

Accuracy in Writing About Sightings

I think it generally positive when writers take up the subject of modern pterosaurs. That said, some of the online writings I have noticed to be inaccurate, with those inaccuracies being multiplied through multiple quotations and quotations of quotations. I will quote but one here.

But before mentioning problems, I recommend the following:

Ropens

Duane Hodgkinson, now a flight instructor in Livingston, Montana, in 1944 was stationed near Finschhafen, in what was then called New Guinea. After he and his buddy walked into a clearing, they were amazed as a large creature flew up into the air.

Now to the problem of lack of accuracy:

The Ropen of New Guinea

Duane Hodgkinson was stationed northwest of Lae, near Finschaven, PNG as part of the Army cavalry in 1944. About noon one day in August he was walking down a trail through a clearing in the forest when he was startled by a crashing in the brush. As he watched a large bird-like creature ponderously rose from the ground, circled and flew away. Hodgkinson, a pilot, estimated the wing-span to be about 20 ft. He clearly recalls the dark-gray coloration, long serpentine neck, beak, and distinctive head crest.

On first glance, this appears to be a quotation from *A Pictorial History of Sea Monsters*, 1972, p. 42, by James B. Sweeney; I have not read that book. But a giant flying

creature seems out of place in a book about sea monsters, so I suspect that only the end of Woetzel's first paragraph comes from Sweeney's book. I suspect that the many details about the 1944 Hodgkinson sighting come from a somewhat casual remembrance by Woetzel. I have not heard about any interview that Woetzel has ever done with Hodgkinson, so let us compare the above with what has been learned from Guessman-Whitcomb interviews with the World War II veteran:

1. He was not walking down a trail through a clearing; he was standing with his army buddy on one side of a clearing.
2. They heard a crashing in the brush, that is true, but they then saw a wild pig run through the clearing. After they saw the running pig, the flying creature then appeared to their view, probably startled out of sleep by the running pig.
3. Hodgkinson did not say that he "watched a large bird-like creature." At first, he saw something flapping its wings, so he assumed that it was a bird. Very soon, however, he saw that it was something else, not a bird.
4. He said that the creature ran through the clearing, taking several steps before becoming airborne. He did not say "rose from the ground," which may cause some readers to think that it flew away mostly vertically.
5. What does it mean, "circled and flew away?" If I understand correctly, Hodgkinson told Whitcomb and Guessman that it flew out of view for a few seconds, then returned, meaning it changed its course by 180 degrees when it was out of Hodgkinson's view. But that point is of little consequence.
6. He did not say that he was a pilot in 1944. He has been a pilot and flight instructor for many years now, however.
7. The wingspan Hodgkinson estimated to be similar to that of a Piper Tri-Pacer, which is just under 30 feet. This is considerably longer than "20 ft."

8. He did not say that he clearly remembers the color of the creature. It was dark but not black, is what he told Guessman.
9. I don't know of any interview in which Hodgkinson mentioned a "long serpentine neck." Where does Woetzel get that description?

David Woetzel is to be commended for his courageous expeditions in Africa and in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere. His sighting report of his own encounter with the flying light on Umboi Island is of great importance, in my view. His description of that light, especially where it was going (towards Lake Pung) is noteworthy and valuable.

His talents, however may be more in exploring and promoting expeditions, more than in writing, at least in terms of accuracy in details for sightings other than his own. I believe the world is a better place because of Woetzel's writings. That said, it will be even better when he uses more accuracy in the details about sightings by other eyewitnesses.