

On Assignment



By Peter Robbins

Mission to Tokyo

Coming up through the ranks in American UFOlogy, I never heard or learned much about the status or popularity of UFO studies among Japanese investigators, but took it for granted that colleagues there were pursuing the subject as earnestly as we their counterparts were in the States.

By the late 1980s, while researching England's Rendlesham Forest UFO incident for my book 'Left at East Gate' I learned that many in Japan took this incident most seriously, so much so that eyewitness Larry Warren, the case's whistleblower (and my co-author) had been invited to speak about his experience in Tokyo in October 1984.

This past October, twenty years to the month later, I had the opportunity to visit and learn about the current state of Japanese UFO research for myself.

My first-hand experience has convinced me that UFOlogy is very much alive and well in the land of the rising sun, and no where more than at the office and meetings of the Organization for UFO Research Japan, a national UFO investigative group better known by its acronym OUR-J. This outstanding group and its dynamic Director, Junichi Kato, are at the forefront of mainstreaming the subject for an increasingly interested Japanese Public.

Jun-ichi – Jun to his friends, works for a respected advertising firm by day and lives with his wife Yuko and children, Sumire, 8, and Ko, 7, in a quiet district on the outskirts of Tokyo.

OUR-J's office is in an old section of Tokyo, and though small, is packed with printed, recorded and photographic information and often bustling.

Jun's interest in UFOs goes back to his childhood in Akita Prefecture. It was there at the age of five that he and his brother and some friends watched as a strange light came in above the field where they were playing baseball. "It was a large elliptical orange thing, kind of like a bike wheel, although I'm not sure if it was rotating."* Unknown to Jun or the other children at the time, more than fifty people at nearby Akita Airport also reported seeing the phenomenon which was captured by a documentary film crew. I could relate to this event as the impact of a similarly impacting childhood sighting ultimately led to my entering the field as well.

Over the intervening years, Jun and OUR-J's members have been responsible for numerous, uncontested and anomalous photographs of aerial unknowns in the skies above Japan, including a jolting selection captured directly above Tokyo.

One of my concerns in developing a working relationship with OUR-J was whether or not the group was governed more by mystical or by scientific thinking. Cult-like thinking permeates numerous UFO groups in the East just as it does in the West, keeping the subject closeted in a manipulative system of pseudo-facts and beliefs. OUR-J's mandate was anything but airy. "In Japan, most UFO groups are cults or religious groups, we're not anything like that," noted Jun. "I make it clear to members that they shouldn't hide their interest from their families, this isn't something you should hide." While lamenting the fact that Japanese investigators have yet to undertake the rigorous investigative work that their American and British counterparts have, Jun Kato's sighting reports, surveys, university lectures, television appearances and regularly published commentaries in leading newspapers and magazines have made him a uniquely important player in the field whose intelligence, passion and personality keep OUR-J members and a growing segment of the public focused on the more scientific and pragmatic aspects of UFO research.

My relationship with the group began in 2000. While working as Editor-In-Chief of the website UFOcity.com I was contacted by Toshie Nakagawa, an OUR-J

officer who is fluent in English and the organization's leading translator. She'd written to tell me that interest in England's 1980 Bentwaters-Woodbridge UFO Incident was still strong in Japan and that OUR-J wanted to know how Larry Warren (my co-author on *Left At East Gate*) and I felt about allowing them to translate portions of our book for their quarterly, *UFO Report Japan*. We obliged gladly.

Toshie and I met when she attended the 2002 national MUFON conference, held that year in Rochester, NY, where I was a speaker. Then in late 2003 I was invited to speak at OUR-J's annual conference for 2004. The requested lecture topics were the Bentwaters-Woodbridge UFO Incident, as well as the current state of UFO research in the US, the UK and Europe. Having never visited Japan I was excited by the prospect and likewise flattered to be the first non-Japanese asked to lecture for this group. Over the next months I prepared my papers and submitted them for approval and translation. As I was to learn, Japanese UFO conferences were considerably more formal than their American counterparts.

