



Recent *IUR* article

Editor's Note: Richard Hall has a long and distinguished career in ufology, beginning in the 1950s. An *IUR* contributing editor and former chairman of the Fund for UFO Research, he is author of a forthcoming sequel to *The UFO Evidence*, originally published in 1964. The following article is from *The International UFO Reporter*, Winter, 1999, all rights reserved.

Signals, Noise, and UFO Waves

By Richard Hall

Over the past 50 years a seeming outbreak of UFO sightings has captured public and news media attention on average about every five to eight years. Sometimes the sightings have been sufficiently spectacular that the publicity has led someone to attempt a scientific study, but these studies usually bog down in confusion and controversy, and the interest fades away.

News media interest comes and goes, the press tending to treat UFOs as a “silly season” topic. Ufologists continue to compile data suggesting that UFO sightings tend to come in waves, but no particular pattern has been found that would even begin to bowl scientists off their feet. For whatever reasons, the UFO phenomenon—or attention to it—ebbs and flows over the years. A number of studies have been conducted on the so-called UFO waves (once called “flaps”) in an attempt to understand their significance. Relatively less examined is the sighting troughs between waves. During these slack periods when UFOs seem to go away (but really don’t), what happens? What, if anything, is different about UFO manifestations during the trough periods? Are there any characteristic types of trough-period sightings that might provide a useful clue about what they are up to? To study these questions, I first reviewed some literature to arrive at a good consensus on major waves, and on definite periods of low sighting frequency on an international basis. (See References and Notes at end of article.) As noted elsewhere, sighting waves are partly apparent and partly real; some mixture of a real upturn in sightings and the attendant publicity, or lack of it (Hall, 1988, pp. 213–224). Since it usually takes many years to flesh out the data and to uncover obscure cases, I have used the time period from 1947 through the mid-1980s in this study rather than more recent time periods. The established consensus waves are indicated in Table 1 at the end of this article, in two categories: (1) pronounced waves (several countries on several continents) and (2) other concentrated periods of sightings on a somewhat smaller scale, located nationally or regionally. These waves are pretty well agreed upon by most researchers. >From a study of the Project Blue Book microfilms and three other references (Clark, 1998; Andrus and Hall, 1987; Hall, 1999) it was possible to derive four rather clear-cut trough periods between 1947 and the mid-1980s, each lasting three to four years:

- 1948–1951
- 1958–1960
- 1970–1972
- 1979–1981

I can confirm from personal experience the 1958–1960 trough, a veritable drought, because those were my first three years at the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), in Washington, D.C. At that time NICAP was very much in the news, and people knew where to report sightings, but several objective measures confirm my impressions: sightings were scarce all over the world at that time (Hall, 1994). An examination of the UFO cases that occurred during these sighting troughs primarily confirms that there is no qualitative change in the reports. Exactly the same kinds of events were reported as at other times. They included disc- and elliptical- shaped objects, radar trackings, and vehicle encounters. In fact, a strong case for the reality of UFOs could be made by ignoring the wave period sightings altogether, and concentrating exclusively on sightings from the trough periods. For example, many classic cases occurred during the 1948–1951 trough, including the 1948 Chiles-Whitted airline encounter, several significant cases at White Sands, New Mexico, and the 1950 Great Falls, Montana, movie film. (See Table 2.) After the November 1957 wave, UFOs once again seemingly disappeared—or drastically cut back activities if we are thinking in terms of visitors from space—for three years. But the disappearance was mostly from the pages of newspapers and the airwaves. After-the-fact historical research shows that there was a steady flow of sightings throughout 1958, with a slight increase in October. Not a large number, but plenty to demonstrate the continuity of the phenomenon. Similarly, throughout 1959 and 1960, a steady flow of absolutely typical UFOs were reported. Again, many highly significant and classic cases occurred during the 1958–1960 sighting trough. (See Table 3.) They included the Trindade Isle, Brazil, photographs in 1958; the 1959 Father Gill case in Papua New Guinea; and the Red Bluff, California, state police sighting in 1960.

The UFO evidence

In preparation for my new volume of *The UFO Evidence*, I conducted an extensive literature survey and compiled data on UFO sightings for the 30-plus years since the cut-off date of the original 1964 report. Using those data, I have studied the 1970–1972 and 1979–1981 sighting troughs fairly intensively, looking for anything different, possibly a scientific clue of some kind.

