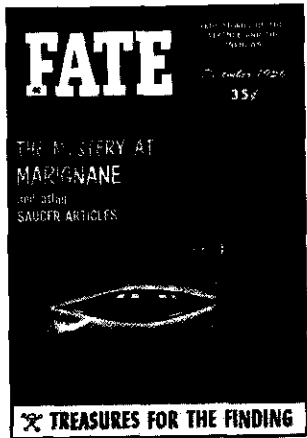


Fifty years ago

UFOCATS



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An object had landed at the airport during the night,  
the customs officer reported.

*It was not a plane but a weird machine.*

## The Mystery at Marignane

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by Aime Michel

**T**he Marignane saucer sighting is one of the most dramatic on record. If history is true, no man in the entire world, probably, has ever come as close to a saucer as the French customs officer, Gabriel Gachignard. The following information is based upon a four-hour cross examination conducted by M. Jean Latappy, one of the best informed men in France on the subject of flying saucers. Oddly enough, Gabriel Gachignard himself refuses to say he saw a flying saucer. But this is his story:

"At about midnight (Sunday-Monday, October 26-27), a light blow of the mistral cleared the sky, but pretty soon it clouded

over again, as if rain was coming. Toward 2 o'clock I was in the hangar. I had been on duty since 8 o'clock. I was wide awake, having slept during the day. I had just bought a snack, some bread and cream cheese. I went out to eat it on a bench, in the open air. These benches are on a cement terrace in front of the hangar. The terrace is separated from the runway where the planes park by some cement troughs with flowers planted in them. I intended, when I had eaten, to go to the control office, to make sure that the mail plane from Algiers was going to land at 2:20, as I had been told. Actually that was a mistake: that service is suspended on Sunday nights.

"The airfield spread out in front of me in the darkness but I know all the corners of the place by heart, and, anyway, it is never pitch dark on that big space. It's so clear in the Midi; you can always distinguish outlines. The runway to the hangar behind me was faintly lit up by the letters of the red neon sign, 30 feet long and three feet high that says 'Marseilles.'

"It was not more than three minutes after two—the Nice-Paris mail, scheduled to leave at that time, had just taken off—when suddenly to my left I saw a small light that seemed to be approaching, flying down the runway. It was not very bright, but perfectly visible and clear, even in the darkness. It seemed to be coming at the speed of a jet plane about to land, perhaps 150 miles an hour. At first I thought it was a shooting star and that I was wrong about the distance and the speed; the background of the field was lost in the darkness and I could not see exactly where the sky began.

"However, about half a mile away to the left, at the edge of the runway, there is a building called the 'Two Barrels' on account of its shape, and I saw the light, which still seemed to be approaching, pass over it at just about 10 meters (30 feet). Its course was absolutely straight, without any oscillation, and came down gradually toward the ground. In a moment it passed in front of me and then I knew that it wasn't any shooting star, that it was something that was really flying.

"All this happened very fast, without my having time to think.

"The light had hardly passed me when it touched the ground and suddenly stopped completely, without slowing down. A dead stop from 150 miles an hour, with no transition! It was about 100 yards away from me, on my right. At the exact moment when it touched the grillwork runway, I heard a dull noise, as if it were muffled, not metallic, the noise something makes when you set it flat on the ground. That was the first sound I heard; the approach had been made in total silence.

"Then I realized that the object was not a plane, because it hadn't slowed down or rolled along the ground. Fifteen or 20 seconds had passed since it appeared, and there it was. It wasn't a plane, but it wasn't just a light plane either, because I had heard a noise. It was something solid.

"I got up right away and went toward it, partly out of curiosity, of course, but also because it's my job.

"It took me about 30 seconds to cover half the distance, and it was during that time that I discovered that the light belonged to a larger object.

"The larger object stood out dimly against the lighter background of the small yellow Meteo building. This building hid the landing strip from me; the strip is always well lighted, but unluckily it couldn't light the place where the shape was.

"The object was dark, darker than the shadows around it. What was it made of? I don't have any idea and in spite of all the questions they've asked me about it I can't tell them anything. It could just as well have

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been made of metal as of cardboard.

"Using the distances and the dimensions of the building behind the objects as landmarks, all we have been able to do is estimate the object's height as three feet and its length as fifteen feet. It had the shape of a football with very pointed ends. The only part of it that was clearly visible were the two ends, because the weak neon light outlined them vaguely, in the shadow. They were very sharp, very tapering. The curve of the object underneath was in complete darkness, which prevented me from seeing whether there were any wheels.

"I couldn't see anything, so I can't tell you anything about them. On the upper curve the same shadows, and I couldn't make out anything there either. The only thing I can be accurate about is this: the light I had seen from the start came from four perfectly square windows, eight to twelve inches on a side. They were placed on a line, and this line wasn't straight but curved, following the upper curve of the cigar, in such a way that the upper edge of the windows seemed to be on a level with the top of the machine.

