Are Technical Issues in Aircrafts a Calling Card for UAPs?: Aviation Safety and the Hypothetical Ability to Preemptively Locate a UAP

Lili Minato
HNR 300 UFO's: Gov't on Record
Professor Dickinson
April 14, 2025

Bibliography

As often stated in Leslie Kean's *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials go on the Record*, the government does not take aviation safety associated with UAPs seriously, "These (UAP) incidents are not investigated by any government agency, as are other events affecting aircraft."[1] Because of this, many UAP, also known as Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon, experiences don't get reported or shared. In 2000, Richard F. Haines, a chief scientist at the National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena, or NARCAP, wrote an eighty-eight page report detailing numerous experiences pilots had with unidentified flying objects.[2] In the paper titled *Aviation Safety in America - A Previously Neglected Factor,* many of these stories share a similar characteristic: before seeing a UAP or while seeing a UAP, the pilot's aircraft has technical issues. These difficulties could range from a faulty compass to the plane's entire system shutting down for a period of time. The consistency of these stories begs the question: Are technical issues in aircrafts a calling card for UAPs? And can this be used by pilots to preemptively locate a UAP? This essay will not only cover reports from pilots who've experienced strange phenomena in the sky but also how the destigmatization of UAPs in government and aviation related fields could allow for safer protocols to be implemented for those who fly.

A case from March 12th, 1977 gives an example of common UAP-related technical difficulties. A routine United Airlines flight from San Francisco to Boston experienced a gradual turn to the left by itself which prompted the Boston airport to ask where the plane was headed. After responding, the pilots attempted to fix the situation which caused them to discover that all

---

[1] Leslie Kean, *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials go on the Record* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010), 52.

[2] Richard F. Haines, *Aviation Safety in America — A Previously Neglected Factor* (National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena, 2000), 1-5, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf80ff422b5a90001351e31/t/5d02ea1772637c00014776c5/1560472092579/narcap.TR1.AvSafety.pdf.

of their compasses were facing different directions. During this experience, the captain and the first officer saw an extremely bright light flying at the same altitude as themselves. They described it as perfectly round and bigger than their own commercial airplane in size. It flew about 1,000 yards away from their own aircraft. They detailed how the UAP flew alongside them for about four to five minutes before quickly flying away and disappearing. About fifteen seconds after the UAP flew away, the plane went back to its correct position. There was no radar traffic in the area during that time.[3]

The March 1977 case was not one filled with casualties and consequences but it shows an example of a technological reaction to a UAP. At least six out of the twenty-four cases from Haines's report listed[4] a malfunctioning compass as a system affected by a UAP encounter. While there is always the possibility of an identifiable issue causing the compass to stop functioning, there is no reason for pilots and their associates to immediately jump to such a conclusion. As Kean states in her book, "According to our (Kean and NARCAP) statistics, in an average career of commercial flying, a pilot has about the same chance of seeing a UAP as he does of striking a bird in flight or of encountering extreme wind shear."[5] UAP's are, as the acronym represents, a phenomenon that a large majority of pilots experience during their time in the sky. Their stories and experiences should be shared in order to understand the possible signs of a UAP. Sadly, the government, along with our society, shares a stigma against the term UFO. Pilots often lose their jobs and careers over reporting their UAP experiences.[6] Their supervisors describe them as "drunk" or "crazy" instead of looking into the actual issue at hand. Reported

---

[3] Haines, *Aviation Safety*, 80.
[4] Haines, *Aviation Safety*, 18-19.
[5] Kean, *UFOs,* 54.
[6] Kean, *UFOs*, 63.

UAP encounters would allow for studies and research to be done on the abnormality which would, in turn, contribute to aviation safety and UAP procedures.[7]

Understanding and noticing these smaller technical difficulties is important in order to avoid bigger and more dangerous situations with UAPs. On October 21st, 1978, a pilot had rented a Cessna 182L single-engine, propeller-driven airplane for a quick late night flight. During this flight, the pilot radioed the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne while flying over Bass Strait. In a flight transcript between the pilot and a flight service operator, the pilot holds many long pauses while describing a large aircraft flying by his plane. He details the object as being fast and bright but he is unsure if it's actually an aircraft or not. He describes the craft as playing a game with him, flying back and forth above his plane at unidentifiable speeds. After a while, the craft started to chase him until it suddenly vanished. Approximately forty-four seconds later, the pilot's engine starts rough idling, which the flight service operator can audibly hear. Seventeen seconds later, the UAP appears again, now hovering on top of the pilot's plane. There is another seventeen second pause where a metallic-pulsing noise can be heard. The flight transcript ends and the pilot and his plane were never found, which leads many to believe he ended up crashing into the water that he was flying above.[8]

