

# An Odd Night in Alaska: JAL 1628 a synthesis of narratives

From Chapter 3, *The End of Human Space*,  
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## The Event

**I**N early January 1987, John Callahan, the FAA's Manager of the Accidents, Evaluations, and Investigations Division in Washington D.C., received a phone call from the Alaskan Air Traffic Quality Control Branch. The caller was an FAA manager asking for guidance on what to tell the media personnel who were overflowing his office. Reporters were requesting information about a UFO that had apparently chased a Japanese 747 across the Alaskan sky for 50 minutes on November 17, 1986. Somehow, the word had gotten out.

"What UFO? When did this take place? Why wasn't Washington Headquarters informed?" Callahan asked.

"Hey," the Alaskan manager replied, "who believes in UFO's? I just need to know what to tell the media to get them out of here."

The answer was easy: "Tell them it's under investigation. Then, collect all the data—the voice tapes and data discs from our facility, and the military, and send them overnight to the FAA Tech Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey."

Based on statements made by the pilots, air traffic controllers, and Division Manager John Callahan, here's a narrative of what happened around that odd hour in the cold Alaskan sky:

Sitting on a runway at Charles de Gaulle Airport on November 16, 1986, Captain Kenju Terauchi of Japanese Airlines flight 1628 (JAL 1628) throttled up his Boeing 747 freighter. This special flight—loaded with crates upon crates of wine to satisfy Tokyo's craze for Beaujolais Nouveau—was to cross Greenland, the Canadian Arctic archipelago, and Alaska on its way to Japan with two layovers in Reykjavik and Anchorage to refuel.

As JAL 1628 approached Alaskan airspace in the early evening of November 17<sup>th</sup>, a nearly full moon rose opposite the glowing red leftovers of

the sun setting on the southwest horizon. At 5:05 p.m. Alaska Standard Time (02:05 UTC), the crew received an order from Edmonton Center to contact the Anchorage Air Traffic Control Center upon entering Alaskan airspace.

Anchorage Center provided transponder codes, displayed the aircraft on their radar's Plan View Display, and ordered the plane to fly directly over Talkeetna, Alaska.

Complying with the navigation order, the crew made a slight left turn—during which they noticed some odd lights a few miles ahead. Being near U.S. and Soviet airspace, border patrols were often encountered, and the crew ignored the lights, thinking at first that they were special mission aircraft or a pair of fighters. JAL 1628 was at an altitude of 35,000 feet and flying at 910 kilometers per hour.

With the adjustment completed, Captain Terauchi noticed that the lights had not changed position for a while. This caught his attention. The lights were 30 degrees front-left and perhaps 2,000 feet below them, on the horizon, exactly matching the freighter's direction and speed.

Then "the two lights began to move in a manner different from ordinary aircraft maneuvers, like two bear cubs playing with each other" (FAA Testimony 1987). There seemed to be three craft in front of them: a large one the apparent size of a walnut at arm's length, and two small playful craft that sloshed back and forth around the larger one. The "distance from the lights was far enough from us, and their movement was not extreme, [so] we felt no immediate danger," Captain Terauchi would note later.

Here is Captain Terauchi's testimony regarding what happened next:

Then unexpectedly, two ships jumped in front of our face, shooting off lights! The inside cockpit shined brightly and I felt warmth on my face. The firing of the

exhaust jets varied, perhaps to maintain balance; Some became stronger than others and some became weaker than others, but seemed to be controlled automatically. Then three to seven seconds later, the fire (like from a jet engine) stopped and became a small circle of lights. The craft's overall shape was square, and it was flying 150–300 meters in front of us, slightly higher in altitude than us. Its size was about that of the body of a DC-8 jet, but with numerous exhaust pipes. The center area of the ship, where an engine might be, was invisible and the middle of body of the ship sparked an occasional stream of lights like a charcoal fire from right to left, and left to right.

We did not feel threatened or in danger because the spaceship had moved so suddenly. We probably would have felt more danger and have been prepared to escape if the spaceships were shaking unsteadily or were unable to stop. It was impossible for any manmade machine to make a sudden appearance in front of our jumbo jet flying 910 kilometers per hour, and then move in [seamless] formation.

I thought that perhaps it is one of those things called a UFO, and taking a photo might help to identify the object later. I asked flight engineer Yoshio Tsukuba for my camera bag placed behind my seat, and he handed it to me. [747 cargo planes also have a lounge behind the cockpit, so Tsukuba also walks back to turn off the lights for the photo]. I began to take a picture. The area in which the plane was flying was unchanged, but the lights were still moving strangely. I had ASA 100 film in my Minoruta Alpha 7000 camera, mainly to take scenery, and had the auto-focus on. I aimed at the object, but the lens kept adjusting and never set focus. I changed to manual-focus and pressed the shutter, but this time the shutter would not close. Then our aircraft started to vibrate and I gave up taking a photo. I placed my camera in its bag and concentrated on observing the lights. It was about seven minutes or so since we began paying attention to the lights. Our ships traveled in formation for about three to five minutes, and then two ships moved forward in a line, slightly higher in altitude than we were, and 40 degrees to our left.

We did not report this action to Anchorage Center. Honestly, we were simply stunned. Our radio communication, both transmitting and receiving, was extremely difficult for ten or fifteen minutes as the little ships came close to us; and their actions interfered with communications from Anchorage Center. Communications became normal [back to five-by-five quality, from two-by-five quality] as soon as the ships left. There were no abnormalities in the equipment or the aircraft. I have no idea why they came so close to us. There was now a pale, flat, white light in the direction where the ships flew that was moving in line with us matching our same speed, direction, and altitude. Again, we began communicating with Anchorage Center.

Captain Kenju Terauchi, *Meeting the Future*, 1987  
Personal Statement

According to [FAA transcripts](#), at 5:19 p.m., First Officer and copilot Takanori Tamefuji called the Anchorage Center, asking if there were any other aircraft in the area.

“Anchorage Center, Japan Air 1628, uh, do you have any traffic, uh, eleven o'clock above?” asked Tamefuji.

Carl Henley, the FAA Air Traffic Control Specialist at the Anchorage Air Route Traffic Control Center in Anchorage (ARTCC), responded.

“JAL1628 heavy, say again . . .” Henley asked, taken a little off guard.

