

30 years on: UFO mystery still vivid

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IT WAS Victoria's very own X-File: a world-famous mystery that remains unsolved 30 years after a young pilot disappeared over Bass Strait.

Steve Robey remembers it like it was yesterday. The now-retired air traffic controller was working the night shift at the Melbourne Flight Service Unit on Saturday, October 21, 1978, when the call came in at 7.06pm.

Pilot Frederick Valentich, flying from Moorabbin Airport to King Island to pick up some crayfish, reported that a strange aircraft was "playing a game with him" and he wanted to know if any military planes were in the area.

Both men were puzzled as there was no known air traffic in the vicinity apart from the 20-year-old RAAF air training corp instructor's plane.

Mr Valentich reported that the unknown aircraft had four bright lights and had buzzed him a number of times at great speed.

He told Mr Robey the object was orbiting on top of him and "it's got a green light and is sort of metallic, like it's all shiny on the outside".

Then it vanished.

Mr Valentich, who had had his pilot's licence for two years, said his plane's engines began rough idling and coughing when the object reappeared. He told Mr Robey he planned to continue flying to King Island.

Then came the message that the object had suddenly reappeared above him. "That strange aircraft is hovering on top of me again . . . it is hovering and it's not an aircraft."

They were Mr Valentich's last words. A still unidentified metallic noise came over the radio during the next 17 seconds, then the transmission ended abruptly.

Mr Valentich and his single-engine Cessna 182L were never seen again, despite an exhaustive seven-day land and sea search. A Department of Transport investigation concluded that the disappearance could not be explained.

Mr Robey, now 61, told *The Sunday Age* that Mr Valentich was obviously distressed. While not prepared to say he believed Mr Valentich had been abducted by aliens, Mr Robey said he still could not explain the incident.

Asked if he believed in UFOs, Mr Robey said: "Yes, I suppose I do, but not in the definition of spaceships and little green men. I mean, you've got to have an open mind about these things."

On the night Mr Valentich disappeared, there were hundreds of UFO sightings reported from Geelong, Frankston, Cape Otway and Brighton. Some people described the object as brilliantly lit, oblong in shape, and moving quickly.

A woman at Queenscliff said she saw what appeared to be a ferris wheel spinning in the sky less than two hours after Mr Valentich's plane disappeared.

The Valentich case became world news and the pilot's family - father Guido, mother Alberta, brother Richard (12 at the time) and twin sisters Olivia and Lara (aged 4) - were thrust into a media frenzy.

Mr Robey, who befriended Guido, said the incident devastated the family.

"Losing your son in such strange, controversial circumstances was just



Guido Valentich with a picture of his missing son, Frederick.

unbelievable. Alberta pined for the loss of her son but Guido was the one who really wanted to find out what had happened to him," Mr Robey said.

Mr Valentich snr, who died in 2000, joined the Victorian UFO Research Centre and never gave up hope that his son was alive and had been abducted by aliens. He conducted a vigil at Cape Otway every year on the anniversary of his disappearance and erected a memorial plaque there in 1998.

Ric Wilson, an aviation consultant with the Australian UFO Research Network, urged the State Government to conduct a new search for the Valentich plane off Cape Otway to try to solve the mystery.