Transparency of UAP experiences and technical issues can assist in avoiding future crashes and disappearances that are similar to the October 1978 case. This experience, similar to many others, showed no evidence of traffic or additional radar that was picked up when the pilot inquired. In a destigmatized world, early UAP signs such as the object not being registered on radar screens, would be an immediate warning sign for a pilot. While this pilot's plane malfunctioned after he made contact with the craft, a complete system shutdown is often a large

[7] Kean, *UFOs*, 63.
[8] Kean, *UFOs*, 55-57.

sign that whatever a pilot is dealing with is dangerous and/or abnormal, “The second impact that a UAP can have on aviation safety is to affect the proper functioning of navigation guidance equipment, flight control systems, radar operations, and radio communication with interference from its alleged electromagnetic radiation.”[9]

While NARCAP shares stories of UAP encounters, they also conduct studies involving a plethora of UAP related situations. The information concluded from Haines and Dominique Winestien’s preliminary study about UAP encounters and alleged technical issues on aircraft systems was that radio systems and compasses are most affected by UAPs, most technical issues occurred when the aircraft was near a UAP, and that magnetic compasses often deviate towards the position of a UAP meaning there’s an intense magnetic field connected to UAP’s.[10] While this study is in its early stages, many of these conclusions can be easily connected to previous UAP pilot stories. In the March 1977 case, their compasses were all facing different directions when they were close to contact with a UAP. These frequently reported technical issues could be used as a baseline for UAP aviation safety guidelines as well as a warning sign that unidentified aerial phenomena may be close by. Sadly, the government and the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) are not too keen on breaking the stigma against UAPs.

NARCAP reported on a safety-related UAP incident from March 19th, 2020 where they were able to draw the conclusion that, “This incident provides more evidence that UAP are a threat to safe aviation. The lack of preparation for aircrews, the failure to collect and analyze data for safety factors, the unpredictability and extreme mobility of UAP, the inability of airborne

---

[9] Kean, *UFOs*, 53.

[10] Richard F. Haines and Dominique F. Wienstien, *A Preliminary Study of Fifty Seven Pilot Sighting Reports Involving Alleged Electro-Magnetic Effects on Aircraft Systems* (National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena, 2001), 15, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf80ff422b5a90001351e31/t/5d02eb044a252700010bd9de/1560472330113/narcap_TR-3_2001.pdf.

anti-collision systems to detect UAP, are contributing factors to an unsafe situation. It is unfortunate that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has zero interest in examining these cases and exercising due diligence to mitigate safety factors."[11] FAA's lack of preparation and transparency on UAP matters has left pilots and crew insufficiently trained for what to do in such a situation. During the March 2020 incident, the crew took multiple videos and photographs of the unknown aircraft, proving that they were not professionally prepared for such an occurrence. Instead of distractedly photographing the ship, the crew should have been focused on keeping their plane safe during a time of uncertainty. The FAA's lack of protocol and documented UAP-caused technical difficulties in planes go hand and hand when it comes to creating a safer and better informed environment for pilots. In a perfect world, the FAA would have the occurrence of technical difficulties such as malfunctioning compasses and radio as a sign of alarm. There would be protocols on what to do when a pilot comes into contact with an unknown object. These UAP calling cards could be used by pilots as a tool when searching for unknown aircrafts in the sky.

Sadly, the preconceived idea that many in the aviation field share is that UAPs are not real and those who see them are crazy. Once that rhetoric is dissolved and those people realize that unidentified aerial phenomenon doesn't immediately mean aliens from space, there may be room to explore such protocols. Currently though, pilots continue to exist in unsafe workplace environments where the unknown could harm themselves and their aircrafts. After investigating the experiences of pilots, there is a large possibility that technical errors, such as a malfunctioning compass and/or radio can be a calling card for UAP activity and pilots should

---

[11] Ted Roe, *An Independent Analysis of a March 19, 2020 Aviation Safety-Related Incident involving UAP, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, Over Mexico* (National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena, 2020), https://www.narcap.org/blog/narcaptr20.

watch out for such signs. UAPs are not a fictional phenomenon and should be studied on a larger scale in order to keep aviators safe from any anomaly that exists high in our skies.

Haines, Richard. *Aviation Safety in America — A Previously Neglected Factor.* National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena. 2000. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf80ff422b5a90001351e31/t/5d02ea1772637c00014776c5/1560472092579/narcap.TR1.AvSafety.pdf

Haines, Richard F. and Dominique F. Weinstein. *A Preliminary Study of Fifty Seven Pilot Sighting Reports Involving Alleged Electro-Magnetic Effects on Aircraft Systems*. National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena. 2001. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cf80ff422b5a90001351e31/t/5d02eb044a252700010bd9de/1560472330113/narcap_TR-3_2001.pdf

Kean, Leslie. *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials go on the Record*. New York: Three Rivers Press. 2010.

Roe, Ted. *An Independent Analysis of a March 19, 2020 Aviation Safety-Related Incident involving UAP, Unidentified Aerial Phenomena, Over Mexico*. National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena. 2020. https://www.narcap.org/blog/narcaptr20

Bibliography