“Do you have any traffic in front of us?”

“JAL1628 heavy, roger,” Henley now understood. Standard procedures are to identify and track an airspace violator until he lands, and then the FAA's Flight Standards people will give him a ticket and a stern talking-to.

“Uh, roger and, uh, we have in sight, uh, two traffic, uh, in front of us one mile out.”

“JAL1628, roger, do you have . . . uh, can you identify the aircraft?”

“Uh, we are not sure, but we have traffic in sight now.”

“JAL1628 heavy, Roger. Maintain visual contact with your traffic and, uh, can you say the altitude of the traffic?”

“Almost the same altitude.”

“JAL 1628, roger. Would you like a higher or lower altitude?”

“Uh, no, negative. JAL1628.”

After a few seconds, Henley asked, “JAL1628 heavy, see if you are able to identify the type of aircraft, and see if you can tell whether it's military or civilian.”

“JAL1628. We cannot identify the type, uh, but we can see, uh, navigation lights and, strobe lights.”

“Roger, sir. Say the color of the strobe and beacon lights?”

“The color is, uh, white and yellow, I think.”

“White and yellow. Thank you.”

In his post-incident report, co-pilot Tamefuji mentioned that these “strokes” were a bit abnormal, “on and off but becoming stronger, weaker, strong, weak—different from strobe lights.”

Henley asked several times if there were clouds near the 747’s altitude. The crew noted thin and spotty clouds near the mountains below, but no clouds in the mid-to-upper air. The air currents were steady and conditions quite pleasant.

At this time in the Alaska Center, Air Traffic Control Specialist [Samuel Rich](#) returned from his break to relieve Mr. Henley but found Henley swamped with work; having overheard the conversation about odd yellow and white strokes, Specialist Rich took the seat next to Henley and radioed NORAD’s Regional Operations Command Center (ROCC) at Elmendorf Air Force base to see if they could read any traffic on their radar screen near the 747. The ROCC has many types of radar: height-finding radar, short-range radar, and long-range radar that can probe 3,000 miles into Soviet airspace.

Rich asked NORAD, “Could you look approximately forty miles south of Fort Yukon? There should be [JAL 1628] up there. Can you tell me [if] you see a primary target about his position?”

As the controllers waited for NORAD, Captain Terauchi, thinking it might be impossible to find anything on his aircraft radar if the large ground radar at Anchorage showed nothing, decided to run a quick test. Terauchi judged the distance of the object visually, and set the 747’s digital weather radar distance to 32 kilometers, the radar angle on the horizon; there on his screen was a large, green and round object 13 to 15 kilometers away, right where the unknown object sat. “Normally,” Terauchi stated

later in his report, “a contact appears in red when aircraft radar catches another aircraft. I wonder if the metal used in the spaceship was different from ours?” (Severe weather would also be red or yellow on the 747 radar unit.) About 15 minutes after their initial sighting, the crew reported to Anchorage Center that their aircraft radar had caught the object within 13 to 15 kilometers at their 11 o’clock position, and asked again if Anchorage Control could catch the object on the ground radar. Control could not (see the Weather and Fixed Map Unit discussion later, as to why the controller could not see the “contact”).

The odd lights remained in formation with the 747. To Captain Terauchi, it seemed strange that the large “mothership” craft was only on the eastern side of their plane, entirely avoiding the right side, which held the last glimmer of the western sunset. That the 747 was sitting on the lighter side of the formation “[gave] the strange craft the advantage of being on the dark side . . . a difficult place for us to see . . . I think they did not want to be seen” ([FAA Interview 1987](#)).

The crew, having had “no fear so far, began to worry,” since they “had no idea of the craft’s purpose” ([FAA Statement 1987](#)).

At 5:25 p.m., Anchorage Control cut in: “JAL1628 do you still have, uh, visual contact with the, uh, traffic?”

“Affirmative. We [have] radar contact [too].”

“JAL1628 heavy, roger, sir. I’m [now] picking up a hit on the radar approximately five miles in trail of your six o’clock position [behind the plane]. Do you concur?”

“Uh, negative, 11 o’clock, uh, eight miles, uh, same level; over.”

At about this time the military responded to Rich’s request: “. . . It looks like I am getting some surge, primary return . . . I don’t know if it’s erroneous or whatever . . .”

“Negative,” said Rich, “huh-uh, it’s not erroneous. I want you [the ROCC] to keep a good track on there, and if you pick up a code; and verify that you do not have any aircraft operating in that area.”

“That is affirm. We [the military] do not have anybody up there right now,” said the ROCC.

“Okay . . . I’m picking up a primary . . . right in front of [the 747] 50 miles south of [Fort Yukon]” said Specialist Rich looking at the radar-data position consul.

“Okay, I’ve got him about his, uh, it looks like about, ten o’clock, at about that range, yes [several miles in front of the 747],” confirmed the military.

“All right, keep an eye on that, and see if, uh, any other military in that area,” asks Rich.

About a minute later, the ROCC responded again, noting that the “target in front of [JAL1628] is an unknown to us.”

[John L. Aarnink](#), Air Traffic Control Specialist, was on his way to take a break when he noticed the unusual activity at Henley and Rich’s Sector 15 positions. Aarnink plugged into the sector C15 (coordinator) position to observe and assist the two by answering telephone lines and coordinating as necessary. In a statement he gave later, Aarnink wrote that he monitored the aircraft transmissions and observed the data on the radar displays that coincided with the information JAL 1628 reported.

By 5:33 p.m., the ARTCC Area Manager in Charge, [Erlan Stephens](#), was also following the JAL 1628 situation. Because of the confirmed radar contact by the FAA and ROCC equipment, Stephens notified the U.S. Customs office at Anchorage International Airport about the possibility of a lost aircraft following JL1628 to Anchorage.

As Captain Terauchi communicated with Anchorage Center, “the two pale white lights gradually moved to the left side, and diagonally

back-left 30 degrees, as if they understood our [radio] conversation. When they were beside our aircraft, they totally disappeared from our radar” located in the nose of the 747 (FAA Testimony 1987).

