

# Burned by a UFO?

## the story of a bungled investigation

by Chris Rutkowski

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Stephen Michalak went to Falcon Lake, Manitoba, on May 19, 1967, intent on doing some amateur prospecting the next morning. On May 20 he left early for the heavily-wooded area just north of the town, setting out early in the morning so as to get a good start to the day. By noon he was eating lunch beside a small quartz outcropping, overlooking a beaver dam in a valley below. He was startled by some noisy geese and, looking up, saw two disc-shaped objects descending from the sky.

Both had domelike structures on top and were glowing red. The farther of the two stopped in mid-flight, then flew toward the west. The other object came toward Michalak and appeared to land on a gently-sloping, smooth rock, all but buried in the hill he was sitting on, only 150 feet away from him.

The craft had no "legs" but was hovering, motionless, and turning from red to steel-gray, as if "cooling down." A brilliant purple light was flooding out of slitlike openings near the top of the object, causing Michalak to flip down the shades on his eye-protectors which he was wearing to protect himself from rock chips. He watched the craft for about a half hour, during which time he sketched the object on his notepad. He was aware of "waves of warm air" and the smell of "sulfur" emanating from the craft. He heard the sound of an electric motor as well as a hissing, as if air were being expelled or taken in by the object.

Suddenly a door opened in the side of the object and Michalak warily approached to within 60 feet. He heard humanlike voices coming from inside and saw lights "like on a computer panel" on the far wall.

Thinking that the craft was an American experimental vehicle and that it was disabled, he called out, "Okay, Yankee boys, having trouble? Come on out and we'll see what we can do about it." The voices stopped, and he spoke again in other languages, asking if the occupants were German, Italian, French or Ukrainian. He walked closer and stood directly in front of the "hatch." He touched the side of the craft with his gloved hand, noting that there were no welding seams or rivets on the outside. Pulling his hand back, he found that the glove had seared and "melted" from the intense heat in the side of the object.

The door shut in front of him, with three panels coming out of hidden recesses and sealing the opening. The object rose slightly and rotated so that a grill with several "exhaust" grids was directly in front of him. Suddenly the object took off with a rush of air, and hot exhaust fumes hit Michalak in the chest. His clothes caught on fire and he was knocked to the ground. He tore off his burning shirt as he watched the craft rise into the sky and move out of sight. He felt nauseous and got a severe headache, then began to vomit. He decided he would have to get home somehow, now that he was very ill.

He began the long hike back to Falcon Lake, over a mile away. When he finally reached a highway, he followed it to the town. As he was walking, or rather staggering, an RCMP car met him, and an officer paused to talk with him. When Michalak related his story the officer told him, "Sorry, I've got other business to attend to!" and he drove off.

Finally back at his motel later in the afternoon, Michalak decided he needed medical attention and eventually caught a bus back to Winnipeg that evening. His family took him to a hospital where his condition was first evaluated. Later a newspaper reporter heard of the story and the investigations commenced.

In my preteen years I was told by a friend that his father had an odd experience in Whiteshell Provincial Park. My parents were not crazy about this friend, ever since he, being somewhat older than me, took me along on a long bicycle expedition and we didn't get back until well after dark. Nevertheless, I continued to see my friend now and then, including once or twice when I was allowed into his house to observe some strange-looking burns on his father's body. I wasn't especially interested at the time and we drifted apart, as childhood friends often do.

Much later, in high school, when I had become curious about scientifically-taboo subjects such as lake monsters, Sasquatch and flying saucers, I ran across numerous references to my friend's father and the unusual experience he had had in 1967. Even the infamous Condon Report couldn't seem to decide whether the case was "real" or not. While its case report implied the incident was a hoax, the book's index labelled the case as unexplained. Did Stephen Michalak perpetrate a hoax?

Fresh out of high school, I sought out a local expert who could answer the question. I found Ed Barker, an artist at the Manitoba Planetarium, who was considered at the time the local authority on UFOs and who had been involved with CAPRO in 1967. CAPRO was the Canadian APRO in those years; it even published a newsletter which had a huge circulation for a UFO magazine, somewhere in the thousands. CAPRO

had correspondents throughout the Prairies and was the regular recipient of UFO sightings in several provinces.

Three founders of the group, Ed Barker, Brian Cannon and Barry Thompson, formed the group at the time of the Michalak case, riding on the popular interest in the UFOs that had invaded Manitoba. In the late 1960s the group fell apart, reportedly from personality conflicts. This was particularly unfortunate for the Michalak case, because the case investigation got caught up in communication problems and has suffered ever since.

