

'Old-Solved Mysteries': The Kecksburg Incident

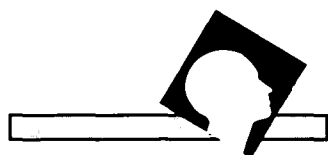
ROBERT R. YOUNG

On September 19, 1990, the NBC television network's season opener of "Unsolved Mysteries" featured a half-hour segment on the heretofore little-known "Kecksburg UFO Crash." It was alleged that this involved the crash and recovery by the U.S. military of an unidentified flying object with strange alien markings in the small western Pennsylvania town of Kecksburg, near Pittsburgh, on December 9, 1965.

The program was the tenth most watched in America in a week that saw the introduction of the season's "new" shows. It was viewed in an estimated 17.7 percent of households with television, and on 30 percent of all television sets turned on (*Broadcasting* 1990). Recent surveys for the National Science Foundation report that 2 in 5 adult Americans believe that alien spaceships account for some UFO reports (*Science News* 1986). It therefore seems likely that several million viewers may have been predisposed to accept the premise of the program.

This "saucer crash" has not been widely known to UFOlogists or UFO skeptics because it appears never to have happened. According to a review of all original published accounts, the sole witnesses to the saucer crash apparently were two eight-year-old children who were among thousands in nine states and Canada to view a bolide (brilliant) meteor (Gatty 1965).

Add to this a gullible local flying-saucer buff who has finally found "his own" thrilling flying-saucer crash to investigate; the U.S. Air Force



Original reports and eyewitnesses suggest the crashed UFO tale recently featured on TV's 'Unsolved Mysteries' is a hoax.

"Project Blue Book" UFO investigating office; "unnamed Pentagon sources"; a secret military satellite launch; the Pennsylvania State Police; the Kecksburg volunteer fire company; local news reporters who were at first kept away; the 24-year-old recollections of local citizens; and the recent materialization of "new" witnesses.

According to a front-page story in the nearby Greensburg, Pennsylvania, *Tribune-Review* the day after the TV show, some Kecksburg residents, including many observers of the 1965 event and even some portrayed in the program, say it is all a hoax. Some residents blame two local men whose story of a copper-colored 12' by 7' "acorn-shaped" object with "hieroglyphic" markings had surfaced only a couple of months earlier—almost a quarter-century after the original publicity.

Tribune-Review staff writer David Darby (1990) reported that more than 50 Kecksburg residents sent a petition to the program's producers in an attempt to stop its airing. The paper reported that these nonbelievers included Ed Myers, the Kecksburg fire chief in 1965, who was portrayed by an actor on the program; Jerome and Valerie Miller, whose home was portrayed as the site of a "military command post" during UFO recovery operations; the owners of the land where the saucer was supposed to have landed; and Kecksburg firemen.

Myers expressed concern. "It's killing me to know this is going nationwide, because there's absolutely no truth to it," he told Darby. "Something's gonna be put in the history books for my grandchildren to read, and it is just not true."

The Millers, the paper reported, deny that their home was a center of military activity. Darby said "whoops of laughter" filled the Miller living room when a group of residents who

consider the whole thing a hoax gathered to watch the melodramatic program.

Several elements combined in 1965 to create local hysteria. For several days the world had been fascinated by front-page coverage of the missions of Gemini 6 and 7, two U.S. spacecraft set for a manned joining. The day of the incident (December 9) the *Pittsburgh Press*, widely read in the Kecksburg area, reported that Frank Edwards, a nationally known flying-saucer lecturer and broadcaster had arrived in the city to speak. The headline, "Lift UFO Secrecy, Saucer Believer Says," had a "kicker" above it, "U.S. Hush-Up Charged."

However, the *Erie Daily Times* (December 10) reported another event that day that went largely unnoticed: a secret satellite was launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California, a launchsite for military polar-orbiting reconnaissance missions. The stage was set.

Shortly after 4:40 P.M. (EST) a brilliant bolide, or "fireball," was seen by thousands in Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Ontario, Canada, according to reports on December 10 in the *Erie Daily Times*; the *Pittsburgh Press*, the *New York Times*, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The fireball was even said to have been seen in California (*Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10, 1965). Astronomers from Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, who had received many reports, concluded the object had been a bright meteor (*Erie Daily Times*, *Pittsburgh Press*, *New York Times*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 10). This was also the conclusion of the Federal Aviation Administration, according to a spokesman at Erie, Pennsylvania (*Erie Daily Times*; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*); Air Force spokesmen in Washington; and unnamed

"Pentagon sources" (*Pittsburgh Press*, *New York Times*).

