

UFOs, Pilots, and the Not-So-Friendly Skies

A senior airline pilot publicly announced he had taken a dramatic color photo of a disk-shaped UFO in broad daylight. Here is what really happened, and why.

Philip J. Klass

Had you been one of the many thousands of people who listened to the popular evening talk-show broadcast over San Francisco's powerful KGO radio station on March 31, 1975, you could easily have been convinced that there are extraterrestrial craft in our skies. You would have heard a senior United Airlines captain report that he not only had seen a disk-shaped UFO in broad daylight but had managed to photograph it in color. In the public mind, airline pilots are viewed as people whose integrity and veracity are beyond question.

I was one of two guests on the Art Finley show that evening, along with Paul Cerny, then chairman of the Mutual UFO Network's Bay Area chapter and now MUFON's western regional director. After Cerny and I had crossed verbal swords on the UFO question, with me in my traditional skeptic's role, we then responded to questions and comments telephoned in by listeners throughout the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain states.

One caller said he was a senior captain with a major airline, which he declined to identify, except to say that "we fly the friendly skies," i.e., United. The captain, who declined to give his name on the air, said the incident had occurred around 4 P.M. in September 1958 when he was flying as co-pilot aboard a DC-6 airliner en route from Seattle to Los Angeles, cruising at an altitude of about 14,000 feet.

He said the disklike object was spotted to the west as it was approaching the DC-6, and it subsequently passed and was flying ahead of the airliner. The pilot said he had with him in the cockpit a recently purchased camera loaded with color film. He quickly grabbed the camera

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and photographed the UFO through the green sun-shield over the right-hand window. The captain said he sent a copy of the color-transparency to "Major Keyhoe's organization," i.e., the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP). He said they analyzed the photo "but could find no spectral lines."

At this point our on-the-air discussion was interrupted for the hourly news report. Cerny and I asked the airline pilot to remain on the line so we could talk to him privately, and he agreed to do so. During the subsequent private conversation, I asked the captain if he had the original color transparency of the UFO, and he assured me that he did. I expressed an interest in obtaining a copy of it, along with a copy of the report he said he had written shortly after the incident, and offered to send him in return an autographed copy of my then recently published book, *UFOs Explained*. He agreed and gave me his name, Joseph H. Mathes, and his address. Cerny also talked with the captain and also requested a copy of the report and the photo for MUFON.

Within a few days I returned to Washington and promptly mailed Captain Mathes an autographed copy of my book. After a month had elapsed without a response, I wrote to Mathes, on May 11, asking if he had received my book and when I might expect to receive a copy of his UFO photo and report. He replied on May 18, thanking me for the "gift." Mathes explained that because of his busy schedule he had not been able to read my book until quite recently. He complimented me on some aspects of the book but challenged others in a manner that suggested he was a "UFO-believer," which, of course, is his (and everyone's) inalienable right.

But Mathes did not enclose the long-awaited UFO photo-transparency or the report. Instead, there was a brief P.S. that said: "As formerly advised, please contact NICAP for information on 1958 report and slide." If Mathes had "formerly advised" me during our original telephone conversation that I should obtain the photo and report from NICAP, there would have been no reason for me to go to the expense of sending him a copy of my book.

I responded on May 27, answering some of the challenges posed in his letter, and concluding: "I feel you have not kept your part of the bargain. I agreed to send you an autographed book without charge and you were to at least try to find your original report and slide . . . Surely for so important an incident and photo . . . you must have put them away in a valuable, safe location . . . At least try to find them for me."

Mathes replied by letter on May 31, devoting nearly four typewritten pages to further challenges to my views on UFOs. Only at the bottom of the last page did he mention the UFO photo and report, saying that he had "not put my report and UFO slide away in a safe place, unfortunately." He claimed he was unable to find them and added that the incident now was quite "old and not all that important." Mathes concluded his letter: "Have a happy and enjoyable summer season. Life has many beautiful things to

offer besides investigating a group of shy, well-meaning visitors to our beloved planet.”

On July 1, 1975, I wrote to Jack Acuff, then head of NICAP, with whom I had cordial relations. I recounted the Captain Mathes UFO incident and asked if Acuff would search NICAP files for the Mathes report and photo, as well as for the spectral analysis that Mathes said NICAP had made. Acuff responded on July 3, saying he had checked NICAP's files and could find neither the UFO report nor the photo.

Then I remembered that in 1964 NICAP had published a 184-page report, entitled *The UFO Evidence*, in which it had listed the most impressive UFO incidents and photos, for distribution to members of Congress and the news media. I turned to this report, which had not been prepared until several years after Mathes claimed he had submitted the photo and report to NICAP. One section was devoted to UFO reports from airline and military pilots, *but there was no mention of any report from Captain Mathes*. Another section listed 64 of the most impressive UFO photos that had been submitted to NICAP between 1946 and 1962, *but there was no mention of a photo from Captain Mathes*.

