

Astronaut "UFO" Sightings

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The glamour and drama of manned space-flights has been transferred to the UFO field via a highly publicized group of "UFO sightings" and photographs allegedly made by American and Russian space-pilots. Hardly a UFO book or movie fails to mention that "astronauts have seen UFOs too."

Careful examination of each and every one of these stories (and they total more than 20 or 30) can produce quite reasonable explanations, in terms of visual phenomena associated with space flights. On a visit to the NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston in July 1976, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, of the Center for UFO Studies, concluded that none of the authentic cases (as opposed to the majority of reports, which are fictitious) really had anything to do with the "real UFO phenomenon."

Skeptical investigators, while pleased that Hynek had dismissed all "astronaut UFO reports" as unreliable, have insisted that this body of stories has quite a lot to do with the major problems besetting the UFO community. How, they ask, can a body of stories so patently false and unreliable obtain such seeming authenticity simply by being passed back and forth among researchers without ever being seriously investigated? Is this a characteristic of UFO stories in general; and if so, the skeptics ask, can a study of how the "astronaut UFO" myth began and flourished help us to understand better the UFO phenomenon in general?

Hynek's disavowal of the stories came after his book *Edge of Reality* (coauthored with Jacques Vallee) carried a long list of astronaut sighting reports. Hynek told colleagues that the inclusion of the list (compiled by George Fawcett) in the book was Vallee's idea, not his, but that even

so he just wanted to generate interest and discussion. He insisted that inclusion of the list was not a judgment on his belief in its credibility and that readers had no right assuming that the data had actually been verified just because they were included in his book. Fawcett, on the other hand, claims that he just assembled the list from all available sources and assumed that somebody *else* would check the accounts before publication. "Maybe 1 percent of the stories are *true* UFOs," Fawcett suggested in 1978.

This is the complete "Fawcett List" as printed in *Edge of Reality*. Following each incident, we supply, in italics, the most likely explanation of the report.

February 20, 1962—John Glenn, piloting his Mercury capsule, saw three objects follow him and then overtake him at varying speeds. *Glenn also said that these "snowflakes" were small, and seemed to be coming from the rear end of his capsule. Later flights also observed them and were able to create "snowstorms" by having astronauts bang on the walls of their capsules. Verdict: Significant data was withheld, totally altering the nature of the incident.*

May 24, 1962—Mercury 7: Scott Carpenter reported photographing fireflylike objects with a hand camera and that he had what looked like a good shot of a saucer. *Carpenter did see "fireflies," as well as a balloon ejected from his capsule. The claim that he reported photographing a "saucer" is counterfeit. His photo, taking into account the glare of sunlight, smeared window, and gross enlargement of the small image, has been widely published as a "saucer" but was in fact the tracking balloon.*

May 30, 1962—X15 pilot Joe Walton photographed five disclike objects. *This story appears to be a complete fabrication. The real pilot's name was Joe Walker.*

July 17, 1962—X15 Pilot Robert White photographed objects about 30 feet away from his craft while about 58 miles up. *Right—and as he reported, the objects were small, "about the size of a piece of paper," and were probably flakes of ice off the super-cold fuel tanks. Verdict: Important information withheld by authors.*

May 16, 1963—Mercury 9: Gordon Cooper reported a greenish UFO with a red tail during his fifteenth orbit. He also reported other mysterious sightings over South America and Australia. The object he sighted over Perth, Australia, was caught on screens by ground tracking stations. *Cooper has recently denounced all stories of UFOs on his space*

flights as fabrications. The multicolor UFO is based on a deliberate misquotation by an author of Cooper's postflight report on a sighting of the Aurora Australis. Verdict: Fraud.