The major difference in UFO manifestation during this period, obviously, was the eruption of the abduction phenomenon. However, typical UFO sightings continued to be made. Again, there was no qualitative difference between the waves and the troughs as far as UFO sightings were concerned. Were there any “unusual” or different activities during the troughs in addition to typical UFO sightings? Sometimes yes, and it may be in this area that we need to focus in the search for clues. Each major sighting wave has tended to introduce or to intensify some startling or attention-getting feature. In 1952 it was the radar-visual and jet interception cases. The 1957 wave featured a rash of electromagnetic effects on vehicles. In 1966 and 1967, vehicle encounter cases multiplied. The 1973 wave brought us a rash of humanoid encounters. But what about during the troughs?

Unusual events during troughs

Let us examine each trough period in turn for relatively unusual occurrences that may or may not have later become more common. During the 1948–1951 trough (see Table 2):

- UFOs interacted with test vehicles at White Sands Proving Grounds, New Mexico, in 1949 circling a missile in flight and in 1951 circling a Skyhook balloon.
- At least three military pilots in scattered locations engaged in intensive “dogfights” with glowing UFOs (in one case a clear-cut disc), also seen by independent observers in two of the cases.
- The mysterious and still unexplained green fireballs appeared, primarily over New Mexico, observed by many scientists in November 1951, just before the colossal 1952 sighting wave began. Also notable in these events is the concentration over sensitive military and scientific installations in New Mexico. This fact was commented upon in at least two Air Force documents (Hall, 1988, p. 200). One, an OSI report from New Mexico in 1950, expressed concern about “the continued occurrence of unexplained phenomena of this nature in the vicinity of sensitive installations.” During the 1958–1960 trough (see Table 3), there were an unusual number of “blatant display” cases for this early period of UFO history. Though the displays were not unprecedented, they did not become more common until much later. They were unusual for that time:
- A large number of Air Force officers at Strategic Air Command headquarters at Offutt AFB, Nebraska, in 1958 observed a cigar-shaped UFO with satellite objects.
- In the last quarter of 1958 there were at least three cases in which oval or elliptical UFOs hovered within plain sight, then accelerated and shot upwards out of sight at incredible speed.
- On February 4, 1959, a reddish object sped back and forth in the path of a Pan American Airways airliner, then disappeared rapidly upwards. • Father Gill and others in Papua New Guinea watched a disc with humanoid figures visible on it. The figures seemed to respond to gestures by the witnesses.
- On August 13, 1960, in Red Bluff, California, an important but underrated case with highly credible witnesses involved an astoundingly maneuverable elliptical object which behaved “intelligently” (Hall, 1964, p. 61).

What these cases have in common is their obviousness and closeness to the witnesses, and their long duration. Few (if any) conventional explanations come even close to accounting for them. Cases of this type, however, became common in the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1970–1972 trough (see Table 4), humanoid sightings and vehicle encounters continued, but nothing that we had not heard before. During the 1979–1981 trough (see Table 5), several strong physical evidence cases occurred. Once again, no scientific clues are immediately obvious.

Remarks

First of all, it is clear that the amount and kind of general news media reporting on the UFO subject at the time of a wave serves as a sociological filter factor in some way, its main effect being to give a somewhat misleading impression of what is really going on. The reporters do not attempt to distinguish solid, carefully investigated reports (“real” UFOs) from trivial IFOs. This often makes it seem that a veritable invasion is going on, whereas in reality the noise level is high.

Waves that were not centered in the United States, or did not have some highly publicized U.S. UFO cases, tend to be unknown here. Some pronounced non-U.S. waves have occurred, but they went essentially unreported by our news media. Examples are 1969, 1977–1978, and to some degree the early 1980s concentrations in Europe and South America. This journalistic failure, in and of itself, ought to be of interest to serious scholars. UFOs apparently do put on spurts of activity from time to time, and new features occasionally do appear. But how much reliance can we place on the wave and trough numbers we currently have to be an accurate reflection of wave magnitude? Several lines of anecdotal evidence suggest that the fundamental underlying causes of apparent waves and troughs are sociological and psychological in nature and that waves are not nearly so pronounced as they appear to be.

When public funding of an independent study of UFOs at the University of Colorado was announced in 1966, an astounding number of scientists and academics emerged from the “UFO Underground” to express their support for scientific study, and public interest soared. Probably not by coincidence, one of the largest UFO sighting waves of all time occurred in 1967. However, this wave cannot be explained by misperceptions on the part of people who desired to see UFOs. Instead—at least for the moment—UFOs were respectable, witnesses knew they would be taken seriously, and they knew where to report the sightings because the investigating agencies were much in the news.

