

UFO OVER IRAN

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

Nearly three years ago a spectacular UFO appeared in the night sky over Tehran, Iran. In past ages comets were said to foretell the fall of kings. Perhaps in this space-minded era flying saucers fulfill the same function. Turmoil was soon to topple the shah.

The UFO chased by Iranian Air Force F-4 fighters on the night of September 19, 1976, spawned a baffling story, claims of a cover-up by the United States, and a legend that went far beyond the drab facts of the event. Late in 1977 the *National Enquirer* selected the incident as the "most scientifically valuable" UFO case of 1976. A special "blue-ribbon panel" of UFO experts sponsored by the newspaper testified that the Iranian UFO represented a genuinely unexplainable phenomenon.

Skeptics, of course, quickly pointed out that the UFO "experts" had relied principally on a two-page summary prepared by a bored U.S. Air Force officer who had

attended the debriefing of an Iranian F-4 crew and on some news clippings and a few telephone calls. Nobody, it seemed, had actually researched the case. They had merely agreed that it sounded like a good story.

Better yet, considering Iran's political situation, it seemed certain that nobody else would ever be able to investigate the story adequately. Thus, the reported UFO could remain safely unidentified forever. But the mystery of the UFO was due more to the political confusion surrounding the incident than to the details of the case itself.

It certainly sounds like a good story. During the thrilling encounters the Iranian pilots appear to have been in fear for their lives. Earthly explanations seem weak next to human terror.

Shortly after midnight on September 19, 1976, Mehrabad Air Force Base received several phone calls. Some civilians had spotted a bright light in the sky and were

concerned. The officer in charge, Major General Yousefi, went out to see for himself and saw a bright starlike object. (In fact, the planet Jupiter was near its maximum brilliance in the east.) A check with radar at the Babolsar and Shahrokhi air force bases showed nothing unusual.

But Yousefi, surprised by the brilliance of the light, decided to scramble an F-4 Phantom jet, an extremely unusual event, as most Iranian jet pilots are very inexperienced in nighttime air operations.

UFO investigators have been frustrated because the UFO's direction and the pursuing Phantom's flight path have never been adequately described. Explanations and searches for contradictions in the accounts are therefore fruitless.

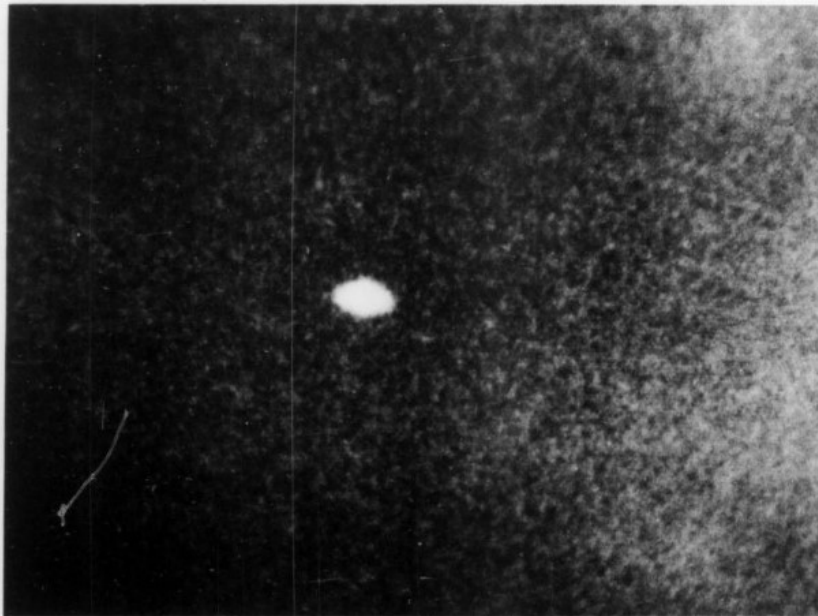
According to a debriefing summary given by the U.S. Air Force, this F-4 suddenly experienced a communications blackout and returned to base. Since it had been chasing a UFO, though there is nothing to indicate that it had gotten close, the experts immediately decided that the UFO had caused the blackout.

A second jet had been launched ten minutes after the first. It, too, tried to approach the UFO, which appeared to recede constantly as the pilot, Lieutenant Jafari, approached. (That, incidentally, is exactly how a distant light in the sky would have appeared.) But suddenly the UFO seemed to attack the second F-4.

In the published accounts the pilot reports seeing an object suddenly break away from the main UFO and come at the jet head on. Jafari tried to fire an AIM-9 missile, one of the Sidewinder series, but "his weapons-control panel went off" and froze his attempt. At the same time his communications blacked out.

These reports, based on tape recordings of the air-to-ground communications, were played for newsmen the following day. What is interesting about them is that the account of the failures on the first jet was based on a story told by the second pilot the next day. The tape recordings played for the reporters evidently failed to mention the loss of communications.

The electrical failure on the second jet, however, seems to have been quite real.



UFO flew along a rural road in Diamante Entre Rios, Argentina, for a few minutes in July 1976.

The pilot panicked and put his plane into a steep dive as the smaller UFO zoomed right at him, then passed inside his turn and slid back to the original object for "a perfect rejoin."

Such maneuvers are remarkable. If they had taken place as described, however, it would have been even more remarkable for Jafari to see them. In fact, he thought the object was getting closer because it was getting brighter. In a dead-on approach the object would not appear to move in the sky at all. As for the maneuvers seen during the pilot's panicked dive, they seem similar to maneuvers reported by other pilots who, misjudging the range to an unknown light in the night sky, have miscalculated the object's flight path.

Based on the information at hand, we just do not know what took place between that jet and the light. We may never know, and this uncertainty must please UFO experts who have been touting the case without ever investigating it.

