



WMU professor studies UFOs

By LEWIS BEALE  
Free Press Staff Writer

**K**ALAMAZOO — It seems only fitting that the man who edits the Journal of UFO Studies, a serious, scientific look at the subject, has had a close encounter of the personal kind.

"I was home one year from college," says Michael Swords, a professor of natural sciences at Western Michigan University, "and my brother and I were listening to a local late-night radio show, when someone called in and said they were observing a UFO, and I thought this was great, I was listening to it while it was happening."

Intrigued, Swords and his brother looked out a window of their house, and saw a hovering, dome-shaped object flashing multicolored lights. Almost as soon as it appeared, the object disappeared from their line of sight, but Swords, who had been reading science fiction and non-fiction books about UFOs since he was a young boy, felt that "I had an interesting experience that I couldn't explain, that kind of unprinted what I had been reading."

Thirty or so years later, the 49-year-old Swords sits in his WMU office, surrounded by books and artifacts that attest to a lifelong interest in anomalies — strange events that have yet to be explained scientifically.

Ranged along one wall are several hundred books, a lending library of sorts, with titles like "The History of Atlantis," "The Tujunga Canyon Contacts" and "Megalithic Science." Scattered throughout the office are models, casts and other knickknacks related to his passion: pre-Columbian artifacts, a plaster cast of Bigfoot's giant foot, a fanciful model of "Nessie," the Loch Ness monster, a small model of a stone head from Easter Island, a detail from a Hieronymus Bosch painting, even a model of the Starship Enterprise.

Swords is no otherworldly weirdo. He is a sober scientist — with a PhD in the history of science



Prof. Michael Swords holds a model built to resemble a being reportedly seen during a UFO abduction in Snowflake, Ariz., in 1975.

# CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH SCIENCE

## HOW CLOSE ARE THOSE FLYING SAUCERS?

The concept of close encounters of the first, second and third kind with UFOs was developed by the late professor J. Allen Hynek, probably the world's foremost authority on the subject. Hynek, who founded the Center for UFO Studies in 1970, coined the "close encounters" terms in the early 1970s, and served as a technical adviser on the well-known Steven Spielberg film. The three types of close encounters, all of which occur within 200 yards of a human observer, are:

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FIRST KIND (CE-1):** Observation of a UFO,

but no apparent interaction with the witness or the environment.

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SECOND KIND (CE-2):** Interaction between the UFO and the environment. Interference with car ignition systems, imprints or burns on the ground, physical effects on plants, humans and animals, etc.

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND (CE-3):** Occupants of a UFO, generally humanoid in appearance, are reported. Usually no direct contact, although incidents of very close contact, even abductions, have been reported.

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from Case Western Reserve University — who describes himself as "a simple college professor who edits a journal on an odd topic, one that people have an interest in." He has, in fact, taken a boyhood interest in the strange and unexplained and developed it into a career.

Swords has contributed to such scholarly publications as Cryptozoology Journal (which researches the Bigfoots and Nessies of the world) and Pursuit, the journal of the Society for the Investigation of the Unexplained. He developed a WMU course on research into anomalies entitled "Science and Para-Science," which, he claims, is just about the only course of its kind in America which can be taken for natural science credit. Now, with the editorship of the Journal of UFO Studies, published by the Chicago-based J. Allen Hynek Center For UFO Studies, Swords has taken on an additional challenge.

"I felt the field was not being taken seriously enough in the academic community, because of the lack of a proper academic journal," says Swords, explaining why, more than a year ago, he decided to help revive a publication that had been defunct since 1983. "The field really needed this outlet."

Make no mistake about it — Swords' journal, an annual which came out last March in a very limited edition of 700 copies (the next issue is due out in the fall), does not deal in tales of bug-eyed monsters or forced sex with aliens. The 174-page publication contains such articles as a detailed scientific soil analysis of a spot in Kansas where an alien craft supposedly landed; a forum among a number of scientists as to whether UFO abduction experiences are for real; a number of book reviews relating to the field; and a research paper by Swords himself on "Science and the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis in Ufology."