The night was still clear as JAL 1628 arrived in the sky above Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks. The city glow was extremely harsh on the crew’s eyes, which had become acclimated to the darkness of the tundra and their cabin. As the 747 flew over the city lights the crew checked on the pale white lights behind them. Terauchi caught a glimpse of the craft following his 747, which now appeared “to be two bright lights, one thousand feet apart, with a silhouette of a walnut-shaped ‘mothership’ between them that reveals a shadow as large as ‘two aircraft carriers’” [see Drawing B]. “We must run away quickly!” fretted Captain Terauchi in his statement later to FAA officials.

“Anchorage Center,” said Terauchi nervously, “This is JL 1628, requesting a change of course to right 45 degrees.” The captain hoped to turn the plane for a better look at the object, and to see what it might do.

To the crew, it felt like a long time before they received permission. When they checked the rear again, the craft was still following. *We have to get away from that object*, worried Captain Terauchi.

“This is JL 1628. Again requesting for a change in course 45 degrees to the right.” Yet, “[Very broken communication; unintelligible],” is what Anchorage Control heard.

“JAL1628 heavy, you’re coming in broken. Say again.”

“Request, uh, deviate, uh, an, from, uh, object, uh, request heading two four zero.”

“JAL1628 roger. Fly heading two four zero . . . JAL1628 heavy, deviations approved as necessary for traffic.”

“It’s, uh, quite big”

“JAL1628 heavy, you’re still broken. Say again.”

“It’s, uh, very quite big, uh, plane.”

Then, several seconds later, ARTCC recommended: “Japan Air 1628 . . . request you to make a right turn, 360 degrees [a complete circle] . . . and advise me what your traffic does then.”

“JL 1628, thank you. We will continue 360 degree turn,” confirmed the crew.

Autopilot mode would make too slow of a turn so, at 5:37 p.m., the crew switched to manual and steered a steep right bank at 30 degrees. Six weeks later, Paul Steucke, FAA’s Anchorage Control Public Relations Officer, would tell the Associated Press regarding this 360-degree turn, “That was pretty clever. It allowed him to eliminate any natural phenomenon which would have stayed stationary” (AP 1987).

The military ROCC was again in communication with Specialist Rich. “Okay. We have no . . . we have confirmed we have no military aircraft working up there.”

“Okay, thank you very much,” says Rich, “You have no traffic at all?”

“That’s correct; does JAL 1628 still have somebody visual?”

“He says he does.”

Specialist Henley asked JAL 1628 to again confirm this: “JAL 1628 heavy. Sir, does your traffic appear to be staying with you?”

“—just looking,” the crew said.

“JAL 1628. Say again?”

“It uh—disappeared.”

Then, a minute later, the ROCC broke in, “This is us again. On some other equipment here we have confirmed there is a flight of two around the 747.”

“Okay, where is—is he following him?” asks Anchorage Control.

“It looks like he is, yes.”

Anchorage Control communicated with the 747 again: “Japan Air 1628 heavy. Military radar advises they do have a primary target in trail of you at this time. Japan Air 1628 heavy. Military radar advises they are picking up intermittent primary target behind you in trail. In-trail, I say again.”

The UFO followed JAL 1628 in a complete circle.

Anchorage Control then asked the ROCC, “Okay, do you have anybody you can scramble up there?”

“I’ll tell you what, we’re gonna talk to your liaison sir about that. I’m gonna talk to my other radar man here . . . he’s got some other equipment watching this aircraft.”

“Roger sir.”

Anchorage Center then asked JAL 1628, “Would you like our military to scramble on the traffic?”

“Negative, negative,” Captain Terauchi said, turning down the offer quickly, thinking that even modern U.S. F-15 fighter jets had no guarantee against creatures with an unknown degree of scientific technology.

“JAL 1628, affirmative. Direct Talkeetna and descend at pilot’s discretion.”

JAL 1628 continued toward Talkeetna at an altitude of 31,000 feet.

The ROCC was talking again with Specialist Rich about the 360-degree turn: “It looks like he, [the odd target] offset left, and then possibly fell back in-tail. However, I can’t see him now, I can’t pick him out.”

“Okay thank you sir,” said Rich.

Henley then asked, “JAL 1628 do you still have the traffic?”

“Affirmative. Uh . . . nine o’clock, uh, uh.”

Specialist Henley now vectored United Airlines flight 69 northbound from Anchorage to Fairbanks for a closer look at JAL 1628, to see if they could identify any traffic. UA 69 spotted

JAL 1628 and saw a beautiful sight as the large 747 floated in alignment with the moon over the white mountaintops surrounding Mt. McKinley. Conditions were “so clear,” the pilot of UA 69 said, “you can see into Tuesday” (Callahan 2011).

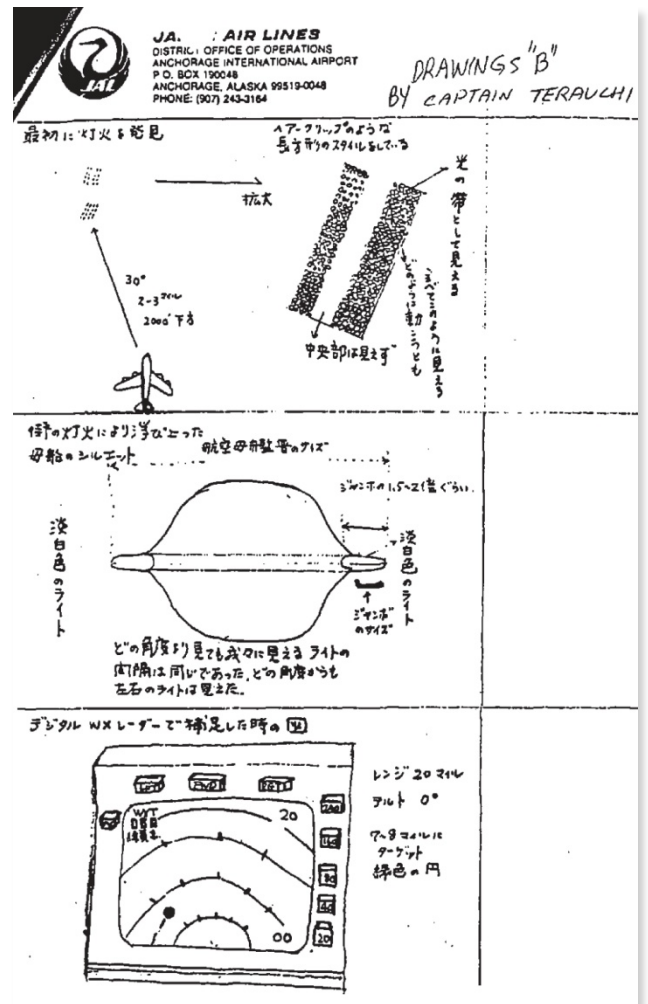
Captain Terauchi commented further on the arrival of UA 69:

We were flying on the east side of Mt. McKinley. The United Airline aircraft came close to us and requested us to flash landing lights for visual confirmation and we both confirmed our positions visually. As the United Airline aircraft was coming close to us, the spaceship disappeared [“the object suddenly took off to the east and was gone . . . so fast . . . I was watching it and it just disappeared”] and there was no other light but that of the moon. This strange encounter ended 120 km north of Talkeetna, 276 km away from Anchorage, and comprised approximately 50 minutes of flight time.

When Specialist Aarnink no longer saw the radar contact, and the 747 crew advised that they no longer saw the traffic; Aarnink called the ROCC and was told that they had also lost the target. Aarnink then unplugged from his position and went on break. Approximately 20 to 30 minutes later, JAL 1628 landed at its scheduled stop in Anchorage to refuel.

On arriving at ANC International Airport, FAA Inspector Jack Wright met the aircraft on the ramp area to interview the crew, who “were shook up but professional” (FAA Inspector Derry and Mickle 1986). Then Wright, Special Agent James Derry of U.S. Transportation Department Security, Agent Ronald Mickle, and Mr. Shimbashi, the JAL Operations Manager at Anchorage, all proceeded with the crew to the JAL operations building for more interviews. “FAA security manager Jim Derry said [the crew was] ‘normal, professional, rational, (and had) no drug or alcohol involvement’” (AP 1986).

As part of his initial debriefing that first night, Captain Terauchi drew these diagrams two hours after the encounter:



“Drawing B” Drawings. By Captain Terauchi, 1986. Note the small 747 under the right side of the mothership object in the middle panel.

On completing his discussion with the crew, Agent Derry called the Alaskan Duty Officer at NORAD to ask whether he had any other questions. NORAD had none, but said they had seen two targets on radar, and only one was JAL; the Duty Officer stated they would give all their data to Intelligence in the morning (FAA Inspector Derry and Mickle 1986). And a new crew flew JAL 1628 to Japan. Captain Terauchi, First Officer Tamefuji, and Flight Engineer Yoshio Tsukuba stayed in Anchorage for three more days before departing on separate flights.



## The Press Grabs the Story

**N**AVY optical physicist and UFO researcher Dr. Bruce Maccabee became fascinated with the story of JAL 1628 and, by the spring of 1987, he had written a thorough article on the event, in which, among other things, Maccabee explored how the press introduced the JAL 1628 event to the public:

On December 29, 1986, the *Kyoda Press* in Japan published the first news story about a Japan Airlines crew who had seen a UFO while flying over Alaska, and that the UFO had been picked up by military radar. The *Kyoda Press* got the story as a result of the air crew talking to their friends, and someone alerted them. On December 24<sup>th</sup> the *Kyoda Press* contacted the [FAA's] Public Information Officer at Anchorage: Paul Steucke.

According to Steucke, as told to Walter Andrus of MUFON, "The first thing I got was a phone call from Kyoda News Service out of Japan. That was the day before Christmas. They sent a correspondent over and the correspondent said to me—you know that we've got some information on such and such. Is it true? I said, well, yeah, and here's what we've got. On the 29<sup>th</sup> after the Christmas holidays that story must have been printed somewhere in Japan because *United Press International* picked it up. Then the *United Press* reporter over here asked me the same questions, and I told him the same thing."

UPI reporter Jeff Berliner broke the story in the United States on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1986. Numerous Associated Press newspapers reprinted the story and the FAA headquarters in Washington, D.C. learned about the whole situation from the Alaska press office. When FAA headquarters called Anchorage for the full story, it learned that the radar data tapes had been saved (which was unusual since the tapes were generally reused after [15] days). The FAA then announced that it would investigate the sighting according to a story in the Washington Post, January 1, 1987.

Dr. Bruce Maccabee,  
*The Fantastic Flight of JAL1628* 1987

The odd JAL 1628 "story was carried in dozens of newspaper and magazine articles during the next several months" (Harper 1995). It was because of the public pressure that the FAA upped the priority of the investigation. A January 5, 1987, Associated Press article

introduced the new situation with a Cold War flavor:

"We're looking at it to insure that somebody didn't violate airspace we control," said Paul Steucke, a spokesman for the aviation agency. "We looked at it about six weeks ago but since then we've gotten a lot of public interest, so we went back and reinterviewed the pilot." The FAA has ruled out alcohol or drugs as a factor in the sightings, Steucke said. "They were rational, professional pilots. I'd describe them as very sincere, very intense," Steucke said, "I've been here twelve years, I've been with the FAA three years, and I've talked to people who've been here seven or eight years and they don't recall anything like this." The FAA started investigating the report after the sighting, he said, but not as a top priority, "Basically, the public interest heightened our interest level. I wasn't hiding it, but I wasn't standing on a rooftop announcing it," he said.

*FAA investigates JAL Flight 1628 UFO Sighting*,  
Associated Press, 1987  
[Note: AP Archives no longer host [this article](#)]

## The Dismissals Begin

**A**S the story began to build, it also began to change. In the same AP article where Mr. Steucke regarded JAL 1628's 360-degree turn, "to see if the lights would follow," and where he said, "'That was pretty clever,'" the article introduced the topic thusly: "Mr. Terauchi said the unidentified objects showed up on the plane's weather radar. But images on military radar screens at the time were dismissed as clutter, and an object that showed up on the aviation agency's screens was thought to be a coincidental split image of the aircraft, Mr. Steucke said. Radar tapes will be analyzed, and the transcribed interviews and radio messages are to be sent to the agency in Washington later this week for review" (AP 1987).

In referring to a "split image of the aircraft," the story used a phrase that had never been mentioned in the radio transcripts or air traffic controller statements. A safe handle is being provided to those who want to lift the story away

from what the strange, apparent truth might be: that a massive, subtle, unknown, and powerful craft with un-Earthly qualities approached the crew of a 747.

