

'Despite a massive cover-up, News of the World investigators have proof that the mysterious craft came to earth in a red ball of light. An American airman who was there told us there were three beings in silver space suits aboard the craft...' More seriously, they produced a supporting statement from a named American Air Force colonel, which we reprint on the right. And an American UFO expert who said 'You can't hide the truth for ever.' Which is where Ian Ridpath takes up the investigation.

A flashlight in the forest

FOUR Christmases ago, something remarkable was said to have occurred outside the US Air Force base at Woodbridge, near Ipswich. News of the event leaked out slowly, finally hitting the headlines in October 1983: "UFO Lands in Suffolk — Official," screamed the front page of the News of the World.

The story was sensational. It told of a group of American airmen who were confronted one night with an alien spaceship in Rendlesham Forest, which surrounds the air force base. According to the story, the craft came down over the trees and landed in a blinding explosion of light.

The airmen tried to approach the object, but it moved away from them as though under intelligent control. The following day, landing marks were found on the ground, burns were seen on nearby trees, and radiation traces were recorded. There was even talk of aliens aboard the craft, and allegations of a massive cover-up. It had all the ingredients of a classic UFO encounter.

The News of the World's informant was a former US

airman. He was given the pseudonym Art Wallace, for he claimed that his life had been threatened if he talked. Yet here he was freely giving interviews to newspapers and television.

While his fantastic story might be doubted, it was impossible to shrug off a memo written by the deputy base commander, Lt. Col. Charles I. Halt, to the Ministry of Defence, which was publicly released in the United States under the Freedom of Information Act. Halt's memo, reprinted in full here, is not as sensational as Wallace's story, but it is prime documentary evidence of a type rarely encountered in UFO cases.

UFO researchers in Britain could scarcely believe their luck: this was The Big One, final proof that We Are Not Alone. The News of the World paid £12,000 for the story. A book was recently published about the case, and American TV crews have been filming at the site in recent weeks.

All that evidence, backed up by the word of the US Air Force, could not possibly have a rational explanation.

NEWS OF THE WORLD OCTOBER 2, 1983 BRITAIN'S BIGGEST SELLING SUNDAY NEWSPAPER No. 7281. Headlines: Colonel's top secret report tells the facts, Mystery craft in exploding wall of colour, Animals flee from strange glowing object. Main headline: UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK. Sub-headline: And that's OFFICIAL. Includes a photo of a woman and a small article titled 'The Street won't die says Bill'.

Or could it? Here are the facts that you have not been told.

Soon after the News of the World story appeared, I went in search of local opinions about the case. I made contact by telephone with a forester, Vince Thurkettle, who lives within a mile of the alleged UFO landing site. "I don't know of anyone around here who believes that anything strange happened that night," he told me.

So what did he think the flashing light was in Rendlesham Forest? I was astonished by his reply. "It's the lighthouse," he said.

That lighthouse lies at Orford Ness on the Suffolk coast, five miles from the forest. Thurkettle plotted on a map the direction in which the airmen reported seeing their flashing UFO, and found that they were looking straight into the lighthouse beam.

Could this really be the answer? I visited the site with a camera crew from BBC TV's Breakfast Time. On the way there, the cameraman was convinced. My report was shown the following morning on Breakfast Time, much to the dismay of UFO spotters and the News of the World reporter.

The lighthouse theory soon had its supporters and its detractors. But there were still too many open questions for the case to be considered solved. For instance, what about those landing marks?

The site of the alleged landing, and it felt spooky. The area had by now been cleared of trees as part of normal forest operations, but enough pines remained at the edge of the forest to give us a realistic idea of what the airmen saw that night.

Sure enough, the lighthouse beam seemed to hover a few feet above ground level, because Rendlesham Forest is higher than the coastline. The light seemed to move around as we moved. And it looked close — only a few hundred yards away among the trees. All this matched the airmen's description of the UFO.

The conclusion was clear. Had a real UFO been present as well as the lighthouse, the airmen should have reported seeing two brilliant flashing lights among the trees, not one. But they never mentioned the lighthouse, only a pulsating UFO — not surprisingly, since no one expects to come across a lighthouse beam near ground level in a forest.

So startlingly brilliant was the beam that the television cameras captured it easily. The formerly sceptical

themselves as a sign that the trees were ready to be felled. I saw numerous examples in which the pine resin, bubbling into the cut, gives the impression of a burn.

