

# The Rendlesham Forest Incident: A Comprehensive Evidence-Based Evaluation

## Historical and Factual Background

<sup>[1]</sup>In late December 1980, **Rendlesham Forest** in Suffolk, England became the scene of an incident now dubbed “Britain’s Roswell”<sup>[2]</sup>. In the early hours of 26 December 1980 (around 3:00 AM), U.S. Air Force security personnel stationed at the nearby RAF Woodbridge base observed strange lights descending into the woodland<sup>[3]</sup>. Believing a possible aircraft crash had occurred, three men (including Staff Sgt. **Jim Penniston** and Airman **John Burroughs**) ventured beyond the East Gate into the forest. According to an official memo by Deputy Base Commander Lt. Col. **Charles Halt**, the airmen reported encountering “*a strange glowing object in the forest... metallic [metallic] in appearance and triangular in shape, approximately two to three meters across the base and two meters high*”<sup>[4]</sup>. The object emitted a brilliant white glow, with a pulsing red light on top and blue lights underneath, illuminating the forest as it hovered or rested on legs<sup>[5]</sup>. As the men approached, the object maneuvered through the trees and “*disappeared*”, after which farm animals in a nearby field went into a frenzy<sup>[6]</sup>. Approximately an hour later, a similar object or light was briefly sighted again near the base’s back gate<sup>[6]</sup>.

Local police were summoned around 4:00 AM on the 26th, but upon arriving, they reported no sign of a craft—only the distant beam of the **Orfordness Lighthouse** on the coast was visible through the trees<sup>[7]</sup>. At daybreak, base personnel returned to the alleged landing site in a small clearing. There, they discovered three triangular ground indentations about 1.5 inches deep and 7 inches in diameter, arranged in a triangular pattern<sup>[8]</sup>. They also noted broken branches and burn marks on nearby trees. The impressions were photographed (a photo later published by investigator Georgina Bruni<sup>[9]</sup>) and were curious enough that the base called the Suffolk Constabulary once more. However, officers who inspected the indentations by daylight remained unimpressed, suggesting the marks could have been made by animals (e.g. rabbit diggings)<sup>[10][11]</sup>. Indeed, one officer returned again in daylight “in case he had missed something” but found nothing unusual and was “**unconvinced that the occurrence was genuine**”, noting the area was swept by the powerful beams of the lighthouse and a landing beacon from RAF Bentwaters, which in certain conditions could cause “*strange visual effects*”<sup>[12]</sup>.

Two nights later, in the early hours of 28 December 1980, strange phenomena resumed. Lt. Col. Halt, determined to document any unusual activity, led a small team into the forest around 1:00–3:00 AM<sup>[13]</sup>. Equipped with an AN/PDR-27 radiation survey meter and a handheld tape recorder, Halt’s party surveyed the clearing where the impressions had

been found. The radiation readings were slightly elevated—around 0.05–0.07 milliroentgens per hour on a tree trunk near the marks, and peaks of approximately 0.1 mR/hr in the depressions and center of the triangle<sup>[14]</sup>. (These levels were only marginally above natural background radiation, as later analysis showed<sup>[15]</sup>.) As documented in Halt’s **audiotape** (now known as the “Halt Tape”), the team then observed a pulsing red light moving between the trees towards a field beyond the forest<sup>[16][17]</sup>. When viewed from the forest’s edge, this bright pulsing light appeared to hover near a farmhouse in the same line of sight as the distant lighthouse<sup>[17]</sup>. Halt’s recorded commentary notes the light blinking at regular five-second intervals—characteristic of the Orfordness lighthouse’s rotation<sup>[18]</sup>.

Moments later, Halt and his men witnessed a vivid display in the sky. In Halt’s written report, he describes a **“red sun-like light”** that hovered and pulsed, then *“appeared to throw off glowing particles”* and split into five separate white lights before disappearing<sup>[19]</sup>. In the aftermath, *“three star-like objects”* remained visible: two to the north and one to the south, about 10° above the horizon<sup>[20]</sup>. These objects moved rapidly in sharp, angular motions and displayed red, green, and blue lights. The southern object reportedly beamed a narrow stream of light downwards periodically<sup>[21]</sup>. Halt’s team observed the northern lights for at least an hour and the southern light for two hours or more, according to his memo<sup>[21]</sup>. Multiple USAF personnel – including Halt himself – witnessed these aerial anomalies<sup>[22]</sup>. By dawn, the events had concluded without tangible evidence of a craft, but the extraordinary experience prompted Halt to file an official memorandum to the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) on 13 January 1981, titled *“Unexplained Lights”*<sup>[23][24]</sup>. This one-page memo calmly summarized the sightings of **“a strange glowing object”**, ground markings, minor radiation readings, and unusual lights in the sky over two nights, thereby establishing a primary contemporaneous record of what is now known as the **Rendlesham Forest incident**<sup>[4][19]</sup>.

**Key witness testimonies and evidence:** Alongside Halt’s memo and tape, other first-hand accounts and documents provide crucial details. Written statements from the Air Force security personnel (obtained in 1997 via the U.S. Freedom of Information Act) show how the story was initially reported by those on patrol the first night<sup>[25]</sup>. Airman First Class Edward Cabansag, who accompanied Penniston and Burroughs into the forest, wrote that upon reaching a vantage point they realized the glowing they’d chased was coming from **“a beacon light off in the distance”**, and that they had in fact been pursuing a light that turned out to be a local farmhouse’s beacon and the distant lighthouse<sup>[25]</sup>. A1C John Burroughs, in his own 1980 statement, similarly recalled seeing a rotating beacon and following it *“for about two miles”* through the woods until realizing *“it was coming from a lighthouse.”*<sup>[26]</sup> These contemporaneous accounts, made within days of the incident, contain **no mention of a landed metallic spacecraft** or close encounters on that first night – in stark contrast to later dramatic narratives. Meanwhile, the Suffolk police logs from those nights record that officers saw **“nothing unusual”** in the forest and that *“the only lights visible were from the Orfordness lighthouse”* on the coast<sup>[10][27]</sup>. The

police remained skeptical, attributing the ground marks to animals and the reported lights to natural or man-made sources<sup>[28]</sup>.

