

# MYSTERY AEROPLANES OF THE 1930s

Part 1

*John A. Keel*

THROUGHOUT the 1930s thousands of people in the isolated villages of northern Scandinavia saw, and were puzzled by, the repeated appearances of large grey aeroplanes which bore no markings or insignia. These aeroplanes became the object of massive searches by land, sea and air, grimly launched by the military authorities of Norway, Sweden and Finland. The Scandinavian Press commented on these events at great length and the mystery even attracted the attention of the *New York Times*. Recently Mr. Åke Franzen, a researcher in Stockholm, Sweden, Mr. B. Hogman of Gothenburg, Sweden, and others, sifted through the newspapers of the period and located over 100 reports on the "ghostfliers" as the mystery planes were known, and Lucius Farish and his team of researchers located other reports in the American press for the same period. We have collected together all these reports, indexed them, charted the courses of the sightings on detailed maps, and attempted to analyse the behaviour of the objects. Additional research has been conducted into the aviation lore of the period and the various historical elements have now been assembled. It has been impossible, of course, to cover all the material in these articles but the data is on file and, as usual, can be viewed by serious researchers who might become interested in this particular phase of the UFO mystery.

Mystery aeroplanes are an important but grossly neglected aspect of the overall phenomenon. After we published an article on the subject in a popular magazine<sup>1</sup> we were inundated with new, valid reports, many of which were identical in description and behaviour to those reported in the early Scandinavian wave. Both *FLYING SAUCER REVIEW* and *APRO* have independently published mystery aeroplane reports in the recent past.<sup>2</sup>

Before we attempt to outline some of the more interesting Scandinavian reports we must review a few of the reports which came from elsewhere during that period. On the surface, these reports seem easily explainable and irrelevant to the flying saucer mystery. But, in actuality, these mysterious aeroplanes were able to out-perform any known aircraft of the period, could fly in inclement weather—even blinding snowstorms—and the patterns of their flights defied military analysis.

Although there were sporadic ghostflier reports in 1932-33, the subject did not create interest until Christmas week, 1933. Other great waves, such as

the flap in the northeastern United States in 1909, have occurred during Christmas week. Many ufologists have already commented on the fact that innumerable seemingly important UFO events have tended to occur on the 24th of the month. The 24th day of March, April, June, September, November and December apparently play an important part in the UFO time cycle. Thorough researchers will find that so-called occult events follow this same pattern.<sup>3</sup>

The "airship" wave of November 1896 was centred around November 24th, the week of the Thanksgiving holiday that year. But, of course, UFO events can and do occur at other times. A massive study of thousands of sightings of *all types* would be necessary before any true significance of this particular factor could be established. Unfortunately, practical studies of this kind have not been attempted by anyone other than the U.S. Air Force.

We attempted superficial examination of these factors in recent FSR articles<sup>4</sup> and noted that a high percentage of Type I sightings in 1966 seemed to take place on Wednesdays. In our study of the 1934 ghostflier reports we find that the majority of the known *landings* occurred on Wednesdays. However, the Scandinavian press referred to them as "Sunday fliers" because the majority of the sightings took place on Sundays. Overflights of high altitude LITS (lights in the sky) are separate and distinct from low-level Type I sightings and could represent an entirely different aspect of the phenomenon. "Hard" sightings of seemingly solid machines may, in many cases, be only tenuously related to the more numerous "soft" sightings of lights.<sup>5</sup>

During 1934, the "hard" sightings took the form of aeroplanes accompanied by engine noises, but reports of "soft" and LITS types outnumbered the "hard".

"Decoy" sightings have been widely prevalent in the U.S., particularly in areas where auto pursuits and animal mutilations have been common.<sup>6</sup> It is probable, therefore, that "hard" objects—whether they be aeroplanes or discs—are less important to our understanding of the overall phenomenon than we have led ourselves to believe. The cunning use of decoys and "hard" landings has been a mere diversion, and these events have seemed to follow patterns of psychological warfare. Some of these patterns become self-evident in the 1934 material.

The operations of these mystery aeroplanes have

simply been too blatant to be meaningful. In December 1969, the citizens of St. Louis, Missouri, were upset because a mysterious aeroplane, grey and sans markings or lights, twice flew under the recently erected Gateway Arch in that city (Associated Press dispatch, December 22, 1969). The mystery plane first performed this hair-raising manoeuvre on Friday, December 12. It returned on Wednesday, December 17, to repeat the performance.

