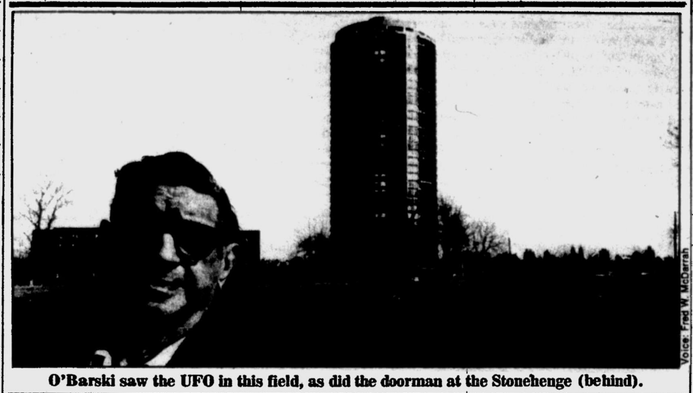
Sane Citizen Sees UFO in New Jersey

BY BUDD HOPKINS

'In mid-January 1975, for about three minutes, a spaceship landed on a hill in New Jersey, apparently to collect soil samples. It happened again last month.'



O'Barski saw the UFO in this field, as did the doorman at the Stonehenge (behind).

The next time you are driving on the West Side Highway, look across the Hudson River and you will see, opposite 87th Street, a tall, round apartment building. It sits atop the Palisades, a prominent unit in New Jersey's burgeoning counter-skyline. This building is named "Stonehenge," an interesting and odd coincidence when one considers a startling event which occurred a few hundred yards from its entrance. Tenants who face the river have a sumptuous downstream view of Manhattan. Those who live on the other side look out on North Hudson Park, a pleasant, manicured place about a quarter the size of Central Park. In the middle of January 1975, for about three minutes, a spaceship sat quietly on the hill facing Stonehenge, apparently on a mission to collect soil samples. This seems, at least, to be the most obvious conclusion one can draw from the evidence. The UFO came in from the west about three in the morning and landed in time to be seen by a passing car about 60 feet away. George O'Barski, driving home from work, had an experience shared, so far, by very few New Yorkers. To this day, one year after the event, he won't go near North Hudson Park. "Even if Congress passed a law requiring it, you couldn't get me into that place at night," he announced to me recently, and he means it.

George O'Barski is 72 years old. He owns and manages a small liquor store in Chelsea, though he himself is a teetotaler. He is street-wise, astute, and reflective. He and Bill Burns, his partner, have been my friends, my evening check-cashing service, and the source of my dinner wine for 17 years. They are truthful men.

Monday through Saturday George works the evening shift, from about six till midnight. Then he closes up, walks "Cognac," the German shepherd attack dog, and spends an hour or so doing bookkeeping, replenishing shelves, and reordering stock. It is usually after 2 a.m. when he drives home to New Jersey. On this particular January morning he was taking an accustomed shortcut through North Hudson Park, avoiding a few traffic lights, on his way to an all-night restaurant in Fort Lee. It was a mild night and his left front window was rolled down a few inches for ventilation. He was listening to his car radio when static began to interfere with the music, and the station started to fade. He slowed down, fiddling with the dial and grumbling to himself about the high cost of radio repairs, when he heard on his left a droning sound; later he described it as reminding him of a refrigerator's hum. A bright, large object flew by on the other side of a row of trees, traveling in the same direction as his car. In seconds it had stopped and was hovering about 10 feet above the ground. George is careful in his descriptions and meticulous about all estimates of size and distance. (He is the kind of man who will tell you that car over there is between 70 and 80 feet from that grocery store.) The UFO was about 30 feet in diameter, flat on the bottom, with vertical sides and a domed top. Its maximum height was about eight feet. It was surrounded with regularly spaced vertical windows, about a foot and a half wide and an equal distance apart. The object itself was dark, but intense light shone from the windows, illuminating the ground nearby.

