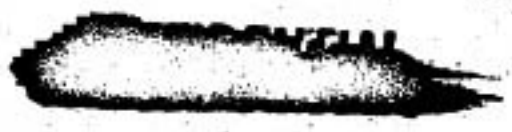
APPENDIX G

Dr. Paul H. Mitts

Psychological Analysis of Reports of Unidentified Aerial Objects



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U. S. AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS, AIR MATERIEL COMMAND
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MEMORANDUM REPORT ON

SUBJECT: Psychological Analysis of Reports of Unidentified Aerial Objects

SECTION: Aero Medical Laboratory

SERIAL NO.: MCREXD-694-18D

Expenditure Order No. 361-38

A. PURPOSE:

1. At the request of the Technical Intelligence Division, Intelligence Department, AMC, an analysis has been made, from a psychological point of view, of 212 investigations of persons reporting sightings of unidentified aerial objects.

B. FACTUAL DATA:

2. A report of this analysis is attached as Appendix A.

C. CONCLUSIONS:

3. It is concluded by the writer that there are sufficient psychological explanations for the reports of unidentified flying objects to provide plausible explanations for reports not otherwise explainable. These errors in identifying real stimuli result chiefly from inability to estimate speed, distance and size.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS:

4. Test the ability of pilots to estimate the course of a small lighted balloon while doing aerobatics with it at night. It is suggested that several pilots try to fly pursuit curves and collision courses on such targets at night and report accurately their sensations. It would be desirable, but probably impossible, to keep them from knowing the nature of the light source.

5. In all future reports of unidentified objects specify the location of object with reference to polar coordinates (direction and degrees above the horizon) rather than asking individuals to estimate distance. If possible, obtain an estimate of size in terms of the visual angle subtended by the object.

6. In all future investigations determine the angular position of the sun with respect to the unidentified object and the observer.

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Also determine the approximate time during which the object was in sight (this information was not available for more than half the reports).

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APPENDIX A

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF REPORTS OF UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECTS

The Inaccuracy of Human Observation

Psychologists have long know that human perception is fallible. In fact, part of the science of psychology is concerned with the measurement of errors of observation, and with the discovery of the conditions and laws that govern such phenomena.

Errors of observation may be classified as variable or constant. Variable errors are those in which a number of separate observations are found to differ from one another. The distribution of such errors often follows the normal probability curve. Constant errors are those in which observations are consistently biased in one or another direction. For example, individuals often are guilty of a constant error, in the direction of underestimation, in reporting their ages.

Errors of observation may be classified further as precision errors and identification errors. Inaccuracy in estimating the speed of an aircraft is an example of the former. Mistaking an aircraft for a "flying saucer" is an example of the latter.

It is the purpose of the present report to analyze 212 reports of observations of unidentified flying objects in order to see to what extent these reports can be explained in terms of known psychological facts and principles.

Scientific Method and a Posteriori Data

A word of caution must be injected at the outset of this report. Certain conditions are necessary for drawing valid scientific conclusions.

These conditions are largely lacking in the case of the data available on unidentified flying objects. It is impossible to say with any assurance what any particular individual in this series of 212 reports was actually observing at any particular time. It is only possible to examine the accumulation of available evidence or the accumulation of all reports of a given class (e.g., all reports from supposedly competent observers) and to consider them in a statistical sense. If certain characteristics appear repeatedly in reports from different people it may be possible to infer causal factors.

It will never be possible, on the other hand, to say with certainty that any given observer could not have seen a space ship or an enemy missile, or some other object. It will only be possible to estimate the probability that he could have seen such things.

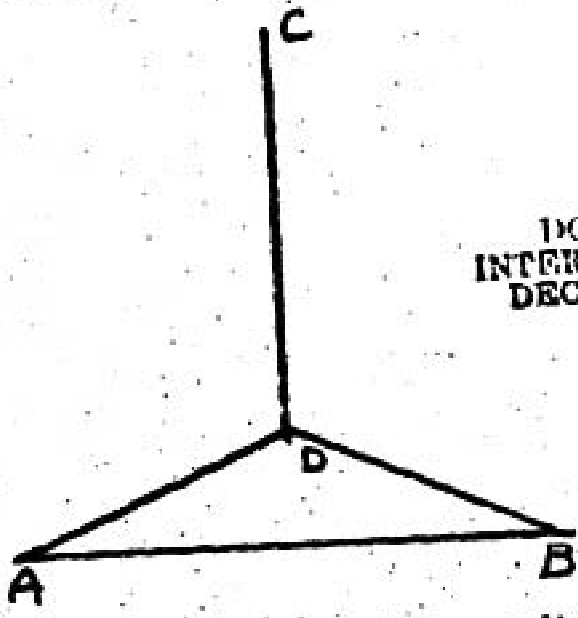
The principal hypothesis to be examined in the following discussion is that reports of unidentified flying objects have the characteristics that would be expected if they were cases of failure, on the part of typical normal individuals, to identify common or familiar phenomena.