Additional information came from other eyewitnesses — the local police, called to the scene by the Woodbridge air base. The police officers who visited the site reported that they could see no UFO, only the Orford Ness lighthouse. Like Vince Thurkettle, they attributed the landing marks to animals. The case for a landed spaceship was looking very shaky indeed.

What had made the airmen think that something had crashed into the forest in the first place? I already knew from previous UFO cases that a brilliant meteor, a piece of natural debris from space burning up in the atmosphere, could give such an impression. But I was unable to find records of such a meteor on the morning of December 27.

Here the police account provided a vital lead by showing that Col. Halt's memo, written two weeks after the

event, had got the date of the sighting wrong. It occurred on December 26, not December 27.

With this corrected date, I telephoned Dr John Mason, who collects reports of such sightings for the British Astronomical Association. He told me that shortly before 3 am on December 26 an exceptionally brilliant meteor, almost as bright as the full moon, had been seen over southern England. Dr Mason confirmed that this meteor would have been visible to the airmen at Woodbridge as though something were crashing into the forest nearby. The time of the sighting matched that given in Col. Halt's memo.

Colonel Charles Halt's memo on official American Air Force notepaper was headed "Unexplained Lights", dated 13 January 1981, and sent to the RAF. It said:

- 1. Early in the morning of 27 Dec 80 (approximately 0300 L), two USAF security police patrolmen saw unusual lights outside the back gate at RAF Woodbridge. Thinking an aircraft might have crashed or been forced down, they called for permission to go outside the gate to investigate. The on-duty flight chief responded and allowed three patrolmen to proceed on foot. The individuals reported seeing a strange glowing object in the forest. The object was described as being metallic in appearance and triangular in shape, approximately two to three meters across the base and approximately two meters high. It illuminated the entire forest with a white light. The object itself had a pulsing red light on top and a bank(s) of blue lights underneath. The object was hovering or on legs. As the patrolmen approached the object, it maneuvered through the trees and disappeared. At this time the animals on a nearby farm went into a frenzy. The object was briefly sighted approximately an hour later near the back gate.
2. The next day, three depressions 1 1/2" deep and 7" in diameter were found where the object had been sighted on the ground. The following night (29 Dec 80) the area was checked for radiation. Beta/gamma readings of 0.1 milliroentgens were recorded with peak readings in the three depressions and near the center of the triangle formed by the depressions. A nearby tree had moderate (.05-.07) readings on the side of the tree toward the depressions.
3. Later in the night a red sun-like light was seen through the trees. It moved about and pulsed. At one point it appeared to throw off glowing particles and then broke into five separate white objects and then disappeared. Immediately thereafter, three star-like objects were noticed in the sky, two objects to the north and one to the south, all of which were about 10 degrees off the horizon. The objects moved rapidly in sharp, angular movements and displayed red, green and blue lights. The objects to the north appeared to be elliptical through an 8-12 power lens. They then turned to full circles. The objects to the north remained in the sky for an hour or more. The object to the south was visible for two or three hours and beamed down a stream of light from time to time. Numerous individuals, including the undersigned, witnessed the activities in paragraphs 2 and 3.

Signature of Charles I. Halt, Lt Col, USAF, Deputy Base Commander.

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Some weeks later I returned to Rendlesham Forest in search of answers. The landing marks had long since been destroyed when the trees were felled, but I now knew an eyewitness who had seen them: Vince Thurkettle. He recalled for me his disappointment with what he saw.

The three depressions were irregular in shape and did not even form a symmetrical triangle. He recognised them as rabbit diggings, several months old and covered with a layer of fallen pine needles. They lay in an area surrounded by 75ft tall pine trees planted 10ft to 15ft apart — scarcely the place to land a 20ft wide spacecraft.

The "burn marks" on the trees were axe cuts in the bark, made by the foresters

culprits in UFO sightings, and have fooled many experienced observers, including pilots. The object seen by Col. Halt to the south was almost certainly Sirius, the brightest star in the sky. If it seems surprising that a colonel in the US Air Force should identify a star as a UFO, consider the alternatives. Is it likely that a bright, flashing UFO should hover over southern England for three hours without being spotted by anyone other than a group of excited airmen? And if Col. Halt really believed that an alien craft had invaded his air space, why did he not scramble fighters to investigate? UFO hunters will continue to believe that an alien spacecraft landed in Rendlesham Forest that night. But I know that the first sighting coincided with the burn-up in the atmosphere of an exceptionally bright meteor, and that the airmen who saw the flashing UFO between the pine trees were looking straight at the Orford Ness lighthouse. The rest of the case is a product of human imagination.