Over the following years, the Rendlesham incident slowly emerged in public view. In 1983, the story was first reported in a British tabloid, and soon UFO researchers obtained Halt's memo through U.S. FOIA channels, confirming that **U.S. military personnel had officially reported a UFO encounter**. By 1984, the clandestine **Halt Tape** recording was also released by a later base commander, providing a real-time *audio* chronicle of Halt's night in the woods<sup>[29]</sup>. These primary materials—memo, tape, and witness statements—formed the foundation upon which investigators and enthusiasts built their case files. Authors **Jenny Randles, Dot Street, and Brenda Butler** published *Sky Crash* (1984), the first full-length account, and over the decades, numerous books, articles, and documentaries have recounted the events with varying interpretations. Through it all, the core factual timeline remains anchored by a handful of primary sources: the USAF eyewitnesses and their reports from December 1980, the responding police records, and the MoD's correspondence. This factual background sets the stage for analyzing how credible these claims are, what skeptical explanations have been proposed, and why Rendlesham continues to captivate the public imagination.

## Credibility of Witnesses and Sources

<sup>[30]</sup>Any evaluation of the Rendlesham Forest incident must weigh the **credibility of its key witnesses and documents**. The primary sources include sworn military eyewitness statements, an official USAF memo (above), an audio recording, and later interviews or affidavits. In general, the **contemporaneous accounts** from December 1980–January 1981 are considered more reliable, while stories that have evolved or emerged years later invite scrutiny. Below is an overview of major players and sources, with an assessment of their reliability:

- **Lt. Col. Charles Halt (Deputy Base Commander)**: Halt is a central figure because he documented the incident both in writing and on tape. His **13 January 1981 memo** to the MoD, composed within two weeks of the events, is a restrained, factual report that refrains from speculation<sup>[4][19]</sup>. Halt's memo carries weight due to his rank and the official nature of the document. Likewise, his **"Halt Tape"** (a 18-minute microcassette recording made during the 28 December investigation) provides unfiltered, real-time observations<sup>[29]</sup>. These contemporary records show Halt to be serious and methodical – he notes measurements (e.g. radiation levels) and describes lights without jumping to conclusions on their origin. In terms of credibility, Halt's *immediate* actions and records are strong evidence that something unexplained was genuinely witnessed. However, in later years Halt's stance became decidedly more certain of an extraterrestrial event. In 2010 he even signed a notarized **affidavit** asserting the objects he saw were "extraterrestrial in origin" and that there was a cover-up by UK and US authorities<sup>[31]</sup>. This marked shift – from the cautious tone of 1981 to confident extraterrestrial claims decades later – has drawn criticism. Researchers point out

**contradictions** between Halt's 2010 claims and what was recorded in 1980<sup>[31][32]</sup>. For instance, Halt's affidavit included details or interpretations that **do not appear in his own earlier memo or tape**, suggesting possible memory drift or post hoc embellishment. Even Halt's former superior, Col. Ted Conrad, expressed sharp skepticism of Halt's later assertions, saying Halt "*should be ashamed and embarrassed*" by talk of a conspiracy and that Halt "*knows better*"<sup>[33]</sup>. Despite these controversies, Halt's original accounts from 1980 remain a cornerstone of the case, while his *personal credibility* has been questioned for embracing more extreme interpretations long after the fact.

- **Sgt. Jim Penniston (Security Policeman, primary witness first night):** Penniston was one of the two airmen who ventured deepest into the forest on 26 December. According to Halt's memo and Penniston's initial testimony, he saw a strange light and possibly an object moving through the trees that night<sup>[4]</sup>. Penniston's signed witness statement from 1980 (released years later) did **not** mention any physical contact with a craft. Yet, in the 1990s and especially by the 2000s, Penniston's story **grew dramatically**. He began claiming that he actually approached a landed craft and even touched its hull, observing glyph-like symbols on its surface, and that he experienced missing time. Most controversially, Penniston asserted that he had "downloaded" a binary code message from the craft into his mind, which he wrote down in his notebook the following day – a sensational detail he only revealed *around 30 years after the incident*. Such additions raise red flags about Penniston's credibility. Col. Ted Conrad flatly **disputed Penniston's later testimony**, stating that when he debriefed Penniston in January 1981, "*he had not mentioned any such occurrence*" as touching a spacecraft<sup>[34][35]</sup>. Conrad's direct contradiction suggests that Penniston's most extraordinary claims were absent at the time and likely developed over years of retelling. Penniston maintains that fear of ridicule or orders to stay quiet initially kept him from fully disclosing what happened, but many researchers (including pro-UFO ones) find the binary code story difficult to accept without any corroboration. **Verdict:** Penniston's early account of seeing unexplained lights is well-documented, but his credibility suffers due to significant embellishments decades later that are unsupported by any contemporaneous evidence<sup>[35]</sup>. His case exemplifies how memory and narratives can evolve, intentionally or unintentionally, under public and media attention.
- **A1C John Burroughs (Security Airman, witness on both nights):** Burroughs accompanied Penniston on the first night and was also present with Halt on the 28th. In 1980, Burroughs described chasing a distant light and hearing odd noises (like a woman screaming, which matched the calls of local muntjac deer<sup>[36]</sup>). He did not report seeing a structured craft at close range. In fact, as noted, his own statement acknowledged the lighthouse as a likely source of the moving beacon they pursued<sup>[26]</sup>. Burroughs' credibility is bolstered by the consistency of his early account with others like Cabansag – he admitted the possibility they were fooled by lights. Unlike Penniston, Burroughs has generally **not dramatically changed** his basic story of what he saw (or didn't see) that night, aside from reflecting on it with the benefit of

hindsight. Notably, Burroughs later suffered heart ailments which he believed were caused by exposure to something during the incident, possibly radiation. In 2015, after years of effort, Burroughs secured a full disability settlement from the U.S. Veterans Administration for injuries *“incurred in the line of duty in Dec 1980”*, effectively meaning the U.S. government acknowledged he was hurt during the Rendlesham incident<sup>[37]</sup>. His medical records remain classified, but a UK Defence Intelligence report (codenamed Project Condign) did speculate that Rendlesham observers *“were probably exposed to UAP radiation”*<sup>[38]</sup>. This development suggests Burroughs genuinely experienced a physical effect, lending some weight to the idea that an unusual event occurred, even if the exact cause remains unknown. Overall, Burroughs is seen as a credible witness in that he straightforwardly recounts the lights and reactions he experienced, without straying into unsupported claims. He himself has said his priority was getting clarity on his health, not proving alien contact<sup>[39]</sup>.

- **Others (Ed Cabansag, Sgt. Bud Steffens, etc.):** Airman Ed **Cabansag’s** testimony, only made public years later, turned out to be highly significant because it provides a **sober, mundane description** of the first night. As mentioned, Cabansag clearly indicated they eventually realized the light was a distant beacon, not an alien craft<sup>[25]</sup>. His account, given immediately after the incident, has the ring of truth and aligns with the local geography (the lighthouse position). Cabansag did not become a UFO celebrity; his testimony was unearthed by researchers, not promoted by him, which adds to its credibility. Sgt. **Bud Steffens** was the security patrolman at the East Gate who first alerted others to the strange lights; accounts describe him as an initial witness, though less is publicly known from his own words. It appears Steffens also thought something odd was in the forest but deferred to Penniston and Burroughs to investigate. **Local police officers** are also key witnesses of a sort: they saw nothing extraordinary despite being on scene within an hour of the first report<sup>[10]</sup>. The police constables’ professional skepticism and the Topliss letter from Suffolk Police later (which emphasized the known lighthouse effects<sup>[12]</sup>) serve as a counterbalance to the excited perceptions of the airmen running around in the dark.
- **British Ministry of Defence officials:** Despite popular belief, the MoD did **not** conduct any in-depth investigation of Rendlesham at the time. The case was handled in a perfunctory way. When Halt’s memo reached MoD staff in early 1981, it was logged but not escalated as a serious defense issue. Years later, inquiries from the public and Parliament prompted official statements. For example, in 1985 the Minister of Defence, Lord Trefgarne, explained that the MoD did not investigate further because the incident was judged to pose no threat to national security<sup>[40]</sup>. When the MoD’s *“Rendlesham file”* was finally released in 2001, it consisted mostly of correspondence with the public and brief internal memos – confirming that no secret in-depth study had been done<sup>[40]</sup>. This undercuts some “cover-up” theories. The MoD’s UFO desk essentially filed Halt’s report and left it at that. **Nick Pope**, a former MoD officer who in the 1990s was responsible for the ministry’s UFO desk, later reviewed the case and found it intriguing but agreed that at the time it was not pursued seriously by authorities. Pope, who has since become an outspoken UFO

commentator, considers Rendlesham one of the best cases due to the military witnesses, yet even he acknowledges the **lack of definitive proof** and the problems posed by conflicting testimonies. In summary, the official stance lends a certain credibility in that there's no sign of fakery or hysteria on the MoD's part – if anything, they were *under*-concerned, implying they suspected nothing truly exotic had occurred.

- **Whistleblowers and secondary witnesses:** Over the years, a few other individuals have come forward or been cited in relation to the case, though their credibility is often dubious. One notable (and contentious) figure is **Larry Warren**, an airman who claimed to have been present on the third night and to witness a craft and alien entities. Warren co-authored a 1997 book (*Left at East Gate*) and cast himself as a whistleblower who helped bring the story to light. However, subsequent investigations by researchers (and even his co-author) uncovered evidence that **Warren may have fabricated parts of his story**, or even assumed another airman's identity in some accounts. There are no official records placing Warren at the scene during the key events, and many within the UFO research community now consider his testimony unreliable. This illustrates how the Rendlesham case attracted some self-proclaimed witnesses whose accounts can muddy the waters. Separating genuine testimony from possible opportunism is an important part of assessing credibility. In Warren's case, the consensus is that his dramatic claims are not to be taken at face value without corroboration.

In evaluating credibility, a pattern emerges: the **closer in time and the higher the corroboration**, the more confidence we can have in a source. The **USAF documents from 1980-81 and the multiple matching eyewitness statements from that time are highly credible** in establishing that lights were seen and odd phenomena experienced. These sources also consistently lack any clear evidence of an alien craft landing, which is telling. On the other hand, **later embellishments and sensational claims (extraterrestrial messages, secret debriefings, additional witnesses)** are either unsupported or directly contradicted by earlier evidence. Even Col. Halt's own later assertions have been challenged by those who were there, like Col. Conrad, who insisted "*we saw nothing that resembled Lt Col Halt's descriptions*" and that no hard evidence ever emerged<sup>[41]</sup>. It is also notable that despite the extraordinary nature of the initial reports, **no photographic or physical evidence** was obtained – the Air Force team did not capture any photos of the UFO itself (only the landing site), and the plaster casts of the landing imprints (if any were made) were inconclusive. The credibility of the Rendlesham incident thus rests heavily on witness testimony. Fortunately, those witnesses include trained military observers, but human perception and memory – even for trained observers – remain fallible. This is why the next section examines how skeptics and investigators have proposed **alternative explanations** that might reconcile the credible parts of the story with more ordinary phenomena.

## Counterarguments and Skeptical Explanations

<sup>[42]</sup>From the beginning, the Rendlesham events have invited **conventional explanations** alongside the exotic ones. Skeptical researchers, including astronomers and investigators of UFO claims, have carefully reviewed the evidence and proposed that a **combination of misperceptions, mundane lights, and pranks** likely accounts for what happened. The central skeptical hypothesis is that **no alien spacecraft landing occurred**, and that the airmen were **mistaken** about what they saw due to a mix of unusual but terrestrial stimuli. Below is a summary of key counterarguments and alternative explanations, addressing each major aspect of the incident:

- **Astronomical Phenomenon (Fireball Meteor):** The initial sighting of “unusual lights” descending into the forest at around 3:00 AM on 26 December coincided with the appearance of a **bright fireball meteor** over southern England<sup>[43]</sup>. Astronomers confirmed that a large meteor was recorded around that time, likely a piece of natural debris burning up as a fiery streak<sup>[44]</sup>. Such a fireball could have created an impression of a distant object falling into the woods, prompting the airmen’s response. This explanation fits well for the *first flash of light* that attracted the guards’ attention – a meteor would account for a sudden bright light in the sky that then disappeared. The meteor hypothesis is widely accepted as a plausible trigger for the initial alarm, essentially meaning the men ran out thinking a plane had crashed when in fact a meteor’s flash had occurred overhead<sup>[43]</sup>. The meteor by itself doesn’t explain the continued lights seen in the forest, but it’s considered the first link in a chain of misinterpretations.
- **Lighthouse and Local Lights Misidentified:** The most famous skeptical explanation involves the **Orfordness Lighthouse**, which stood ~5 miles east of the base. The lighthouse had a bright rotating beam that flashed every 5 seconds, and due to a partial blackout shield, its beam was **highly visible from the forest but not from the nearby town of Orford**<sup>[45]</sup>. Importantly, the direction where the airmen saw a bright hovering light (both on the first night and during Halt’s investigation on the third night) aligns almost exactly with the lighthouse’s position beyond the forest<sup>[17][18]</sup>. In fact, Halt’s own tape timings noted a flashing light every 5 seconds, which matches the lighthouse period<sup>[18]</sup>. On the first night, as noted earlier, the witnesses eventually deduced they were chasing the lighthouse: “*what we were chasing was only a beacon light off in the distance... it was a lighthouse,*” admitted Burroughs and Cabansag<sup>[26][46]</sup>. This candid realization strongly supports the idea that the moving red-orange light between trees was not a landed UFO but simply the lighthouse seen under unusual circumstances (e.g. through fog or between trunks, creating an illusion of motion). Additionally, a farmhouse in that line of sight had a bright yard light that might have added to the illusion of a glowing object in the woods<sup>[25]</sup>. The combination of the farmhouse light near the horizon and the farther lighthouse beam might have appeared as strange multi-colored lights filtering through the forest—especially to airmen already on edge from the meteor sighting. Thus, **skeptics argue that the “craft” with blinking lights was actually the lighthouse beam**, and the perception

that it was moving or “landing” was a misjudgment of distance and perspective in the dark forest (a well-documented perceptual issue in many night-time UFO cases).

- **Noises and Animal Reactions:** Witnesses on both nights reported hearing unusual sounds—specifically, what Halt described as the farm animals “going into a frenzy” and Burroughs likened to a woman screaming<sup>[6][47]</sup>. Far from being evidence of alien terror, these noises have a straightforward explanation: the area is home to **muntjac deer**, a small deer species known for loud, eerie calls that can sound like human screams when alarmed<sup>[36]</sup>. Naturalists confirmed that muntjac deer are active at night and will bark or scream when startled. The patrolmen trampling through the forest in the middle of the night could easily have alarmed local wildlife. Indeed, Halt recorded hearing strange shrieks, which matched the description of muntjac calls<sup>[47]</sup>. So the **“women screaming” sound was almost certainly deer**, and the *farm animals making noise* could have been just normal farm reactions to the commotion or even to the bright meteor/flare. This explanation demystifies an element of the story that some had dramatized as animals sensing an alien presence.
- **“Landing Marks” on the Ground:** The three depressions found in the clearing, initially posited as potential **landing gear imprints** from a triangular craft, turned out to be far less exotic. Local police and forestry workers examined the marks and concluded they were **rabbit diggings** or holes made by animals<sup>[11]</sup>. The holes were shallow and not uniform as true landing pad impressions likely would be. No scorch marks or residual evidence was found at the spots beyond some broken branches (which could have been caused by normal forest activity or the men themselves moving through). The MoD case file even notes that foresters recognized the holes as rabbit scrapings<sup>[43]</sup>. Thus, what the airmen took as physical evidence of a craft was likely a misinterpretation of ordinary ground disturbances. No **unusual traces** (like metal fragments, scorch patterns, or radiation beyond background) were ever found at the site<sup>[15]</sup>, further undercutting the idea that a solid vehicle had landed.
- **Starlight and Optical Illusions:** The star-like objects Halt saw in the sky (and described as moving and beaming light) have also been given prosaic explanations. Astronomers identified that the brightest “star” Halt saw to the south that night was **Sirius** – the brightest star in Earth’s night sky, low on the horizon in winter<sup>[48]</sup>. When near the horizon, stars like Sirius can appear to scintillate intensely, changing colors and even seeming to dart or move due to atmospheric distortion (a known phenomenon called *“twinkling”*, which is exaggerated when you’re looking through a lot of atmosphere at a low elevation angle). Halt reported the object as hovering for hours and sending down a beam; skeptics note that Sirius was indeed hovering (as stars do relative to our frame) and its intense twinkling could create the illusion of a beam or flicker. Furthermore, **autokinesis** – a psychological phenomenon where a fixed light in darkness appears to move when stared at – could explain why Halt’s team perceived the star-like lights to make “sharp movements”<sup>[21][48]</sup>. In essence, the stress and expectation of seeing a UFO might have primed the observers to interpret bright stars or planets as something more exotic. (Notably, misidentification of stars

and planets is one of the most common causes of UFO reports globally, especially when witnesses already encountered something unusual.) Given that Halt's own description of the stars turning from elliptical to circular under magnification<sup>[49]</sup> sounds very much like simple refocusing of out-of-focus light, the **consensus among skeptics is that the star-like UFOs were bright stars** (likely Sirius to the south, and possibly stars like Vega or Deneb to the north) distorted by optical effects<sup>[48]</sup>.

- **Prank or Hoax Theories:** Aside from misperception, another angle is that **some of the phenomena were artificially staged**. One theory posits that fellow U.S. servicemen perpetrated a **prank** on the security patrols. A former USAF police officer, Kevin Conde, claimed in 2003 that he once played a joke by driving a patrol vehicle with modified lights into the woods, causing UFO-like effects<sup>[50]</sup>. However, upon investigation it appears Conde's prank occurred on a different date (if at all), and he later clarified it was not on the same nights as the famous incident. A more dramatic story surfaced in 2018, suggesting that Britain's elite **Special Air Service (SAS)** staged the entire affair as a revenge prank on the U.S. Air Force<sup>[51][52]</sup>. According to this account (reported by Dr. David Clarke after interviews with an alleged SAS source), British special forces had been angered by a prior incident in August 1980 in which they were captured and mistreated by American base security during an exercise. In retaliation, SAS troopers supposedly rigged strange lights in Rendlesham Forest on those late December nights: hanging **colored flares**, using **black helium balloons and kites** to carry suspended lights, and generally giving the Americans a scare<sup>[53][54]</sup>. They even allegedly coined the phrase, "They called us aliens... Right, we'll show them what aliens really look like," indicating the prank's theme<sup>[55]</sup>. This SAS scenario, if true, could explain the otherwise puzzling array of lights moving at different heights (ground-level lights among trees and aerial lights "dropping" or darting around). The tale concludes that Halt's team stumbled into this orchestrated hoax, thus the combination of roaming lights and parachute flares produced the encounter that Halt dutifully reported – and the pranksters never expected it to become an international mystery. How credible is the SAS prank theory? It's difficult to verify. It is based on anonymous testimony from someone claiming insider knowledge, and no hard evidence (like documents or a confession from a named SAS soldier) has been presented publicly. Some find it plausible, as it neatly ties together loose ends (the multiple-night aspect, the seemingly intelligent control of the lights, etc.) with Cold War era inter-service antics. Others remain cautious, noting this explanation surfaced decades later and could itself be folklore. As of now, the **SAS hoax story is an intriguing but unproven hypothesis** – one that underscores the point that not every mysterious event is necessarily alien, as human ingenuity (or mischief) can sometimes mimic the extraordinary.
- **Psychological and Environmental Factors:** It's also worth noting the psychological context. The sightings occurred in the wee hours after Christmas, when personnel might have been on edge due to the holiday or simply tired. The initial belief that a plane had crashed would have pumped adrenaline into the responders. Once in the

dark forest, **expectation and suggestion** can play powerful roles. Each witness can inadvertently reinforce the other’s interpretation (“Did you see that? It looks like it’s moving!”), leading to a shared conviction that something uncanny is afoot even if the stimulus is ambiguous. The power of suggestion might explain why Penniston later felt confident to assert extreme details – in the moment, each person was likely **not 100% certain what they saw**, but over time, the more the story was told and discussed, the more concrete certain memories became. Additionally, the environment (a dark forest with distant lights and unfamiliar sounds) was ideal for misperception. UFO skeptic Brian Dunning, after analyzing the case, concluded that “*without exception, everything [Col. Halt] reported on his audiotape and in his written memo has a perfectly rational and unremarkable explanation*” when each component (the meteor, the moving light, the ground marks, the stars) is examined individually.<sup>[56][57]</sup> Dunning and others caution that when those separate, mundane elements are experienced in sequence, it’s easy for witnesses to **connect the dots into a seemingly supernatural narrative** – essentially, “*pattern matching where none exists.*”<sup>[58]</sup> In Dunning’s words, hearing all three nights of stories told together “*it’s easy to conclude (as did the airmen) that the light overhead became an alien spacecraft in the forest*”, even though each part had a different source<sup>[57]</sup>. This psychological “joining of dots” is a known driver in many UFO cases, referred to by researchers as the “**Roswellian Syndrome**” – where initial simple reports snowball into a complex UFO legend over time.<sup>[59]</sup>

To crystallize the **competing explanations**, consider the following comparison of key claims vs. explanations:

Observation/Claim	Extraordinary Interpretation	Conventional Explanation
Bright light “crashes” into forest (3 AM 26 Dec)	A UFO or craft landed suddenly	Fireball meteor observed that night, giving illusion of a crash <sup>[44]</sup> .
Glowing object with colored lights seen between trees	Alien spacecraft moving through woods	Distant Orfordness lighthouse beam and farm lights, appearing to move as witnesses walked <sup>[26][18]</sup> .
Triangular imprints in clearing + broken branches	Landing gear marks from UFO	Likely animal diggings (e.g. rabbits) and natural tree fall <sup>[11]</sup> . Police found nothing abnormal.
Strange noise (“woman screaming”)	Entity sound or distress from UFO	Calls of muntjac deer and other forest animals, startled by activity <sup>[36]</sup> .
Red light seen across field (28 Dec)	UFO hovering at forest edge	Orfordness lighthouse viewed through trees, flashing 5-second intervals <sup>[18]</sup> .
“White lights” falling from red object	Ejecta from alien craft or multiple UFOs	High-altitude <b>stars</b> (Sirius, etc.) twinkling; or possibly flashlights/flares if a prank.
Star-like objects perform maneuvers	Distant UFOs in the sky	Bright stars distorted by atmospheric effects and <i>autokinesis</i> (illusion of motion) <sup>[48][60]</sup> .

Observation/Claim	Extraordinary Interpretation	Conventional Explanation
Beam of light from sky onto ground	UFO scanning or targeting area	Optical illusion from star twinkling; also reported beam could be a distant lighthouse beam hitting haze.
Radioactivity readings above background	Radiation from craft's propulsion	Very slight rises (0.07–0.1 mR/hr) still within normal variance <sup>[15]</sup> ; equipment not designed for such low levels, so not significant.
Witnesses <i>debriefed and told to keep quiet</i> ("bullets are cheap" threat)	Government cover-up of alien encounter	Likely an embellishment – Halt said he was <i>never</i> debriefed and men spoke freely afterward <sup>[61]</sup> . No evidence of official intimidation.
Multiple nights of activity with intelligent control	Ongoing UFO presence surveilling base	Possibly <b>hoax/prank</b> on second night (e.g. SAS or colleagues using flares, lights, balloons) <sup>[53][62]</sup> , coupled with initial misidentifications.

It becomes evident that **the prosaic explanations, taken together, account for nearly all aspects of the incident with fewer assumptions** than the extraterrestrial hypothesis. The skeptics' case is bolstered by the witnesses' own early admissions (lighthouse, etc.) and the lack of any physical evidence to contradict the mundane explanations. Even Col. Halt, while still standing by his experience as unexplainable to him, conceded that *"if someone had the time and resources, the exact cause could be determined"* and he put odds "way high" against it being an ET spacecraft<sup>[63]</sup>. In other words, while believers see Rendlesham as a possible alien visitation, the **burden of proof for that remains unmet** – and all available evidence can be reinterpreted in light of known phenomena or potential hoaxes.

That said, not every skeptic agrees on a single narrative. Some favor the **"everything was mistaken identity"** line (meteor + lighthouse + stars), while others suspect a mix of mistakes on one night and **pranksters on the other**. The **prank theory** in particular acknowledges that the witnesses truly did see *something* unusual – but that something was human-made mischief. Interestingly, the prank explanation and the misperception explanation are not mutually exclusive: it could be that the first night was pure misidentification (no pranksters involved), and the subsequent night a copycat prank or escalation happened once word got around base that "something's out there" (speculative, but possible).

Crucially, no skeptic suggests the witnesses were *lying* about their perceptions – only that they were *mistaken* in their interpretation. This aligns with the fact that Halt and his men were clearly puzzled and even excited (as the tape shows) by what they saw; they weren't simply fabricating a story. The incident thus serves as a textbook example in UFO lore of how honest observers can be sincerely baffled by a series of normal events that align in a strange way. **In sum, the skeptical consensus** (articulated by investigators like Ian Ridpath, David Clarke, and others) is that the Rendlesham mystery has a down-to-earth

solution: *no extraterrestrials required*. As Ridpath quipped after years investigating, “No evidence has emerged to confirm that anything actually came down in the forest.”<sup>[11]</sup> The lack of debris, the lack of radar hits, and the identification of plausible sources for the lights strongly support this conclusion.

Still, despite the robust explanations, some **lingering questions** keep the case debated. For instance: Why did trained military men seemingly *fail to recognize* the lighthouse for an extended period? Could adrenaline and inexperience in the woods truly account for that level of misjudgment? If a prank was involved, who exactly carried it out and how did they coordinate it without leaving clear traces? And, if nothing truly extraordinary happened, why do some witnesses (like Halt) remain convinced decades later that it was **not of this world**? These questions lead into the broader **influence and impact** of the Rendlesham incident – how it has been perceived and why it still captivates.

## Influence and Impact on UFO Discourse and Policy

The Rendlesham Forest incident’s fame stems not from definitive evidence (there is no unequivocal photo or radar track), but from the **credibility of the witnesses and the compelling narrative** that unfolded. Over the past four decades, this case has significantly shaped public perception of UFOs in the UK and has had ripple effects on government transparency and ufology:

- **“Britain’s Roswell”**: Rendlesham is frequently referred to by this moniker<sup>[2]</sup>, highlighting its status as the UK’s most famous UFO event. Just as the Roswell incident in the U.S. involved military personnel and became a cultural touchstone, Rendlesham has entered British popular culture. It has been the subject of countless media treatments: newspaper investigations, TV documentaries, dramatizations, and even an episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*. The incident’s timing (during the Cold War on a joint US-UK airbase believed to house nuclear weapons) and the involvement of credible military witnesses gave it an enduring mystique. For many in the public, “Rendlesham” is cited as *strong evidence* that something beyond our understanding (possibly extraterrestrial) has occurred. Polls in the UK have often shown a significant portion of respondents are aware of the case, and a fair number believe it could have been an alien encounter, owing to the refrain that it was “witnessed by the Air Force.” Thus, in the court of public opinion, Rendlesham bolstered the idea that UFOs might represent real, physical unknowns that even soldiers can see up close.
- **Tourism and Local Recognition**: In the area of Suffolk, the legend of the UFO landing has been embraced to an extent. The Forestry Commission established a **“Rendlesham UFO Trail”** – a forest walking trail that leads visitors to the key locations of the sightings<sup>[64]</sup>. In 2014, a sculpture depicting a UFO was installed at the alleged landing site, a metal artwork that provides an imaginative interpretation of what the craft might have looked like<sup>[65][66]</sup>. The trail features informational boards that tell the story in a neutral tone, and even the original **East Gate** of RAF Woodbridge (now

abandoned) has become a minor pilgrimage spot for UFO enthusiasts. The UFO trail and related attractions have drawn many tourists, indicating the incident's imprint on local culture and economy. In essence, Rendlesham Forest has turned into **Britain's own "UFO Mecca,"** similar to Roswell, New Mexico – complete with an annual UFO conference in the vicinity in some years and numerous books sold in local shops.

- **Government Files and Policy:** One tangible impact of Rendlesham was its role in prompting greater **government transparency on UFO matters.** Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, pressure from UFO researchers (including requests by former Chief of Defence Staff Lord Hill-Norton in Parliament) kept the case in official discussions. The MoD consistently stated that the incident was of "no defence significance," but because it was so high-profile, it was frequently brought up as a counter-example by those who felt the MoD was dismissive. This contributed to the MoD's decision to release its UFO archives to the public. In 2001, the MoD's file on Rendlesham was released under the new Freedom of Information Act<sup>[40]</sup>. While it revealed no smoking gun, the fact of its release was seen as a win for those seeking accountability. Over the next decade, the MoD went further and released nearly all its UFO files (Project Condign report, correspondence, etc.), again with Rendlesham often cited in press coverage as "the case that got away" (unexplained). By 2009, the MoD actually **closed its UFO desk** entirely, reasoning that 50 years of reports (including Rendlesham) had shown no threat and no evidence of extraterrestrial craft. Thus, one might say Rendlesham indirectly helped bring about the end of official UFO investigations in the UK – not because it proved aliens, but because it became an example (to MoD) of a lot of fuss with no actionable outcome. Interestingly, across the Atlantic, when the U.S. Pentagon in 2020–2021 began acknowledging interest in "Unidentified Aerial Phenomena" (UAP), Rendlesham has been occasionally mentioned in Congress and media as one of the strong historical cases. It stands alongside Roswell and the recent Navy pilot sightings as a "why don't you explain this?" challenge to authorities.
- **UFO Research Community:** Within ufology, Rendlesham's impact has been significant. Believers tout it as one of the **most credible multi-witness encounters,** involving military personnel and purported physical traces. It has fueled theories about UFO interest in nuclear sites (since RAF Bentwaters/Woodbridge had nuclear ordnance) and appears in lists of evidence that "UFOs monitor our weapons"<sup>[67]</sup>. In fact, in September 2010, Col. Halt and other former USAF officers participated in a high-profile press conference at the National Press Club in Washington D.C., where they claimed UFOs have tampered with nuclear missile sites<sup>[68]</sup>. Halt recounted the Rendlesham incident in this context, asserting again that the UFO shone beams of light potentially *into* the base's weapons storage area<sup>[68]</sup>. Such events keep the case in the spotlight and tie it into broader UFO narratives. On the flip side, **skeptical researchers** have used Rendlesham as a case study in how UFO myths can form. For example, a 2012 *Skeptical Inquirer* article dubbed the accumulating layers of the story (from solid core to embellished lore) as "*the Roswellian Syndrome,*" noting how initial truths can become distorted over time<sup>[69]</sup>. Both believers and skeptics thus find Rendlesham to be a valuable example – either of credible contact or of credible

debunking. It has spawned healthy debate, detailed investigation (few UFO cases have had as much paper analysis and triangulation of testimonies), and even friendly rivalry among researchers. Ian Ridpath and Jenny Randles famously came to different conclusions despite looking at the same data, illustrating how perspective shapes interpretation in ufology.

- **Public Discourse and Media:** The enduring mystery of Rendlesham has kept it in the public discourse about UFOs. It often features in “top UFO cases” lists on television or online articles<sup>[70]</sup>. Its story has been told and retold, each time often gaining a new detail or focus depending on the storyteller. As a result, the *mythology* of Rendlesham sometimes diverges from the documented facts. For instance, some dramatized accounts merge the nights into one, or have all witnesses seeing a craft on the first night, which isn’t supported by original statements. Nonetheless, the popular narrative – of a UFO landing in a British forest and the government hushing it up – has fired the imagination of many. This has arguably contributed to a more receptive attitude toward new UFO reports. People often say, “Well, we know something happened at Rendlesham, so anything is possible.” In a broader sense, Rendlesham and cases like it have nudged the Overton window on discussing UFOs; what once was fringe became a topic even discussed in reputable newspapers like *The Telegraph* and *BBC News*, especially when anniversaries roll around<sup>[71]</sup>. The case thereby helped legitimize UFOs as a subject of serious inquiry or at least serious curiosity in the UK.
- **Science and Academia:** While mainstream scientists largely regard the incident as resolved (in favor of mundane explanations), it has had academic attention in terms of **psychology and sociology**. It’s cited in studies of perception and memory. The fact that multiple trained observers could be so **certain** of an extraordinary interpretation, and later even defend that interpretation against all counter-evidence, is of interest to psychologists. It ties into how humans can confidently recall things that might not have happened exactly as remembered – the Rendlesham story is a living example of memory construction and group reinforcement. Sociologists and media scholars also study how the Rendlesham narrative was constructed through media, how it became a part of local folklore (with tours and art), and how authority (military officers, etc.) influences belief.

In summary, the Rendlesham Forest incident’s influence extends far beyond that quiet Suffolk woodland. It has left a mark on **government openness (through FOIA releases), on local culture (through tourism and art), and on the UFO debate globally**. It underscores a core dynamic in the UFO topic: credible people can report incredible things, leading society to grapple with where the truth lies. Even if the most likely explanation is prosaic, the event’s legacy is very real – seen in the continued references in pop culture, the signs at the forest, and the way “Rendlesham” can instantly invoke a discussion about whether we’re alone or simply prone to error.

## Key Sources and Suggestions for Further Research

To truly **understand the Rendlesham incident** and resolve remaining ambiguities, it is valuable to consult primary sources and authoritative analyses. Below is a list of key sources (documents, transcripts, and expert studies) and some recommendations for further research:

- **USAF Halt Memo (13 Jan 1981):** The one-page official report by Lt. Col. Charles Halt to the UK MoD, titled “Unexplained Lights,” is a primary document summarizing the events in Halt’s own words<sup>[4][19]</sup>. It can be found in the UK National Archives files and reproduced in many books and websites. It provides the baseline timeline and descriptions from a senior witness, and any serious inquiry should start by reviewing this memo in full.
- **The “Halt Tape” Audio Recording (28 Dec 1980):** A real-time audio cassette recorded by Halt during the investigation. A **transcript** is available on Ian Ridpath’s website<sup>[29]</sup>, and the audio itself has been released publicly. This tape captures the genuine reactions and observations as they happened (e.g. measured radiation readings, exclamations upon seeing lights, timestamps of lighthouse flashes). It’s an invaluable resource to hear what the witnesses were experiencing moment-to-moment, without the filter of later memory. Researchers can compare the tape’s content with later statements to identify any embellishments.
- **Eyewitness Statements from 1980 (USAF Security Police):** Through FOIA, researchers like James Easton obtained the original typed statements of Airman John Burroughs, Sgt. Jim Penniston, A1C Ed Cabansag, and others involved on the first night<sup>[25][26]</sup>. These statements (dated just days after 26 Dec 1980) are primary evidence for what each person claimed to observe initially. They are archived on various UFO research sites and summarized in literature. Notably, they reveal that some airmen reported the lighthouse effect and did not mention any “craft” – crucial context often lost in UFO retellings. Any follow-up research should reference these to ground analysis in the contemporaneous testimony.
- **Suffolk Constabulary Reports (1980/2005):** The local police logs and reports, including Inspector Mike Topliss’s 1999 letter summarizing the constables’ findings<sup>[12]</sup>, were released via FOI in 2005. These give an official British law enforcement perspective: essentially dismissive of anything paranormal. They are available through Suffolk Police archives or FOI request repositories. They provide balance to the solely USAF narrative and confirm details like lighthouse visibility and animal tracks.
- **Ministry of Defence UFO Files on Rendlesham (released 2001):** The MoD’s file (referenced as DEFE 24/1924/1) contains internal correspondence, public inquiries, and responses regarding the incident<sup>[40]</sup>. While it holds no sensational revelations, it’s important for understanding the government’s stance. It includes the *Lord Trefgarne briefing* explaining why the case was not pursued<sup>[72]</sup>. These files can be obtained from the UK National Archives or online (some documents are hosted on sites like

theblackvault). They show the chain of communication and dispel some conspiracy theories about hidden investigations (since none are evident in the file).

- **Project Condign Report (2000):** A declassified MoD report on UFOs (referred to as UAPs) known as *Project Condign*. This report mentions Rendlesham in passing, suggesting the possibility of **plasma or electromagnetic effects** causing witness injuries and perceptions<sup>[73][74]</sup>. While Condign's theories are speculative (and some say dubious), it's an official consideration that some atmospheric plasma phenomenon could have been at play. Researchers might explore if any such naturally occurring plasma (like ball lightning or other ionospheric effects) were recorded in the area and time – though none are known.
- **Books and Investigator Reports:** Several books provide comprehensive investigations:
  - *Sky Crash* (1984) by **Jenny Randles, Dot Street, Brenda Butler** – the first detailed account, including interviews with many participants while memories were fresh.
  - *You Can't Tell the People* (2000) by **Georgina Bruni** – named after a quote attributed to Margaret Thatcher about Rendlesham, this book compiles extensive research and argues for a cover-up, including photos and FOI docs<sup>[9]</sup>.
  - *Left at East Gate* (1997) by **Larry Warren & Peter Robbins** – presents Warren's now-disputed account; to be read with caution and in conjunction with critiques.
  - *Encounter in Rendlesham Forest* (2014) by **Nick Pope, Jim Penniston, John Burroughs** – offers the insiders' pro-UFO perspective, including Penniston's binary code narrative and Burroughs' health saga.
  - *The Rendlesham Enigma* (2019) by **Burroughs and Penniston** (an expanded work) – further details witnesses' interpretations.
  - *The UFOs That Never Were* (2000) by **David Clarke, Andy Roberts, Jenny Randles** – includes a chapter re-examining Rendlesham and leaning toward a skeptical conclusion<sup>[75]</sup>(this is notable as Randles, once a proponent, came to accept more of the mundane explanations).
  - *In UFOs and Nukes* (2008) by **Robert Hastings** – chapter on Rendlesham linking it to nuclear weapons presence, giving a conspiratorial angle.

Reviewing these works provides insight into both sides of the debate. Scholars should compare how each source uses the evidence and where they diverge. Pay special attention to how witness testimonies are quoted – some books quote from **later interviews which might conflict with the original 1980 statements**. Tracking those changes is a research project in itself.

- **Expert Analyses (Web/Journal Articles):** A trove of analysis is available in articles:
  - **Ian Ridpath's Rendlesham Files:** Astronomer Ian Ridpath's website has a dedicated section breaking down the case – covering the timeline, lighthouse

evidence, star charts for that night, transcripts, etc. Ridpath's work<sup>[76][18]</sup> is a cornerstone of the skeptical explanation and is richly referenced.

- **Dr. David Clarke's Blog and Papers:** Clarke (an academic and folklorist) has written extensively, including obtaining comments from Col. Conrad and exploring the SAS hoax claim<sup>[41][33]</sup>. His 2018 article "*Who Dares Wins?: Britain's Roswell meets the SAS*" digs into the SAS prank story with intriguing detail<sup>[51][53]</sup>.
- **Skeptical Inquirer (Joe Nickell & James McGaha, 2012):** An article analyzing Rendlesham as a developing myth<sup>[69]</sup>, reinforcing how initial uncertainties turned into legend.
- **Skeptoid Podcast Episode #135 (Brian Dunning, 2009):** A scripted analysis that concisely presents the skeptical case, including the quote about pattern-matching<sup>[56][57]</sup>.
- **BBC and Newspaper Archives:** Contemporary news pieces, such as BBC News articles from 2003 and 2010 and *Telegraph* features in 2016, 2018, etc., often include interviews with primary figures or newly revealed information (e.g., Conrad's first interview in 2011<sup>[77][62]</sup>). These can be mined for quotes and to gauge how the story was perceived at various points in time.
- **Remaining gaps and research suggestions:** Despite all that's been written, a few unresolved aspects could benefit from further inquiry:
  - *Verification of the SAS Story:* If possible, military historians or investigative journalists could attempt to verify the SAS claims by seeking out SAS veterans of that era willing to speak, or checking regimental logs (even if unofficial) around late 1980 for any hint of "Operation Alien" prank. A single credible testimony or document confirming a prank would largely solve the case.
  - *Geospatial Analysis:* Modern tools like GIS mapping and light simulations could recreate how the lighthouse beam appeared from various points in the forest in 1980. Overlaying the witnesses' reported positions and sight lines with the known lighthouse flash could further confirm if they match perfectly (initial studies indicate they do<sup>[18]</sup>). Likewise, star positions and brightness on those dates can be precisely charted to confirm which stars Halt likely saw<sup>[48]</sup>.
  - *Physical Evidence Re-examination:* If any artifacts remain (plaster casts of the imprints, the audio tape for forensic analysis, soil samples if collected), applying today's technology might reveal overlooked data. For instance, digitizing the original Halt tape at high resolution to see if any background voices or sounds give clues (some researchers have done this informally, but a proper forensic audio analysis might be useful).
  - *Physiological Studies:* In light of John Burroughs' heart issues allegedly linked to the incident, medical researchers or biophysicists could explore what kind of radiation or energy could cause such damage and whether any known environmental source (for example, a radar or transmitter malfunction) might have been present. The

Condign report posits an unknown atmospheric plasma – if that’s taken seriously, perhaps scientists could study similar plasmas and their effects on humans.

- *Psychological Interviews*: Conducting new interviews with the remaining witnesses (Halt, Penniston, Burroughs, etc.) using cognitive interview techniques might clarify inconsistencies. Even asking them to review their own early statements on camera and comment could be illuminating – to see how they reconcile then vs. now. (Though after so many years, expect rehearsed positions.)
- *Classified U.S. Records*: While the UK MoD files are public, it’s less clear if the U.S. Air Force or Department of Defense has additional records. A thorough FOIA search in U.S. archives for OSI (Office of Special Investigations) files or Bentwaters/Woodbridge logs from those nights might be worthwhile. Some FOIA requests have been made with little result, but researchers could push to see if, for example, base radar logs or tower logs from Dec 1980 still exist and show anything (the base did have radar; officially nothing was tracked, but hard data would be nice to confirm).

In conclusion, **the Rendlesham incident remains a rich field for study** because it sits at the intersection of multiple domains: military history, folklore, physics, psychology, and media studies. By consulting the primary evidence and heeding both believer and skeptic analyses, one can piece together a narrative that is captivating yet grounded. The case exemplifies how an event can be both **well-documented** and **hotly debated**, leaving it to each researcher to judge the credibility of sources and the plausibility of explanations. Future investigations – especially those leveraging modern technology or unaccessed archives – may yet fill in remaining pieces of the puzzle. