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WESTCHESTER SIGHTINGS

Near midnight on December 31, 1982, Edwin Hansen, a 55-year-old warehouse foreman, was driving home on an interstate highway near Kent, New York, when he saw lights hovering above the road just ahead of him. At first he took them to be from a helicopter shining a searchlight on the ground, but when he drew closer, he could hear no sounds. The lights began making slow, tight circles, moving together as if they were part of one object, and Hansen strained to see what shape, if any, was behind them. He wished the lights would come closer. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than they did. The searchlight was suddenly shut off and the lights descended toward Hansen's car.

"It was shaped like a boomerang with lights running up and down its wings," Hansen told investigators. "Part of what seemed to be a long, triangular tail section loomed behind the boomerang pattern of lights. It was so huge it filled up the entire sky" (Hynek, Imbrogno, Pratt, 1987).

By now the light was so intense that Hansen was forced to shield his eyes with his hands. Once again the searchlight beam flashed down on the road, moving closer and closer. Thoroughly panicked, Hansen honked the car horn and pleaded for the object to go away. Then "thoughts that weren't my own" came into his head and "a kind of voice" told him to be calm. The object turned away and Hansen sped past the

cars of onlookers who had pulled over to the side of the road to observe the spectacle.

Just moments later a Kent police officer standing outside his home observed what apparently was the same object. The lights, he said, "seemed to be connected by some type of structure." V- or boomerang-shaped, the object emitted a "faint, deep, hum." The lights vividly lit up the ground all around the witness. "I never saw anything like this before," he said, "but I can tell you this was not any type of aircraft that I know of" (Hynek, Imbrogno, Pratt, 1987).

These are the first known sightings to figure in one of the most extraordinary UFO events in history: the repeated appearance of large (and at times enormous) structured objects over seven densely-populated counties in New York and Connecticut. (To ufologists the episode would be referred to as the "Westchester sightings," because that New York county claimed a plurality of the reports.) The sightings would occur most intensely in the early spring of 1983 and the summer of 1984 but would take place sporadically at other times, ending in 1986. The witnesses numbered in the many thousands. The great majority of witnesses would relate some or all of the features described above. In that sense, at least, the sightings were somewhat monotonous; yet their very consistency suggested the presence of a genuinely out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon.

The principal investigator was Philip J. Imbrogno, a science teacher at a school in White

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Plains, New York. Imbrogno interviewed numerous witnesses and even saw a UFO himself on two occasions. The first sighting was at 1 a.m. on October 5, 1984, as he and another investigator, Fred Dennis, were returning from an interview with witnesses to spectacular sightings at a nuclear-power plant, to be described shortly. Imbrogno and Dennis saw a large half-circle of six bluish-yellow lights, connected to a partially-illuminated structure. Suddenly it flipped on its side and turned like a ferris wheel—just as innumerable observers had described its doing. Imbrogno saw and chased a boomerang-shaped object in a car on March 21, 1985.

One of the most dramatic events associated with the affair was a 2½-hour localized sighting flap on the evening of March 24, 1983. The first known sighting was at 7:30 p.m. when a corporate executive in Bedford, New York, saw a half-circle of lights hovering behind some trees near a commuter-bus station. There was no sound. After watching for five minutes, the man went inside his house to alert his family, but when they came outside, the lights were gone. Half an hour later, in Carmel, 10 miles to the north, four persons saw a half-circle of red and white lights and the vague outline of a larger object to which the lights were attached. The lights were hovering over trees several hundred yards away. The lights drifted to the east and were lost to view, but almost immediately a family living a quarter-mile away saw them drift into view. They saw, in one's words, a "huge object" which stopped over some trees. Through binoculars the observers saw a dull-green metallic structure connecting the lights. When the UFO turned slightly, they could see it had a V shape. At that moment a brilliant beam of white light shot down from the center of the object and in it a small reddish object descended, then shot off "very, very fast toward the north" (Hynek, Imbrogno, Pratt, 1987). The beam was shut off and the object turned and headed slowly east.