Reports of bolides are typically inaccurate. Astronomer Frank Drake (1972), after efforts to recover meteorites from fireball reports, has estimated the fraction of eyewitnesses who are wrong about something to be 1 out of 2 after one day, 3 out of 4 after two days, and 9 out of 10 after four days. Witnesses often grossly underestimate the distance of fireballs, which may be dozens of miles high. When the meteors disappear over the horizon it is sometimes taken as a "nearby" event (Klass 1974:42-49).

The 1965 fireball was no exception. It was reported to have "crashed" or "landed" in six widely separated locations. A pilot in the air reported watching as it "plummeted" into Lake Erie (*Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10). At Midland, Pennsylvania, west of Pittsburgh, falling debris was reported but police found nothing (*Erie Daily Times*, *Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10). At Elyria, Ohio, west of Cleveland, a woman reported that a fireball the size of a "volley ball" fell into a wooded lot. Firemen reported 10 small grass fires but no flying saucer (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 10).

At Lapeer, Michigan, 40 miles north of Detroit, sheriff's officers investigating the report of "a ball of fire crashing" found only pieces of tinfoil (*Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10). The most spectacular report came from Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, where pilots, weather observers, and U.S. Coast Guard personnel reported that a flying object "exploded" over Detroit. Coast Guard boats sent into Lake St. Clair found nothing (*Tribune-Review*, County Edition, Dec. 10). The Air Force UFO investigating office at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, may have been interested in the recovery of space-launch debris and

sent three-man investigating teams from the 662 Radar Squadron, based near Pittsburgh, to Kecksburg and Erie (*Erie Daily Times*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*).

In Kecksburg the scene had turned into a circus. Little Nevin Kalp had run and told his mother, Mrs. Arnold Kalp of RD 1, Acme, Pennsylvania, that he had seen something "like a star on fire." Going outside she saw "blue smoke" that seemed to come from a nearby woods (Gatty 1965; *Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10). Other reports had described a bright trail left in the air by the meteor (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 10). A "thump" whose vibration felt by one witness was attributed to dynamiting at a local quarry or to a shock wave heard by many western Pennsylvanians who witnessed the fireball. Mrs. Kalp called a local radio station that had been reporting a plane crash. Soon, according to the *Tribune-Review*, a "massive traffic jam" had engulfed the small town (Gatty, *Tribune-Review*, City Edition, Dec. 10, Dec. 11).

A local volunteer fire policeman informed reporters that the Army and the state police had told them not to let anybody in (Gatty 1965). One result was that an early edition of the Greensburg paper carried a seven-column banner headline atop page one, "'Unidentified Flying Object' Falls Near Kecksburg," and, "Army ropes off area" (*Greensburg Tribune-Review*, County Edition, Dec. 10).

Captain Joseph Dussia, commander of the Pennsylvania State Police Troop A Headquarters at Greensburg, announced the next day that after an all-night search "absolutely nothing had been found." Reports of something being carried from the area referred only to equipment used in the search, Dussia said. He added, "Someone made a mountain out of a molehill" (*Greensburg Tribune-Review*, City

Edition, Dec. 10). The Air Force also announced that nothing had been found (*Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 10). The next day a *Greensburg Tribune-Review* editorial summarized its staff's independent investigation: Nothing at all seems to have happened (Dec. 11). The official explanations are totally consistent with all published accounts and the present recollections of scores of witnesses.

When does the "unsolved mystery" come in? Now enters Stan Gordon, founder of the Pennsylvania Association for the Study of the Unexplained (PASU), a Greensburg-based group that collects sightings of UFOs, Bigfoot, and other oddities, such as the "Eastern Cougar," an animal that has been extinct for a hundred years. PASU seems to do little research into these events but does issue press releases. Gordon, a 30-year veteran of saucer chases, is also Pennsylvania director of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), the nation's largest surviving flying-saucer group.