Possible Sources of Inaccurate Reports of Flying Objects

There are three broad classes of mistakes in human observations. These are the following: 1. Misinterpreting the nature of real stimuli, 2. Mistaking unreal (imaginary) stimuli for real ones, and 3. Deliberate falsifications. Each of these are considered briefly below.

(1) Errors in Identifying Real Stimuli. All normal, intelligent people experience certain errors of observation. The moon appears much larger on the horizon than when it is high in the sky. A stick looks bent when one end is in water. Distant objects appear relatively close in clear, desert atmosphere. A small point-source of light, if viewed in a dark room, will appear to move about in

the autokinetic illusion (see Guilford, J. P., 1928). In the accom-
panying figure the line AB looks approximately as long as the line CD,
but when you measure them the two will be found to be of quite different
lengths.



Visual stimuli originating within the eye itself also give rise
to mistaken observations. Muscae volitantes or "flying gnats" are small
solid particles that float about in the fluids of the eye and cast
shadows on the retina. They often can be seen when you look up at
the clear sky, or when you are reading. They move as your eyes move.
It is sometimes possible also to see corpuscles or other objects that
are circulating within the fluids in the ~~retina~~ of the eye.

Then, of course, everyone from time to time mistakes some more
or less familiar object for another object. A probable explanation
for many reports of unidentified aerial phenomena is that the object
is really something quite familiar, such as an aircraft, a light, or a
bird. The observer simply fails to identify it correctly. These
errors arise chiefly as a result of inability to estimate speed and
distance.

(2) Mistaking Imaginary for Real Events. This error of
observation is usually made ~~maix~~ by children, by individuals of low
intelligence (people who are very suggestible), by people who see
visions, or by the mentally ill. It usually is not difficult for an

export to spot this type of person. Reports will be received from such persons especially at times when the radio and newspapers carry accounts of strange phenomena. Relatively few of the 212 investigations considered in this report are of this nature, probably because investigators interviewed only the more reliable type of witness.

(3) Deliberate Falsifications. It is always possible that some persons will give false reports. Circulation of false reports has been a standard psychological warfare technique from earliest times. This procedure might have some utility in wartime, but it hardly seems likely that it would be resorted to at this time. Probably, however, some individuals start false reports of "flying saucers" for the same reason that they turn in false fire alarms.

Some Consistent Points in the Reports of Unidentified Objects.

The following section summarizes some significant facts that come out of a tabulation of 212 reports of interrogations, by USAF Intelligence Officer, of some of the individuals who reported seeing unidentified flying objects. It is understood that these interrogations covered primarily persons that were judged to be reliable. Most of the 212 reports were made by pilots, non-flying officers, professional men, government employees, ex-services and other supposedly dependable people.

1. Number of objects. About 75% of the people who reported on the number of objects seen said that they saw only one object.

2. Time the object remained in sight. About half of the persons specifying time in sight saw the object for 60 seconds or less.

3. Altitude and distance of the object. Of those who estimated the distance of the object, two-thirds judged it to be more than a mile away. Ninety percent also thought that it was more than 1,000 feet high.

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4. Speed. About half judged that the speed was less than 500 miles an hour. The other half of the judgments varied from 500 miles an hour all the way to "terrific", "tremendous", "inconceivable" and "blue blazes".

5. Background against which viewed. The great majority of observers saw the object against a clear day or night sky.

6. Time of day sighted. About two-thirds as many observations were reported at night as in the day. There are, of course, many more opportunities for observing things during the day. The most popular hours were from 12 noon to 5:00 P.M. and from 7:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. at night. Very few (6 only) observations were made from 5:00 to 7:00 P.M., the usual hours of sunset.

7. Color. Observers almost universally reported seeing a light-colored object. Thirty observers reported "white" and twenty-five said "silver". Over 70 percent described glittering, shiny, luminescent, mirror-like, flame-like or other very bright objects. Only six individuals said black or dark.

8. Shape. Over half described the object as either "round", "disc-shaped", "spherical" or "circular". Other descriptions were similar. Very few observers saw any distinctive shape.

9. Size. The majority of observers did not specify the objects' size. Of those who did over half said it was less than 10 feet in its largest dimension. Many compared it with a dime, a lamp, a dot, a weather ballon, a baseball, etc.

Interpretation of the Common Points of All Reports

The words used by observers to describe the appearances of the unidentified objects fall into a surprisingly uniform pattern. The objects were usually reported as being far away, small, bright and without a distinctive shape. They were usually seen against a clear sk y

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and were frequently seen for less than a minute.

