and miracles of the past, and some puzzling (to him) bits of archeology and concludes that there have been UFOs for thousands of years, and that UFOs from space provide a rational explanation for all these puzzles.

Does a cave painting show a man with horns and a mask? He is a spaceman with antennae. Did Ezekiel see the wheel, way up in the middle of the air? A space ship to Daniken. Did ancient Peruvians do some puzzling earth sculpture on a gigantic scale? A space port and a direction pointer to Daniken.

Another ZOWIE! new in 1973 is "God Drives a Flying Saucer" by R. L. Dione (Bantam paperback). Dione, a teacher in Connecticut, sticks to the Christian tradition.

He explains miracles and wonders in the Bible and later by UFOs, radiation, electromagnetic thought transference, etc: the Star of Bethlehem, Our Lady of Fatima, Ezekiel's wheel, apparently miraculous cures and disasters, Paul on the Damascus road. He thinks angels and God himself are "saucerians" — natural beings bound by physical laws (including laws not yet discovered.)

Both Daniken and Dione are far from the spirit of science, in spite of their science-fiction jargon. But they click with something in the spirit of the age.

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