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Could we have hitched a ride on UFOs?

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Newly released files may put one mystery to bed, but in doing so others are left unanswered

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It is not the sort of discussion you imagine among the grey-suited ranks of Whitehall - defence analysts debating the existence of little green men and speculating about whether they have visited Earth.

But a set of newly released internal Ministry of Defence documents gives a fascinating insight into the military's interest in [UFOs](#). They tell the story of the MoD's decision to investigate the threat they might pose and whether alien military technology could be used in the defence of the realm. They also reveal the conflicting attitudes within Whitehall to the subject and the lengths that officials went to in order to keep the project secret.

The documents, many marked "Secret UK Eyes A", lay out the rationale for the three-year Project Condign report which analysed more than 10,000 possible UFO sightings collected over several decades - many from military personnel. The existence of the 460-page report was revealed last year following freedom of information requests by David Clarke, a lecturer in journalism at Sheffield Hallam University, and his colleague Gary Anthony. It was more FOI sleuthing on their part that turned up the current slew of papers.

The documents show that the internal lobbying effort for a UFO study began in 1993. In a briefing note from the secret UFO investigation branch of Defence Intelligence - called DI55 - an unnamed author wrote: "The national security implications are considerable. We have many reports of strange objects in the skies and we have never investigated them.

Paranoid response

"I also believe that it is important to appreciate that what is scientific 'fact' today may not be true tomorrow ... If reports are taken at face value then devices exist that do not use conventional reaction propulsion systems, they have a very wide range of speeds and are stealthy. I suggest that we could use this technology, if it exists."

And he speculates: "If the sightings are of devices not of the Earth then their purpose needs to be established as a matter of priority ... possibilities are: 1 Military reconnaissance. 2 Scientific. 3 Tourism"

According to a former MoD intelligence analyst who asked not be named, the MoD was paranoid in the late 1980s that the Soviet Union had developed technology that went beyond western knowledge of physics. "For many years we were very concerned that in some areas the Russians had a handle on physics that we hadn't at all. We just basically didn't know the basics they were working from," he said. "We did encourage our scientists not to think that we in the west knew everything there was to be known."

Material that was held back from the original FOI release of the Project Condign report, but which was published in October after an appeal, suggests that the MoD suspected that this scientific knowledge came from studying UFOs - or unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) as the MoD prefers to call them. "Russian, former Soviet republics and Chinese authorities have made a co-ordinated effort to understand the UAP topic. Several aircraft have been destroyed and at least four pilots have been killed 'chasing UFOs'."

One of Project Condign's conclusions was that UAP events could be put down to poorly understood phenomena called plasmas. The report says that the Russian military was doing research using plasmas as reflector antennas, aerodynamic drag reducers, stealth absorbers and using them to produce "saucer-shaped volumes".

The initial request in 1993 for an MoD research project into UFOs was shelved, but in a later memo dated June 19 1995 following a surge in UFO reports, the same unnamed wing commander at DI55 wrote: "Until we conduct some analysis of the files we will not have any idea what the many reports represent. If at any stage in the future UAPs are shown to exist then there is the potential for severe embarrassment."

Clarke, whose book *Flying Saucerers: The Social History of Ufology* will be published in April, says: "They knew that because no detailed study of the subject had ever been carried out - and consequently they had no idea what UFOs were - they could not justify the claim they were of no threat."

Nick Pope, who worked on the MoD's public UFO desk until 1994 and features in the correspondence, adds: "This was always the big debate. How could you possibly fulfil the remit of looking at the issue properly to see if there was anything of defence significance, without carrying out research and investigation? I think it is one of these subjects where it is low probability, high consequence," he adds. "For the want of spending a little bit of money, the potential wins if there were anything of any defence significance here would be worth having."

But how much money did the MOD spend? One document refers to a £35,000 cost estimate, while in another from 1996, the head of Defence Intelligence (Scientific and Technical) estimated £80,000 for a year-long study. Project Condign when it was eventually begun took more than three years to complete. So does that mean a price tag of at least £240,000?

No, according to the MoD, although it would not release the true figure. "This assumption that the sum will tally up to £80,000 a year isn't supported and is inaccurate. It was funded from an existing contract within existing budgetary levels," it adds.

The project was given to a trusted defence contractor and although details of the contract have not been revealed, the documents suggest that it was handled so as not to expose Project Condign to scrutiny. In the initial 1993 correspondence on the subject, a memo from DI55 refers to the potential "political embarrassment" of the project becoming known. It goes on: "I believe that opening a new contract especially for this study and using competitive tendering would potentially expose the study to too wide an audience."

But Pope believes this was simply a practical measure. "Using an existing contract is always going to be easier than actually commissioning a new one," he says. "It wasn't an attempt to take it outside scrutiny. It was a quick fix."

Suspicious minds

The internal memos and briefing notes are peppered with hints of the considerable scepticism the DI55 wing commander encountered from superiors. In the original August 1993 brief he writes: "I am well aware that anyone who talks about UFOs is treated with a certain degree of suspicion. I am briefing on the topic because DI55 have a UFO responsibility, not because I talk to little green men every night!"

And in a later document he describes a briefing by DI55 on the subject. "The scientists and engineers present treated to [sic] topic seriously while non scientists (or those without a physical science background) made the usual jokes about little green men and mass hallucination!"

When Project Condign was eventually completed in 2000 it concluded that there was no evidence that UAPs were of extra-terrestrial origin. But there was a limit to what the author could do, because he was not allowed to interview people who had witnessed UAP events or talk to experts.

"The nature of the security classification meant he was unable to discuss the study with scientists who might have been able to advise him on the credibility of the conclusions he reached," says Clarke. This explains Project Condign's baffling conclusion - that UAPs are real, but caused by strange plasmas, which are on the fringes of scientific understanding. "He ended up trying to explain one mystery by reference to another," says Pope.

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