First of all, it is obvious that it would usually be impossible for observers to make reliable estimates of the speed, distance, or size of such stimulus objects. It is not possible to estimate accurately the distance of small bright objects viewed against a clear sky, unless the object is identified first. If you know beforehand that an object is a weather balloon, an F-80, or a dirigible you can estimate its speed and distance with some degree of accuracy. In such situations distance is judged on the basis of known size, and speed on the basis of an estimate of distance plus the angular change in position. It must be concluded, therefore, that most of the statements of speed, distance, altitude and size are entirely unreliable and should be disregarded. This is doubly true of observations made at night. The objects seen may actually have been at very great distances, or they may have been relatively close by. In the latter case, of course, they could also have been quite small.

Secondly, it is probable that individuals who saw objects in daylight were in many cases observing either the reflection of the sun on a shiny surface or else looking directly at a light source of high intensity. Aircraft themselves, when viewed against a clear sky, are seen as dark objects against a lighter background unless they are reflecting the sun's rays directly. This fact was recognized during the recent war by camouflage experts who placed bright lights on the leading edges of the wings of aircraft on anti-submarine patrol in order to conceal them from the eyes of submarine lookouts. If observers, during daylight hours, were actually seeing lights, or reflections of the sun, this would account in large measure for their inability to identify the objects. On the other hand, if they were actually seeing enemy missiles, for example, the majority of reports

of daylight sightings should have been of dark objects. It is possible, of course, that they may have thought the objects were bright because they expected all aerial objects to be bright.

On the basis of the evidence thus far considered, the best guess as to the nature of a visual stimulus that would elicit reports of unidentified flying objects is that in the daytime it would be the reflection of the sun from an aircraft, a wind-blown object, etc., and at night some direct light source, such as an engine exhaust, the light on a weather balloon, a running light on an aircraft, a meteor, etc., or lights from the ground or the moon reflected back by birds or other objects in the air.

Discussion of Several Specific Reports

Discussion of a few specific reports will serve to illustrate some of the points brought up earlier, particularly some of the factors that make observations of aerial phenomena inaccurate.

Incidents No. 81 and 163.

In one case (Investigation No. 81) a civilian employee at Hickam Field at 0900 observed what looked like a balloon with a bright object suspended below it. It was estimated to be at about 6,000 ft. The bright object appeared to reflect the sun's rays at times. After a few minutes he looked away and then could not find the object again.

In another case (No. 163) a reserve officer at Van Nuys, California, about an hour before dark saw an object that looked somewhat like a weather balloon at about 2000 ft. He kept it in sight for about an hour. He later concluded that it was at a great height. At first it had the color of a fluorescent electric light but became orange as the sun went down and then rather suddenly became invisible.

Both of these objects could well have been just what they appeared to resemble most—balloons. The sun was low in the sky in both cases.

Reflection of the sun's rays may have given an unusual appearance to the object. The second case illustrates the uncertainty of judgments of height or distance. The object looked near, but when it remained in view for an hour the observer decided that it must be very far away. Actually he probably had nothing on which to base an accurate estimate.

Incidents 61 and 61a.

Two couples saw approximately 12 objects flying in formation at what they judged to be 2000 or 3000 feet altitude over Logan, Utah at 22:30. They were judged to be about the size of pigeons and looked white. All four observers agreed that these objects looked and acted somewhat like birds but all thought they were not birds because they appeared to travel much faster than birds.

As we have seen, it is not possible to judge speed accurately under the conditions of these observations, i.e., when looking at objects of unknown size and distance against a night sky. The objects may actually have been a flock of white birds, flying at a relatively low altitude and reflecting the lights of the city.

Incidents 30, 30b, 30c, and 46, 46a, 46b, 46c, 46d.

During the same space of time (about half an hour) on the night of 7 January 1946 observers at Lockbourne Air Force Base, observers at Clinton County AFB and the pilot of an aircraft flying from Dayton to Washington reported an unidentified object in the sky. All reports agreed as to the color and general appearance of the object, and as to the fact that its light at times was visible through a light overcast. All agreed also that it was seen to the southwest. However, persons at all three locations judged the object to be only a few miles away. To all of them it looked motionless at times, then appeared to gain and lose elevation. A very similar object was seen by numerous

persons at Fort Knox and other towns in Kentucky a few hours earlier. All saw it in the southwest and many thought it was only a few miles away. The Commanding Officer at Goodman Field observed it for 1 1/2 hours, (beginning at 1445). During this time it seemingly remained stationary. It was "chased" by four National Guard pilots, one of whom crashed after having been up to 20,000 feet. It was also reported by persons in Lexington, Madisonville, and Elizabethtown.

