

# Famous Alien Abduction in Pascagoula: Reinvestigating a Cold Case

Among reports of extraterrestrial encounters, the 1973 claim of two Mississippi men to have been taken aboard a flying saucer remains controversial. Was it a real encounter or a hoax? Or is that a false dichotomy?

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**C**harles Hickson, the chief claimant in the Pascagoula, Mississippi, UFO abduction case, died of a heart attack on September 9, 2011, at the age of eighty. Until his death he maintained the truth of his alien encounter—part of the UFO “flap” of 1973 (Peebles 1995, 241–45). It has remained (after the Betty and Barney Hill case of 1961) “the second most famous UFO-abduction case in history,” according to UFO historian Jerome Clark (1998, 714).

## Very Close Encounter

Hickson, then forty-two, was fishing from an old pier on the Pascagoula River with a friend, nineteen-year-old Calvin Parker Jr., on the night of October 11, 1973. Hickson claimed they heard a “zipping” sound and encountered a glowing object—an elongated UFO—hovering above the ground. Three robotlike aliens exited from the craft; although they were gray humanoids just over five feet tall, they were otherwise of a type not reported before or since (Nickell 2011): each entity lacked a neck, exhibited only slits for eyes and mouth, had a nose and ears that were sharply pointed protrusions,

and possessed clawed hands. The legs were joined, pedestal-like, and the entity glided (see Figure 1).

The two men claimed they were taken aboard the spacecraft, where they were examined, after which they were returned to their fishing site. Unnerved, they sat in a car to regain their composure (with Hickson, at least, drinking whiskey), then reported their experience to the sheriff.

Although the UFO reported by the men had apparently not been seen by people on the heavily traveled nearby highway (Randle 2001), there had been other UFO sightings in the area, including on the night in question. The UFOs were variously described—some saw a helicopter-like object; one person reported a supposed “experiment” from an Air Force base; and so on (Clark 1998, 715; Blum with Blum 1974, 14–19).

## Controversy

The pair’s veracity was accepted by UFO believers J. Allen Hynek of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) and James Harder of the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), both of whom rushed to interview the “ab-

ductees.” Harder tried unsuccessfully to hypnotize the men (Clark 1998, 717) but did conclude they had experienced “an extraterrestrial phenomena [*sic*].”<sup>1</sup> Hynek believed the pair had at least had “a very real, frightening experience” (Blum with Blum 1974, 24–25). The sheriff’s department also felt the men were telling the truth, and Hickson requested and passed a lie-detector test arranged by the agent with whom the men had signed a contract to promote their story. Parker suffered a breakdown and was briefly hospitalized (Clark 1998, 714–17).

The men’s fantastic report drew much skepticism. Famed UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass noted discrepancies in Hickson’s account (for instance, once referring to the creatures as having a “hole” for a mouth but later calling it a “slit”). Klass also pointed out that the lie-detector test was conducted by an “inexperienced” polygraph operator and that Hickson refused to take another administered by an expert police examiner. Based on other evidence—including the fact that Hickson had once been fired for improperly obtaining money from employees under his su-

pervision—Klass concluded the case was a hoax ([1974] 1976, 347–69; 1989, 18–19).

### A Solution

So which was it: a genuine alien abduction or a hoax? Or is that a false dichotomy? In reviewing the case, I thought there might be another possibility: the two men, who might have been drinking before the incident (as Hickson admitted he was after), might have dozed off. Hickson could then have entered a hypnagogic (“waking dream”) state, a trancelike condition between waking and sleeping in which some people experience hallucinations, often with bizarre imagery, including strange beings (aliens, ghosts, etc.). This state may be accompanied by what is called “sleep paralysis” (the body’s inability to move due to still being in the sleep mode). In fact, Hickson not only reported the bizarre imagery but also

said that the aliens “paralyzed” him before carrying him aboard the UFO in what sounds like a hypnagogic fantasy.

The imagery might even have been triggered by Hickson actually sighting something—almost anything—that, while he was in the waking-dream state, appeared to be a “UFO.” During a recorded interview with Sheriff Fred Diamond (Blum with Blum 1974, 30–

36), Hickson described the UFO as “a blue light,” adding: “It circled a bit.” He emphasized it was blue, saying, “And you think you *dreamin’* about something like that, you know” (original emphasis). Hickson also reported that it made “a little buzzin’ sound—nnnnnnnnnnnn, nnnnnnnnnnnnn” (Blum with Blum 1974, 31). Bright lights and odd noises can also be part of the waking-dream

