

TODAY COMMENT

Heroism in midst of tragedy

STRUGGLING waist-deep through thick black mud. Often in the dark and always shrouded in a dreadful stench. Cold, wet and afraid.

That was what Commander Jack Birkett and his seven-man team of Royal Navy divers had to cope with as they struggled in the bowels of the still half-submerged Herald of Free Enterprise at Zeebrugge.

But these were not the worst of the horrors they faced. Even more dreadful was their task of dragging out the bodies of the dead. Everywhere there were pathetic signs of the lives that had been so swiftly and tragically snuffed out when the ferry sank.

A husband and wife entwined in each other's arms — one last, desperate embrace. Another man trapped in a refrigerator which he had mistaken for a way of escape. Yet another found with the book he had been reading still clamped in his hands. And floating in the murky water the paraphernalia of ordinary life. Cups and saucers, toys and teddies, bags and clothing.

The bodies themselves often had to be identified by touch alone. Their days in the water had rendered most of them unrecognisable.

It is little wonder that Commander Birkett said he never understood the meaning of the word "horrific" until he saw inside the ferry. We owe him and his men our gratitude for tackling, without complaint, a job most of us could not begin to deal with.

In the midst of tragedy it is good to find heroism still alive.

Spring is in the air again

THE RED cones are going up all over Britain's motorways. British Rail is about to slip in a crafty fare rise. Our air traffic controllers declare ominously that their morale is declining and their management doesn't care. And in Spain the Madrid metro is on strike along with the country's rail and air services.

Yes, folks, you guessed right. Spring is in the air.

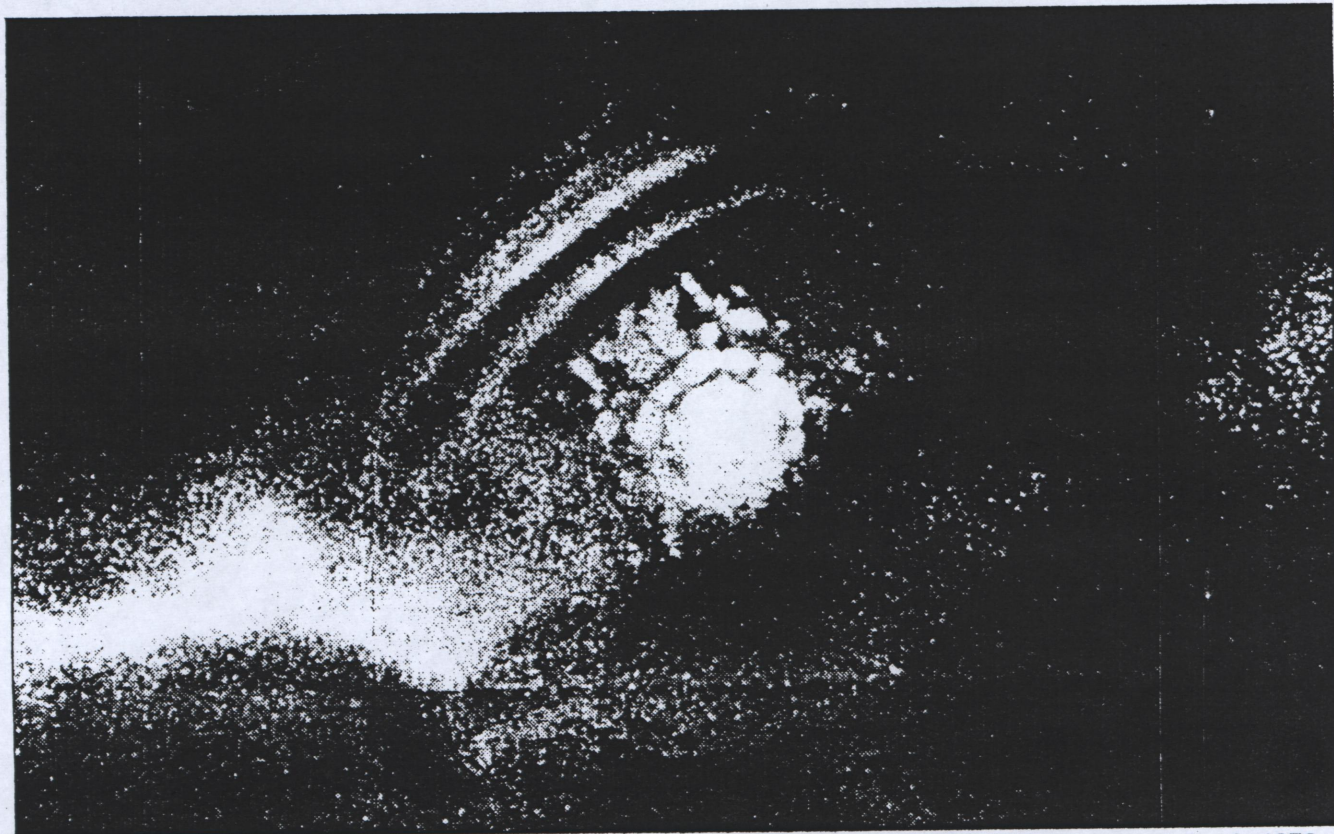
But the passing of winter is no longer marked by branches budding, daffodils flowering and lambs gambolling in the fields. That's strictly for the poets of yesteryear.