Driving very slowly, George watched with a mixture of bewildered fascination and abject fear. As the object hovered, an apparatus resembling some kind of ladder-ed stairs appeared at one side, a vertical door opened, and uniformed figures began to descend to the ground. There were at least nine and possibly 11 of them, each clad in a light-colored coverall, and each about three and a half feet tall. Their faces were not visible because each wore some kind of helmet. When George was telling me these things his eyes were round, startled again by the memory of his terror. "I've been held up in the store lots of times in 30 years by men with pistols and knives, and I've been plenty scared, but nothing like this, ever. I was petrified." He accents, and repeats, the last sentence. He kept his car moving slowly, but the figures paid no attention to him. Each one carried a large spoonlike tool and a little bag with a handle. They moved quickly. In George's words, "They came down this ladder thing like kids coming down a fire escape. Fast. No wasted motion." They dug, spooning the dirt into their bags. In a few moments they were back inside, and the UFO ascended, moving north. George, at his closest, was 60 feet away. The entire incident took place in less than four minutes.

I asked George what he did when he got home. "Hey . . . I was sweating. I immediately made some tea. Then after that I turned on this radio and then I thought I'm not even going to stay up. [On a normal night, that was his habit.] I went to bed. I went to bed, I was that scared. I pulled the covers over my head. I got up and I took two aspirin. You know, I was scared. I figured the whole damn world had come to an end. . . . I didn't know what the hell to think. . . . I thought either I'm going crazy or there's something awfully wrong down there. . . ."

The next morning George went back to the park. He walked over to the spot where the UFO had landed. There, in a small area, were about 15 little holes, about five or six inches deep. He said, "You know, when I went there and saw those holes I got even more scared. . . . I'll tell you something. I even felt those holes. I didn't believe it looking at them. I put my hand in one."

Like most people who have had experiences like his—and there are hundreds—George tried every means he could to wish away the memory. He wanted to believe he had dreamed the whole thing, or even that "I had somehow slipped a gear." He told me that when he saw and felt the holes, he had to go home and make some more tea and take two more aspirin. His sighting was eventually confirmed by another witness, but he has continued to suffer from the enormity of his experience. If anything, confirmation has made it more disturbing for him.

Budd Hopkins

A common misconception about people who report encounters with unidentified flying objects is that they "believe in UFOs." The fact is that very few witnesses have a priori beliefs. They are firm about the accuracy of their descriptions of color, shape, height, movement, etc., but they offer few explanations of what they believe the object was. In a reflective moment, George told me he has theorized that perhaps the government, or a foundation somewhere, has developed a secret method of propulsion, powering totally unconventional craft like the one he saw. "But then," he added, "it makes no sense. Why couldn't they just send up for soil samples? How could they recruit all those little guys? A normal run would have guys all heights. It doesn't make sense."

I heard George's story in November and recorded it on my cassette; the quotes are verbatim. I completely trusted his veracity, but I also noticed certain internal details in his narrative that reinforced its truthfulness. No one making up a story like this (and for what reason?) would, in effect, leave himself out of the events. George's role is strictly passive. Never once does a small figure—"They looked like kids in snowsuits," he said—notice him, turn toward him, threaten him. He merely drives by, watching. Almost all serious UFO reports involve benign behavior, and George's story in this respect is typical. It seems to me that anyone inventing a sensational encounter with "space beings" would begin by creating a weird, memorable face: huge eyes, pointed ears, or whatever, and then work down to trivial details. George's "kids" wore helmets, *obscuring* their faces, yet he is sure that their boots were of one piece with their trouser legs. He said that when the object took off it flew north extremely quickly and lightly, as if it were metal and somewhere high up was a giant magnet attracting it. Listening to the tape one has the inescapable impression that an intelligent, careful man is trying his best to find words to describe an almost incredible experience.

It was essential, I realized, to locate an investigator who knew what to do next. I was acquainted with the UFO literature, and the previous summer had looked into a series of sightings on Cape Cod, but I actually knew no one officially serving in a research group. A few phone calls led me to Ted Bloecher, New York State director of MUFON. (Mutual UFO Network) and an investigator of 20 years' experience. His group, a national investigatorial network, forwards its reports to an organization of scientists serving under Dr. J. Allen Hynek. There they are evaluated and computerized in a search for recurrent patterns. On Saturday, November 23, Bloecher, George O'Barski, Jerry Stoehrer of MUFON, and I went to North Hudson Park to reenact George's 3 a.m. encounter.

