



UFOs OVER COSFORD

PROJECT CONDIGN

On 15 May 2006, under the Freedom of Information Act, the Ministry of Defence published a formerly secret report on UFOs. Much information about UFOs has already been released, both at the National Archives and on the Ministry of Defence's website. The Freedom of Information Act came fully into force on 1 January 2005 and one of the subjects that is most frequently raised under the legislation is UFOs. There is massive public interest in the phenomenon. But the release of this latest study is different and totally unprecedented. The study was classified 'Secret UK Eyes Only' and only 11 copies of the report were ever made. It ran to over 460 pages and was codenamed 'Project Condign'. Work started in 1996 and the final report was not published until December 2000. The study's findings were sensational but the story behind the study was even more bizarre.

The Ministry of Defence first became involved in the UFO phenomenon in 1950 when the Department's Chief Scientific Adviser, the great radar pioneer Sir Henry Tizard, decreed that UFO sightings should not be dismissed without some form of proper, scientific study. The result was the most splendidly named committee in the history of the civil service, the Flying Saucer Working Party. Their conclusions, set out in a classified report from 1951, were sceptical: UFO sightings were misidentifications, hoaxes or delusions. Consequently, they recommended no further investigations be carried out.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill pressed the Air Ministry for answers in 1952. His letter - available for viewing at the National Archives - says "What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience". The reply simply restated the party line. UFOs were of no defence significance. But later that year there was a high profile series of UFO encounters involving the RAF. UFOs were tracked on radar. Aircraft were scrambled. Pilots saw UFOs demonstrate speeds and manoeuvres that went far beyond anything the RAF were operating. And some of these mystery objects were filmed on the gun cameras carried on some of our aircraft.

The MOD and the RAF were forced to think again and the sceptical conclusions of the Flying Saucer Working Party were overturned. UFO sightings were to be reported and investigated, but could not be discussed with the media or the public. Guidance was set out in a 1956 document classified Secret. In 1965, in the course of liaison with the Americans, the Ministry of Defence confirmed that UFO sightings were investigated by "our Air Force Technical Intelligence Department". And in a statement that has led to accusations of cover-ups and conspiracies, the document went on to say "Our policy is to play down the subject of UFOs and to avoid attaching undue attention or publicity to it".

The MOD continued to receive reports of UFO sightings. Most were from the public, but some were from police officers, civil pilots or military personnel. The numbers varied. In 1976 we received 200 UFO reports. In 1978 we got 750. I joined the Ministry of Defence in 1985 and in 1991 was posted to the division then responsible for investigating UFO sightings. My brief was to see whether there was evidence of anything of any defence

significance - any threat to the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom's Air Defence Region. What I found changed my life forever.

There has always been a sceptic versus believer debate raging at the heart of the Establishment in relation to the UFO phenomenon. Some people in Government thought the whole subject was a waste of time and money, while others thought it was an issue of critical importance. There were some surprising players in all of this. A former Chief of the Defence Staff, Lord Hill-Norton, believed some UFOs were extraterrestrial and that governments were covering up the truth. Former Royal equerry and Deputy Commander in Chief of RAF Strike Command Sir Peter Horsley wrote in his autobiography about an encounter with an alien. "Oh God, how unfortunate that the public will learn that the man who had his finger on the button at Strike Command was seeing little green men" commented a senior officer, anonymously, of course.

During my tour of duty on the UFO project, my conclusions generally mirrored those of my predecessors. Most UFOs could be explained as misidentifications of ordinary objects and phenomena: aircraft lights, weather balloons, satellites, meteors and the planet Venus. But some of the cases on our files were considerably more interesting:

On 26 December 1980 a UFO landed in Rendlesham Forest next to the United States Air Force bases at Bentwaters and Woodbridge. One of the many military witnesses got close enough to touch the hull and sketch the strange symbols - which he likened to Egyptian hieroglyphs - that he saw on the craft. Indentations were found in the clearing where the UFO had landed and a Geiger counter was used to take radiation readings, subsequently assessed by the MOD's Defence Intelligence Staff as being "significantly higher than the average background". The UFO returned on the following night, when witnesses included the Deputy Base Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Halt.

On 30 March 1990 the Belgian Air Force tracked a UFO on radar and scrambled two F-16 fighters, with orders to intercept the UFO. The two aircraft 'locked on' to the UFO with their onboard radars, but the UFO repeatedly broke the lock and a bizarre game of cat and mouse played itself out over the next hour or so. I made enquiries about this with staff at our embassy in Brussels, and was told that the Belgian Government had assessed this event as real - an unknown craft had indeed been involved.

On 5 November 1990, RAF Tornado aircraft flying over the North Sea were casually overtaken by a UFO. The pilot's report stated "UFO appeared in our right hand side ... we were travelling at Mach point 8. It went into our 12 o'clock and accelerated away. Another 2 Tornados saw it".

On 30 March 1993 a massive wave of UFO sightings occurred over the UK, culminating in a massive triangular-shaped craft flying over RAF Cosford and RAF Shawbury in the Midlands. Witnesses included members of an RAF Police patrol, and a meteorological officer who saw a UFO that he said was several hundred feet in diameter, emitting a low frequency humming sound and firing a narrow beam of light down at the ground. It moved slowly across the countryside before shooting off to the horizon several times faster than an RAF fighter jet.