I departed Newark International Airport on Wednesday October 20 and arrived at Narita Airport somewhat bleary-eyed after the thirteen hour flight. There I was met by Toshie and Jun's wife Yuko Kato. The two would remain my primary companions, guides and translator for the duration, and what great hosts they and Jun were! It was genuinely moving to see Mount Fuji for the first time from the train into the

city where we arrived at about dusk.

I checked into my hotel, had a great dinner with my sponsors, then returned to my hotel where I slept like a log until late Friday morning.

The next day Yuko and Toshie and I linked up with Jun and had lunch at a very Japanese-style Chinese restaurant in the Takashimaya Department Store, followed by coffee (yes, Starbucks) on the building's roof garden.

We spent that evening at Jun and Yuko's home where Toshie and I reviewed and timed our simultaneous English and Japanese versions of my talks. Later we ordered out for dinner: Italian food from Domino's Pizza. Like us, the Japanese share a real fondness for both Chinese and Italian cuisine and it was great fun to tear into the pizza, pasta and garlic bread at the traditional floor-height Japanese dining table. It was also that evening that I met Jun and Yuko's children, Sumire, eight, and Ko, seven. We hit it off wonderfully and the two of them remained my close companions for much of the remainder of my visit.

OUR-J's Fifth National Conference was held on Saturday October 23rd. The venue was a building in downtown Tokyo designed specifically for conferences, receptions and other events. Staff members were both professional and courteous and the great majority of attendees dressed formally for the occasion. The groups demographic interested me as well. Unlike a similar event stateside – primarily male dominated and middle-aged,

OUR-J members and friends seemed equally divided between men and women who ranged in age from their teens to well into their seventies. A good percentage were professionals as well, with doctors, lawyers, business executives and distinguished academics being more the norm than not.

The event proceedings were well-designed and featured a moving memorial tribute to Graham Birdsall, complete with photo. Graham had made a huge impression on the OUR-J members who'd met him the previous year at the Laughlin, NV conference, as had UFO Magazine. I was moved to see my friend remembered and honoured so, even though he had been gone for more than a year now. Sadly, both of my talks were dedicated to another friend and colleague, Dr. John Mack who had been killed by a drunken driver while visiting London only a month earlier.

Those of you who have attended UFO conferences in the States can attest to their general informality; it was anything but in Tokyo. Shortly after I arrived I was sequestered in their green room with my translator, then brought out just before my first talk and seated at a small dais, memorable for a particularly Japanese touch: a single, beautiful flower arrangement.

Toshie was seated at a table to my right. Those in attendance were seated in rows but at tables where they were free to take notes and keep a water glass at hand. I would read several sentences from my paper, then pause while Toshie translated.

Upon completion I received a polite ovation to which I stood and bowed, and was then led from the hall. After drawing a bit with the kids, I returned to the green room until it was time to present my second paper. Both PowerPoint presentations went off without a hitch and my efforts were again well received. After completing the second talk, Jun made his closing remarks, then many photos of all in attendance were taken. This was followed by one more trip to the green room, this time for an interview for a national magazine. Simultaneous to this, the remaining fifty or sixty OUR-J members had regrouped on the building's top floor to prepare for the banquet which was being held in my honour.

And what a banquet it was, replete with all kinds of Japanese food and drink and a compliment of Chinese and Italian dishes to round it out. It was toward the end of this sumptuous meal that the earthquake hit. I hadn't been drinking much but felt that maybe I had been when I looked up to see the large chandelier overhead swaying. It was actually the building that was swaying and the chandelier was just going along for the ride. Being an East Coaster, earthquakes and tremors are not a normal part of my routine. With glasses and crockery now rattling away on the tables I steadied myself and looked around to judge the ferocity of the quake by the expressions on my colleagues faces. 'No big deal' they seemed to say in unison. It was then that a new friend touched my right arm and said with a demure smile in perfect English, "Welcome to Japan!" It was however a big deal

at the epicentre two hundred and fifty miles away where the quake registered a six point eight on the Richter Scale, killing dozens and injuring thousands. The things we take for granted..