Despite the sober tone of the journal, and an international advisory board that includes academics from Spain and Canada, Swords admits that UFO research has an uphill struggle. The reasons for this are twofold: lack of respect from the academic community at

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large, and the influence of the media on the average person's perception of what constitutes a UFO.

"These people (scientists) have been 'knighted' by the American system as the smart people, and the academic community looks upon itself as the tellers of truth," says Swords. "Imbedded in the business of being a scientific academic is the idea of watching what you say. It gets these people to the point of having a restricted world view of what they feel is true or not, and limits their creativity."

"In terms of what people think, the general public is very willing to talk about it," adds Swords, who undoubtedly knows that a 1978 Gallup poll showed that 57 percent of all Americans believe the Earth is being visited by alien spacecraft. "But it's bad for UFO research, because it creates certain kinds of caricatures of what UFO phenomena should be, and we don't really know. You're sitting here with a field that's rich in phenomenology. . . . Whether there is any extraterrestrial explanation to all this, we don't know."

Swords is convinced there is other intelligent life in the galaxy. He points to research findings by such scientific disciplines as astronomy, cosmo-chemistry, bio-evolution and planetology which suggest that we are not alone. But he also notes that there are

## WHAT KIND OF UFO WAS IT?

Michael Swords, editor of the Journal of UFO Studies, says that 95 percent of all UFO sightings can be easily explained. According to him, explainable and unexplainable sightings fall into the following categories:

■ Explainable: artificial objects such as advertising airplanes which are mistaken for spaceships; astronomical objects; psychological anomalies (e.g., people with dissociative hysteria, who have difficulty separating fantasy from reality); and natural

phenomena such as lightning or cloud formations.

■ Unexplainable: "glow-balls," usually of a reddish-orange color, which have an erratic motion in the sky; trace cases or ground marks, i.e., the UFO has landed and left some sort of evidence of its landing; abductions; and what Professor Swords refers to as the "X" category — individual close encounters that do not fit into the abduction category.

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"mundane explanations" for 95 percent of all UFO sightings (see box, this page), and the remaining 5 percent may not involve ETs at all. Because of this, he believes that a rigorous application of the scientific method is needed to cut through the overkill of false information that is separating us from the truth about interstellar voyaging — if, in fact, there is any.

"One of the fundamental instincts in human life is curiosity," he says. "It energizes the human species. The looking at anomalies is the standard method of scientific discovery, and you never can tell which one will open up a wonderful world. I also think we need

to do this because this is a human event of some kind, and some of these people (who have had a contact) are in a traumatized state, and we as humans should care about them."

The second issue of the revived journal will, says Swords, take up theories about electrical fields that some researchers blame for creating balls of light that are mistaken for UFOs. There will be an article that attempts to define the nature of ufology, to tell what the field really is, what the difference is between an IFO (Identified Flying Object) and a UFO. And there will be a regional review of the status of ufology in Australia. The field is slowly

but surely building up a network of scientists interested in the subject, but Swords feels there is a lot more that could be done.

"It would be nice to have a national supported research network," he says, while adding that the French have had a government-funded UFO research project for several years. "You also need testing labs (for soil samples, etc.), and people you could count on giving you good results. The other thing we need are medical and psychological counselors to get interested in this abduction situation, people without prejudices who could help them (those who claim to have been abducted by aliens), and find something out."

Swords pauses. He has been in this field for the long term, and is in it to stay. But he recognizes that he is also something of a salesman, and credibility is the commodity he is pushing.

"About the only way you can get the academic community to pay attention is to say we're going into this in the same way any investigator would go into a mystery," he says, "with several hypotheses in mind, and the ET hypothesis is only one of many. That's the proper scientific method."

The Journal of UFO Studies is available for \$15 by writing to: The J. Allen Hynek Center for UFO Studies, 2457 W. Peterson Ave., Chicago, IL 60659.

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