Half an hour later sightings erupted in two locations 15 miles apart. In Millwood and

Yorktown in Westchester County over a thousand persons, by conservative estimate, saw a huge array of V-shaped lights flying slowly, at altitudes varying between 2000 feet and treetop level, and sometimes hovering over cars and individuals. Most witnesses heard no sound and all were astounded at the object's size. One compared it to a "flying city." Another said it was the size of an aircraft carrier.

The object seen to the north, in several Putnam County communities, was somewhat smaller, but it was also boomerang-shaped, silent and capable of hovering. As one witness, Ruth Holtsman, who was in a car with her family at the time, put it, "The strange thing about it was that the object made no sound. It just hung there motionless in the sky. It was like seeing a ghost" (Hynek, Imbrogno, Pratt, 1987). While it was in view, a driver pulled up and stopped almost directly underneath it. The lights started to flash in a wild sequence up and down the "wings." That driver jumped into his car and fled in the direction from which he had come. Then the UFO approached the Holtsmans' car, which was bathed in a blinding white light as it sped under the boomerang.

Around the same time John Miller, in a car on his way home, saw the object hovering just above a pond near his Brewster home. The UFO was scanning two "very bright" searchlight beams over the surface of the water as if, Miller thought, it were looking for something. He could hear a "faint whooshing sound." At 8:45 several dozen diners at a ski-resort restaurant near Stormville saw white lights in a boomerang shape hovering over a utility pole 200 yards away. Three other persons were much closer to it: they were driving by the utility pole and stopped. The driver, a Putnam County correctional officer, got out and studied the object, about 200 feet above him, carefully. It was silent and the structure that held the lights was dark and nonreflective—a detail all those who saw the object behind the lights were to remark on. After watching it for 20 minutes, the officer headed back to his jeep, at which time the UFO moved down the road.

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"I followed it to Interstate 84," he told Imbrogno. "As it started to move, all the lights went out and I could see the outline of it against the sky. I could see the dark V moving." Ten seconds later the lights came back on, relatively dim red and white ones; then the bright white lights came on again and the others disappeared. He and his companions followed the object for over an hour, clocking its speed at 20 mph.

Sightings continued in the two counties until about ten o'clock. Among the witnesses was a veteran aircraft mechanic who was certain what he saw could not have been caused by an aircraft. The last sighting occurred over nearby Danbury, Connecticut, when an IBM executive saw a lighted object "larger than a 747" hovering over pine trees near his home.

Of all the sightings, perhaps the most important from a number of points of view, not the least of them national-security concerns, took place at the Indian Point nuclear reactor complex on the Hudson River at Buchanan, New York. This sighting, unlike many of the others, was not reported in the newspapers at the time it occurred. Imbrogno learned of it only because one of the witnesses called a radio show on which Imbrogno was discussing the UFO wave. The caller, a New York State Power Authority police officer, said he and 11 other officers had seen a giant UFO hovering 300 feet over one of the reactors for ten minutes on the night of July 24, 1984.

Imbrogno asked for a personal interview, but the guard (whom Imbrogno identifies only as "Carl") said he would have to get clearance from his supervisor. At first permission was granted but then withdrawn, and the guards were ordered not to discuss the incident. When Imbrogno threatened to take the story to ABC News, the manager relented, explaining that the authorities were reluctant to admit that guards were seeing "flying saucers" because they feared critics of the plant would use this as evidence that the already-controversial reactor was in the hands of unstable persons. Imbrogno was able to meet with Carl and a number of the other guards twice in a restaurant. From them he got this story:

There had been, it turned out, two sightings. The first was on June 14, when Carl and other security personnel saw "10 or more lights arranged in a boomerang pattern" hovering for about 15 minutes a quarter of a mile away. The lights were "incredibly bright" and behind them was a "dark mass" which blocked out the lights of a plane that flew behind it. Carl estimated it was 300 feet long.

