

# THE NEW ZEALAND "FLAP" OF 1909

**It is highly important that saucer students should have at their disposal records of sightings that precede that of Kenneth Arnold in 1947 which made the term "flying saucer" widely known. It cannot be denied that in 1909 most of the present day rationalisations were not available and New Zealand was remote both in time and place from the latest developments of the great industrial powers situated in Europe or in America. This article is reproduced by kind permission of Mrs. Hinfelaar from their journal SPACEVIEW (May-June issue) published from P.O. Box 21007, Henderson, New Zealand.**

**T**HROUGH the excellent co-operation of a reporter on our main daily newspaper, we have been able to unearth a series of sighting reports that would make any sceptic think twice in regard to the existence of unidentified flying objects.

The period in which these sightings were recorded was devoid of any air traffic other than the earliest efforts of the Wright brothers and Count Zeppelin. The former made their first flight in 1903, while the latter launched his first dirigible in 1900. The second ship of this type was destroyed in 1905, during an emergency landing. Although airship traffic dates from 1909, and was later used for bombing purposes in World War I, none of these dirigibles are known to have visited New Zealand skies.

At any rate, the flying range of these craft was so restricted that they had difficulty in making the return flight from Germany to England. Moreover, these ships were cumbersome and their manoeuvrability was low.

Having regard to these facts, it was therefore startling, to say the least, when in the year 1909 cigar-shaped flying objects were reported all over New Zealand. The first of these sightings was observed in the last week of July, and the last sighting was reported in the first week of September. For a solid six weeks hundreds of eye-witnesses continued to report the presence of "phantom" airships in our skies. Sightings were not merely restricted to the craft themselves, but also included (in many cases) their occupants. Dozens of accounts were reported to the local newspapers and in all but a couple of cases the actual sightings could be corroborated by several witnesses.

As far as localities go, the objects were seen in the North as well as in the South Island, covering an

area from Dargaville to Invercargill, a distance of approximately 850 miles. Sightings occurred during the day—as well as at night, and the most outstanding feature in nearly all reports was the description of the unidentified flying object. Never at any stage was more than one object sighted at the same time. The shape of the object was usually described as being elongated ("torpedo", "boat", "cigar" or "codfish").

In some cases, always at night, the objects carried strong searchlights (with reflectors) which lit up the landscape for miles. The speed of the craft was varied and ranged from a cruising speed of 30 m.p.h. to great velocity. Their passage through our skies was frequently described as the sailing of a boat (rather majestically) or as the rising and falling of a bird in flight. Some of the craft put on quite a display while dipping from 2,000 ft. to 1,000 ft. and circling around.

## A cigar-shaped object

In one instance two local residents of Gore (South Island) reported having seen, at night, a boat-shaped object carrying two large fans and three lights—which at times were covered by the fans. Two other residents (dredge hands) in the same locality reported an object shaped like a boat with an open top that came down through the mist in the early morning. The dredge hands swear they could discern two figures on board the craft. A similar airship was seen by several school children at noon. They stated it had the figure of a man seated in it. The manager of a firm in Dargaville observed a cigar-shaped object which moved along the coast, five miles from the shore. He watched it for 15 minutes while it sailed on majestically.

Although in one particular case the papers took great delight in reporting an obvious hoax, in all other cases ridicule and rigid cross-examination failed to shake the accounts as reported by hundreds of witnesses.

Curiously enough, during the beginning of the month of August, the planet Mars was approaching its closest proximity to Earth, and its unusual brilliance gave rise to several reports of mistaken identity.

Earlier in the year 1909, to be exact on May 18, at Caerphilly, Wales, a Cardiff man, named Lithbridge\* was walking through the mountains when he came across a large cylindrical construction parked beside a lonely road. Inside it he saw two peculiar looking men, dressed in some kind of fur coats. On his approach they gabbled excitedly in a foreign language. The next minute the machine rose in the air and flew away. It had no wings and made little noise. A depression was found in the grass at the place he indicated. It was the first report in this century of a landed UFO.

There is no evidence to suggest that the year 1909 produced any UFO landings in New Zealand. To most witnesses the six weeks' flurry of sightings was, however, convincing enough to accept that intelligently controlled alien craft of an unknown identity had been visiting New Zealand skies.

The sighting flap ended as abruptly as it started. The last reported UFO sighting for the year is given here in full:

*New Zealand Herald*, September 10, 1909.

"The Airship mystery again cropped up at Gore about 4.30 p.m. on the 1st instant (says the *Dunedin Star*).—An object resembling an airship was seen manoeuvring in an undulating fashion in the direction of the Tapanui Hills and it gradually disappeared over the horizon towards Kelso. The gentlemen who reported the occurrence are two well-known residents of Gore, and their veracity is beyond question. They describe the object as of

cigar shape, with a car attached to it, but they are unable to speak as to its occupants. They state that it was moving with great velocity. At first they believed it to be a balloon, but on closer vision they saw that it was of airship type. It remained in view for some minutes."

The Gore correspondent of the *Southland Times* telegraphed:—"The sensation caused in Gore by the reported sight of the airship on the 1st instant, has been greatly intensified by the appearance this afternoon of the mysterious object, it being seen by a considerable number of persons in different parts of the town. Whether it is an aeroplane or not, on the strength of what has been more or less widely seen, there is no doubt that there is something of singular shape and size in the sky. Between 5.45 p.m. and 6 p.m. it appeared in view, coming over the hills on the eastern side of the town Otaraia. It apparently sailed backwards and forwards at a great pace and, turning around, gradually disappeared over the same hills, although it was subsequently seen in the direction of Gore racecourse. The children of a prominent resident saw it, and stated that it was of cigar shape. They were so certain of it that they telephoned their father in his place of business to advise him to look out from his office at the object. The father, however, had just left the building. Reliable testimony to the sight is also born by a party of golfers who were on their way home from the golf links when they saw it. They include the two gentlemen who viewed it previously. One of the party, however, thought it was a large kite, but he was unable to account for its rapid movements and manoeuvres. The others are of decided opinion that it was an airship which met their gaze, and they describe it as resembling a large codfish, and plunging in its movements. Many other persons corroborate the latter description, and Gore is intensely excited."

[See *The Books of Charles Fort*, p. 631. The correct spelling of this witness's name is Lethbridge. For a further account of this contact see *FLYING SAUCER REVIEW*, March-April, 1960, issue, p. 19.

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