Dr. Bruce Maccabee commented further regarding how the press, and the scientific community, analyzed the story:

The FAA wisely decided not to try to explain what the air crew reported. Yet, a small group of would-be debunkers did not exhibit such wisdom. Not content to wait for the complete release of information, on January 22, 1987 the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) issued a news release entitled “UFO Mystery Solved.” The cover letter announced “the findings of the CSICOP investigation into the Japan Air Lines Flight 1628 UFO incident of November 18, 1986,” stating that “according to a leading UFO investigator” [Philip Klass] at least one extraterrestrial object was involved—the planet Jupiter, and possibly another—Mars.” The press release asserted that at the time of the sighting Jupiter was “extremely bright” at a -2.6 magnitude, and would have been 10 degrees above the horizon on the left side of the aircraft where the pilot first reported seeing the UFO.

Dr. Bruce Maccabee,  
*The Fantastic Flight of JAL1628, 1987*

This planetary “explanation was widely publicized. The explanation made the captain look like an idiot, but that’s okay. Only idiots report UFOs. Having done their duty the news media promptly forget about the sighting” (Maccabee 1987). By the summer of 1987, the *Skeptical Inquirer* article “FAA Data Sheds New Light on JAL Pilot’s UFO Report,” revised the skeptical position, and moved on to weather. Dr. Maccabee, an optical physicist, prodded again in the following:

The *Skeptical Inquirer* published an analysis that the lights [JAL1628 saw] were explained as reflections of moonlight from the clouds and “turbulent ice crystals.” (Recall that the air crew reported thin clouds below them.) According to Philip Klass, the turbulent ice crystals “could have generated flame-colored lights” and “this would also explain why the undulating lights would periodically and suddenly disappear and then reappear as cloud conditions ahead changed. When the aircraft finally outflowed the ice clouds and the initial ‘UFO’ disappeared for good (the Captain) would

search the sky for it, spot Jupiter further to the left and conclude it was the initial UFO.”

The lights ahead of the aircraft were described as bright. The copilot compared them to headlights of oncoming aircraft. A reflection of the moon from thin clouds would cover broad areas of clouds and would be dim, rather than bright and point-like . . . . One might ask, if there were so many clouds, why the radar didn’t pick up numerous “blobby” returns on the right side and ahead of the aircraft as well as on the left where the “mother ship” appeared to be. And, of course, [the article’s] explanation does not account for the “silhouette of a gigantic spaceship.”

[Note: The *UFO Mystery Solved*, and *FAA Data Sheds New Light on JAL Pilot’s UFO Report* articles have both been removed from [www.csicop.org](http://www.csicop.org) archives without explanation.]

A high schooler grudgingly knows from late night homework sessions that the duty of a scientist is to painstakingly explore evidence. Yet the duty of a *Scientist*, with a Large “S,” seems instead to be the maintenance and projection of a culture of safety and control—in the name of “science”—onto new and fearful elements that seem out of place. It’s easy to think rationality is void of emotion, yet if we consider inductive reasoning, emotions surprisingly walk on stage unannounced. In saying that all swans we have seen are white, therefore, all swans are white . . . *faith* requires we trust that, “Yes, all swans are white” when we haven’t seen *every* swan! Faith in not necessary to determine the a priori knowledge that all swans are birds, and all hot stoves are hot—faith is only needed in that we have *actually* seen a bird, or a hot stove. Yet, in determining “truth” beyond a priori knowledge requires an emotional faith and trust to project past experience onto wider ideas.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Hume says we cannot rationally justify the claim that nature will continue to be uniform, as a “uniformity principle” cannot be demonstrated—it is “consistent and conceivable” that nature might stop being regular; and we cannot hold that nature will continue to be uniform because it has been in the past, as this uses the very sort of reasoning (induction) under question, and would be circular reasoning (Hume 1748). Thus, no form of justification will rationally

If a pilot sees a surprising fantastical craft, he thinks “Wow, I’m seeing a fantastical craft!” Because his sensation is raw and vivid—and although shocked—he believes the truth of the experience. When a radar specialist experiences an odd radar blotch where a pilot reports a fantastical craft, he might think “Whoa. What the heck is this?” When a *scientist* hears the fantastical above, she might think, “Gosh, too bad the event wasn’t fully recorded with high-quality video equipment.” Yet, when a *Scientist* hears the fantastical above, he might think, “Well, it was just Jupiter or the reflection of the Moon.”

The Prophet Mohammed once compared a scholar or philosopher who writes about mysticism without having had any mystical experience to a donkey carrying a load of books (Stace 1960). With extreme experiences, like an Alien encounter, it is possible for one’s experience to diverge so far from someone else’s experience that each individual’s ability to reconcile the two positions will fundamentally fail, and the two people’s perspectives may enter realms of mutually perceived mysticism.

We are all hardwired with the same fallible brains. While some people seek out the skeptical or scientific explanations, others decide that since they can’t explain something, no one else can either, and therefore the experience is mysterious or inexplicable.

... I have no doubt UFOs exist. UFOs, are, of course, Unidentified Flying Objects, and “unidentified” simply means that what the eyewitness saw was not immediately recognized by that person, at that time, under those circumstances. There are many things in the skies that the average person may not be able to identify from a quick look, but that a pilot, a meteorologist, or an astronomer might instantly recognize.

Benjamin Radford,  
[Space.com](http://Space.com), 2006

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warrant our inductive inferences. Yet, when given the choice between a false reason and no reason at all, Hume’s wise and obvious choice is Reason.

When a trained and experienced observer, like a pilot, has an encounter that no longer conforms to the canon of Earthly Experiences, it seems appropriate to have the courage to take notice and remain objective—that there *is* something beyond our understanding going on in the sky and these radar screens, and that, if it has no Earthly explanation, then it logically hints at extraterrestrialism.