On July 7, I wrote to Captain Mathes saying that NICAP had no record of having received either his UFO report or the photo, adding that my search through NICAP's lengthy 1964 report containing its most impressive cases also had failed to turn up any mention of the incident. I concluded by offering him an “out.” Was it possible, I asked, that he had sent his UFO report and photo to some other UFO organization and not to Major Keyhoe/NICAP. My letter was soon returned, unopened, marked: “Refused by addressee. Return to sender.”

I began to wonder if Mathes really was a senior captain with United Airlines, or whether this claim, like the others, was bogus. On August 3, I wrote to a friend who was employed at the United Airlines flight-training center in Denver to ask if he could check company records to determine if United had a captain named Joe H. Mathes. Two weeks later my friend replied that it was not necessary for him to check the records because he had met Mathes in late 1973 when he came to Denver for his semi-annual pilot proficiency check. He said that Mathes had told him that he and a team of electronic and computer experts in California were working to “crack the code” that would enable them to communicate with the extraterrestrial visitors who pilot the UFOs!

Another curious incident involving MUFON's Paul Cerny had occurred during the same talk-show on station KGO. At one point in our discussion, Cerny suggested that the real reason I was a UFO-skeptic and debunker was that I was being paid by the Central Intelligence Agency or some other government office. I reminded Cerny that he had made a similar allegation in the late 1960s when we had appeared together on a Bay Area television program. At that time, I reminded him, I had offered to pay him \$10,000 if he could substantiate his charge.

When he raised the issue again on the KGO program, I noted that, because there had been considerable inflation since my offer was made, I would now raise it to \$25,000. I said I would pay him if he could prove that I had ever received any money from *any* government agency at any time except for a small Social Security payment on the death of my mother and an even smaller amount one year as a refund on my income tax.

Furthermore, to help Cerny obtain the evidence he needed to collect the \$25,000, I offered to send him for his examination photocopies of my Federal tax returns since 1966, when I first entered the field of UFOlogy, *if he would let me examine his Federal tax returns for the same period*. If he found evidence of the alleged payments in my tax returns, he could collect the \$25,000. And if he found no such evidence but could prove his charge by other means, he could have me sent to prison for tax evasion as well as collecting the money, which undoubtedly would please him greatly. *Cerny agreed to send me his Federal tax returns as soon as he received mine.*

Upon returning to Washington, I made a photocopy of my Federal tax return for 1966, and on May 10, 1975, I mailed it to Cerny with a letter saying that as soon as I received his 1966 return I would send him a copy of mine for 1967, and this procedure would continue until each of us had sent the other all of his tax returns. *The letter containing my 1966 tax return was returned, unopened, marked: "Refused. Please return to sender" and signed "P. Cerny."*

I heard no more from either Mathes or Cerny. Then in mid-February 1982, I was told that Cerny and Mathes had concocted the story of the pilot's UFO sighting in advance of the KGO program to confront me with a seemingly irrefutable UFO report—from a senior airline captain with a daylight photo to support his story.

This I learned from a young UFOlogist named John Merrell, of Beaverton, Oregon, whose experience in investigating UFO cases had converted him to a skeptic. Merrell had corresponded with Mathes in the spring of 1975. In a letter dated May 11, 1975, barely six weeks after the KGO broadcast, Capt. Mathes suggested that Merrell "contact one Paul Cerny, a personal friend of mine . . ."

Mathes concluded that if Merrell was "deeply serious about learning the real purpose and validity of UFOs, and their reason for visiting this planet. I would be happy to forward to you a copy of *The Amnesia Factor*, published by Celestial Arts of Millbrae, Calif., when it reaches the bookstores next August . . . I wrote the book in conjunction with Lenora Huett, my coworker." Merrell obtained a copy and, following our recent discussion, he sent it on to me.

The contents of the paperback book are summarized on its back cover: "Two extraterrestrial guides speak through the unexpected voice of a gentle and gifted 'channel.' Through a series of taped interviews in which two beings in different times and dimensions speak through Lenora Huett, J.H. Mathes writes compellingly of what they said about him, about

mankind, space, other worlds, and God.”

In the introduction of the 169-page book, we are told that Mathes “maintained a firm, skeptical stance throughout three decades concerning ESP phenomena. But one sunny afternoon in 1971, he was introduced to Lenora . . . Within ten short minutes with Lenora, his limited opinions had to be radically revised. He quickly determined that her telepathic ability was genuine by asking complex questions clearly beyond her field of knowledge.”