The MOD's UFO Project had also been sent a number of intriguing photos and videos of UFOs, and had the means to have the images enhanced and analysed by various technical specialists. Some intriguing images had arrived via the Scottish Daily Record in 1990, and a poster-sized photograph had been produced from one of the negatives and pinned to my office wall by one of my predecessors. The photograph had been taken in daylight and showed a

vast, diamond-shaped UFO, metallic silver in colour, apparently hovering low over the Scottish countryside. The photograph was removed in 1994 by the then head of the division, who had convinced himself that the picture showed a secret prototype aircraft codenamed Aurora - a hypersonic replacement for the SR-71 Blackbird that the US Government denied existed. A question was asked in Parliament in 1996 about the location of this photograph, and the matter has subsequently been raised in a Freedom of Information Act request. Unfortunately, the photograph had disappeared, and could not be located.

This was the background to Project Condign. For 40 years a debate about UFOs had raged within the MOD and the RAF, with first the sceptics then the believers gaining the upper hand. We needed resolution. We needed a proper, in-depth scientific study that was going to look at all the evidence we'd amassed, and come to a definitive view about the UFO phenomenon. My opposite number in the Defence Intelligence Staff had first discussed this with me in 1993. Like me, he seemed intrigued by some of the UFO cases on our files, and some of our discussions about UFO aerodynamics and propulsion systems were like something from a 'Star Trek' script. Nothing was said openly, but when terrestrial explanations for some UFO cases were eliminated, fingers were pointed suggestively upwards. And whenever the question of UFO occupants was mentioned, the marvellous phrase "these people" was trotted out. "What did he mean '*these people*'?" my boss asked me, on the way back from one particularly surreal briefing.

But how were we going to get a study commissioned when so many of our colleagues thought the MOD should drop its UFO investigations altogether - as the United States Air Force had in 1969, when their research programme, Project Blue Book, was closed down. One of our tactics was a simple linguistic sleight of hand - we banned the phrase 'UFO'! One mention of the phrase 'UFO', and people's prejudices and belief systems kick in, be they sceptics or believers. The term was too emotive and had too much baggage. So we devised 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena' (UAP) as a replacement, and tried to use this in all internal policy documents, retaining the phrase 'UFO' only for our dealings with the public. It worked. With the phrase 'UFO' having been quietly dropped, we pushed to get a study approved. To my surprise and delight, given some of the more sceptical voices in the Department, resources were eventually obtained. I assessed the formal proposal, when it arrived, and recommended to my bosses that the study be commissioned. Against my expectation, my recommendation was accepted. However, the project was subsequently delayed, and in 1994 I was promoted and posted to a different section. Accordingly, I played no part in the study and am certainly not - as has been alleged on the internet - its anonymous author.

So what did we get? After four years and 460 pages of analysis, have we solved the UFO mystery? Well, no, we haven't. "That UAP exist is indisputable", the Executive Summary states, before going on to say that no evidence has been found to suggest they are "hostile or under any type of control". What we have is a comprehensive drawing together of some existing research, coupled with some exotic new theories. But by its own admission, the report has not provided a definitive explanation of the phenomenon: "although the study cannot offer the certainty of explanation of all UAP phenomena ..." it says, leaving the door open.

One of the areas that will be most contentious relates to what the report refers to as "plasma related fields". Electrically-charged atmospheric plasmas are credited with having given rise to some of the reports of vast triangular-shaped craft, while the interaction of such plasma fields with the temporal lobes in the brain is cited as another reason why people might feel

they were having a strange experience. The problem with this is that there's no scientific consensus here, and as a good rule of thumb one shouldn't try to explain one unknown phenomenon by citing evidence of another. In other words, you can't explain one mystery with another one! That said, the opportunities presented here are recognised and the study recommends further investigation "into the applicability of various characteristics of plasmas in novel military applications".

The report also deals with flight safety issues. There are numerous UFO sightings involving pilots, and the Civil Aviation Authority has records of some terrifying near misses between aircraft and UFOs. In one such case, on 6 January 1995, a UFO came dangerously close to hitting a Boeing 737 with 60 passengers on board, on its approach to Manchester airport. The CAA commended the pilots for reporting the UFO and the official report states that both the degree of risk to the aircraft and the cause were "unassessable". Numerous RAF pilots have seen UFOs too. I have spoken to many such witnesses, not all of whom ever made an official UFO report. Project Condign has an intriguing recommendation when it comes to such aerial encounters: "No attempt should be made to out-manoeuvre a UAP during interception".

This is good news for all those with a serious interest in UFOs. The longest and most comprehensive UFO study ever undertaken in the United Kingdom is published, underpinning the MOD's commitment to the Freedom of Information Act and the principles of open government. Although some parts of the study have been quite properly withheld, as they relate to areas such as the capabilities of radar systems, the media and the public now have an insight into a world that was previously closed to them. The real X-Files have been opened and proof revealed as to just how seriously some of us in government viewed the UFO phenomenon, and how much hard work went into the effort to resolve one of the last great mysteries of our time.

Some commentators recently suggested that interest in UFOs was declining. The publication of this report looks set to reignite the debate and propel the subject back into the spotlight. UFOs - sorry, I mean UAPs - are back!

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