"The four windows formed a group centered exactly in the middle of the thing, so that the extreme right-hand and left-hand windows were at the same distance from the two pointed ends. But they were in pairs: there was the same distance between the windows of each pair, while the space between the two inner windows was wider. The two outer windows seemed to me slightly inclined.

"Behind these windows a strange light was flickering. It was not steady or fixed or vivid, but ghostly and soft, almost milky at times. It seemed to go back and forth behind those windows, with changing tints, bluish or greenish, on a pale background. Anyway, it wasn't strong enough to light the dark parts of the object. Its intensity was always the same; it didn't vary when the object was moving. On the other hand, it never stopped 'throbbing,' like the movement of waves.

"I noticed all this while I was walking towards the object.

"But suddenly, when I was not more than 50 yards away from it, I saw a shower of sparks, or rather, a sheaf of tiny white glowing particles, spurt out from under the rear end, on my left. But they did not give enough light to help me distinguish the shape of the object any better. This fiery stream was inclined toward the ground.

"This lasted for only a second, and at the same time the cigar took off so suddenly, and with such irresistible force, that I lost my self-control and retreated instinctively, five or six steps. During that second I wondered what was going to happen, whether the machine was going to shoot flames or rush over me! I certainly believed there was danger. And besides, even if I couldn't see 'them' clearly, because the machine was in the shadow of the building, 'they' could see me perfectly, silhouetted against the light of the neon sign!"

M. Latappy says that while the customs official was recalling this scene, his features

were completely disordered. The jet of sparks, the lightning take-off, everything in the silence of vast powers used without effort, had suddenly revealed to this simple man the unleashing, close to his defenseless body, of an unforeseeable and unimaginable force. At that moment, says M. Latappy, Gachignard had the face of a man who finds that he has been at the verge of an abyss.

But let us hear the end of the story...

"The shower of sparks and the departure were accompanied by a slight noise, a kind of swish, like a sky-rocket. There was no air stream, no blast, no preliminary downward tilt. It's true, I was 50 yards away. But in no more than two or three seconds the object had disappeared, in exactly the opposite direction from its arrival. Just as the speed of approach had been moderate, the speed of departure was terrific. There wasn't even the appearance of acceleration, but it changed instantly to a frightening speed, impossible to estimate. The angle of ascent was small; as when it arrived, the machine went through the space, 30 or 40 yards wide, between the operations building and the runway-control building. This passage is in line with the grillwork runway where it landed.

"After it took off, I could not have followed it by eye except for the jet of white particles gushing from the rear, as the windows and their light were not visible any more from where I was. I could see that when it flew between the two buildings it was still very low, lower than their rooftops,

which are about 30 feet up. The next instant the light disappeared over the Berre pond, which is at the end of the airport, across the road."

It was all over. The customs officer was alone with his bewilderment and could ask himself whether he had been dreaming. At once he tried to find out who might have seen it besides himself. No one was on

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the runway. He went back to the hangar. Everyone was asleep, for there was no traffic at that hour. Finally, at 2:15 a.m., he ran into the Air Force agent, Dugaunin.

"Good Lord, how pale you are!" Dugaunin exclaimed, before the other had said a word.

Gachignard told his story. They telephoned the control tower, but no one had seen anything. The tower hardly watches any area except the main runway where all the planes land and take off. Furthermore, it would appear from M. Gachignard's narrative that the cigar came and went too low to be seen—lower than the tower itself, perched way up there, 45 feet off the ground!

"So I was the only one who saw it; if anyone's around on an airfield at night, it's bound to be a customs officer."

That was the conclusion of Gachignard's story, as told to M. Latappy.

What shall we think of this story?

Everyone who questioned M. Gachignard is convinced of his good faith. In the customs service, with its high standards, he has an excellent reputation as a steady, solid, reliable man, a realist. He is sure that he saw what he says he did. He is not a hoaxer. But did he really see it? Or is he the victim of an hallucination? (The possibility that it was a dream must be discarded, because he was eating at the time.) If it was a case of hallucination, it was, I think, a very strange one.

Note that this "hallucination," so full of detail, almost duplicates the one experi-

enced by Professor Clyde Tombaugh, the great astronomer (over the New Mexico desert). He too saw a cigar-shaped object, he too saw square "windows" (or rectangular ones, taking into account perspective); he too mentioned fantastic speed and silent movement. The only difference between the two observations, that of the distinguished scientist and that of the obscure official, is the landing, with the two faint noises at arrival and departure and the stream of luminous particles.

Here we have some precise and certain data. The machine landed in front of the Meteo Building as if in front of a ruler. Gachignard thus had reference marks for the length of the object, about 15 feet, and for its height, three feet. The positions of the witnesses are also known exactly: when the machine landed, he was about 100 yards away from it; when it took off, he was 50 yards away.

Here are the figures which allow us to specify the angle of vision very exactly, and the perspective.

