

# Philip J. Klass

## (1919–2005)

By Robert Sheaffer

The man who was indisputably the most influential UFO skeptic of all time passed away in Merritt Island, Florida, on August 9 at the age of 85. Philip J. Klass was the man that UFO proponents loved to revile from the time he first became active in UFO investigations in the late 1960s, until failing health forced him to retire from UFOlogy in 2003. To the extent that UFOlogy is a religion, Klass fit perfectly into the role of its Satan, precisely because he was so effective in casting doubt on UFOlogy's most high-profile, cherished cases.

Philip Julian Klass was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on November 8, 1919, and grew up in Cedar Rapids. His father was a lawyer, which undoubtedly influenced his style of argument. Klass would often argue about a UFO case like a lawyer in front of a jury, sometimes using circumstantial evidence to cast doubt on a dubious UFO claim when there was no "smoking-gun" evidence against it. For example, if Father Gill

*Robert Sheaffer is a leading skeptical investigator of UFOs, a longtime CSICOP Fellow, and a founding member of the CSICOP UFO Subcommittee. He worked closely with Klass on many UFO-related matters for over thirty years. He was also a founding director and past chairman of the Bay Area Skeptics, a local skeptics' group in the San Francisco Bay area. Mr. Sheaffer lives near San Diego, California. He is the author of UFO Sightings (Prometheus, 1998). His Web site is at [www.debunker.com](http://www.debunker.com).*



Philip J. Klass. Photo by Tom Flynn

and his Papua New Guinea congregation truly believed a UFO was approaching, signaling them, and about to land, why did they go inside to eat dinner? While many found such arguments persuasive, the dedicated UFO believers usually found Phil infuriating.

Klass attended Iowa State University, graduating in 1941 with a degree in electrical engineering. After graduation, he moved to Schenectady, New York, to take a job with General Electric. His work on defense-related electronic systems earned him a draft deferment during World War II. Afterwards, his expertise in avionics—aviation-related electronics systems—gained him profes-

sional recognition, culminating in an offer from the industry-leading *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine in 1952 to join its editorial staff in Washington, D.C. Klass accepted the offer, becoming the senior avionics editor. Over the following forty years, he gained a worldwide reputation in the aerospace industry for his writing. He was named a fellow of the Institute for Electrical and Electronic Engineers in 1973 for his work in technical journalism and earned numerous other awards.

Klass's first involvement with UFOs came from a pair of articles he wrote for *Aviation Week* in 1966, later expanded into his first book, *UFOs Identified* (in 1968). After reading John G. Fuller's pro-UFO book *Incident at Exeter*, Phil thought that the objects could be "identified" as plasma balls, similar to ball lightning, hovering near power lines. He was convinced that the "classic" Lucci brothers photos, included in Fuller's book, were a plasma phenomenon. I first met Phil in 1968, but not until 1970 did we have the opportunity to discuss this case at length. I tried to persuade him that the "plasma" explanation for the UFO phenomenon was at best quite speculative and that the Lucci photos were likely hoaxes, as suggested in the then-newly released Condon Report (and since confessed by one of the hoaxers). Because I had been able to duplicate the photos quite convincingly, Phil came to agree, gradually leaving the "plasma UFO hypothesis" all but discarded. But even this first book hints at the depths of Phil's knowledge and interests: his firsthand investigation convinced him that the Socorro landing was

a hoax, and he explains the Betty and Barney Hill "UFO abduction" as a complex psychological event.

As early as 1968, Phil began to wonder how many UFO proponents truly believed their own propaganda about "proof" of alien saucers and challenged them to "put their money where their mouths are." He proposed a \$10,000 agreement: Klass would pay the signer \$10,000 upon definite proof of an alien landing, as affirmed by the National Academy of Sciences, or an actual appearance of an alien being on a TV news program. The signer, however, must pay Klass \$250 a year, for up to twenty years, for each year that this *did not* happen, while Klass would remain obligated by the agreement for the rest of his life. (These forty-to-one annual odds against a "UFO revelation" are actually quite generous for those who go around proclaiming that the government is about to release dramatic UFO secrets any day now.) He actually did collect some payments from a few individuals, including Stanton Friedman, but nobody stayed current with the agreement very long. Phil had made his point: even the most ardent talkers about "government cover-ups" and "impending disclosures" do not *really* believe their own babble.

In 1974 came Phil's second UFO book, *UFOs Explained*, to my mind still his best. It took down such highly publicized cases as the RB-47 aircraft-radar UFO case, the army-helicopter case in Mansfield, Ohio, the "abduction" of two fishermen in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and an alleged "landing-trace case" in Delphos, Kansas. All of these were being widely touted by prominent UFO believers, including the former U.S. Air Force Project Bluebook consultant, Dr. J. Allen Hynek, as solid evidence. Nobody except Phil could have convincingly tackled UFO cases involving radar, aircraft instrumentation, etc. His knowledge of avionics was second to none, and when a radar system or an aircraft control behaved strangely, causing some to attribute the anomaly to distant lights in the sky, Phil would go straight to the technical manual

for the relevant avionics, and explain exactly what had happened.

In 1976, Klass participated in the meetings that resulted in the founding of CSICOP, and became one of its most active and energetic Fellows. For many years, he served on its Executive Council.

**"If I ever found out that there was anything to the claims about a secret government UFO project, I'd write it up for Aviation Week."**

More UFO books were to follow: *UFOs: The Public Deceived* in 1983, *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* in 1988, and *The Real Roswell Crashed-Saucer Coverup* in 1997. Phil also wrote a book for young readers, *Bringing UFOs Down to Earth* in 1997.