Yet, Captain Terauchi, a pilot with decades of experience, was grounded by JAL and given a desk job, despite what UFO researcher and NASA engineer Dr. Richard Haines noted: Terauchi “‘kept his airplane in control at all times, he followed all required procedures, actually reported the event, and delivered his cargo to his intended destination.’ Dr. Haines was informed by JAL that the main reason for terminating Terauchi’s flying status was, ‘we don’t think pilots who experience such hallucinations should be flying’” (Harper 1995). Terauchi was reinstated as a pilot only *years* afterwards when Dr. Haines mailed JAL managers a thick envelope of other well-documented pilot-UFO interactions witnessed by flight crews from around the world.

## The Investigation

**I**N January 1987, the FAA’s Anchorage Facility gathered all the data, radar returns, voice tapes, and transcripts from the November 17, 1987 event and re-interviewed the crew “in a courteous and professional manner with no attempt to intimidate them” (Harper 1995).

On January 2, 1987, Inspector Richard Gordon received the personal statement of Captain Kenju Terauchi (translated by Sayoko Mimoto of the FAA Alaskan Region Airway Facilities Division). This statement provided the framework for the earlier narrative. In [Terauchi’s interview](#), the captain provided

Inspector Gordon with highly detailed descriptions of what the crafts looked like and how they behaved.

To Terauchi, it seemed as if the craft *intentionally* did not want to leave any evidence, because “if they were at the [exact] same altitude [as our 747], they would create air turbulence, but they never were positioned so the air turbulence would disturb us. The turbulence would assure their existence; therefore, they positioned themselves well from the beginning . . . . I think, perhaps, they have regulations they must not be [clearly] seen by humans” (FAA 1987).

Terauchi, without hesitation, expressed the belief that he saw an unearthly craft. He continued, “I felt there was a living creature in it. It jumped in front of us, very unusual. They took such unexpected actions . . . they [have] complete control of inertia and gravity. Yeah, so their technology was unthinkable, unimaginable high technology” (FAA 1987).

On January 5, 1987, FAA Inspector Peter Beckner and Japanese interpreter Sayoko Mimoto interviewed JAL 1628 [First Officer Takanori Tamefuji](#) at the Federal Building in Anchorage, Alaska. First Officer Tamefuji stated that, “I am certain I saw something. It was clear enough to make me believe that there was an oncoming aircraft.” Yet, Tamefuji’s most interesting points came near the end of the interview:

Tamefuji: And uh, can I ask one question?

Beckner: Sure.

Tamefuji: Uh, I read the FAA news uh, um, I found military radar picked up some kind of target on their radar. What type of understanding?

Beckner: Um, I’m not sure what they’ve seen on that radar, right at the present moment.

Tamefuji: Uh-huh.

Beckner: Let me just do this. I can find out and let you know.

Tamefuji: And uh, the interview said military, some kind of commander, I don’t remember—but, uh, some military . . .

Beckner: Military . . . military, uh, commander?

Tamefuji: Uh, how should I say, but some personnel from military said this [craft] was a weather interference . . . uh, on the radar.

Beckner: Okay, that I—that I don’t know.

Tamefuji: But uh, it was clear sky, so . . .

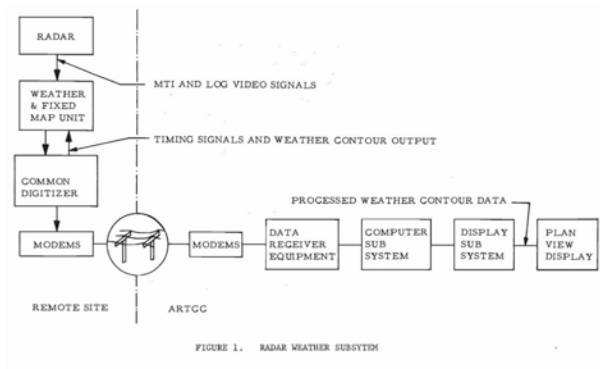
Beckner: Right.

Tamefuji: . . . there’s no possibility of weather interference.

Beckner: On the weather interference, okay. Well, I’ll do this, I will find out what the result of the analysis is on those. We’re going to eventually get that anyway. And I’ll let you know what we have. Okay? I have your phone number so I’ll do that. Okay?

Tamefuji: Yes.

In this interview, Inspector Beckner didn’t understand the function of the Weather and Fixed Map Unit (WFMU) the FAA uses to display air traffic data on a Controller’s Plan View Display (Callahan 2011). By the mid-1970s, the FAA had achieved a semi-automated air traffic control system that used both radar and computer technology to manage national airspace [see FAA “Figure 1” below]. The Weather and Fixed Map Unit came into existence after the FAA’s Black Thursday event, when, during a tragic Thanksgiving holiday, the networked National Airspace System attempted to assign every raindrop of a Midwest storm the flight information of a typical airplane! The overburdened FAA computer processors crashed and caused major delays across half the world. Technicians all over the country were called away from their holiday dinners to figure out the problem overnight (Callahan 2011).



FAA "Figure 1." *Report No. FAA-RD-76-53*. 1976.

It is important to briefly explore how this radar system works so that we can better understand the “weather confusion” to which Beckner, the controllers, and the public reports referred. A single radar sweep consists of *many* thousands of radar pluses. As these timed pluses reflect off a tree, a cloud, or an airplane, they are called a *target*. The number of pluses returned from each target is called a *run length*. The WFMU separates the run length counts of each target and determines what the radar target might be—a possible Boeing 747 might reflect a run length of around 1,200 pluses, a possible Airbus A320 might reflect 260 pluses—and then the WFMU passes this information to controller’s Plan View Display as a symbol (such as +, -, \*). The controllers using the FAA’s Alaskan computer systems during the JAL 1628 event would not have separated radar targets, but rather separate radar *symbols* (Callahan 2011). Only on the old systems, like those that first detected the approaching Japanese Air Armada on December 7, 1941, would everything the radar struck—a bird, a cloud, etc.—be displayed as a target on the controller’s scope. “The reason why the UFO didn’t show up well on the FAA’s data tapes was that it was too large of a craft, and the WFMU identified it as weather. The FAA system is not configured to identify and track

these tremendous performance specifications” (Callahan 2011). A UFO eight times larger than a 747 might have a run length of perhaps 8,000 pluses, and get registered as a small thunderstorm in the MFMU; and this is perhaps why Specialist Henley was so interested in the weather at the beginning of JAL 1628’s experience.