The story is not over, though. Another object appeared, dropping from the purported mother ship. The F-4 attempted to approach it, and the pilot reported seeing a light on the ground—presumably the one that had dropped from the UFO some minutes earlier. The light dazzled Jafari's eyes, wiping out his night vision.

While returning to the air base, Jafari noticed some radio interference. Later he reported seeing another UFO pass over him. When prompted, ground controllers in the airport tower also saw a light in the sky.

The UFO story was everywhere in the Tehran newspapers for days afterward. Military attachés at the U.S. embassy noted the account, had it translated, and forwarded it to Washington. The Iranians, meanwhile, seemed puzzled. But as time went by, they were less and less alarmed. Early in October the shah himself brought up the encounter during a ceremonial visit by American astronauts. They, too, were unable to explain it.

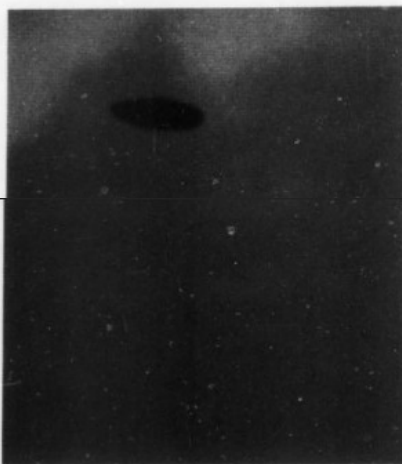
The actual event had barely ended when the myths began to grow. First came a story that the U.S. government was trying to hush it up by keeping its files secret—files that were nothing more than translations of Tehran newspaper accounts and an account of the Iranian pilots' debriefing. Later stories told of a humanoid space creature that had attacked local farmers during the dogfight. In St. Louis, Missouri, UFO buffs claimed that the Iranian jet had been kidnapped by the UFO and that the pilot had never been found. The Iranian UFO was well on its way to becoming a classic.

Official sanction of the case came last January 31, when the *National Enquirer* publicized the decision of its experts. The paper gave a check for \$5,000 to the ambassador from Iran at the time, Ardeshir Zahedi, on behalf of the four pilots, an air force general, and an

air-traffic controller. Since the Iranian military personnel were not allowed to accept cash gifts, the money was donated to the Red Lion and Sun, the Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross.

According to Dr. James Harder, professor of civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley and director of research for the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization, a long-established civilian UFO group, "the case was particularly important, because it provided evidence for long-range jamming of fire-control electronics. You can always jam communications, but [the capability] to jam the electronics of fire control within the plane is something that has not been firmly established before."

Another panel member, Dr. Frank Salisbury, a plant physiologist at Utah State University, dismissed any possible explanations beforehand: "If a UFO cannot be explained as a natural or psychological phenomenon, hoax, or secret weapon,



UFO above Indonesian waters, 1976.

then it's of high interest to scientific UFO investigation. This case meets this criterion. Too many witnesses in highly responsible positions were involved for us to think of hoaxes or hallucinations."

This statement presents a summary judgment. Its list of alternatives is incomplete. And as far as "secret weapons" are concerned, the panel lacked the top-secret Soviet records for that date. Even Iranian and American records were unavailable. That avenue of research is definitely still untrod—and likely to remain so forever.

Harder and Salisbury, along with panel members Dr. John L. Warren, of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, and Dr. Leo Sprinkle, of the University of Wyoming, in Laramie, were evidently convinced that here at last was a UFO case that could not be solved by archskeptical Philip J. Klass. Klass, a Washington-based aviation journalist and author of two books on UFO cases he claims to have solved, has made a habit of investigating the *National*

Enquirer's "best cases" over the years. He has often uncovered information that the pro-UFO investigators had not found or had chosen not to tell the public.

Klass's difficulties in attacking this case were compounded by distance and by the web of military security that had been wrapped around it. The language barrier promised to throw more snares in his path. In fact, some cynical observers of the strange world of UFOria privately suggested that the Iranian case had been chosen over a hypnotic-regression UFO kidnapping in Kentucky primarily because it would prove impossible to research.

If so, the panel has been partially successful. Klass has not yet issued a full report on his investigation. Recently, though, he told *Omni* that he has turned up some very interesting details. "I have talked with several American technical representatives who were in Iran," he recounted. "Two were at Shahrokhi. They offered an explanation for the electronic outage experienced by the second F-4." Klass promises to publish his findings in the near future.

The dramatic story of the panicked pilot, Jafari, trying to fire his Sidewinder missile with a frozen weapons-control panel also turned out to have been garbled in the retelling. Experts from the Tactical Air Command told Klass that the weapons

panel has nothing to do with the Sidewinder, which is fired from another electrical circuit entirely.

"Most important to me," Klass concluded, "the Iranian Air Force never called in American experts to do a thorough checkout for damage."

In examining this case, Klass noted that fireballs had been seen in the skies over Morocco that same night, and a Portuguese jet liner had reported a bright fireball over the eastern part of the Atlantic Ocean. To some, this suggests that the UFO was streaking westward at high speed. To skeptics, it reveals the existence of a bright meteor shower that could have helped confuse the frightened Iranian pilots.

Because of recent events in Iran, investigations seem to have reached a dead end. But Klass is continuing to search for American engineers who were in Iran at the time. The idea that the "sighting" was really a series of coincidences and panicked misidentifications, while possible, has not yet been established.

Without a thorough investigation, this Iranian case should never have received the official pro-UFO endorsements that it has garnered. Nor should it be so widely flaunted as the best proof that UFOs are real. Of course, it could be the best if there are no better cases to rely on. That in itself would be a harsh indictment of the quality of UFO evidence available today!

Anyone recently returned from Iran who has insights into this case can contact Philip Klass through this column. ☐