

Red flares spark night flier riddle

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IT was just after midnight and Police Sergeant William Smith was busy helping at the scene of a road accident.

Suddenly he was distracted by gasps of surprise from a small crowd gathered in the darkened street.

Following their gaze upwards the sergeant saw two startlingly bright flares light up the night sky over Somerset.

The first, blue, stayed suspended for several seconds before adding to the ground. It was closely followed by a red one.

Simultaneously Sgt. John Sparrow, on duty in another area south of Bristol, Avon, saw a red flare coming from the sky and a white light moving ahead of it.

A few minutes later and a

few miles further south, at the city's airport, an air traffic controller began track an unidentified aircraft which slowly crossed the radar screen before disappearing from view, reappearing, and finally vanishing on the edge of the Bristol Channel.

No clue

The sightings sparked off a massive rescue operation, and have left the authorities in the West Country with the riddle: Was it a small plane in distress? Did it ditch in the sea? Or was it something else?

Despite a lengthy search of the Bristol Channel and its coast, no clue has been found.

Yet there is no question

that flares were set off that night, and each was connected with the dot on the radar screen.

But what was that speck?

The only facts, according to airport staff, are that it was definitely an aeroplane or "some kind of flying object" at least the size of a plane. It was above 1,000 feet and it was moving at 60 knots, unusually slow even for a small aircraft.

Why did the pilot not use his radio? Why let off flares, sometimes used after an aircraft ditches in the sea but not often while it is airborne?

Some observers have put forward the theory that the slow-moving craft was a motorised glider, perhaps engaged on illegal business such as drug-smuggling.

Whatever the answer, there is nothing to indicate the night flier's identity or eventual fate.

A spokesman at Bristol Airport said: "We have been waiting for something to turn up which might explain it, but we have learned nothing from our observations so far."

The lifeboat from Barry, South Wales, two inshore rescue boats, an R.A.F. Sea King helicopter and teams of Coastguards searched in vain for six hours.

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