Each year in early January PASU issues its annual press release to Pennsylvania newspapers listing exciting reports received during the previous year. Their 1989 release featured an alleged UFO encounter by a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, policeman (*Latrobe Bulletin*, Jan. 9, 1989). A PASU investigator later said the witness had suffered "severe burns" and a "severe eye injury." MUFON's state director soon turned it into a "returning UFO abductee" encounter, making claims publicly denied by the witness. Local amateur astronomers found the witness had been looking at the planet Venus. The witness refused to be examined by a physician; a PASU investigator "lost" film evidence of the witness' injuries, and a substance Gordon had tested at a laboratory and then described as "strange" and "unusual" turned out

to be a common fertilizer (Young 1989).

In 1990 PASU issued a call for anyone with knowledge of the Kecksburg UFO crash to come forward (*Latrobe Bulletin*). With an experienced nose for saucer news, they must have sensed that even after 24 years witnesses always seem to be willing to come forward if the case is exciting.

Actually, the Kecksburg UFO tale has been making the rounds among Pennsylvania saucer buffs for some time. Flying-saucer evangelist Robert D. Barry hosts a Saturday midnight program, "ET Monitor," on WGCB-TV, Red Lion, Pennsylvania, a religious station, where he mixes NASA films, UFOria, viewer calls, and occasional Bible readings. Barry mentioned the Kecksburg recovery in a lecture at Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, on March 22, 1989, and followed on his April 2, 1989, program with the revelation that the incident involved the recovery of "bodies." Later, on his April 23, 1989, broadcast, he stated that no bodies were involved in the UFO accident.

Barry says that years ago he was told by an unnamed NASA informant that the Kecksburg UFO had been tracked, a claim that is contradicted by statements made by a North American Air Defense Command spokesman at the time (*Erie Daily Times*; *Pittsburgh Press*; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Dec. 10). Barry has also reported, citing Stan Gordon as his source, that a 1965 member of the Kecksburg Fire Company claims it had been contacted by NASA *before* the UFO crashed and asked to keep the public away from the area, a claim contradicted by the original published reports and eyewitness statements (*Tribune-Review*, City Edition, Dec. 10, 1965).

A curious claim, oddly similar to the Kecksburg story, occurred January 28, 1990, on Bob Barry's television program. At 7:10 P.M. (EST) that evening a bright fireball had been seen over much of the East Coast (*Harrisburg Sunday Patriot-News*, Jan. 28, 1990). That night on "ET Monitor" Barry reported that "a Greensburg source," a euphemism he sometimes uses for PASU's Stan Gordon, had called to say that "an object landed" nearby at about 7:20 P.M., that the area had been cordoned off, and that the source was "trying to get as close as he could." A well-known baseball philosopher would have been prompted to say that it seemed like "déjà vu all over again."

It is too bad the producers and researchers at "Unsolved Mysteries" didn't scratch around a little. At least 50 folks at Kecksburg could have saved them an embarrassment.

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Robert R. Young is education chairman of the Astronomical Society of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Address: 329 S. Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104.

CSICOP and the Institute for Inquiry invite you to attend the INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES WORKSHOP

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, April 19, 20, and 21, 1991

at the Ramada Hotel in Lexington, Kentucky

With CSICOP Fellows Joe Nickell and Robert Baker

Friday, April 19

1:00-2:00 P.M.: Registration. 2:00-5:00 P.M.: Investigative Techniques, I, Joe Nickell. Busting Ghosts and Poltergeists, Robert Baker. Some Curious Apparitions, Joe Nickell. 5:00-7:00 P.M.: Dinner Break. 7:00-9:00 P.M.: Visit the historic "haunted" Hunt-Morgan House.

Saturday, April 20

9:00-12 NOON: Hypnosis, Trances, and Past-Life Regressions, Robert Baker. Investigative Techniques, II, Joe Nickell. NOON-2:00 P.M.: Lunch Break. 2:00-5:00 P.M. Belief, Logic, and Proof & Investigative Tools, David Kesling. Dealing with the Media, Stephen Peterson. 7:00-10:00 P.M.: Banquet (optional, \$25.00, reservations limited). Entertainment: "Magic Man" Joel Dattilo.

Sunday, April 21

9:00 A.M.-12 NOON: UFOs, Abductions, and Dealing with the Disturbed, Robert Baker. Some Recent Case Studies in the Paranormal, Joe Nickell.

For further details, write or call Barry Karr, CSICOP, Box 229, Buffalo, NY 14215-0229. Tel. 716-834-3222.