One of our earliest mystery aeroplanes chose to indulge in nightflying directly over New York City in 1910. Like similar craft of later years, it performed hazardous manoeuvres at tree-top level over crowded Madison Square Park. According to the *New York Tribune* of August 31, 1910, "It was heard before it was seen. The whirring sound of a motor high in the air caused many necks to be craned toward the Metropolitan tower at 8.45 o'clock when a long black object was seen flying through the air toward the tower. The vague bulk, as it came into nearer view, took on the semblance of a biplane. It swung past the tower, then turned and described one graceful circle after another around the illuminated structure, its outlines standing out clear in the lights from the many windows."

The *Tribune* went on to describe how the object executed a "series of swooping circles . . . and dipped down so that it seemed to brush the tops of the trees."

The next night, Wednesday, the aeroplane returned to the very same park at 9.00 p.m. and repeated the manoeuvres. In a lengthy story on September 1, 1910, the *Tribune* discussed the whereabouts of all the known pilots and planes in the vicinity, and concluded that none of them were the culprit. Indeed, the primitive open biplanes of that day could hardly risk fighting the dangerous updraughts around Manhattan's towers and few pilots were willing to attempt nightflying at all. "Persons who saw the flying mystery last night differ as to the number of lights it carried," the *Tribune* reported. "Some say it carried two red lights, others lean to the three green theory."

Apparently the phantom flier of Manhattan was never identified despite the *Tribune's* wishful "if he comes again tonight the aviator may drop his name to earth in an otherwise empty bottle."

Three weeks later, on Wednesday, September 21, 1910, "a fleet of balloons" passed over New York City in broad daylight. The *Tribune* noted (Sept. 22, 1910): "Some persons said they must be at least five thousand feet in the air, and few thought they could discern two or three passengers in each. Others said they were just toy balloons used as advertisements. These latter proved to be right as to size, but, if the balloons were used for advertising purposes, there was nothing in their appearance to show it. The last of the balloons passed over the lower city about 5 o'clock, floating in the direction of Long Island. While the spectacle lasted, the police had their hands full keeping the streets and sidewalks clear."

The next evening Mr. Dennis Ready, an engineer at the Dunkirk Waterworks, reported to the police that he had seen "a large cigar-shaped balloon hovering over the lake, about two miles from shore. . . . The balloon appeared to be unmanageable. It gradually disappeared and he believes it dropped into the lake." A fishing tug was sent out to search for it. The story appeared in the *New York Tribune* on September 23, 1910. Dunkirk, N.Y. is on the shores of Lake Erie, approximately 500 miles northwest of New York City. It is about 25 miles west of Sinclairville, N.Y. and Cherry Creek, N.Y., sites of UFO landings and low level activity in 1965-66 . . . a very active "window" area.<sup>7</sup>

### The Snow Phantoms

On Tuesday, August 24, 1909, "an unknown controllable airship" caused great excitement in the Estonian city of Tallinn (Reval) as it circled twice before disappearing in the direction of Finland. A report published in *Dagens-Nyheter* of August 25, 1909, stated that "the population is frightened and is urging the formation of a defensive air fleet." Newspapers speculated that the object was "probably Swedish" even though no such craft existed in Sweden at the time.

Exactly one month later, on Friday, September 24, 1909, a winged object passed over the Castle Forest near Gothenburg, Sweden, at an altitude of about 100 metres. Earlier in the day, a "dirigible" of the "Percival type" flew low over the eastern part of Grason and Osthannar. It came from the northeast, and disappeared in a westerly direction.

We now have a number of mystery aeroplane and unidentified dirigible reports from northern Europe throughout the 1920s and 1930s. We also have a few interesting subsidiary mysteries to research and contemplate. On Friday, December 21, 1923, the French dirigible *Dixmude* vanished forever somewhere over the Mediterranean or the Sahara desert. Extensive searches failed to locate any debris or any sign of the 52 passengers.

One of the first ghostflier reports to appear in *Dagens-Nyheter* (Stockholm) in 1933, came from Kalix on December 24, 1933. It stated simply: "A mysterious aeroplane appeared from the direction of the Bottensea at about 6.00 p.m. Christmas Eve, passed over Kalix, and continued westward. Beams of light came from the machine, searching the area."