On the night of the 24th the object appeared from the same direction as before. The lights, in a semicircle, first flashed yellow, then white, then blue. Far to the rear was a blinking red light. The dark mass behind the lights blocked out the stars as it approached, slowly and steadily, even as winds gusted at 30 knots an hour. By the time it got to within 500 feet, the witnesses could see an ice-cream-cone shape and a solid body the length of three football fields. As it passed overhead, it was moving so slowly that the witnesses could keep up with it simply by walking, suggesting to them its speed was something like 5 to 10 mph. It took all of five minutes to pass over them. Only one of the three reactors was operating at the time and it was the one over which the UFO flew, at one point getting as close as 30 feet to it. An officer inside the plant was instructed to film the object on a security camera atop a 95-foot pole. The object was so enormous that the officer had to pan the camera almost 180 degrees in order to cover all of it. Another officer told Imbrogno, "There was this series of lights in the shape of a boomerang, and behind it was this dark structure, and there were these two things on the bottom that looked like hollow spheres of some sort. They looked like portals that could open up and rockets or something could fly out of there. They were very dark. It was very low. It was so close I actually got scared looking at it" (Hynek, Imbrogno, Pratt, 1987).

During the object's approach toward the east gate of Reactor Number Three, the plant's movement-detecting sensors and the alarm system failed, as did the computer in charge of security and communications. When a National Guard base 10 miles away was notified and asked to provide an armed helicopter to shoot down the UFO, the object flew away.

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The next day the commander of the security guards instructed his charges to forget what had happened. The video and audio records of the event were removed, and in the next days representatives of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission oversaw a shakeup of the security operation at the plant. The efforts of Imbrogno and radio reporter Gerry Culliton to gather more information from plant officials and, through the Freedom of Information Act, from relevant government agencies came to naught. They did learn, however, of civilian sightings, one recorded on videotape, near the plant on the nights in question.

In the midst of the Westchester flap, *Discover*, a popular-science magazine edited by Leon Jaroff, a hostile critic of UFOs and other unorthodox phenomena, declared it had solved the mystery. The "UFO," *Discover* announced, was an illusion fostered by a group of Stormville pilots who flew ultralight aircraft in tight formation and used their lights in such a way as to create boomerang or circle patterns. As to the silence or very slight sounds witnesses reported, *Discover* noted that single-engine planes, even when directly overhead, are hardly audible at ground level when the craft fly "above 3000 or 4000 feet." *Discover* failed to note that many witnesses were considerably closer to the object than that—anywhere from a dozen to a few hundred feet—nor did the magazine inform its readers of one of the phenomenon's most consistently remarked-on features: its ability to hover, and to do so, moreover, for extended periods of time. Also, some witnesses reported that the object accelerated from a very slight speed to an extremely rapid one in less than five seconds—a remarkable feat for so small and unstable a craft as an ultralight.

Witnesses who were experts on aircraft, including an ultralight pilot, continued to insist that the "object" could not have been a formation of planes or even a single airplane. An analysis of one of the videotapes made of the lights was conducted at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, where it was concluded that

the object was an unknown. Some witnesses saw both the Stormville aircraft and the boomerang and concluded they were in no way similar. One even took videotapes of both to make his point.

In *Night Siege* (1987) Imbrogno lists 12 reasons for rejecting the Stormville-pilots explanation, remarking among other points that on those occasions when witnesses saw both a plane and the UFO in the sky, they could hear the former even when it was farther away than the latter, which was silent. Furthermore, the UFO appeared on nights when "it was definitely established that the Stormville pilots were not in the air." The UFO's maneuvers—great speed at times, at other times speed so slow as to be below the stall speed of an aircraft, and of course, hovering—simply are beyond the capacity of most aircraft, including those alleged to be responsible for the sightings. Also, Imbrogno wrote, "The number and intensity of the UFO lights was far beyond the power capacity of small planes."

