

Challender tracks NASA flights for UFO clues

By Will Evans

Sacramento Bee staff writer

When NASA launches another shuttle into orbit, the folks at Mission Control won't be the only ones following its every move.

Jeff Challender will be watching every second of shuttle footage available on cable television from his Sacramento, CA, home. And he'll be recording it, adding it to his collection of hundreds of missions, for proof.

Proof of what, he doesn't know. But Challender, 49, believes National Aeronautics and Space Administration cameras are catching glances of UFOs.

Alien spacecraft, space animals, secret government experiments or none of the above—Challender has no idea what they are. But despite debunkers who say he's staring at ice particles or other space junk, Challender doesn't think the white spots occasionally moving across his screen can be explained by normal means.

These flying objects are, at least for him, "unidentified."

"I don't go for the flying saucers and little green men routine," he says. "All I know is that there is something appearing on NASA video that doesn't belong there."

Though there are many UFO trackers in Sacramento, he's one of only a handful in the world that scope NASA flights for clues. And for his patience and dedication to detail, watching video that he says produces about 10 seconds of "interesting" material out of several hundred hours, he has become respected as a self-taught "expert" in the wider UFO community.

"He has probably more expertise than anyone else, certainly outside of government, in looking at the film," says George Filer, a retired Air Force major who runs a UFO Web site from New Jersey.

Challender, disabled by a severe spinal injury, lies on a mattress surrounded by an arsenal of recording equipment for his work: nine VCRs, stacks of VHS tapes, two DVD burners, and a DVD player.

With his massive, hand-built, quadruple-hard-drive computer in front, he seems suspended in some kind of space vessel himself.

But the only thing that hints of extraterrestrial interests is a little silver alien, perched on top of his computer.

Challender grabs the NASA footage from Channel 72, run by the Sacramento Educational Cable Consortium. From each mission he'll probably examine 30 to 40 hours of tape, sometimes straight from breakfast to when his family calls him to dinner.

The longtime aviation junkie started taping missions in 1997, just for fun, to edit each one into a documentary. But in 1999, he saw something that grabbed his attention: an illuminated dot, pulsating as it whizzed across the screen. Then, later, he saw many white dots moving



Jeff Challender of Sacramento, CA, is surrounded by computer and electronics equipment that he uses to examine NASA mission films for unidentified flying objects. (Sacramento Bee/Manny Crisostomo)

around, changing direction and speed. What were they? Challender has been tracking similar "anomalies" ever since.

"I want answers," says the former railroad laborer. "I believe something's going on and the facts are being kept from us."

NASA isn't so sure.

"I'm not aware of any visuals of (extraterrestrial) activity," says Fred Brown, executive producer of NASA Television.

Challender points to incidents where the camera seems to zoom in on one of the dots and then cuts off the live footage—signs, he says, of a coverup.

Nonsense, Brown says. "If those things were out there and we were trying to hide them, we wouldn't put them on NASA Television."

Challender is probably seeing bits of liquid or ice, close to the camera, blown around by jets of gas from the shuttle, says Seth Shostak, an astronomer at the SETI Institute, a nonprofit organization running what used to be NASA's "Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence."

"You have to be careful," he says. "They're very impressive if you're naive."

But Jack Kasher, a retired University of Nebraska, Omaha, physicist, says he's viewed Challender's findings, concluding that they aren't ice particles, and challenging anyone who says so to prove it.

Still, Shostak says, why would SETI spend millions searching for alien radio signals if there were Martians buzzing around every NASA mission?

Shostak believes that there is alien life. If 10 percent of stars had planets and 1 percent of those supported life, there could be millions of worlds with life just in our gal-