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Exeter is UFO capital of New England

Staff Writer | Portsmouth Herald

Thanks to a highly publicized UFO sighting in 1965, Exeter is known as the "UFO Capital of New England." Should we believe in UFOs, or are they just nonsense? The idea of "belief" shouldn't really be part of the question. A UFO, after all, is an "Unidentified Flying Object" — "unidentified" being the operative word. It's when we begin to interpret what the object is that we get into trouble. As soon as it's called an alien spacecraft it becomes an "Identified Flying Object," then you have to start talking about "belief." And in spite of all the sightings and theories, there is still no physical proof that alien spacecraft have visited Earth. Too bad, because it would be really cool if we could prove it.

Or, perhaps not. On our lonely little planet, it has generally been disastrous when native populations were visited by other, more technologically advanced cultures. Maybe it wouldn't be in our best interests to invite visitors from other star systems. There must be life out there somewhere — the universe is simply too darn big to contain only this one small puddle of life. But we're really, really far away from each other. Still, it isn't outside the human imagination that there might be some way to bridge the distances and differences.

In September of 1965, there were a number of documented sightings of strange red lights in the Exeter area. The Exeter News-Letter described them as "brilliantly lighted flying objects." In the early morning hours of Sept. 3, the Exeter Police Department began getting reports of flying objects chasing people. Although the News-Letter reported Sept. 9, there were two women, most reports in the last 44 years reference one woman seeing the object while driving in her car on Route 101. The woman reported her car had been followed by a red-lighted flying object. It only went away when she stopped the car. The police officer, Eugene Bertrand, calmed her down and went back to the station figuring it was just a case of hysterics.

But two hours later a terrified Norman Muscarello, an 18-year-old Naval recruit, staggered into the police station with a similar tale of being chased on Route 150 in Kensington. Officer Bertrand accompanied him back to the location and both men, and Officer David Hunt, who arrived on the scene shortly after them, saw the object again. And it was very frightening. According to the newspaper account, the men described it as "about the size of a house," and it "hovered silently over the nearby farm buildings frightening animals in the barn before disappearing in the distance." The police officers then drove Muscarello to his home. Back at the station, dispatcher Scratch Toland received a phone call from a terrified man who said he was calling from a phone booth in Hampton. He'd been chased by a flying object with bright red lights. The caller hung up before Toland could get more information.

The sightings, and the surrounding publicity, haunted the people involved. In spite of the fact that none of them ever said that the object was an alien spacecraft, it was widely assumed to be just that. Journalist John Fuller came to Exeter and later published a book called "Incident in Exeter," which focused more attention on the witnesses than they necessarily wanted.

Four separate sightings, all with the same description: What can we make of this? Certainly they saw something, and it was quite frightening. It's still a creepy story today. The most logical explanation was that it had something to do with our close proximity to the Pease Air Force Base. And although the Air Force investigated and admitted that there were bombers in the area during that time period, they denied that there were any craft matching the description of the witnesses. Still, that the object was always following roadways is somewhat suspicious. Could it have been a lost aircraft? If so, how come it was so eerily silent? We may never know what it was, and that's what "unidentified" means. It means we don't know.

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