When I came onto the scene in the 1970s, I wanted to know more about what was learned from the investigations. Ed Barker originally helped me by lending me a copy of a booklet that Michalak "wrote," ghostwritten by a Polish-speaking reporter for a local newspaper. It was published by Osnova Publications, at an address in Winnipeg. The booklet was included in a publications list as being available as recently as 1980; yet when I went to the address in 1975, the woman who answered the door had never heard of Osnova.

I then asked Barker for the CAPRO case files of the incident. He replied that Cannon and Thompson had taken most of them when they left. He had, however, written about the case in a few articles and had enough of a working knowledge of the case that he frequently discussed details during his speaking engagements and television appearances. But I was still stymied; the Condon Report opined that the case would, if proven factual, prove the existence of extraterrestrials in our environment. I felt that the case was thus important enough that it needed a detailed analysis. And I didn't see one.

Barker invited me along on a field trip expedition to the Michalak site near Falcon Lake. We went in a rather abused van loaned from the Museum of Man and Nature and parked in a gravel pit across from the motel Michalak had stayed in 10 years earlier. We trudged into the bush, across a swamp, up boulder-strewn hills and through thick forest growth, until we emerged on a rocky hill overlooking a creek. We rounded the hill and found ourselves looking out over a pond formed by a beaver dam. On the pond a gaggle of geese noisily objected to our presence, and I recalled that Michalak spoke of probably these very birds before his sighting. Barker announced that a flat rock outcropping beside the landing site and we focussed our attention upon it.

The rock sloped slightly down toward the valley but seemed to conform to the dimensions reported by Michalak. We took some soil samples and surveyed the area. Aside from being a particularly attractive view, the site itself was in direct view of a forest ranger tower about a mile distant. If the landed object was really as luminous as reported, then it is odd that it was not observed by the ranger on duty. I was told that the ranger had been interviewed, though when I tried to arrange my own interview with him or her, the name had been forgotten and the files, of course, were missing, including the possible original interview. Admittedly, forest rangers have been known to doze off occasionally during a shift, so a report that a bright

object was not observed is not authoritative.

Later that year, I returned to what I thought was the site on my own, on a more circuitous but easier route which is part of an established hiking trail through extensive blueberry patches. In later years, however, I have not been able to pinpoint the site this way and I recall the difficulty the original search teams had in getting there with Michalak himself as a guide.

The lack of investigative files has always been a major problem for my own inquiries. A number of years ago, I obtained copies of the National Research Council "non-meteoric" file on the case, which included a large batch of RCMP and RCAF documents. I also collected as many references to the case as I could find. I gathered a huge set of newspaper clippings, comments in some journals, and even the Parliamentary Proceedings in which Members of the Canadian Parliament have raised the issue of UFOs and, in some cases, the whereabouts of Michalak's file itself. Also in the collection are a set of articles by Brian Cannon, who described the case in *Canadian UFO Report*, a long-defunct but excellent publication in its early days. Cannon talked about analyses done on the soil samples at the University of Manitoba, showing high levels of radiation. Some samples were sent to APRO with the same result. But at the University of Manitoba I was unable to find anyone who had even heard of such analyses.

During one visit to the planetarium, Barker kindly gave me some extra vials of soil samples, after I had said that I wanted them retested. I took them to an associate who routinely checked materials with a Germanium/Lithium scintillation counter (a GeLi detector). Using a PDP10, we plotted the activity in the samples, then compared the peaks to known activity. It was concluded that the samples showed only normal uranium byproduct activity, and quite a low level.

This was intriguing. Documents I obtained showed that 1967 analyses suggested the appearance of radium. In fact, the presence of this element in a provincial park had prompted the closure of the area in 1967, for fear of radiation contamination to the public. Government investigators took this seriously enough that medical radium dumps were checked for unauthorized disturbance. Later, it was suggested that someone had tampered with the samples by introducing scrapings from the radium dial of a wristwatch. But our later analyses must have been in error. Barker insists that the original analysis did detect radium, so it is difficult to resolve the matter at this time.

The metal samples were another problem entirely. In 1968 Michalak visited the site again, this time with Gerald Hart, a Winnipegger who allowed Michalak the use of a cottage near the area. In a large crack directly underneath the "landing site," they found several pieces of metal, seemingly melted under great heat. They brought them back to Winnipeg, and it was found that the pieces were radioactive.

Now, it must be remembered that the site was examined quite thoroughly by investigators with radiation counters in 1967, and nothing unusual was found at that time. Yet here

were some very odd items which simply could not have been missed. The planetarium possesses some of the pieces, and I recently obtained a piece from another source. It was energetic enough that it still poses a minor health hazard, according to activity tests I had done on it a few months ago. Documents obtained from Atomic Energy of Canada Limited show that the pieces are all of a high grade of silver, with crushed uranium ore adhering to their surfaces with a gluelike substance. In other words, nothing extraterrestrial, but definitely strange. Even in 1968, when RCAF investigators were called to Michalak's house to look at the samples, their official report contained the comment: "Should this be a hoax someone is going to considerable effort to perpetrate same."