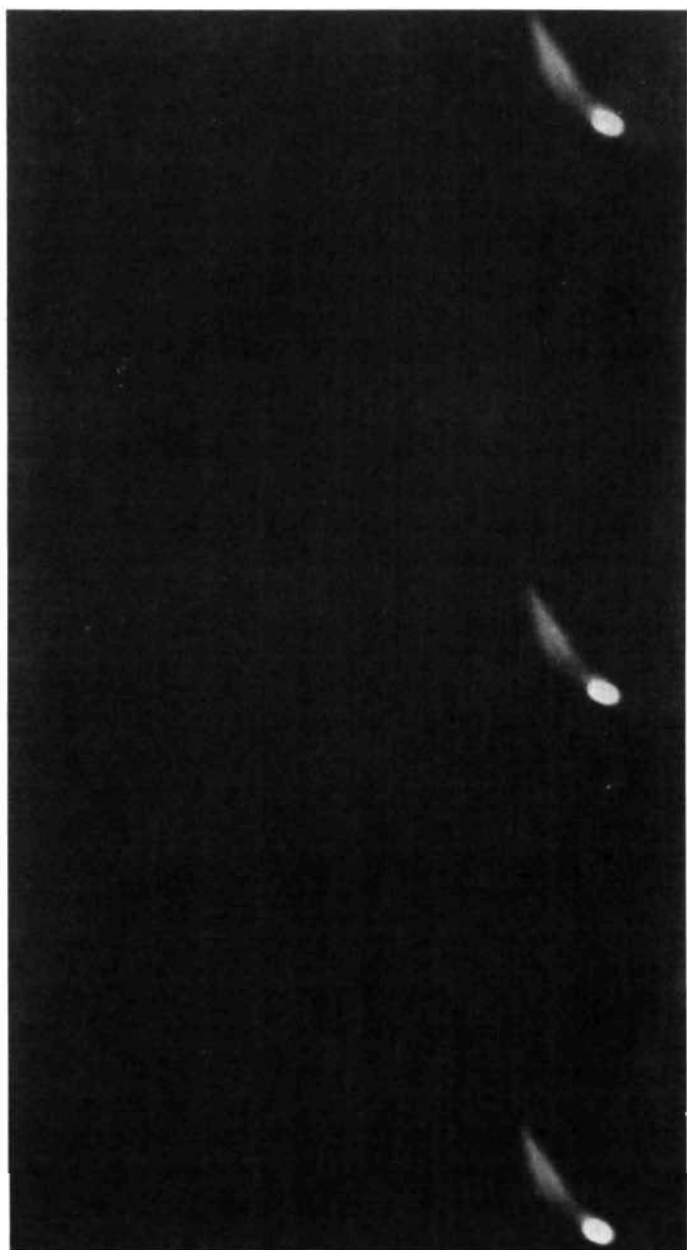
October 3, 1963—Mercury 8: Walter Schirra reported large glowing masses over the Indian Ocean. *Indeed he did, referring to lightning-lit cloud masses over the ocean a hundred miles below. The author of this story deliberately quoted out of context. Verdict: Fraud. And note: Wrong date (really 1962), and Mercury 8 follows Mercury 9 in this "reliable" chronology.*

March 8, 1964—Voskhod 2: Russian cosmonauts reported an unidentified object just as they entered the earth's atmosphere. *Several hours before returning to earth the cosmonauts spotted a cylinder-shaped object they assumed (probably correctly) was just another man-made satellite. Such sightings were becoming more and more frequent as the number of manned flights and unmanned satellites rose.*

June 3, 1964—Gemini 4: Jim McDivitt reported he photographed several strange objects, including a cylindrical object with arms sticking out and an egg-shaped UFO with some sort of exhaust. *This is the most famous "astronaut UFO" case, and it has been embellished and distorted in dozens of publications. McDivitt saw a "beer-can shaped" object which he took to be another man-made satellite (some observers believe it was his own booster rocket), and tried to take a few photos which did not turn out. A still from the movie camera (which McDivitt insists he never touched during the sighting) was mistakenly released without the astronaut's review, showing what turned out to be a light reflection off his co-pilot's window, according to McDivitt. UFO buffs took this photo and acclaimed it as one of the best UFO photos ever taken, showing (they claim) a glowing object with a plasma tail. McDivitt never saw anything like that in space. Verdict: Gross exaggeration and distortion on the part of UFO writers. Also, the year is wrong—it should be 1965.*

October 12, 1964—Voskhod 1: Three Russian cosmonauts reported they were surrounded by a formation of swiftly moving disc-shaped objects. *This story appears to be a complete fabrication, but UFO buffs cling to it while challenging skeptics to "prove it did not happen."*

December 4, 1965—Gemini 7: Frank Borman and Jim Lovell photographed twin oval-shaped UFOs with glowing undersides. *This famous photograph is a blatant forgery, in which light reflections off the nose of the spacecraft are made to look like UFOs by airbrushing away the vehicle structure around them. Verdict: Fraud.*



Famous McDivitt "UFO" photo (actually a still movie film), which has been reprinted in dozens of UFO books and magazines, is only a reflection of the sun on co-pilot's window, according to McDivitt. The astronaut *did* see a nearby satellite, but did not succeed in getting a photo; he never even touched the movie camera. Yet UFO groups have selected this as one of the "four best UFO photos ever taken" and theorize that the "tail" is actually a "plasma jet" for interplanetary propulsion.