Today the tell-tale signs of spring are the stirring of the massed ranks of those determined to stop us enjoying the holiday. The first wave of their attack will sweep out of the trenches, where they've been hiding for months, next Easter weekend. And they will keep up their assault all through the summer.

So, make sure you're ready. Get fit. Consult your maps and timetables for alternative routes to the holiday spot of your choice. Prepare to wait all night at the airport — then lug your own luggage to the plane.

And remember, when you pin yourself to the tail of a 25-mile jam on the M1 this weekend — you ain't seen nothing yet.

Britons who believe we've got visitors



SCIENCE FACT: It's either a swirling star formation or an alien visitor to Rochdale, where this picture was taken in 1978

It came from outer space

by FLEUR BRENNAN

ONE hot July night last year, Neil Gardner saw something "out of this world" in the sky over Bisley rifle range, where he had spent a day's shooting.

Struck by the vivid colours streaking from the object, he looked through his marksman's telescope.

"I saw a craft about four times the size of a jumbo jet. It was changing shape as I watched, from bell-shaped to saucer-shaped and back again."

He stood spellbound for more than an hour while smaller saucer-shaped craft constantly left and returned to the "mother ship".

"It was like watching a kaleidoscope with brilliant laser lights of different colours," he said.

A former crew member with British Airways, Mr Gardner, 53, is convinced they were not aircraft.

Eventually the objects disappeared into the clouds and Mr Gardner and his companions, who also saw them, went home.

PUZZLE

Mr Gardner, of Iver Heath, Bucks, is one of a growing number of people who are fascinated by Unidentified Flying Objects. They present a puzzle that seems to defy solution unless life from other planets really has, at last, decided to visit Earth.

A survey by the Aetherious Society — an international pressure group which promotes and researches the idea of inter-galactic travel — has shown that 16 per cent of people in Britain (but only ten per cent in London) believe they have seen UFOs.

Are they cranks and hallucina-

(OR DID IT?)



SCIENCE FICTION: How they saw it in Close Encounters

tors, or do they know something that the rest of us don't?

A call to the press office revealed that the RAF does not keep check on sightings unless they appear over military installations. Most sightings are explained away as the red, green and white lights of aircraft or the searchlights of helicopters on practice landings, or by natural phenomena.

Surely that must mean the RAF is sceptical? "Oh no. I have seen one myself," said the duty officer.

Although he did not want to be identified, he described the mysterious, round metallic object he and fellow officers came across when flying in formation over Cyprus some years ago. "All 24 of us saw it and it had to be a UFO because it was moving at a speed no earthly craft could achieve."

frightened, but just wished he could go with them on a flight.

He is one of a growing number of people who believe in beings on other planets. Seventy two per cent of Britons think there is life elsewhere in the universe.

The survey also found that three quarters of the population would like more UFO information.

The authorities are noticeably coy about spilling the beans — in 1982 Lord Clancarty in the House of Lords asked the Ministry of Defence to give an explanation of 600 sightings. He is still waiting for an answer.

SIGHTING

The Aetherious Society in London this month obtained from America 200 documents which show an attempt by the Federal Aviation Administration to cover up a sighting of a UFO reported by Japanese Airline Pilot Kenju Terauchi when he was flying across Alaska last November.

At first, the FAA confirmed radar tracking of the UFO, but when they later claimed it was an error, a public outcry led to them releasing all their documents. Copies clearly show reports of UFO sightings on the radar screens of air traffic controllers in Alaska.

Captain Terauchi and his crew say they watched three UFOs flying with them for more than 400 miles above the Arctic, for 32 minutes. The captain tried to photograph them, but his camera would not work. He said the objects moved with amazing speed and abrupt stops. "We did not feel threatened by the space ships."

John Holder of the Aetherious Society says the documents vindicate their campaign for more information about UFOs.

If you have seen lights in the sky, call the Aetherious Society's hot-line (01 731 1094) between 10am and 10pm any day.