Following the banquet fifteen or twenty of us visited a Japanese beer hall, an institution they'd borrowed from the Germans – complete with pitchers and steins of beer, trays of sausages and mounds of fresh sauerkraut! There we talked and laughed into the night and conducted a more informal question and answer session than the conference's formality had afforded.

The next day, Sunday, we visited the beautiful Meji Jingu Shrine in Tokyo's equivalent of Central Park, and from there joined about thirty or so OUR-J members for an afternoon sky watch held in a huge meadow nearby.

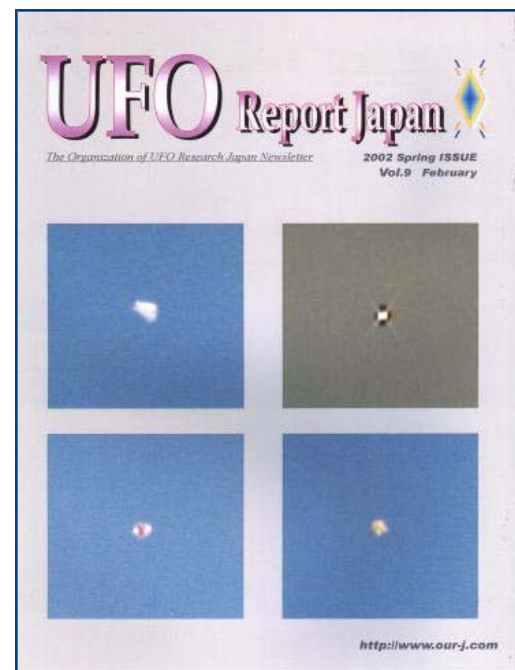
Over the years, most of the sky watches I'd attended in the US and the UK were held at night, and while focused on observing the sky also served a social function. This one is pretty much all business. Every member seemed to possess either binoculars or camera with a telephoto lens, or both. And while snacks and cold bottles of green tea were in abundance, OUR-J's members and friends carefully observed the skies above Tokyo with a single-mindedness I was unused to and broke up late that afternoon. I should add here that for those who may scoff at the idea of a sky watch being held in full daylight in the centre of one of the world's largest cities, you should know that members have regularly observed and photographed truly anomalous

objects in the skies above, a good proportion of which have been disc-shaped. While none were seen that afternoon, I was impressed with both the group's discipline and attitude.

That evening Jun, Yuko, Toshie, Sumire and Ko visited OUR-J's office in the quiet Suidobashi District of old Tokyo. Here we were joined by Yasuo Kuwabara, who is perhaps Japan's leading scholar and translator of classic US UFO documents. Mr. Kuwabara, a tall, quiet and modest man, is responsible for translating into Japanese much of the Condon Committee's Scientific Study of UFOs and the Ninetieth Congress's Symposium on UFO Hearings, among other Project Bluebook era papers which are now available to the Japanese public in published editions. Yasuo Kuwabara's efforts, like those of Jun Kato, should serve to remind us that dedicated individuals can indeed make a difference in our field. My final day and a half in Tokyo was dedicated to unabashed tourism and spending as much time as possible with my new friends. Highlights included a visit to Asakusa Kannon, an absolutely beautiful Sensoji Temple in the old part of Tokyo and a final dinner with my translator and the Kato family. Jun and Toshie saw me back to Narita Airport the next afternoon and it was not easy to say good bye to these esteemed colleagues. I look forward to building on these friendships and to another visit to this most fascinating country. For any of you interested in making contact with OUR-J, you can do so by writing to them at:

The Organization of UFO Research Japan; #403, 3-11-5, Idabashi, Chiyoda-ku; Tokyo, 102-0072, Japan.

Building links with our colleagues in Japan as well as in other countries benefits us all and our search for the truth. Sayonara until next time readers.



Interview excerpts are from the article, 'Close Encounters,' which appeared in the Japanese magazine Metropolis, issue No. 501, October 2004.

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