We drove directly to the spot where George said the UFO had landed. It is a large, flat field, thinly rimmed by trees, and it is used for football and baseball. The UFO crew would have had a nice view of the upper Manhattan skyline, to the right of the Stonehenge apartments. The ground at the site is covered by a thick mat of coarse grass—except for a series of 15 or so bare places, about six inches in diameter, where the grass is entirely missing. There are no actual holes remaining, but the dirt in each little grassless circle contains no traces of roots, a fact discovered by Ted Bloecher when he took soil samples for possible future examination. Several weeks later we located the park custodian whose job entails packing holes on the field to prevent accidents. He remembers that in the early summer he refilled a number of small holes in that general vicinity, some of which he assumed had been dug by dogs.

Ted Bloecher stationed himself at the precise landing spot while Stoehrer and I got into George's car. George took the wheel to retrace his route that January night. With the tape recorder going, and Stoehrer timing each incident, we rode along through sunny North Hudson Park listening to George's story. From the moment his radio started to misbehave till the UFO's liftoff, slightly under four minutes elapsed. The drive established a plausible time frame with the car moving at slow speed, and we had a new account to compare with the earlier one.

Stonehenge apartments, situated at the bottom of the hill, has a 24-hour doorman service. I decided to ask a few questions, knowing that the view from the lobby would have been excellent; the front door is about 300 yards from the landing site. I was told that the night doorman who had been working in January had since left the Stonehenge. His name was William Pawlowski. I was given his new address, and was informed of an odd fact: Sometime in the wee small hours in January, the huge front plate-glass window in the lobby had been shattered, under rather unclear circumstances.

Any connection between the broken window and the UFO sighting seemed entirely unlikely. Bloecher, a walking encyclopedia of Air Force and civilian UFO reports, could recall no case where the two were coincident. He was able, though, to recount many reports of small figures attired as George described them, digging earth samples and even removing plants from farms. These events have apparently occurred over a span of some 20 years in France, the United States, South America, and elsewhere. Bloecher has frequently encountered witnesses to similar events who, like George, hesitate for months to tell anyone their stories. Ridicule and disbelief are predictable responses. The night of his sighting, George, a widower, did not waken his son to tell him what had happened. Not until the next day, after he had seen the holes, did he finally unburden himself. His son said that no one would believe him so he'd best keep the story to himself. George told me in November that had he seen a policeman five minutes after the UFO had taken off, he would not have reported it. "A man my age telling a story like this—why, they'd put you away. If you'd come in here a year ago and told me the same story I wouldn't have believed you either." The pressure to share his perplexity and fear must have finally been too strong, and in a very hesitant, guarded way he had approached me, though he had no reason to believe I would be a sympathetic listener.

Bill Pawlowski, the former doorman, proved to be difficult to locate. I called him home many times over a two week period. As I learned later, he works nights at a security job, and the phone is turned off during the day so he can sleep. On December 9 I reached him. I said that I was looking into an incident involving some unusual lights that had occurred in the park opposite Stonehenge, and did he recall seeing anything odd. His answer was immediate. He said that he did recall such an incident and that it had been frightening. He had looked up into the park because he had suddenly noticed some extremely bright lights shinning down the hill towards him. These lights were in a horizontal row, 10 to 15 of them, regularly spaced. He had never seen anything like it. For a moment he thought it could be an evenly parked row of automobiles shining their headlights towards him, but then he realized the lights appeared to be about 10 feet off the ground. Surrounding the row of illumination he could make out a continuous dark mass; he knew that he was seeing something distinctly unusual.

He walked over to the window for a better view, and decided to call a tenant in the building. He turned behind him to the phone, dialed the number, and began to speak when he heard a high-pitched vibration and a sudden crack. The lobby window had broken at a low point near his feet. He hung up, crouched down to look at the break, and when he glanced up a moment later the lights had gone. He immediately called the police.