Photo of nose of Gemini-7 with sunlight gleaming off two rocket thrusters. Dark nose almost blends in with dark earth background.



With the help of airbrushing, the Gemini-7 photo became a view of two glowing UFOs. Forgery was first published in Japan and subsequently in an American tabloid newspaper. Hoax eventually appeared in *Edge of Reality*, by Dr. J. Allen Hynek.

July 18, 1966—Gemini 10: John Young and Mike Collins saw a large, cylindrical object accompanied by two smaller, bright objects, which Young photographed. NASA failed to pick them up on screens. *The astronauts reported two bright fragments near their spacecraft soon after launch, presumably pieces of the booster or of some other satellite. No photos were taken. They were out of range of NASA radar at this point anyway. Dramatization of ordinary space event.*

September 12, 1966—Gemini 11: Richard Gordon and Charles Conrad reported a yellow-orange UFO about six miles from them. It dropped down in front of them and then disappeared when they tried to photograph it. *The astronauts described the close passage of another space satellite, identified by NORAD as the Russian Proton-3 satellite but later shown to have been some other object. The men got three fuzzy photos, which, much blown up, have been widely published. But their eyesight accounts describe a solid satellite-looking object on a ballistic nonmaneuvering path.*

November 11, 1966—Gemini 12: Jim Lovell and Edwin Aldrin saw four UFOs linked in a row. Both spacemen said the objects were not stars. *Indeed they were not, since the astronauts were talking about four bags of trash they had thrown overboard an hour earlier! Deliberate misquotation by a UFO-book author.*

December 21, 1968—Apollo 8: Frank Borman and Jim Lovell reported a “bogie”—an unidentified object—ten miles up. *Actually, Borman referred to a “bogie” on his first space-flight three years before, describing some pieces of debris associated with his spacecraft’s separa-*

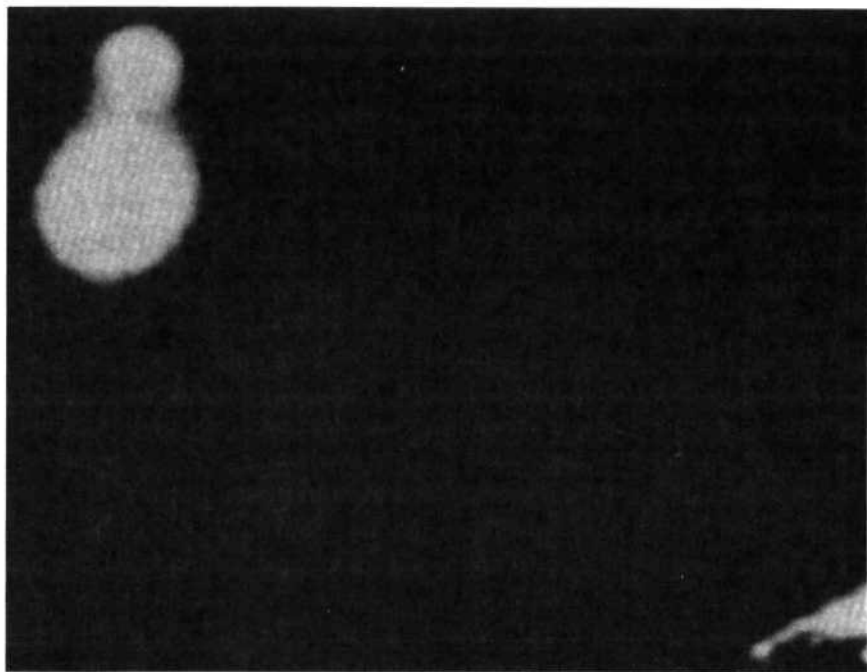


Photo of "Snowman UFO" reportedly made by "Buzz" Aldrin in lunar orbit (also described as "a mass of intelligent energy" in *Science Digest*). A series of pictures of this event appeared in a Japanese magazine, were widely publicized in America by Bob Barry (20th Century UFO Bureau), and have now been entrenched in UFO folklore.



The forgeries have been widely printed in the UFO media, along with fabrications about "NASA cover-ups."