Once the University of Colorado Project failed, rent by internal divisions, political pressures, and confusion over proper methodology, UFOs were once again debunked. The scientists and academics then vanished once more into the underground. Anyone with his finger on the UFO pulse knows that this underground movement still exists and is substantial. Due to their caution and conservatism, however, these scientists and academics surface only when it is (politically and otherwise) safe to do so. The message is that ridicule is a powerful factor in suppression of objective UFO reporting and investigation. This despite the fact that, as J. Allen Hynek stated, “ridicule is not part of the scientific method.” Clear documentation exists to show that important groups of people are inhibited by the ridicule factor from reporting their sightings or participating in open scientific study of UFOs. Airline pilots, at times, have been restricted by their companies from talking about the subject. Individual pilots on their own, with good reason, have concluded that it would be professional suicide to talk openly about their sightings. Military service career-ists often experience the same pressures.

Charles I. Halt, Colonel, USAF, retired, recently acknowledged in a public talk that he feared for his reputation and career when he went out into the field expecting to find a simple answer for the “lights” that were spooking his men outside of Bentwaters AFB, England, in December 1980, but instead personally experienced some mystifying events which he felt obliged to report up the chain of command.

Later, the senior enlisted men involved confided in Halt that they, too, had held back on reporting all that they had experienced for fear of damaging their professional careers. When all the evidence is pieced together about the Bentwaters event, it can be clearly seen as a pivotal case in the effort to unravel the UFO mystery. Overwhelming credible testimony is out there, if we could only get past the misleading and confusing speculation that so dominates the field.

In order to do that, we must first penetrate the ridicule curtain. The ridicule factor has a powerful net effect in inhibiting some of the best potential witnesses from fully reporting their experiences, so that persuasive testimony and important evidence are lost and UFOs fail to receive the scientific attention they so badly need. Most veteran UFO investigators will have encountered bitter and cynical UFO witnesses who swear they will never report another sighting to anyone, however spectacular, because of the ridicule and the negative effects on their lives and careers. Next time a news reporter asks you, “Why is it that only little old ladies in tennis shoes report UFOs?” you may want to suggest that maybe they are the only ones naive enough to do so. News media, in general, serve only to perpetuate the stereotypes. Little in the way of vigorous investigative reporting has been applied to the subject, largely because of the scientific disdain and the prejudices of editors. Television news shows usually report UFOs only as their light story of the day: “Now let’s all have a big laugh about the latest flying saucer story.” In the final analysis there is no question that many hundreds, perhaps many thousands, of sightings by competent and credible witnesses are suppressed because of the ridicule, and the failure of our major institutions to address the subject squarely.

On top of that, many cases never are carefully and thoroughly investigated. Under these circumstances, we cannot be at all sure about the frequency of real UFO sightings. Those seeming tidal waves, truth be known, may be more like ripples. But those ripples are portentous.

Table 1. Consensus UFO Sighting Waves

1952: radar-visual sightings and jet interceptor pursuits, UFOs over Washington, D.C., Utah movie film.
 1954: pronounced world-wide wave with pilot sightings, humanoid encounters in France and Italy.
 1957: primarily U.S. and South America, electromagnetic effects on vehicles, humanoid encounters.
 1960: relatively high sightings in several countries, not particularly in the U.S.
 1966-1967: very large wave, innumerable CE1 and CE2 reports.
 1973-1974: pronounced world-wide wave, Charles Hickson abduction, Ohio helicopter encounter.
 1977-1978: pronounced world-wide wave, concentrations in Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Italy, and the Middle East.
 1982-1985: relatively high sightings in several countries.

Table 2. Sightings During 1948-1951 Trough

07/23/48-Montgomery, Alabama. Chiles and Whitted. Airline encounter with cigar-shaped object.
 10/01/48-Fargo, North Dakota. F-51 pilot. Dogfight with highly maneuverable ball of light.
 10/15/48-Japan. F-61 night fighter. Radar-visual encounter with elongated object.
 11/18/48-Andrews AFB, Maryland. USAF pilot. Dogfight with glowing, highly maneuverable disc.