They responded very promptly, he said, possibly because a North Bergen police lieutenant lives in the building. The two patrolmen and Pawlowski examined the break, which turned out to be peculiar. Whatever hit the glass did not come through. On the outside there was an indentation as if a marble of glass had been gouged out of the surface; from this little crater radiated a series of cracks. No projectile could be found anywhere nearby. Opposite the front entrance to Stonehenge is a driveway and a low wall. Whatever broke the huge plate-glass window had to have come from above, and it was clear to Pawlowski from where the "shot" was fired. He did not, however, tell the police about the lights in the park; again, the old reluctance to open oneself to ridicule. "The lights had disappeared," he said, "and I thought they'd never believe me anyway, so I didn't tell them. I just suggested they drive around up there and see what they could find." As might have been expected, they resumed their patrol and skipped the park altogether.

I asked Pawlowski if he had told anyone else about the lights, and to my relief he had. The police lieutenant who lives in Stonehenge—Al Del Gaudio—was on night duty and returned home about 6:30 a.m., some three and a half hours after the landing in the park. Bill was on friendly terms with the lieutenant and told him his story. On December 5 I phoned Lt. Del Gaudio to ask him about it. He is a brusque, no-nonsense kind of professional, judging by his voice; he makes Kojak sound like Truman Capote. My questions, specifically, were: did he know Bill Pawlowski, and what had the former doorman said to him the night the window was broken? "Sure, I knew him," said the lieutenant. "He used to work nights. I came in about 6:30 that morning and he had some wild story about this big thing with lights on it that came down in the park. He thought it was involved with the broken window, but you can't believe a story like that. He must've been drinking or something." The all-purpose answer, like "Shut up."

Every detail of Pawlowski's story confirmed O'Barski's. George had seen the object while he was moving, so it was difficult for him to estimate the number of lighted windows visible from a single point of view; he guessed 10 or 12, and possibly as many as 15. Pawlowski had remembered seeing 10 to 15 lights; he was nervous enough not to count. George had said that the UFO stopped 10 feet off the ground and had then settled a bit till it was only perhaps three feet from the field. Pawlowski's guess, from 300 yards away, was that the lights were 10 feet off the ground. Both agreed that the entire sighting had lasted only three minutes or so; both had set the time at around 3 a.m. All this information was elicited separately and voluntarily from each.

I ended my phone conversation to Pawlowski thoroughly shaken. My wife and I went off to see a Robert Altman movie about a detective. It was funny but I wasn't laughing. What had begun as an almost incredible story—which I believed—told to me by a friend of 17 years had just turned into something more complicated, more certain, and more disturbing. A spacecraft had landed one mile from Broadway, and 60 feet from poor George O'Barski driving home from work. The uniformed—and uniform—crew had disembarked and taken earth samples. Why, and why from *this* spot?

Scenarios followed as I tried to put the parts together. Had someone or something aboard seen, in the large round building down below, a uniformed human looking back up the hill? Bill Pawlowski unfortunately reached for the phone, and crack went the window at Stonehenge. End of phone call. End of soil collection. Somehow the "shot" seemed more like a deliberate warning than a miss. What was going on here anyway?

Bloecher, Stoehrer, and I planned the next step. It was to interview Pawlowski in depth in the hopes of bringing up additional information. After that we would take him to the park and let him show us where he had seen the UFO. We gave him no details from George's account; we wanted his memory to be as pure as possible. Another interesting observation did surface. Pawlowski remembered that at the foot of the hill across from Stonehenge is a large tree made up of three trunks growing from one set of roots. One trunk grew somewhat parallel to the ground, but in a direct line with both Stonehenge's entrance and the UFO site atop the hill. Pawlowski insists that when the sun came up the morning of the landing the large trunk was broken and hanging down. He believes the same "weapon" which broke the window also sliced through the tree. The park service has since cut back the broken trunk almost to the ground so we will probably never know if the two accidents had the same mysterious cause.

More crucial to our investigation was the matter of exactly where Pawlowski remembered seeing the UFO. He returned to the park on December 11—his first visit in months—with Jerry Stoehrer, and from the front of Stonehenge looked back up the hill. He remembered a pole which had appeared to bisect the lights, as if it were in front of the UFO. Atop the hill there had been a flagpole, since removed, but it had been located about 200 feet to the left of the place O'Barski put the landing site. Pawlowski looked, pondered, and finally decided that it must not have been the flagpole in front of the lights, because he remembered them being further to the right, where in fact, a tall lamppost stands. He walked up the hill straight to the spot that O'Barski had named. Jerry had been holding his breath; he relaxed—we had our final detail confirmed.

