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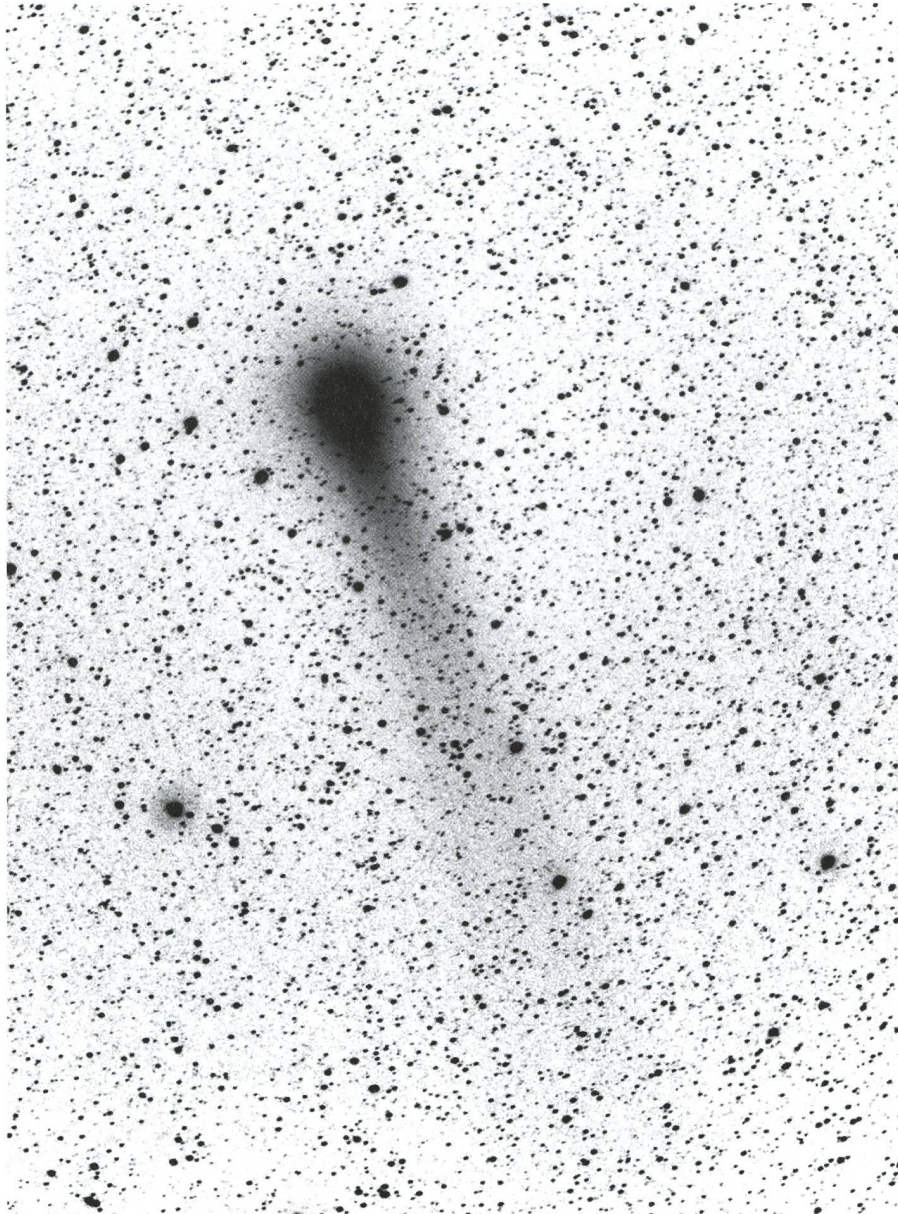
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La comète C/2001 A2 - Linear

La comète de l'été était bien visible toute la nuit. Aux jumelles, elle apparaissait toute ronde sans queue apparente. Photo prise avec un téléobjectif de 400 mm de focale.

ARMIN BEHREND
Les Parcs, CH-2127 Les Bayards/NE



C/2001 A2 (LINEAR)

22.07.2001

End of a satellite

MICHAEL MARTIN-SMITH

June 4, 2000 saw the safe controlled re-entry of one of NASA's less known but most successful space observatories. Launched in 1991 from the Space Shuttle, the second of NASA's Great Observ-

atories had a design life of 5 years. At a weight of 17 tons it was the largest unmanned science satellite ever launched by the USA. Its task was to examine the heavens in the most highly energetic



wavelength of all – Gamma radiation. In the event the craft operated without a hitch for 9 years and a decision was taken to de-orbit it in a controlled manner on the failure of one of its three steering gyroscopes. This was primarily a safety decision, as NASA wanted to avoid a 17 ton satellite landing in a populated region. The safe re-entry into an uninhabited area of ocean showed this decision to be correct, but brought to an end one of the least known but possibly most significant eras of space science, with implications for the very future of advanced life throughout the Cosmos.

Electromagnetic radiation ranges in wavelength from long radio waves via infra-red visible light, ultraviolet, X-rays, and finally gamma rays – the shortest, most energetic wavelength of all. All these waves travel at the speed of light and their energy is inversely proportional to their wavelength. Very roughly electromagnetic waves correspond to increasing temperature and energy level of cosmic activities as the wavelength is shortened, with gamma rays signifying the most energetic processes of all.

How did the need for such an obscure scientific investigation come to pass?

In the 1960's gamma rays were more widely known through their lethal association with human nuclear explosions here on Earth, and so the US Defence Department had in place satellites to monitor nuclear tests and explosions by recording the gamma ray signatures of such events.

It soon emerged that there were gamma ray explosions or bursts lasting from a few seconds to 20 minutes or so which had nothing to do with human military ambitions, since they came from well beyond our stellar neighbourhood. Little was known at that time except that they were either due to totally unimaginable violent processes occur-