Another problem with the Stormville-pilots hypothesis is that sightings of boomerang-shaped objects were not confined strictly to a small area of New York and Connecticut. Reports of identical objects have been made all across the United States beginning as early as 1951 with a series of sightings in west Texas. More recently, in 1987, this sighting took place in southern Ohio:

One autumn evening Rich and Kathy Dicenso, their four children and a family friend were sitting before a bonfire on the south side of the Dicensos' cabin. The sky was clear and full of stars. Suddenly a dark shape appeared overhead, blocking out the stars in a boomerang shape. Along its perimeter the boomerang carried 12 to 20 lights. Rich Dicenso would later tell investigator Jennie Zeidman, "Just east of the zenith I first saw the stars winking out and soft, slightly yellowish lights moving due south over the house's edge. The dark gray shape and two or more rows of lights began to dominate more and more of the sky [and became] an ever-widening wing-arc of lights. I stood up for a better view . . . [and said] 'What is this, *Close Encounters*, or what?' The scale was so grandiose" (Zeidman, 1989).

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The object was moving very slowly, taking six or seven seconds to come fully into view, and making no sound. It was long enough to extend beyond the house's 72-foot length. After a minute the lights "wobbled" and changed color to amber and then red. "It came over the house extremely slowly," Diczno said, "but when it decided to go, it was just gone." The object, or at least the lights on it, split into three sections and spread out and "dissipated" in the distance. Except for this last, somewhat ambiguous detail, this sighting could be of the Westchester phenomenon.

Yet the presence of the Stormville pilots is a genuinely complicating factor in the Westchester affair, even if it fails to account for much of what was reported. Dick Ruhl and Richie Petracca, investigators for the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), were on Interstate I-84 at 9:30 one evening during the flap when they saw, Ruhl would write, "a brilliant white wedge-shaped object floating and turning in the sky." The lights on it turned red and then other colors. Another object appeared to the left. "We watched in utter amazement," Ruhl would later recall, "as the two objects glided extremely slowly and maneuvered about themselves, constantly changing from white as they approached us, to red as they turned away[,] and then from the side, the red, green-blue and white lights appeared. They finally formed up into a huge boomerang-shape and it was then that I saw some light [through binoculars] reflected on the bodies of six aircraft. We knew we had the evidence on the 'Stormville pilots'" (Ruhl, 1984).

Ruhl and Petracca went to the Stormville airport and saw the "UFO" from there. The planes then broke formation and landed, but when Ruhl tried to photograph the lead pilot as he stepped out of his Cessna Skyhawk, he was threatened. The two investigators left the airport soon after.

Ruhl subsequently talked with an area airport owner who told him he, his family and others had seen the pilots flying in a wedge formation. Once, while flying, he approached them and heard the lead pilot order the others to turn out their lights.

This itself was illegal, but they were also flying at a lower altitude than the law permitted. Ruhl speculated that the pilots were using mufflers on their engines to cut down on the sound their planes made.

Although Ruhl's account is more persuasive than *Discover's*, it should be said that Ruhl and Petracca's sighting differs from most of the Westchester reports, both before and after their discovery of the true nature of the lights. Ruhl says the lights "seemed to hover," an optical illusion sustained for seconds at best, while a number of other witnesses stood beneath the hovering object for 15 to 20 minutes or longer. This means, since here optical illusion is out of the question, that either they are lying or the object *was* hovering. Other witnesses, moreover, saw the lights through binoculars at considerably closer range than Ruhl and Petracca did, and invariably they reported a dark, nonreflecting metallic structure consistent with the lights' boomerang configuration. They did not spot aircraft. Conceivably some may have been mistaken, but this description occurs so often—and some of it comes from witnesses who work professionally with aircraft—that it is difficult to believe all the observers were in error.

Nonetheless the Stormville pilots are undeniably a part of the Westchester story, and the exact nature of their role will likely remain the subject of continued discussion, dispute and controversy.

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