These "beams of light" became a familiar feature in the 1934 reports, just as they are common in modern UFO descriptions. The beams were often described as "blinding." They illuminated the ground over which they passed "like daylight." Such searchlights were also reported in the flaps of 1896-97, and 1909.<sup>8</sup> Arc lights had come into use in the 19th century but these required heavy, powerful energy sources. Any flying craft using an arc light would have necessarily been overloaded with batteries or a large generator. We tend to forget now just how primitive the flying machines of the 1920s and 1930s

were. Night flying was still rare and daring in 1934. Conventional aeroplanes were equipped with landing lights very similar to automobile headlights. These would not have been bright enough to provide a satisfactory explanation for the brilliant UFO lights. Customarily, landing lights are not kept on while the plane is aloft.

Instrumental and navigational aids were also crude in 1934. Only a few hardy pilots dared to venture into even a mild rainstorm in those days. Most of the planes then in use were clumsy biplanes with open cockpits. They were short-ranged and quite inefficient machines. Airborne radios were not widely employed, being heavy, expensive and cumbersome to handle by a single pilot in a small plane. Nevertheless, the ghostfliers were equipped with radios and their broadcasts were intercepted throughout Scandinavia. Some of the planes described by the witnesses were obviously larger than any known aircraft of the period, with the exception of the China Clipper which was then in the early stages of development.

Unlike conventional pilots, the ghostfliers were seemingly fond of operating in impossibly difficult weather. One even circled over New York City during a heavy snowstorm on Tuesday, December 26, 1933. The New York *Times* devoted nearly a full column to the story on December 27, naming witnesses and giving the full details.

The plane was first heard circling above Park Avenue and 122nd St. at 9.30 a.m. Numerous witnesses began to call the National Broadcasting Company. Reports continued until 2.25 p.m., meaning that the mystery plane had circled low over Manhattan in a blinding snowstorm for five full hours. An amazing endurance feat, if nothing else. "All airports were notified," the *Times* said, "and at Newark Airport the radio operators from the Department of Commerce and airlines joined in offering what help they could. Beacons on the field were lighted and searchlights flashed through the white smother of snow. . . . All fields in the Metropolitan district reported there had been no flying during the day, and no stray plane had dropped down from the snowy skies."

There were other puzzling incidents of this type. Researcher Charles Flood found the following item in the Portland, Oregon, *Oregonian*, February 15, 1936:

"MYSTERY PLANE BATTLES SNOW—Cody, Wyoming, Feb. 14 (AP). An unidentified airplane tonight battled a raging blizzard and 20 below weather over Cody as residents here attempted to guide it to the local airport, about three miles from town.

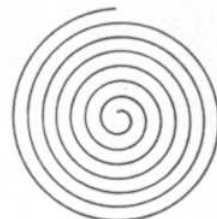
"The ship was heard roaring over the city at about 6 p.m. (Mountain Standard Time). After it circled several times, the sound of its motors faded and it was not heard again for almost an hour.

## ARE UFOs RELATED TO PSYCHIC EVENTS?

"UFOs aren't fun anymore. Once you divest yourself of the nonsensical beliefs, and recognize all the manifestations for what they really are, you are confronted with the awesome realization that the subject is much more vast than you had ever imagined it to be. And that the UFO source is far beyond our comprehension . . . We are trying to cope with something which has the ability to manipulate time and space and the human mind." (John Keel in Issue No. 1 of E.S.P. Magazine).

Stimulating articles by John Keel, Brad Steiger, Dr. R. Leo Sprinkle, Dr. R. Regis Riesenman, Dr. Berthold Eric Schwarz, Gray Barker, Jim Moseley, and others.

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At approximately 7 p.m. it was heard over the town again, the pilot accelerating his motor as he circled for several minutes.

"Residents of the city fought their way through heavy snows to the airport, and circled the field with flares. Before the flares could be lit, however, the sound of the unknown plane's motor had again faded."

Two days later the *Oregonian* carried a follow-up report: "Cody residents today still had no explanation for, and no further information on, a mysterious aeroplane heard circling over the town last Friday night."

Approximately 35% of all the known sightings of the 1934 Scandinavian wave took place during severe weather conditions. Heavy snowstorms, blizzards and dense fog were mentioned in many of the accounts. The aircraft even operated at very low level during snowstorms, hedge-hopping with great skill and circling low over villages, ships and railway stations in hazardous mountain regions remarkably similar to the rugged terrain around Cody, Wyoming.