On January 7, 1987, [Anthony Wylie](#), an FAA Quality Assurance Specialist in Anchorage, signed a statement asserting that he reviewed the Continuous Data Recording of the alleged JAL 1628 sightings. He very carefully noted that he “could not find any target information in the vicinity of the reported traffic, the radar track appeared to be normal and consistent with other tracking data reviewed in the past.” The word “information” is an interesting one. Does this mean transponder codes? Or commonsense aircraft movements? The definition of “information” is loosely centered on “data making sense.” Obviously *data* was recorded, because Washington Headquarters talks about the various data problems in the pages below. And if there was no data collected, then what were the Air Controllers talking to each other about?

On January 9, 1987, [Manfred Keller](#), an FAA Automations Specialist in Anchorage, also signed a statement interpreting the recorded radar data of JAL 1628, saying that he had “searched the specific areas where the pilot reportedly had traffic and could not find any indications of other target *information*” [emphasis added].

On January 15, 1987, the JAL 1628 flight engineer, [Yoshio Tsukuba](#), spoke with Inspector Peter Beckner. Tsukuba confirmed the strange sightings, and had immediately seen what Captain Terauchi pointed at. Tsukuba further confirmed that an odd object indeed showed up



as a green target on the plane's weather radar, despite clear weather conditions. Tsukuba was also adamant in clarifying that the cabin lights were dim, and that internal reflections were not an issue.

On February 24, 1987, the *Anchorage Daily News* published a story that the Anchorage FAA office was releasing a [press package](#) containing all of the air traffic control audio tapes, crew interviews, and four glossy photos of the relevant radar charts for \$194.30 to help satisfy the massive deluge of interest from news organizations and individuals all over the world.

LIST OF RECORDS AVAILABLE	
ORDER FORM	
for	
JAL FLIGHT 1628	
UNIDENTIFIED TRAFFIC SIGHTING	
NOVEMBER 18, 1986 UTC	
(The event occurred on November 17, 1986 Alaska Standard Time)	
<b>PLEASE MARK ITEMS DESIRED.</b>	
<input type="radio"/>	\$194.30 Complete package of all written records and photographs plus all tape recordings.
<input type="radio"/>	\$94.30 Complete package of written records and photographs only.
<input type="radio"/>	\$5.05 Complete Inspection/Investigator (Flight Standards) package, includes items 1 through 9.
<input type="radio"/>	\$0.30 1. FAA Form 8020-5, Aircraft Incident Record. (Brief summary statement, submitted by Flight Standards Division, January 26, 1987) (2 pages)
<input type="radio"/>	\$0.45 2. FAA Form 3112, Inspection and Surveillance Record; notes by Inspector Jack Wright after interview of pilot and crew, 11/17/86, (3 pages written plus 2 pages drawings)
<input type="radio"/>	\$0.30 3. FAA Form 1600-32-1, Notes of interview with all three crew members of JAL Flight 1628; completed by Security Inspector Ronald E. Mickie, 11/17/86. (2 pages)
<input type="radio"/>	\$0.40 4. FAA Form 1600-32-1, Notes on interview with all three crew members of JAL Flight 1628, map, and drawing by the pilot; completed by Special Agent James Derry, 11/17/86. (4 pages)
<input type="radio"/>	\$1.15 5. Transcript of Interview with Captain Terauchi, 1/2/87, by Richard Gordon, manager of flight standards district office in Anchorage. (19 pages)
<input type="radio"/>	\$1.10 6. Written Statement and Drawing by Captain Terauchi; <u>in Japanese</u> . (16 pages written, plus 2 pages drawings)
-more-	

FAA Anchorage Center's [List of Records Available](#), order form on JAL 1628. Page one of four.

[Much of this package was used to distill the present narration, and is available as a [PDF \(230MB\)](#), and includes additional resources added by UFO researchers over the years.]

In January 1987, John Callahan, the FAA's Manager of the Accidents, Evaluations and

Investigation Division in Washington D.C. received all the data from Alaska for his investigation. The package included all of the reports, transcripts, and radar data of the JAL 1628 event. After a short review of the material, he briefed his boss, Harvey Safeer, and FAA Administrator Admiral Engen on the situation—telling them that there might be a problem. The next day, Callahan and Safeer headed to the FAA Tech Center in Atlantic City to observe the data playback and create reports alongside other the FAA experts.

In the 1980s, the FAA had developed a Re-track Program capable of combining and playing back recorded radar data onto another PVD. With the data playback and radio voice tapes keenly matched together, it was as if you were standing right there with the controller at the time of an earlier event (Callahan 2011). At the Tech Center, Callahan instructed the FAA specialists to synchronize the voice tapes with the radar data so everyone could hear what the controller and pilot said, and Callahan videotaped the Re-track Program Display.

The radar playback displayed primary radar targets in the vicinity of the 747, and the target returns were displayed at about the same time and place at which the pilot had advised Anchorage Control that he was viewing a UFO (Callahan 2007). Callahan stated later that if this craft had been a Learjet or military aircraft at the wrong altitude, this fact would have been clear; the FAA had procedures that covered the tracking of unidentified aircraft violating another's airspace—but the FAA had no procedures for dealing with UFOs . . . (Callahan 2007).

Back at FAA headquarters after the technical review, Callahan give Administrator Engen a quick briefing.

“Would you like to see the video we made at the Tech Center?”

“Can you put that on my TV?” Engen asked.

“Yah, sure.” And Callahan showed Engen the tape.

Five minutes into the video, Engen told his staff he was going to be late for his next meeting. After a few more minutes, Engen said that he would need to cancel his meetings altogether as he watched the whole video. After the video, Admiral Engen called to set up a meeting with President Reagan’s scientific staff. Callahan was told by the Admiral that his function at this meeting would be to “give them a dog and pony show” and hand the data to them “since the FAA does not control UFOs in the government” (Callahan 2011).

Around 9:00 a.m. the next morning, Callahan brought to the meeting in the FAA Round Room a copy of the video and all the other data printouts the FAA had available at the time. Also attending the Round Room meeting were the FAA’s head radar and computer systems engineers, three scientists from Reagan’s Science Team, three people from the FBI, three people from the CIA, and “a bunch of other grunts” (Callahan 2007).