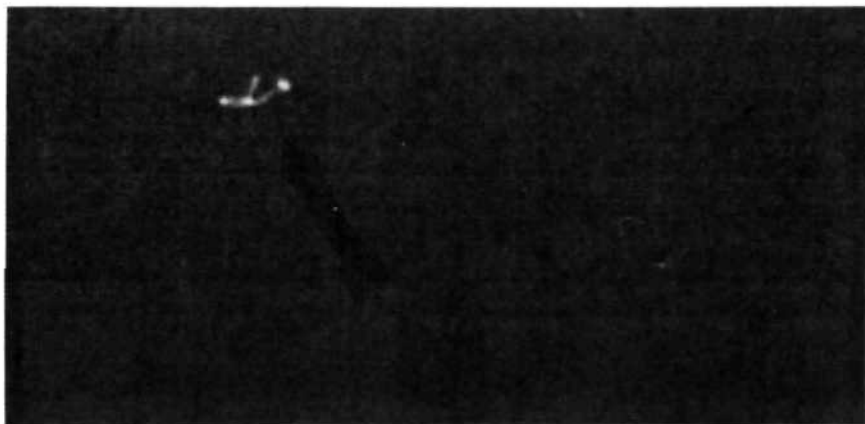
The "Snowman UFO" photo is a forgery. Scenes such as this one from Apollo-11 film magazine "F" were heavily retouched to eliminate other reflections and accentuate sharpness of primary reflection of interior lights.

tion from the booster rocket. The reference to Apollo 8 is careless, possibly even fictitious.

July 16, 1969—Apollo 11: This was a mission on which a UFO reportedly chased the spacecraft. *“Reportedly,” indeed, but not very accurate. Actually, several UFO stories have attached themselves barnacle-like to man’s first moon landing. A photo of an insulation fragment taken soon after third-stage separation has been widely published as a “UFO.” The astronauts watched their booster through a telescope on the way to the moon. A series of “UFO photos” allegedly taken by astronaut Aldrin in lunar orbit are actually forgeries by a Japanese UFO magazine. An alleged “astronaut radio conversation” describing a UFO ambush is a hoax.*

November 14, 1969—Apollo 12: Astronauts Pete Conrad, Alan Bean, and Dick Gordon said a UFO accompanied them to within 132,000 miles of the moon, preceding them all the way. *No, they never said that. They were joking with the ground control room about a tumbling piece of their booster rocket that was flashing in the sky. UFO buffs completely misunderstood the meaning of the conversation and conjured up a UFO. On the way back to earth, the astronauts were puzzled by a light between them and the earth, which turned out to be the reflection of the moon behind them on the night-time Indian Ocean below them.*

Many other “astronaut reports” have been added to this list, including photographs from Skylab (of a passing satellite, distorted by some



Strange squiggle photo from Skylab is probably a film or camera fault, since crew testimony and other photos show this was a bright point source—clearly a nearby artificial satellite.

camera artifact), from Apollo lunar flights (movies showing debris floating around inside the cabin), and from other Mercury and Gemini flights. None, when investigated with an appreciation of the actual space-flight environment, appears to be “extraordinary” or “unusual,” although many sightings of passing satellites remain technically “unidentified,” since the actual satellite has never been named (nobody has taken the trouble to spend several hours of computer time searching memory banks).

The entire phenomenon of the “astronaut UFO sightings,” however, does explicitly demonstrate the carelessness and lack of verification among UFO circles eager to exchange the latest hot stories without any regard for authenticity or accuracy. Skeptics have claimed that this characteristic is not limited to the “astronaut UFO sightings.” The topic is not one to which UFO specialists can point with pride in their own behavior and standards of reliability.

Closing note: A common claim is that there is some sort of NASA “cover-up” of secret photographs and/or voice transcripts from space. In fact, every photograph taken by NASA in space is available for publication and can be inspected by accredited news media representatives (there are tens of thousands of photos—there is no way to arrange public viewing). And volumes and volumes of voice transcripts are readily available at Houston.

Often astronauts are quoted about UFOs. Sometimes they are referring to experiences they have had before or after their roles in the space program. In other cases they are making general statements based on reading the news media. Many quotations are fictitious. Only one astronaut claims to have seen a UFO in space, and that is Jim McDivitt, who stipulates that *his* definition of a UFO covers the probability that his object was some other man-made satellite which has not been identified. He does not think it was an alien space vehicle or any such similar “real UFO” manifestation. ●