04/24/49-Arrey, New Mexico. Balloon tracking crew. Theodolite observation of high-speed UFO.
 06/10/49-White Sands, New Mexico. Two round, white objects maneuvered around a missile in flight.
 08/49-Las Cruces, New Mexico. Astronomer Clyde Tombaugh. Sighting of window-like rectangular lights.
 03/20/50-Little Rock, Arkansas. Circular disc with portholes maneuvered above an airliner.
 05/11/50-McMinnville, Oregon. Trent. Photos of daylight disc.
 05/20/50-Flagstaff, Arizona. Meteorologist Seymour Hess. Sighting of "powered" disc.
 08/15/50-Great Falls, Montana. Mariana movie. Film of two discs.
 01/16/51-Artesia, New Mexico. Two discs circled Skyhook balloon, observed by balloon trackers.
 8/25/51-Lubbock, Texas. "Lubbock Lights" photographs.
 10/10/51-Minneapolis, Minnesota. Two sightings of UFOs by balloon trackers in aircraft.
 11/51-New Mexico. Mysterious "green fireballs" observed by numerous credible witnesses, including scientists and technicians.

Table 3. Sightings During the 1958-1960 Trough

01/16/58-Trinidad Isle, Brazil. Clear photographs of Saturn-shaped daylight disc.
 04/2/58-Columbus, Ohio. Cigar with row of portholes or windows.
 04/04/58-Santa Monica, California, Cigar with windows, rapid vertical climb.
 05/05/58-San Carlos, Uruguay. Airborne encounter with brilliant object, pilot felt heat.
 05/17/58-Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Light reaction case; UFO sped away when light was shone at it.
 09/08/58-Offutt AFB, Nebraska. Numerous USAF personnel observed cigar-shaped object with satellite objects.
 09/21/58-Sheffield Lake, Ohio. Disc hovered near ground.
 10/07/58-Nantucket, Massachusetts. Oval object hovered, climbed away at high speed.
 10/26/58-Baltimore, Maryland. Hovering ellipse flashed, shot up out of sight.
 12/20/58-Dunellen, New Jersey. Police saw red pulsating ellipse approach, hover, shoot straight up out of sight.
 06/27/59-Papua New Guinea. Father Gill case. Humanoid beings on top of hovering disc.
 7/13/59-Blenheim, New Zealand. Domed disc with beings descended, illuminated area in green light.
 09/24/59-Redmond, Oregon. Disc hovered near airport, ascended into clouds as jet interceptors approached.
 03/04/60-Dubuque, Iowa. Three glowing, blue-white objects in formation.
 04/25/60-Plymouth, New Hampshire. Bright red cigar-shaped object hovered, sped away.
 08/13/60-Red Bluff, California. State police saw highly maneuverable elliptical object, red light beams.
 10/03/60-Tasmania, Australia. UFO with satellite objects.

Table 4. Sightings During the 1970-1972 Trough

01/07/70-Imjarvi, Finland. Humanoid beings confront skiers, apparent abduction.
 08/13/70-Haderslav, Denmark. Egg-shaped object over police car, E-M effects.
 04/14/71-Callery, Pennsylvania. Disc with windows, humanoid beings visible within; light beam upwards.

- 05/24/71-Mendoza, Argentina. Saturn-shaped UFO, darting motions, rapid acceleration.
08/09/71-Minas Gerais, Brazil. Airliner paced by glowing orange disc.
11/02/71-Delphos, Kansas. Glowing object hovered just off ground, animal reactions, strong physical traces.
06/09/72-Cadiz, Spain. E-M effects on car, pulsating yellow oval object visible on road ahead.
08/19/72-Colby, Kansas. Luminous disc brightly illuminated ground, departed upwards at high speed.

Table 5. Sightings During the 1979-1981 Trough

- 01/03/79-Mindalore, South Africa. Mother and child saw craft on ground, humanoid encounter.
03/06/79-Westminster, South Carolina. Low-level dome-shaped object illuminated area, up and down motions, light beam.
08/04/79-Canoga Park, California. Two beings visible through dome of large glowing disc.
4/2/80-Pudasjarvi, Finland. Car drove into "fog," headlights deflected, abduction, physical examination.
05/07/80-Valdese, North Carolina. Domed disc maneuvered near car, E-M effects on radio.
09/30/80-Victoria, Australia. Top-shaped object with body lights landed, strong physical traces.
12/27/80-Bentwaters AFB, England. Military police encounter with landed craft, radioactivity and physical traces.
12/29/80-Huffman, Texas. Spindle-shaped object blocked highway, strong physiological effects, mystery helicopters.
01/08/81-Trans-en-Provence, France. Disc-shaped object landed, physical trace evidence investigated by official agency.
07/04/81-Lake Michigan. Airliner crew saw silvery disc-shaped object ahead of plane.
10/08/81-Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Daylight disc photograph.
11/24/81-Marshall, Texas. Domed disc hovered, beamed light onto truck.

References and notes

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