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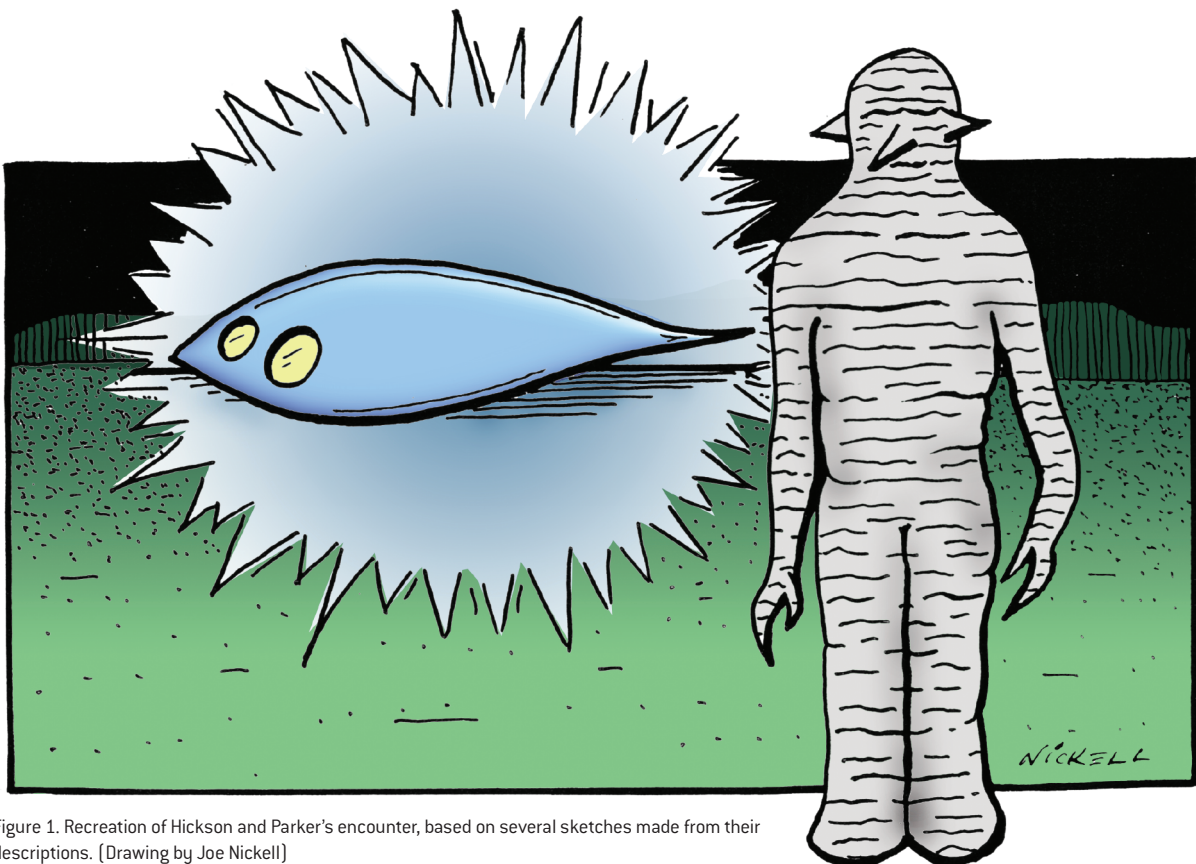


Figure 1. Recreation of Hickson and Parker’s encounter, based on several sketches made from their descriptions. (Drawing by Joe Nickell)

experience, as can the sense of floating (Mavromatis 1987, 148). Hickson stated, “I couldn’t resist [the extraterrestrials], I just floated—felt no sensation, no pain” (Blum with Blum 1974, 32). These phenomena, coupled with the paralysis and fantastic imagery, corroborate the diagnosis of a hypnagogic experience.

Of additional corroborative value are other factors, including Hickson’s description of the aliens as speaking inside his head (Clark 1998, 715), because a feature of hypnagogia is the sense of perceiving “with whole consciousness.” This explains the bright lights and clar-

tion was vulnerable: he had recently joined the shipyard where Hickson worked and was residing with the Hicksons.) It would have been significant if Parker had himself been in a hypnagogic state, since “suggestibility is high during this state” (Goldenson 1970, I: 574). Interestingly, when the two men were left alone in a room at the sheriff’s office, where they were secretly tape recorded (Clark 1998, 716), they did not make incriminating statements as they might have if perpetrating a hoax but acted more like people comparing notes to see if they were in agreement with each other.

**But if Hickson had a hypnagogic experience, what about Parker? Actually, he need not have been in such a state himself because, as he told officers, he had passed out at the beginning of the incident and failed to regain consciousness until it was over.**

ity of his experiences, since hypnagogic visions often seem particularly illuminated, vivid, and detailed (Mavromatis 1987, 14–52, 148).

But if Hickson had a hypnagogic experience, what about Parker? Actually, he need not have been in such a state himself because, as he told officers, he had *passed out* at the beginning of the incident and failed to regain consciousness until it was over (United Press International 1973). Later he “remembered” bits and pieces of the alleged encounter. This would be consistent with an example of *folie à deux* (a French expression, the “folly of two”) in which a percipient convinces another of some alleged occurrence (as by the power of suggestion, the force of a dominant personality, or the like) or the other person simply acquiesces for whatever reason. (Young Parker’s posi-

Still, some of Hickson’s behavior is questionable. For example, he kept adding to his story. He claimed on a television show a month later that the interior lights of the UFO had been so intense as to cause eye injury lasting for three days, although an extensive hospital examination the day after the incident had shown no such eye damage (Klass 1974, 349–50). But this is a familiar story: even accounts of the truest occurrences gain distortions and embellishments over time, so why should Hickson’s story be any different? UFOlogist Kevin D. Randle (2001) insists Hickson’s alterations “went beyond that.” Specifically, he says, “These changes seemed to be in response to criticisms and appeared to be an attempt to smooth out rough spots in the story.” But to me that just signals Hickson’s defensiveness brought on by people ridiculing him—

not proof of initial hoaxing.

When all the facts are weighed, the preponderance of evidence appears not only to favor the hypothesis involving the hypnagogic state but to provide corroboration as well. The realization may not benefit the late Charles Hickson, but it could help others who hear of supposed alien abductions to rest in peace. ■

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#### Note

1. The men were later hypnotized by another person (Hickson and Mendez 1983).

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