The finger was quickly pointed at Hart, who is certainly an eccentric character. He continually writes to officials in rather disrespectful terms (referring to "those jackasses in Ottawa" and the "Unloyal Canadian Hot Air Force") and refuses to pay income tax. But no one has ever found any firm evidence that he could have been the "perpetrator." It has been pointed out to me, for example, that Hart was the financial backer for Michalak's book, but there is no incontrovertible evidence that this would have been a motive for any illicit action. That still begs the question, then, of just who could have been responsible for the hoax.

An entirely different line of investigation also has led to some bizarre results. Michalak's physiological effects have always been problematic. There is no question that he was left physically burned after his experience; his chest and legs bear the continued legacy of second-degree burns. Today, his legs have apparently healed, leaving a mottled, hairless, white-pink patch of flesh over his shins. Barry Thompson of CAPRO had Michalak go to a nuclear research center for a body survey, thinking he was the victim of a nuclear accident. But Michalak's burns turned out to be chemical, rather than radiational (fortunately for him). This agrees well with Michalak's comments about a "hot gas" that came from the craft's vents. But his physiological effects extended much further than this, with reported weight loss, rashes and fainting spells. These symptoms led Michalak to travel to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

The Manitoba Medicare system is one of the most comprehensive in the world. But Michalak wanted to know exactly what was wrong with him and local physicians were not coming up with definite answers. So, at his own expense, he traveled to Minnesota and checked into a hotel across from the Mayo Clinic. He visited the clinic as an outpatient for a few days, then traveled back home to await the results. But none came. Brian Cannon, who seemed to lead the investigation at this point in 1969, enlisted the aid of John Magor, the publisher of *Canadian UFO Report*. Magor in turn contacted Dr. Berthold Eric Schwarz, the noted ufologist and psychiatrist, to inquire of the clinic's files on the matter. The result was the now-famous "letter of denial" in which a spokesman for the

clinic claims there are no records of Michalak's tests in its files.

The story of the sinister disappearance of these files is something of a folk legend in Winnipeg. It has frequently been related to me in an inquiring tone when I have been a guest on TV shows and during lectures. Barker even today speaks about it at his numerous appearances. Michalak and his family are particularly puzzled, since they even have the receipts and his ID card from the clinic!

But something else happened during the course of the investigations. CAPRO broke up, leaving Barker as the lone "UFO expert" at the planetarium in Winnipeg. Cannon formed his own group, the Independent Research Center, in 1969. (The center was, of course, entirely operated by himself.) The communications between the CAPRO members effectively ceased.

I first got a hint of what had really happened when I read the excellent book *UFOs and the Behavioral Scientist*, edited by Richard Haines. Inside was an article by Schwarz, and it mentioned results of the Mayo Clinic tests in a matter-of-fact manner. Startled, I immediately wrote to Schwarz, imploring him to explain how he got the information.

It appears that Cannon continued with the case but did not tell Michalak, Barker, or anyone else who was closely involved. Schwarz had sent Cannon standard medical release forms for Michalak to sign. The signed forms were returned to the clinic, and the results came quickly. Simply put, the Mayo Clinic could not find any medical reason for Michalak's symptoms or experience. But why were the records kept from Michalak and his family?

Schwarz and Cannon corresponded for several years. Schwarz even assisted Cannon in preparing a revised translation of Michalak's book which was to be published at some point in the 1970s. Then their correspondence waned. I took this lead and contacted Cannon, who by this time had moved to Vancouver. I both wrote and telephoned him, asking specific questions about the case.

These included: (1) Where are the investigation files of the case? (2) Who interviewed the RCMP officer who had met Michalak immediately after the incident? (3) Who did the lab analysis at the University of Manitoba? Where is it? and (4) Who did the hypnosis of Michalak? Despite eight years of patient requests, I got no answers to my questions.

A number of explanations have been offered for Michalak's experience. These range from Donald Menzel's label of "hoax" to John Keel's suggestion that Michalak accidentally entered another dimension. But since these are not based entirely on available facts, they are less important than the explanations given by people with a working knowledge of the case. It is known, for example, that Michalak's own physician did not believe the story, not from medical evidence but from personal opinion. Cannon clearly favored the extraterrestrial hypothesis and still others felt that Michalak had chanced upon a secret government craft.