The whole group watched Callahan’s Tech Center video three times. The video ended as the Alaskan Controllers said, “What’s that following UA 69?” (Callahan 2011). The UFO had moved from JAL 1628 to UA 69 as the new plane approached; yet this section was omitted from the public transcripts.

During the earlier Tech Center review in Atlantic City, Callahan had asked the head software and hardware engineers, who had built the FAA systems, to put together a large 8-by-10 foot chart detailing JAL 1628’s flight path, and on it they placed every [recorded radar return](#). Callahan asked them to put the long chart on the wall.

“Tell me what those dots are. What is it?” he said.

And the two engineering teams began to explain what they interpreted the radar symbols on the PVD meant to them.

The hardware engineers stood up and said, “This target over here is a software problem. This one here, a software problem. There’s nothing wrong with our hardware system.”

Callahan says, “Fine. Makes sense to me.”

The software guys approached the chart and said, “This target over here, that’s a *hardware* problem. And this one here, a *hardware* problem. There were no software problems.”

So there were no software problems. And there were no hardware problems. “So do we have a target there or not?” asks Callahan.

No one had a comfortable answer.

In the Round Room meeting, one of Reagan’s scientists asked a number of questions such as, “What is the range of the radar? What is the frequency of the radar? What is the bandwidth? What is the formula for the height-finding equipment?” The technical responses to these questions from the experts were delivered like “like high school math coaches” spitting out numbers and data.

At the end of the briefing, one of the three people from the CIA stood up and said, “This event never happened. We were never here. We’re confiscating all this data and you are all sworn to secrecy.”

As the meeting broke up and people began to pick up their charts and files, Callahan asked a CIA guy, “What do you think it was?” thinking it could have been some sort of giant stealth bomber.

“It looked like we had a UFO up there,” the CIA fellow says, “This is the first time we’ve recorded so much data on a UFO, and now they have over 30 minutes of radar data to go over,” he replied.

“Well, let’s get a briefing out and advise the American public we were visited by a UFO,” Callahan suggested.

“No, no, no. You can’t do that. It would frighten the people. If we were to tell the American public there are UFOs, they would panic,” he informed Callahan. “We’ll go back and study this.”

“Oh, okay.”

**This attitude was eerily similar to the other Great Stories I’ve been exploring:**

If we announce the story now, though, there’ll be an initial wave of enthusiasm and then the skeptics will start carping. It’ll embarrass you and it’ll embarrass us. Much better to gather the evidence, if you can.”

Defense Secretary Kitz to Ellie  
*Contact*, by Carl Sagan, 1985

The science team and the CIA took all the FAA data at the meeting, but they didn’t ask if this has been *all* the data the FAA had.

A few weeks later, the final, detailed FAA report that was in progress at the time of the Round Room briefing, which included extensive interviews with the pilot and crew, the Tech Center charts, and the facility voice tapes—arrived at Callahan’s office. Callahan figured that, when the CIA wanted the rest of their data, they would be sure to come and get it; so he placed the thick report on a small table in his office. It lay there waiting for the CIA, but they never knocked on his door.

Since the FAA held no archival categories dealing with UFOs, the report collected dust in Callahan’s office until he retired a few years later, after which the report sat in his barn until 2001 when he felt emboldened enough to share his story, and the data reports, with Dr. Steven Greer’s nonprofit initiative, The Disclosure Project, on the rationale that he was uncomfortable with the government’s keeping such important secrets from the public.

On March 5, 1987, the FAA released its findings:

Radar data used to track Japan Airlines flight 1628 on the night of November 17, 1986, was retained by FAA. Review of this radar data by FAA experts using identical equipment at the FAA’s research technical center in Atlantic City, New Jersey, revealed that the radar system was receiving what is called an “uncorrelated primary and beacon target.”

This electronic phenomenon is not unusual according to Steucke who said, “It is unfortunate that the uncorrelated target phenomenon occurred just when a pilot was reporting seeing something outside his aircraft. The controller’s statements, released by the FAA, indicate that they thought there might be another aircraft or object in the area of the JAL flight. Steucke said, “The controllers were doing their job right because they have to work with what is right there in front of them on the screen, especially when you have a Captain that is reporting “other traffic” in his immediate area. The radar data they had was one target, moving slowly across the radar screen.

Review of the radar data by FAA experts revealed the “uncorrelated target” phenomena. FAA electronic technicians explained that an “uncorrelated primary and beacon target” on the radar screen, which occurs when the radar energy that is sent up toward the aircraft, (primary signal) returns to the radar receiver along with the aircraft transponder (beacon) signal, and the two do not match up as being at the same exact location.

*FAA Releases Documents on Reported UFO Sighting  
Last November,*

By Paul Steucke, FAA Office of Public Affairs, 1987

The FAA wisely sidestepped the weather and astronomical excuses, and instead, politely attacked the competency of its own people and equipment. Indeed, how unfortunate it was that the captain saw an “uncorrelated target.” Not every airplane in the air has a transponder; stealth aircraft on special missions will turn off their transponders. It is not FAA policy for a controller to ignore a pilot’s report of another craft, especially near Soviet airspace, merely because it doesn’t have a correlated transponder—an ‘uncorrelated primary’ *means the radar hit something* (Callahan 2011). And it wasn’t a weather balloon.



On March 12, 1987, *The Wall Street Journal* finished off the story with a final, elitist, afterthought [paraphrased]:

Orders continue to roll in from UFO watchers (whose resources aren't astronomical) of the \$194.30 unbound collection of reports and records of the JAL 1628 incident, despite the FAA's conclusion—in a separate report that costs nothing—that the FAA couldn't substantiate the sighting. Its technical experts in Atlantic City, NJ said blips on a radar screen that appeared to confirm an object in the vicinity of the JAL jet were actually “split-radar returns”—shadows of the plane's primary echo.

Unfair criticism of the billions of dollars of equipment that sits along NORAD's thousand-mile radar fence tracking polar airspace for

incoming air and missile attacks from China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union. Unfair criticism of the several sets of professionals, and radar operators and their managers, who were apparently incapable of properly identifying primary radar echoes visually corroborated by an experienced pilot.

Instead, the radar blob was a mistake, an item of non-consequence.

People in positions of authority said it was nothing to worry about, and the world moved on while a massive Strangeness slowly approached from the north.

And a misguided application of Occam's Razor strikes again.

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