

THE SKEPTICAL INQUIRER
WINTER 1979-80
BY JAMES OBERG

CRIPPLED UFO? THE CASE OF THE PHANTOM SPACECRAFT

“Crippled UFO Orbiting Earth.” announced the National Enquirer’s banner front-page headline last July 17 [1979]. Perhaps it was timed to help commemorate the tenth anniversary of the first Apollo moon-landing. With that event and the fall of Skylab fresh in everyone’s mind, outer space seemed a bit closer – not much farther away than the grocery counters around the nation where this weekly tabloid is sold.

According to the Enquirer’s Los Angeles stringer, Henry Gris, top Russian scientists had identified fragments of a derelict alien spacecraft thousands of miles out in space. The discovery, Gris continued, had been independently verified by American space experts.

As might be expected with such claims, however, professional satellite trackers were quick to deny the existence of such objects. The Public Information Office at NORAD (North American Air Defense Command) in Colorado Springs claimed to have no record of the alleged satellites: “Anything of that size at that altitude would have been spotted by our radar and optical nets years ago.” asserted Air Force Tech. Sgt. Michael Bergman. “There’s nothing there fitting such a description.”

Optical tracking groups, such as the former Moonwatch team at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, also had no data to support the existence of such objects, even though they would have been clearly visible to the naked eye. The United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space, which maintains a registry on all satellites, had no entry that would correspond to any of the claimed objects. Thus there was international agreement: the objects did not seem to exist. (The Enquirer’s staff had evidently not bothered to check with any of these agencies whose job it was to keep track of satellites – or if any check was made, the negative results were not included in the article.)

The Russians, as quoted by Gris, were just as adamant in their positive claims. “We are convinced a crippled spaceship from another planet is circling earth.” declared astrophysicist Sergey Bozhich in Moscow. “There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with the remains of a large alien craft.” revealed Vladimir Azhazha. “The craft was at least 200 feet in length and up to 100 feet in width.” added Aleksandr Kazantsev. “A [rendez-vous] mission should be launched...The benefits for mankind should be stupendous.” emphasized Aleksey Zolotov.

However impressive these assertions may sound, Western UFO experts have had experiences with earlier wild and unsubstantiated claims from the same people. Zolotov, well-known champion of the “spaceship theory” of 1908 Tunguska explosion (a theory almost universally rejected by practicing Russia space scientists, who are not quoted in the National Enquirer), is also a devotee of body auras and of faith healing. Kazantsev is

one of the original “ancient astronaut” proponents, well known for his attempts to prove “scientifically” that all the biblical concepts of God were actually based on human misinterpretations of visits from alien cosmonauts. Azhazha has claimed that the American moonship Apollo 13 was deliberately zapped by UFOs to prevent its setting off a nuclear bomb on the moon. All three men are also well known for their eagerness to endorse any wild UFO claims. Their credibility among informed observers is not measurably different from zero.

Yet these “crippled UFO” claims are evidently corroborated by a scientific paper written by John P. Bagby in the January 1969 issue of the journal *Icarus*, according to Gris. Well, it’s not exactly that simple either, as I found out when I telephoned Bagby at his office at the Hughes aircraft plant in Culver City, near Los Angeles. I asked him about the “crippled UFO” story, and he informed me that he had never been contacted by Gris (it would have been a local call) or by anyone else on the research staff of the *National Enquirer*; in fact, he had not even heard about the story until called by a relative in Chicago.

“There are too many coincidences between the Russian claim and my original paper regarding extrapolations based on unpublished assumptions.” Bagby said. “The date of fragmentation and the number of groups and fragments – I doubt that they could have come up with them independently.” Bagby agreed with a suggested scenario that Bozhich, the originator of the claim in Moscow, might have come across a copy of the *Icarus* article, or a translation of it, and might have repeated the data to Gris, implying it was his discovery.

Bagby still believes that the objects he reported are real and have been circling the earth since 1955. The absence of any sign of orbital decay suggests to him that the still-hypothetical objects are massive – perhaps mini black holes that could swallow radar beams and thus avoid NORAD’s detection. “My work tends to make me discount the spaceship hypothesis.” Bagby concluded.

The same “crippled UFO” story also appeared in a British tabloid (*Reveille*, July 29, 1979) under the front-page headline “Sensation in Space” (“Top scientist says: It’s the discovery of the century – a damaged alien craft is orbiting the earth”). In response, the weekly *New Scientist* checked with Desmond King-Hele, world-renowned expert on satellite tracking. King-Hele, who works for the Royal Aircraft establishment at Farnborough, denied the existence of such satellites: “If there were objects of the size and distance suggested by the Russians, they would be tracked both by radar and visually.” he said. “We have seen no such objects...There are no alien spacecraft knocking around in orbit.”

New Scientist also quoted from another report in *Icarus* (vol 19, 1973, p. 547), by Jean Meeus, which vigorously disputed Bagby’s 1969 paper. After demonstrating a total inconsistency of the claimed orbits, orbital motions, and brightness, Meeus scathingly concluded: “Bagby’s story on the Earth moonlets thus appears groundless. The objects cited by Bagby do not exist.”

The last word belongs to Charles Redmond, a public information specialist at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. Since Gris' article seemed to imply that NASA has endorsed the theory (it has not, need I say?), people had been calling Redmond's office asking when the inspection and retrieval mission would be launched. "I told them that the mission would have to wait until we worked out the problems of biological quarantine, to avoid any possible contamination with interstellar germs that could be dormant on board the UFO." Redmond recalled with a boyish grin. "Oh my God!" he added, his face drawn in mock alarm. "Do you suppose any of the callers actually believed me?" Time will tell, but it is a safe bet that Redmond's joke will make its way into the folklore of UFOria, where UFOs abound but a sense of humor is nowhere to be found.

--James Oberg

The Black Knight from Space

<http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread292902/pg6#pid11413972>

Black Knight Satellite

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGKtIB9cYV0>

May I modestly suggest the reason the poster has choral music playing and not the actual air-to-ground conversations that accompanied these pictures is that the space-walking STS-88 astronauts who took the photos were apologizing for dropping an insulation blanket they had removed during wiring up the first module of the International Space Station. Naturally these comments are 'inconvenient' to the posters pitch to a hyper-gullible audience best kept misinformed.

The search for small natural earth satellites : final technical report

Clyde William Tombaugh; New Mexico State University. Physical Science Laboratory.;
et al

[University Park, N.M. : New Mexico State University, Physical Science Laboratory, 1959]

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/search-for-small-natural-earth-satellites-final-technical-report/oclc/68160008?referer=di&ht=edition>

"Sponsored by Office of Ordnance Research, U.S. Army, Lowell Observatory Contract: DA-04-495-ORD-521, New Mexico College Contract: DA-04-495-ORD-727, OOR Projects 1072-P and 1602-P, Department of the Army Project 5B99-01-004, Ordnance R and D Project TB2-0001, Army Ballistic Missile Agency Contract: DA-04-495-ORD-1101."

"30 June 1959.