

VASP

FLIGHT 169

CLOSE ENCOUNTER OR CELESTIAL ILLUSION?

In the early hours of February 8, 1982, Boeing 727 PP-SNG of Brazilian airline VASP was operating the regular “redeye” service from Fortaleza to São Paulo, when the crew became aware of a mysterious “luminous object” apparently following the jetliner. UFO or mass optical illusion? **SERGIO GONÇALVES** examines the scientific evidence



VASP's Flight 169 cost 135 Cruzeiros in 1982, with a scheduled departure from Fortaleza at 0145hr. The service operated seven days a week between Fortaleza and São Paulo, with stops at Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Cuiaba, Curitiba, Goiania and Rio de Janeiro. Stops at Altamira, Campinas, Campo Grande, Porto Velho, Rio Branco and Santarém were also made on selected days.



All of Boeing's 727s were built at Renton, Washington, “Super 200” PP-SNG (c/n 21345) making its first flight on October 7, 1980. It was delivered to VASP nine days later to become one of 13 used by the airline on its medium-haul routes, and particularly its Economy Night Flights, during 1977–2005.

AT DAWN ON Monday, February 8, 1982, Boeing 727-2A1 PP-SNG of Brazilian domestic airline *Viação Aérea São Paulo* (VASP) was cruising along Airway UR-1. It had taken off from Pinto Martins Airport in Fortaleza at 0150hr under a full moon in good weather, on a scheduled flight to São Paulo via Rio de Janeiro. The three-engined jetliner was operating service VP169, a *Voo Econômico Noturno* (VEN — Economy Night Flight), equivalent to the famous “redeye” in the USA, such flights having recently been authorised by Brazil’s Department of Civil Aviation in order to offer more affordable prices to passengers. In the cockpit were Capt Gérson Maciel de Britto, who had logged more than 26,000 flying hours, copilot Alberto and Flight Engineer Cesarino.

THE ENCOUNTER BEGINS

One hour and 22 minutes into the flight, cruising at around Mach 0.8 at 31,000ft (9,500m), the 727 was approaching the city of Bom Jesus da Lapa in Bahia when the crew became aware of the apparent approach of a luminous object from the port side. The object seemed to resemble an illuminated aircraft, and appeared to move into a position to follow the jetliner. Captain Britto immediately contacted the Recife Air Traffic Control Centre on frequency 126.9, which was vectoring the flight, to enquire about other aircraft in the vicinity. He was informed that there were no other aircraft, civil or military, in the area, the nearest on its screens being tens of miles away.

Unsatisfied with this report, Britto switched the 727’s landing lights on and reduced the cockpit lighting, better to observe the mysterious