The ghostfliers' abilities to operate in the most appalling weather remains one of the more puzzling aspects of this flap. One witness, a lighthouse keeper named Rutkvist, claimed that he observed a mystery aeroplane during a blizzard which included winds measuring 16 metres per second. From his lighthouse at Holmogadd, Sweden, he saw the object on at least two occasions. On Monday, January 8, 1934, he reported watching it manoeuvre over the nearby island of Grasundet. He said that it would hover and then slowly spiral down toward the island. When it neared the water it would ascend again and repeat the manoeuvre. It continued to do this for an hour. "I have never seen anything like it," he said in a story published in the Stockholm press on January 9. "It was a very strange action for an aeroplane."

Very strange, indeed! The governments of Sweden, Norway and Finland took the ghostflier reports very seriously and launched massive investigations.

In a widely published story datelined Oslo, Norway, March 10, 1934, General Henriek Johannessen of the Norwegian Air Force was quoted as saying, "Reports still trickle into the newspapers. We can't reject all of these observations as illusions."

Other officials and aviation experts were interviewed by the press and unanimously expressed the opinion that the ghostfliers were far more expert than any pilots in northern Europe, that they were superbly equipped with advanced radio and navigational equipment, and seemed to represent "an extraordinary organization." Authorities were particularly disturbed over the mystery planes' penchant for flying over forts and "strategic areas."

On April 30, 1934, Major General Reutersward, commanding general of upper Norrland, made this statement to the press: "Comparisons of these reports show that there can be no doubt about illegal air traffic over our secret military areas. There are many reports from reliable people which describe close observations of the enigmatic flier. And in every case the same remark can be noted: no in-

signia or identifying marks were visible on the machines. . . . It is impossible to explain away the whole thing as mere imagination. The question is: Who or whom are they, and why have they been invading our air territory?"

#### END OF PART ONE

Part Two will outline the events preceding the 1934 wave, and the action taken by the Scandinavian military authorities.

Part Three will summarize the general sighting data, occupant sightings, landings and overall patterns found in the wave.

#### NOTES

1. "New UFOs Buzz World Airports" by John A. Keel, *MALE* magazine, December 1969.
2. See "UFOs Over the Americas" by Coral and Jim Lorenzen, Signet Books, 1968, Chapter VI, *The Hertzke Case*. FSR, November/December 1968, "UFO Over Airport", page iii.
3. In his article, "Liquidation of the UFO Investigators", *SAGA*, January 1970, Otto Binder points out that several well-known UFO personalities have died on June 24th, including Frank Scully, Richard Church, Arthur Bryant and Willey Ley. Frank Edwards died suddenly on the evening of June 23, 1967. In a control study of coincidental deaths, I found that the deaths of American Presidents also followed non-probable patterns. For example, two early presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, both died on July 4, 1826. President James Monroe died on July 4, 1831. July 4 is a major American holiday . . . Independence Day. It is uncanny that these three men, all contemporaries, should have the same death date.
4. See "The Flap Phenomenon in the United States" by John A. Keel, FSR Special No. 2, *Beyond Condon* . . . (1969). And "The Time Cycle Factor" by John A. Keel, FSR, May/June 1969.
5. See "The Principle of Transmogrification" by John A. Keel, FSR, July/August 1969, for a fuller definition of these terms.
6. Decoy sightings, animal mutilations, etc., are discussed at great length in *Strange Creatures from Time and Space* by John A. Keel, Fawcett World Library, 1970.
7. For a summary of the Cherry Creek landing of 1965 see NICAP's *UFO Investigator*, August/September 1965, page 7. Details of the Sinclairville sightings (April 1966) included a case of actinic ray burns and will appear in *Operation Trojan Horse* by John A. Keel, G. P. Putnam's, 1970.
8. For a discussion of the UFO light beams see *Passport to Magonia* by Dr. Jacques Vallée, Regnery, 1969.

YOUR CLIPPINGS of newspaper items are very welcome. We apologise here for being generally unable to acknowledge these items as the pressure of work on our tiny staff and on our postage resources is too great. However, please do not be deterred by this seeming lack of courtesy. We really do appreciate anything you care to send.