Dr. Sunil Sen, a physicist at the University of Manitoba,

was highly skeptical of the whole affair. At a seminar in 1976, he stated that he believed Michalak had been trying to make an amateur rocket in the woods and had gotten burned in the process. As for the radioactivity, he suggested Michalak was naively using chunks of pitchblends for an "atomic pile." While it is hard to believe that Michalak could have been bothering with this, especially since his geological experience would have taught him otherwise, it is harder to believe that Sen's knowledge of the case, which came solely from the Condon Report, could have led to such a contrived theory from a scientist.

Perhaps the oddest ideas came from the principal investigator for the RCAF, a Sgt. Bissky. Bissky's reports abound in the NRC files, so I contacted him directly. He claimed that a "confidential source" told him Michalak knocked on the door of their cabin near Falcon Lake, on the night before the incident was claimed to have happened. Michalak had supposedly been drinking and had fallen onto a hot barbecue grill in his stupor. Thus, he was burned in an odd checkerboard pattern, and he sought his neighbors for help. Of course, Bissky could not tell me his source's name. It is worth noting that if this had really happened, Michalak's burns would not be the observed polka-dot pattern, but a grill-like matrix, so the story seems doubtful.

Bissky's story led me to recall that Michalak said he had encountered an RCMP officer on his walk back down the road to the Falcon Lake Motel. Since this happened in the afternoon, it could lead to the refuting of Bissky's story. I therefore sought this RCMP officer, to ask him about it.

Barker originally had told me that he believed Cannon had spoken with the officer but he later realized that the officer had never been interviewed. I went to Falcon Lake, but the RCMP there had, of course, changed posts by then, and no one knew who had been at the detachment in 1967. I went to the RCMP headquarters in Winnipeg and spoke with a CO in charge of Criminal Investigations. He told me that they had no records of who might have been there in 1967, since their files get disposed every seven years. This is true, but records of this sort must be kept for longer periods in the archives. Since I was not in the mood to buy the Brooklyn Bridge, I left it at that.

Other possible witnesses' interviews are likewise absent. The motel operator might have been able to substantiate Michalak's coming and goings. The bus driver might have established that Michalak was ill enroute to Winnipeg. There is no record of any of these inquiries in the course of CAPRO's investigations.

The question of hypnosis is also a strange one. Barker has a tape recording, though I have not yet had an opportunity to listen to it, of a hypnosis session that was conducted by a local clinical hypnotist on Michalak. But when I spoke with this hypnotist, he was adamant that Michalak was never hypnotized, but only interviewed by himself, to see if he would be a good candidate. He also told me that "the fellow with Michalak" was "very hostile and uncooperative." The "fellow with Michalak" was obviously from CAPRO, though his identity is still not positively known at this time. One of Michalak's sons clearly

recalls a lengthy session when his father was cloistered in a room with several people, among them CAPRO members, including Barker, and did undergo hypnosis. But if the hypnotist was not the one originally named to me, then who was it? There has been some suggestion that the hypnotist was in fact a reporter for a local newspaper, though I have not been able to establish this as fact.

Finally, there is the problem of the manuscript for Michalak's book. It was written in Polish, then translated, and there was a suggestion that the translation might have been slightly in error. But the publishing house is gone, the translator is gone, and the manuscript is gone. Michalak says that Cannon had it, though Cannon himself said he did not have it in his possession.

It seems that we will never be certain what happened to Michalak on May 20, 1967. As a single-witness account, it ranks as one of the most important in the history of ufology. Even the Condon Report lists it as "unknown" in its index, though it cautiously notes, "If [Michalak's experience] were physically real, it would show the existence of alien flying vehicles in our environment."

But something went awry with the investigations of the incident, and we are left with a loosely-strung collection of information that doesn't suggest an obvious conclusion. It seems likely that the investigation itself was badly botched both through a lack of cooperation and communication between CAPRO members, estranged or otherwise, and through a certain lack of basic competence.

A further interesting complication is that a former CAPRO member has suggested that another member was an undercover officer with the RCMP. It is claimed that this person once said he left the RCMP over some dubious charges. As unsubstantiated as these claims are, and I will not vouch for their authenticity, this might conceivably explain a few things that have been left hanging.

Over the past 10 years, I have gone to considerable length to determine what exactly happened in 1967 overlooking that beaver dam in the forest. I have made many attempts to obtain various documents and have sometimes been successful. The recent death of Brian Cannon has meant the loss of valuable information and we may never locate the "missing" files, if they existed at all.

I have spoken with Michalak and members of his family several times. I do not believe he perpetrated a hoax, judging from the evidence available. But the facts show that he was physically injured at Falcon Lake, a landing trace was found, and several levels of government investigated. Certain documents continue to be missing from the official files, and the private CAPRO files are likewise not forthcoming. Persons associated with the case have been labelled "suspicious" by some investigators, and others either don't know or are not talking.