

# The Flying Spacewatchers

Flying saucers, meteors and reentering satellites are being peered at from airline cockpits by a worldwide network of almost 30,000 observers.

by Jonathan Eberhart

From the cockpit of his United Airlines DC-8, en route from Chicago to Seattle at 37,000 feet, Capt. Homer Peterson first saw a broad vapor trail, much wider than that of a plane, just above the western horizon. Then he saw that the vapor was led by a glowing reddish-white object, followed by a flaming tail. Suddenly the object exploded "like buckshot," each piece trailing fire.

Spectacular though the explosion was, it did not take Capt. Peterson by surprise. About three hours before, he had received a TIP (Tracking and Impact Prediction) from the North American Air Defense Command, through his airline's operations office. The TIP had warned him to be on the lookout for a man-made object that

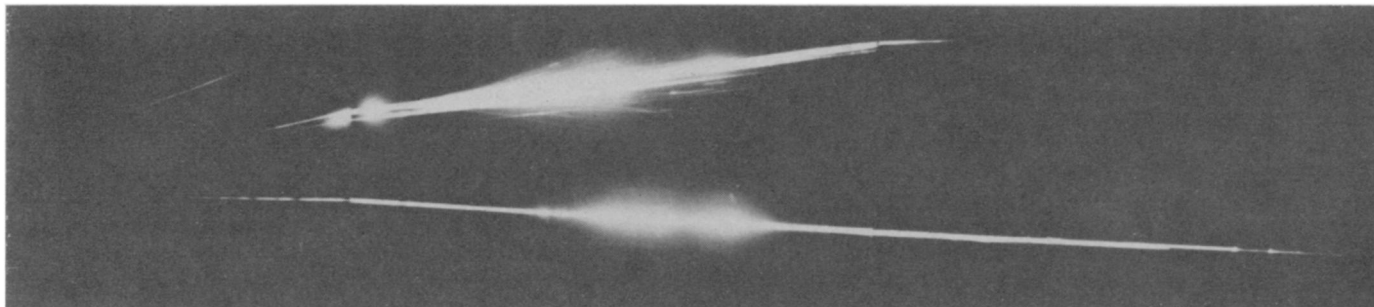
nized reporting was done by United; then the field was opened up. Today 68 airlines make up the net, 50 of them outside the U.S. Only five major airlines in the world do not belong to the chain, one of which is Russia's Aeroflot, which wrote last year that it was waiting for the Soviet Academy of Sciences to decide whether such a project is as valuable as it is cracked up to be. The other holdouts are Trans World Airlines, Japan Air Lines, Scandinavian Air Service and Air France.

Still under Roth's direction, VFON now represents almost 30,000 flight crew members who fly almost two million miles of air routes, most of them unduplicated. There have been 41 reports submitted on 14 reentering space objects (at least half of them Russian),

wire and all radio reception—but, strangely, not transmission—cut out.

The pilot who reported the sighting has been guaranteed anonymity by both VFON and Dr. Condon—a necessity if the network is going to receive any UFO reports at all. "It's a matter of regaining the pilots' trust," Roth says.

Besides the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory and the University of Colorado, VFON sends data of various kinds to the Environmental Science Services Administration, Northwestern University, the University of Arizona and a saucer-spotting organization called the National Investigations Committee for Aerial Phenomena. Even the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is interested; last month Roth briefed a space agency team



NASA

A spectacular reentry: pilots around the world are being organized to spot them.

was about to fall from space.

The object was Cosmos 111, a Soviet space probe launched two days before and believed to be an unmanned moon shot that never got out of earth orbit. NORAD, which tracks every man-made object in the sky, knew that some commercial airliner would probably be in the best position to see the fiery reentry firsthand, and thus decided to alert an unusual, almost freelance spacewatching organization called the Volunteer Flight Officer Network.

Early in 1962, when almost 100 satellites had already been successfully launched by the U.S. and Russia, the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Mass., asked airline pilots to aid in spotting the ones that fell back, as well as to keep track of meteors, fireballs and other objects entering the atmosphere. Occasional reports trickled in, but it was about a year and a half before Herb Roth of United Airlines' flight training center suggested an organized observing network.

Until December 1965, all the orga-

16 on naked-eye-visible satellites still in orbit, 721 meteors and fireballs, four ballistic missiles in flight, four upper atmosphere sounding rockets, one weather balloon and 20 unidentified flying objects.

The UFOs have been posing a bit of a problem. Dr. Edward U. Condon of the University of Colorado, who has taken over the country's official UFO-checking chores from the Air Force, would like very much to have the flight crews' relatively close-up eye-witness reports. Many pilots, however, are reluctant to admit having seen unexplainable things, and often have been ridiculed in the past if they have reported UFO sightings.

As a result, UFO reports are fairly far between. The most recent came in last February from Peru, where flying saucers are called OVNI, or *Objetos Voladores No Identificados*. A bright light appeared near an airliner at about 7,000 feet, then moved to a point directly above the aircraft and hovered there. The passengers got rattled, the lights dimmed, the compass went hay-

under Christopher Kraft, director of flight operations at NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, on the network's operation.

The flight crews' reports to VFON are made on standard questionnaires, though they may vary from airline to airline. United's form has a dozen questions including the altitude and position of the plane, plus items such as brightness of the object reported.

When NORAD warns the network a few hours in advance that a reentry is about to take place, the airlines that will have planes in the predicted area are notified by telephone. In the future, Roth hopes that VFON will be able to do it more quickly by teletype, using an already-existing linkage that connects most of the world's major airlines.

Other plans include getting the five holdout airlines to join—"There's a large void that we're trying to fill," says Roth—and persuading as many flight crewmen as possible to take cameras along. At present there is almost no photographic evidence available to correlate with VFON reports.