1. The machine was small. The total height, three feet, means that the extremities were 15 1/2 inches above the ground. Therefore Gachignard must have seen it from above.

2. But we must be even more precise. M. Latappy wondered if the supposed cigar might not actually be of the more usual "saucer" shape, and this theory is by no means improbable. As the object was practically "cutting the grass" as it arrived and departed, the observer could hardly have

seen it except from the side. Half a mile before it landed it was only 30 feet above the roof of the "Two Barrels" building.

Let us suppose that M. Gachignard saw, from a distance of 50 yards, a disc 16 feet in diameter poised 20 inches above the ground. How would it have appeared to him? Since he was of medium height, his eyes were about five feet three inches from the ground. If we assume that the disc was perfectly flat, a quick calculation shows that he could have thought he saw a cigar 16 feet long and four inches thick. He would, in fact, have seen the disc as an ellipse with axis of four inches and 16 feet. At a distance of 100 yards, the smaller axis could not have exceeded two inches.

M. Gachignard, however, estimated that the thickness of the object was one yard. A comparison of these three figures—one yard, four inches, and two inches—shows that, if the object had been saucer-shaped, perspective would have allowed him to see the under part of the machine, assuming, of course, that there was enough light to see it by. And he would have seen up to 17 or 19 inches of that lower side, according to his distance from it as he approached it.

At the two extremities, which were not entirely in shadow, he would then necessarily have seen the edge of the saucer if the object had had one. Each tapered end would have looked as if it were bisected almost horizontally, the upper part being slightly larger than the lower. But during the 30 seconds that his observation lasted

he saw nothing of this kind.

3. His description of the stream of white particles confirms the results of this calculation: the luminous jet spurted out under the left-hand pointed end, and its light was insufficient to enable him to get a better idea of the shape of the object. If it had been saucer-shaped, there would have been a reflection on the lower surface.

4. If we admit that he actually saw what he saw, then we must also accept the deductions of other sightings. And there is no case where a saucer-shaped object took off like lightning without the "see-saw movement"; the behavior of the cigars, which appear much less frequently, is not so well known.

All these considerations point to the fact that the object was indeed cigar-shaped. And at any rate, they are based entirely on the evidence given by the customs official, and he himself insisted that he felt certain of only a few of his statements. For all practical purposes he saw neither the upper nor the lower part of the object. He could follow the curve of its outline for only a yard at most, at each end. If he estimated that the object was one yard high, it was only because the top edge of the windows was a yard above the ground. All we can say, therefore, is that nothing proves the machine was saucer-shaped and much of the information suggests that it was not.

5. The "windows." It is highly probable that these "windows" were something more mysterious, something that had nothing to do with M. Gachignard's anthropomor-

phic explanation. The strange throbbing light, with its greenish, bluish, milky reflections, certainly stirs the imagination, but perhaps the task of explaining it should be left to the science-fiction writers.

The shape of the windows and their arrangement also presents a problem. M. Gachignard saw them as "square or rectangular," and M. Latappy drew them exactly as they were seen, according to the witness. But how are we to understand about perspective? How can we apply these surfaces bounded by straight lines to a curved body? We cannot see any answer.

From the geometrical point of view, the most likely position for the windows is the one least likely to be thought of when studying the drawing: that is, flat on the object, the windows being horizontal and looking toward the sky. We must not forget that M. Gachignard saw the machine, which was only three feet high, from above. He stresses the fact that the upper edge of the windows coincided with the upper curve of the object, so that the windows must have been at the top and not at the side.

If we refer to Plantier's theory, this position would imply that the "windows" were really the engine, or, more specifically, the generators of the vertical field of force, which insure the equilibrium of the machine in relation to gravity.

The fact that the witness did not notice any appreciable change of brightness would be consistent with the observed movements of the machine. From the beginning of the sighting to its end the altitude of the object

did not vary by more than a few dozen yards, which means that the generators of the vertical field were contending with a practically constant pull of gravity.

And the motive power? Normally, the Plantier theory would call for some kind of luminous phenomenon in the direction of the course flown. There was, of course, the stream of sparks, but we cannot derive much information from that phenomenon.

6. The noises. The dull sound heard when the machine landed is curious. From the observer's description it seems to have been something like the noise made when a big dictionary is suddenly shut, but louder, of course, since it was heard clearly 100 yards away. How could such a noise be produced by two metallic bodies coming in contact? But if we accept Plantier's theory, there is a very simple explanation.

Remember that the machine landed on a "grillwork runway"—a runway made of strips of metal, which the American army laid down, after the war, on airports all over the world—consisting of perforated plates simply laid side by side on the ground. When the aircraft, flying at 150 miles an hour, came down to within a few inches of these plates, one or two of them must have been caught up in the field of force, lifted off the ground, and dropped down again at the exact moment when the object stopped.

To explain the swishing noise we should have to know a great deal more than we know at the present time. ✎