Klass was anything but an "armchair" investigator. He traveled to Socorro, to Roswell, to Delphos, and many other places—always at his own expense—to investigate major UFO cases. When he was not traveling, he was on the telephone with witnesses, with other UFO investigators, or with law-enforcement personnel. Between the books, he somehow managed to write an amazing quantity of material pertaining to cases he was investigating, frequent challenges to the "other side" to answer difficult questions and "white papers" that set forth his position on a controversy, usually also containing pointed criticisms of positions taken by the opposition. I accumulated entire notebooks filled with such papers that were being sent back and forth.

In 1980, Phil was instrumental in bringing together a UFO subcommittee of other active skeptics, eventually including James Oberg, Gary Posner, James McGaha, and myself, among oth-

ers. Because the amount of labor involved in sending out skeptical information and "white papers" to an ever-increasing number of UFO skeptics steadily grew, Klass began publishing a *Skeptics UFO Newsletter (SUN)* in December 1989, published six times a

year. The effort required to keep writing and publishing so much high-quality material, in addition to his regular full-time career, must have been prodigious. Publication of *SUN* continued until the end of 2002 (readers can access back issues online at [www.csicop.org/klass/files/home.html](http://www.csicop.org/klass/files/home.html)).

Klass was very much a "Washington insider." He knew cabinet secretaries and congressmen, and he occasionally met presidents. The magazine where he worked was widely and affectionately known as "Aviation Leak," for its many revelations about new military projects under development. He would often say something like, "If I ever found out that there was anything to the claims about a secret government UFO project, I'd write it up for *Aviation Week*." Indeed, the total lack of credible insider rumors and leaks on the subject was one of the reasons Klass remained so completely skeptical about UFOs. He and his colleagues got plenty of insider leaks about stealth aircraft, ABM systems, spy satellites, and the like—but *nothing* about UFOs. During the Cold War, on more than one occasion, Russian "businessmen" in Washington (no doubt working in a more official capacity) offered hospitality to Phil, hoping to glean some nuggets of

insider knowledge. Phil always kept the FBI informed of such approaches.

A man who always placed work before relaxation, Klass typically spent at least eighty hours per week on the combination of his *Aviation Week* career, his UFO investigations and writing, and later, on his condominium association. (He felt he was protecting his investment by playing as large a role as possible in the management of common expenses and repairs.) Klass officially retired from *Aviation Week* in 1986, but his workload since then seems if anything to have increased. He kept writing avionics articles, saying that the only difference his retirement made was that he was now doing most of his work at home. The truth is that Klass simply could not sit idle; when time opened up, he had to reach out to take on more work.

He used his scant free time in active pursuits, especially skiing and sailing. I had the privilege to accompany Phil on several sailing adventures on the Potomac River, where it was obvious he enjoyed the boat's pitching and swaying

far more than did I. He continued his active life until he was approaching eighty. For many years, he lived in an impressive bachelor apartment in Washington's exclusive Harbor Square apartments, overlooking the Potomac and the Washington Monument. Many out-of-town visitors, including both pro- and anti-UFO researchers, enjoyed his hospitality. Always atypical, the longtime bachelor married for the first time at age sixty to Nadya Ganev, a Bulgarian-born woman who was working as a broadcaster for the Voice of America, and who now survives him.

One unmistakable "Klassic" trait was his fearlessness. Phil always followed a line of argument to its conclusion and argued all of it forcefully, no matter who might disagree or be offended. During the "missile gap" debates of the 1960s, Klass, using a pseudonym, wrote a series of reasoned articles in an influential publication arguing against a hasty missile buildup, articles that might have ended his career as an aerospace journalist had his identity leaked out. And when con-

fronting UFO promoters, Phil was unstoppable. He delighted in the role he called "skunk at the garden party" at pro-UFO conferences that he frequently attended, naturally at his own expense. On the downside, Phil's argumentativeness was not always directed at proper targets. He could be an extremely difficult man to work with, and his tendency to escalate small disagreements into major arguments needlessly alienated more than a few of his fellow skeptics.

Toward the end of his career, even many of UFOlogy's most dedicated proponents grudgingly expressed a degree of admiration for Klass and for his role in trimming away misinformation and imposture. UFO promoters typically claim that skeptics are "uninformed" about the supposedly excellent "evidence" for UFOs, but everybody agreed it was impossible to say that about Klass. Phil may be gone, but thanks to James McGaha, Asteroid 7277, a ten-kilometer piece of rock, was officially named "Klass" in his honor, and it will circle the sun for as long as the solar system survives.

## Robert A. Baker

### (1921–2005)

By Joe Nickell

**R**obert A. Baker—one of the world's preeminent authorities on such phenomena as ghosts, alien abductions, religious apparitions, and reincarna-

tion—died August 8 at his home in Lexington, Kentucky, at age 84. He is survived by his wife Dolly and six children.

Dr. Baker—Bob to his many friends—worked at the MIT Lincoln Lab (1950–1952), conducted training research for the U.S. Army (1953–1968), and taught at the University of Kentucky (1969–1988), chairing the psychology department there until his retirement.

The author of more than a hundred professional journal articles, he also

wrote fifteen books, including *They Call It Hypnosis* (1990), *Hidden Memories: Voices and Visions from Within* (1992), *Mind Games* (1996), *Child Sexual Abuse and False Memory Syndrome* (1998), and (with Joe Nickell) *Missing Pieces: How to Investigate Ghosts, UFOs, Psychics & Other Mysteries* (1992). He was a frequent contributor to *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* and was a Fellow of CSICOP as well as the American Psychological Association.

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*Joe Nickell is CSICOP's Senior Research Fellow and author of numerous investigative books—most recently Secrets of the Sideshows (University Press of Kentucky, 2005).*