

UFOs OVER BUFFALO!

FLYING SAUCERS BUZZING BUFFALO? The “rock jocks” from Buffalo radio station WEDG’s popular morning show “Shredd & Ragan” challenged us in July 2003 to explain several UFOs that a listener had caught on video. We accepted.

The Evidence

I confess that I was not eager to accept this pig-in-a-poke deal, being hopelessly overextended already and always leery of frivolous claims. (One can spend a huge amount of time trying to explain some anomaly that is of interest to one puzzled person—or even an attention-seeking hoaxer.) However, Center for Inquiry communications director Kevin Christopher twisted my overworked arm, noting that the case was destined to garner attention and that, being local, it was more accessible to investigation; he also assured me that other staffers—including three summer interns—would be glad to provide yeoman’s service. Kevin prevailed, and I would later tell him (quoting a famous letter from President Abraham Lincoln to General Ulysses S. Grant), “You were right, and I was wrong.”

I insisted on one thing, however: receipt of an affidavit from the eye-witness detailing the conditions under which his video had been made and attesting that it was unaltered. This was immediately forthcoming (Szeglowski 2003), and, with greetings from his partner Ted Shredd, Tom Ragan personally delivered a copy of the videotape to us.¹ Viewing the video, besides Kevin and me, were experienced videographer and editor Tom Flynn, *Skeptical Inquirer* managing editor Benjamin Radford, assistant communications director John Gaeddert (who chronicled our project’s activities), and interns Dawn Peterson, Benjamin Hyink, and Chris Lauer.

The video—which was made near downtown Buffalo at about 6:50 P.M.

UFOS OVER BUFFALO!



Figure 53. UFOs near downtown Buffalo, New York, were caught on amateur video. Local radio hosts challenged CSICOP to investigate. (Courtesy of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine)

on Sunday, July 13, 2003—depicted several “bright lights in the eastern sky,” as the amateur videographer himself termed the UFOs (figure 53). “After observing these lights with my girlfriend and child for several moments,” he stated, “I then grabbed my video camera”—a handheld Canon 8mm model—“and began to film these lights.” He then quickly obtained a tripod to steady the camera (Szegłowski 2003).

The Investigation

Two unusual effects on the video—the lights blinking simultaneously and the whole picture going dark at one point—were readily explained by our video expert Tom Flynn: the blinking was an effect of the “searching” function of the camera’s autofocus when image details are especially poor, and the image darkening was almost certainly caused by the inadvertent pushing of the fade-out button. These effects were not actually observed in the sky but rather viewed through the camera—both by the eyewitness and by his girlfriend, using the

camcorder's flip-out LCD screen. Flynn called our attention to the moment when the screen was unfolded from the camcorder body.

But what were the lights—the UFOs—themselves? We could see that, in relation to the power lines, they were moving slowly and so were not stars or planets. Given the position of the sun, behind the camera, we thought it likely that the objects were not transmitting light but simply *reflecting* sunlight. After eliminating such possibilities as birds, gliders, helicopters, satellites, and other aerial phenomena, we settled on two basic hypotheses. Some thought that the shining objects could be distant airplanes, while I brought up the possibility of balloons.

After viewing the video, Ben Radford circulated a memo citing evidence that the UFOs were apparently drifting rather than flying. He dubbed them “Unidentified Floating Objects,” consistent with balloons (Radford 2003). Chris Lauer, pursuing a double major in meteorology and computer science at North Carolina State University, ruled out weather balloons, which he had experience observing. However, he agreed that small helium-filled party balloons were a good possibility. Even those subscribing to the airplanes hypothesis agreed that conducting some simple experiments with balloons was a good idea. We performed them at approximately the same time of day and under similar conditions as the UFO sighting.

Our first set of experiments (July 25) was a failure. Our initial balloon releases were too far from the video and still cameras, but when we corrected that problem, we discovered that flat, shiny, Mylar balloons tilted in the wind, flashing like signal mirrors. So, for the second set of experiments (July 28), we used round, sixteen-inch white balloons (figure 54), and their similarity to the UFOs was immediately apparent. On video, the results were striking (figure 55), even replicating the “blinking” effect. Everyone agreed with Flynn's assessment of “98 percent confidence that we have identified the mechanism” responsible for the UFOs.

Seemingly corroborative evidence was provided by our team's student meteorologist. Lauer (2003) determined from posted airport records that on the day in question, the winds were from the southwest at nine miles per hour. This was consistent with the left-drifting, receding UFOs in the video, which (since the camera faced east) indicated that the objects were drifting



Figure 54. Dawn Peterson prepares to release balloons as part of an experiment to replicate the UFO video. (Also shown are Paul Kurtz, Joe Nickell, John Gaeddert, and Ben Radford.) (Courtesy of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine)



Figure 55. Balloons replicated the appearance of the UFOs in the video. (Courtesy of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine)

northeastwardly, as expected. Also, someone noted that white, helium-filled balloons might have been released in keeping with a local wedding custom.

The Presentation

To see how convincing our results would be to others, we decided to play a little trick on our radio friends. Keeping the details of our solution a secret, Kevin Christopher invited Tom Ragan to a video presentation at the Center for Inquiry. At the showing, while I made introductory remarks about the original UFO video, Flynn played a clip from *our* video. Ragan acknowledged that the segment looked like the original video he had seen. I then confessed the trick, and we played both videos for him to judge. He agreed that ours was a convincing replication.

Before our appearance on “Shredd & Ragan,” the radio duo’s producer put our video clip on the station’s Internet site (wedg.com 2003), along with the original video that had already been airing. The unscientific poll showed that a greater percentage of respondents actually thought that ours was more convincing than the original (52.39 percent versus 49.4 percent).² Subsequently, on August 25, Tom Flynn and I appeared as guests on “Shredd & Ragan.” With quips and banter, we explained the approach we had taken, and both Shredd and Ragan concluded on air that we had convincingly solved the mystery. Our group had transformed the UFOs into IFOs: identified floating objects.

Notes

1. The original 8-mm tape had been transferred to a VHS tape.
2. After we revealed on “Shredd & Ragan” how our video had been produced, the positive poll results naturally declined.

References

- Gaeddert, John D. 2003. Project chronology and notes, July 30.
 Lauer, Chris. 2003. Memo to Kevin Christopher, August 8.
 Radford, Benjamin. 2003. Memo to project members, July 22.
 Szeگلowski, Jack. 2003. Notarized affidavit accompanying UFO video, July 17.
 wedg.com/snr/ufosighting.html. 2003. Accessed July 28 and August 20.