Bill never saw the little figures, which is not surprising for several reasons. They were working on the ground 50 feet or so back from the crest of the hill, so they probably would not have been visible from the entrance to Stonehenge. Also the difficulty in looking out from inside a lighted room, through the glare on the windows, obscures small details; Bill was only able to see the unusually bright lights and the darkish shape containing them. He was amazed when we finally told him the other details of George's account. I believe he felt a mixture of envy and relief that O'Barski had been about 1000 feet closer to the UFO.

Ted Bloecher, Jerry Stoehrer, and I were at the point of calling the investigation complete—as complete, at least, as seemed presently possible—when another development dropped on our heads. On Thursday morning, January 15, 1976, at 3 a.m., almost exactly a year after the first landing, a UFO returned and landed in the same spot. A new investigation has begun. Two witnesses have given us descriptions of the startling events of that evening; neither knew about the January 1975 sighting. It is important now that we not provide more details of this recent incident since we are seeking more witnesses with genuine information. (I have deliberately not given every detail we have of the earlier sighting, either, for the same reason.) Bloecher, Stoehrer, and I were stunned by this new event; O'Barski went a little pale when I told him.

Over the years there have been countless attempts by scientists and laymen alike to explain away the UFO reports by a variety of imaginative and often doctrinaire theories. The situation occasionally resembled a group of self-assured town planners explaining to a bloodied pair of hit-and-run victims that because the streets are arranged the way they are the accident couldn't have happened. Dr. J. Allen Hynek was once the nation's best-known debunker. For almost 20 years he was the Air Force's consultant on UFO matters, and at their behest came up, every now and then, with some rather strained "natural explanations." Swamp gas was the most famous, and one of the least plausible. Twenty years of studying the reports and carrying on active investigations led him gradually to an extraordinary reversal. Today Dr. Hynek believes the matter of UFOs is of crucial importance, and that there is a very real possibility that we have, now, extraterrestrial visitors. He directs the Center for UFO Studies in Evanston, Illinois, where reports like O'Barski's are under intensive study. In fact, on January 23 he interviewed O'Barski and told me later that he considered him an excellent, credible witness.

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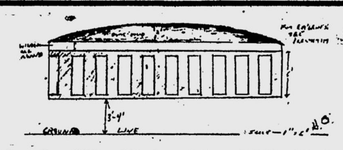

Sketch based on O'Barski's description of UFO with diameter of about 30 feet, maximum height eight feet, flat bottom, domed top, and regularly spaced vertical windows.

MUFON research indicates there have been some 500 such reports during the past 10 years, or almost *one every week* within the United States. There is reason to believe that the U.S. government recognizes the seriousness of the UFO reports and is investigating through the National Academy of Sciences, the probably elsewhere, despite the denials of government spokesmen. We're used to that.

Dr. Hynek has since requested Ted Bloecher to present a full report on this case to a meeting of scientific consultants and state investigators in Chicago on April 30. Though many details of this sighting have been also reported in earlier cases, and are familiar to investigators, the North Hudson Park landing is the first to be reported so close to New York, and only the second this close to a major city; possibly it marks a change in UFO behavior. I have passed on to George some of the consequences of his report. Talking one night about it he looked at me a little sheepishly and said, "Budd, I know what you mean when you say 'UFO,' but I don't know exactly what the letters stand for." All he knows about it is what happened to him that night, and as he says, "I'll have that with me the rest of my life."

Dr. Hynek, in his book "The UFO Experience," referred to a sighting somewhat like O'Barski's, and wrote, " . . . if considered entirely apart from the total pattern of UFO sightings it seems totally preposterous, even to offend common sense. The latter, however, has not proved a sure guide in the past history of science . . . it may yet be discovered that the humanoid cases are the key to the whole problem." □

Anyone having a UFO sighting to report, please send an account of it, mentioning the date, place, time of day, number of witnesses, and so forth to: Mutual UFO Network, 103 Oldtowne Road, Seguin, Texas 78155. Please include your name and address, which at your request can be kept confidential.

Budd Hopkins is an abstract painter whose work is in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim and the Whitney.