The significant fact that emerges from these reports again is the inability to estimate distance. It appears possible that persons over parts of Kentucky and Ohio may have been seeing the same astronomical phenomena which was a great many miles away. Nevertheless each believed it to be relatively near his own location.

Incident No. 172.

A National Guard Pilot returning to Fargo, North Dakota, in a F-51 at approximately 2100 hours saw a small light in the air below him. He was then in the traffic pattern. He dived on the light. The light gained altitude. The pilot "chased" it up to 14,000 feet, making various passes at it and attempts to ran it as he climbed. He finally stalled out.

Several inferences can be drawn from the several reports about this incident. In the first place, when it is night, and a pilot is turning so steeply, and going such violent acrobatics, that he sometimes blacks out, as was the case here, it would be very difficult if not impossible to judge at the same time what another object was doing. In the second place, if the pilot kept his eyes intently on the object, as also was the case here, he would have great difficulty in knowing and reporting later what he himself was doing. The situation is very conducive to loss of orientation. In other words, it is impossible to infer

maneuvering or not maneuvering. It is quite possible that it was simply climbing steeply on a relatively straight course, such as would be taken by a lighted weather balloon.

As a matter of fact, a lighted weather balloon was released by the Fargo Weather Station within 10 minutes of the time the light was first sighted by the F-51 pilot. It is the opinion of the writer that this lighted balloon easily could have accounted for all of the pilot's observations. (It should be noted that the standard 30 inch and 65 inch weather balloons have a vertical speed of about 600 and 1100 ft./min. respectively.)

General Discussion and Summary

In the preceding section the hypothesis has been advanced that most reports of unidentified flying objects have been the result of persons failing to identify familiar phenomena, such as reflections from bright surfaces in the day or lights in a night sky. It is believed that this explanation will account for many of the reports. However, some reports undoubtedly have other explanation.

Vertigo. The term vertigo covers a large group of miscellaneous phenomena including air sickness, disbelief in one's instruments, and partial loss of orientation. The conditions under which some of the observations of flying objects were made were such that they could have produced loss of orientation on the part of an observer. This is especially true for those experiences occurring at night and those in which attempts were made to "chase" the object. Movement is always relative. If the only outside reference is a point of light, and both the observer and the object observed are moving, it would be practically impossible under certain conditions to tell which was moving and which was not, or to separate out the two motions. It is hard enough

to fly a good pursuit curve on another aircraft in good daylight, for example, much less to close on a solitary light at night. The difficulty is due chiefly to the inability to judge distance or speed of a point source of light.

Suggestion. Suggestion works in various ways. Sensational radio and newspaper reports lead a few people to imagine they are seeing things they are not seeing. The effect on most people is to dampen their critical judgment. Under such conditions we are more likely to overlook certain factors, and find it easier to accept the suggested explanation uncritically. The expected result would be to make the reports of most observers slightly less accurate than if they had never heard reports of others seeing "flying saucers". Particularly when the stimulus object is fuzzy or ill-defined, persons tend to see it as resembling whatever is suggested to them. Carmichael et. al., for example (1932) showed individuals simple designs and gave them the name of an object. When the individuals drew the design from memory, they drew it to resemble whatever the object was that had been suggested to them.

Precedent. An historical precedent can be found for most errors of human observation. Although the writer has not tried to make an historical survey of reports of earlier unidentified aerial objects, he feels sure that there have been many such reports in years past, particularly during and after World War I.

Small Wind-borne Objects. It is possible that some observers may have seen small objects carried aloft by strong winds, or objects droppod from aircraft. Bits of paper, small cartons, etc., may occationslly be carried to a considerable height by strong winds. Aircraft may sometimes jettison small articles. It would be impossible to

estimate the distance, size or speed of such objects, and it would be easy to fail to recognize them.

Conclusions

It is concluded by the writer that there are sufficient psychological explanations for the reports of unidentified flying objects to provide plausible explanations for reports not otherwise explainable. These errors in identifying real stimuli result chiefly from inability to estimate speed, distance and size.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered:

1. Test the ability of pilots to estimate the course of a small lighted balloon while doing acrobatics with it at night. It is suggested that several pilots try to fly pursuit curves and collision courses on such targets at night and report accurately their sensations. It would be desirable, but probably impossible, to keep them from knowing the nature of the light source.

2. In all future reports of unidentified objects specify the location of the object with reference to polar coordinates (direction and degrees above the horizon) rather than asking individuals to estimate distance. If possible, obtain an estimate of size in terms of the visual angle subtended by the object.

3. In all future investigations determine the angular position of the sun with respect to the unidentified object and the observer. Also determine the approximate time during which the object was in sight (this information was not available for more than half the reports).

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