During this first session, Mathes writes, “we soon discovered that Lenora knew nothing about UFOs, nor did she have any real interest in such things. Paul [whose last name is not given but who appears to be Paul Cerny] then began projecting slides onto the screen. As a test, he asked Lenora if the UFO in the picture was real or fake. Gradually overcoming her shyness, Lenora faintly murmured, ‘That one feels like a fake.’ Then another UFO flashed onto the screen and she hesitated, looking far away. Suddenly she stated, ‘That’s the real thing.’ Then another lighted the screen. Leaning forward, she stated, ‘That, too, is a real object. I can sense that there was life aboard that craft.’ We stared at Lenora. somehow I could tell that she had been accurate . . .,” Mathes wrote.

The most impressive part of Mrs. Huett’s performance was yet to come. “Paul lapsed into his lecture format by stating the circumstances surrounding each sighting. ‘This photograph was taken by a scientist . . . We’d like to find out if UFOs are able to penetrate into dimensions other than ours.’ Lenora leaned back, closed her eyes very briefly, then surprised us all by rattling forth the following strange message: “They could, but do not. Their vibrations vary within the bounds of those energy layers within the physical matrix. They are able to reach a different vibration, yet are still here.”

Mathes asked: “What can I learn about my prior lives? I’m especially interested in Biblical times.” Mrs. Huett informed him he had once been a Tibetan monk, named Twzen, and Mathes reports: “With the spelling of the name Twzen, I felt a strange glow flood through my body.” Mrs. Huett explained that data on prior lives comes from the Akashic Records and that a person’s “guides” were the guardians of the records. When Mathes asked for the names of his “guides,” this question brought forth a scowl from Lenora. Mathes writes: “Much later, I discovered that the cause of her hang-up was bound up in the past. Lenora had innocently told some close friends of her newfound ability with telepathy and, when they tested her by requesting the names of former relatives, she had misspelled a few. Her close ‘friends’ had promptly called her a fake. Such mistreatment had caused Lenora no end of confusion and hurt.”

After the first chapter, Mrs. Huett and Mathes abandon UFOs for much more esoteric subjects such as multi-dimensional worlds, “astral planes,” and “karmic debts.” (In the Acknowledgments page, the authors express their appreciation to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for his “exquisite

new Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita correcting many centuries of misinterpretation,” and “To his beloved teacher: Jai Guru Dev eternally.”)

According to John Merrell, Cerny admitted to him that I had been “set-up” by prearrangement with Mathes. At the time of the KGO broadcast I never once suspected that Cerny and Mathes were in cahoots. Merrell has a tape-recording of the program and told me he has listened many times to the portion in which Mathes called in and Cerny and I asked questions about his UFO incident. Merrell says that Cerny was a good “actor” and successfully gave the impression of “surprise” and “astonishment” as Mathes told his tale.

Art Finley, the talk-show host on the night of March 31, 1975, has long since left the area. Even if station KGO were to reveal on another talk-show how its listeners had been victimized, how many of the original listeners would be tuned in? How many of the original listeners, when the subject of UFOs comes up in conversation, comment: “Well, all I know is that I heard a senior airline captain one night on the radio say that he not only had seen a strange, disklike object in broad daylight but he had even photographed it. Surely a senior airline pilot wouldn’t tell a story like that on the radio if it weren’t true.”

As for me, I hope the time never comes when I settle back in my airline seat and the pilot comes on the cabin intercom to say: “Good evening, folks, welcome to the friendly skies. This is your captain, Joe Mathes. I have just received an extraordinary message that you won’t believe . . .”

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Editor's Postscript: On May 12, 1982, the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER sent a copy of the article above by Philip J. Klass in manuscript form to the pilot, J.H. Mathes. It invited him to comment, in writing, on the specific factual points in the article and offered him space for those comments to appear with the article. He replied by telephone to the editor on May 14, saying he did not wish to reply in writing. He maintained he had taken the daylight UFO photo in question (a 35-mm slide), but said he would not provide any evidence to support the assertion. He refused to provide the slide or a copy of it for analysis. “I have no obligation to produce it,” he said. He said he had sent a copy of it and a report on the sighting to NICAP (Major Donald Keyhoe) in Washington about November 1958 “give or take two or three months,” and we should check there. As the article points out, Klass had already checked, and NICAP could find no record of having received anything from Mathes. Nor was there any mention of it in the 1964 NICAP report that contained a section devoted to UFO reports from airline and military pilots. Mathes said he could not provide a copy of the report he sent NICAP because he “had not made a copy of it” at the time. As for the radio program on KGO, Mathes said Paul Cerny had known of the (alleged) photo and did suggest he call in to the radio program Klass was on. But he said, “There was absolutely no collusion whatsoever.”