

# Alien abduction? Defence's X-Files are lost in space

Linton Besser

COULD there be any better fodder for Australia's conspiracy theorists? The Department of Defence has "lost" its X-Files.

For decades, Defence officials dutifully investigated an unknown number of UFO sightings being reported all over the country. Intelligence officers attached to the Royal Australian Air Force checked the known movement of aircraft against reported sightings, and politely responded by mail to everyone who claimed they saw floating lights or flat saucers or streaking vapour trails. Some of the files were marked as classified.

Last year, the British government released a large part of its dossier on unidentified flying objects after significant pressure from freedom-of-information applicants. More than 4000 pages of Defence Ministry documents, detailing 800 reported encounters during the 1980s and 1990s were posted online.

The *Herald* sought access to the Australian version. But the response was more surprising than what the files might have contained - the material has largely gone missing.

The department spent two months searching its offices for files that would be captured by the *Herald's* FOI application, which sought a "schedule of records held by the Department of Defence... which relate to unidentified flying objects".

But in late May, the department's FOI assistant director, Natalie Carpenter, delivered a reply that seemed almost designed to set online chat rooms alight with conspiracy chatter.

The only file Defence was able to locate was titled "Report on UFOs/Strange Occurrences and Phenomena in Woomera"; the others had been destroyed.

"We also discovered one [other] file, which had not been destroyed but could not be located," Ms Carpenter wrote.

"In an effort to retrieve this file our office conducted searches of the Defence Record Management System, National Archives Australia [Canberra], National Archives Australia [Chester Hill], Defence Archives Queanbeyan and Headquarters Air Command, RAAF Base Glenbrook.

"Despite searching these locations, the files could not be located and Headquarters Air Command formally advised that this file is deemed lost."



The truth is out there... clockwise from left, Linda Leventhal shows a sketch of her UFO sighting in 1984; a mysterious patch said to be caused by a flying saucer landing in 1977; a family watch for aliens in 1972. Photos: Fairfax Library



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Previous FOI applications for similar files had also been destroyed, she said, "as is normal administrative procedure".

What is left is sketchy at best - a handful of ancient press clippings and scattered pieces of formal government correspondence. The papers show that about six years ago, the Australian UFO Research Association was able to locate some files, now missing. The organisation's summary of the material is one of the few complete items left in the remaining dossier.

It shows there were a series of sightings from around the country and overseas, including people living in towns near Woomera, a weapons range.

One incident report released to the organisation that year was a detailed report of an object's flight path by Warrant Officer G. E. Millard in October 1952.

Though he was able to track its movement for 24 minutes via radar equipment, he couldn't actually see the target using the normal telescope attached to the radar. After extensive investigation, he concluded the anomaly was a snow cloud.

The UFO research group's report says "to date we have found three Department of Supply files dealing with the topic of 'flying saucers' or UFOs".

"The earliest file so far located in South Australia is from series D174, control symbol SA5281 titled 'Unusual Occurrences Flying Saucer at Woomera' with a date range of 1952-1955. It was originally classified 'Secret'. It is a 25-page file."

In November 2000, the then defence chiefs decided the department would stop collecting UFO reports.

"For many years the RAAF was

responsible for the handling of Unusual Aerial Sightings (UAS) at the official level," they wrote in a department-wide policy memo.

"This function ceased in 1996 after consideration of the scientific record suggested that there was no compelling reason for the RAAF to continue to devote resources to the recording and investigation of UAS.

"The ADF does not accept reports on UAS and does not attempt assignment of cause or allocation of reliability. Members of the community who seek to report UAS to ADF personnel are to be referred to their local police authorities in the first instance, or alternatively to seek contact numbers for civil Unidentified Flying Object research organisations from the relevant state telephone directory." The memo said the ADF did not affiliate with any civil UFO organisations.

## UFO archive sighting

IN 1982, Bill Chalker became the first civilian to be given access to the government's tightly-held UFO files in Canberra, some of which were previously classified. Mr Chalker, considered by many in the field to be Australia's leading UFO researcher, accessed the Department of Defence UFO files during several visits to the Canberra headquarters of the Directorate of Air Force Intelligence. He said there were "hundreds" of documents, many of which he photographed. He said it was "astonishing" the files were now missing. He noted most of the files had been transferred to National Archives Australia in Canberra, and that he had accessed those archives just a few months ago.

"Some of those UFO documents would still be classified, and would not be available for viewing," Mr Chalker said. "But the Department of Defence would have surely found the hundreds of other files if they just headed down to National Archives and looked."

But a spokeswoman said two months of searching had failed to uncover the files, which she said had also included a search of National Archives.

"The real story here is, why would they [the department] make that response?" Mr Chalker said. He said many of the UFO files were now available on the National Archives website.

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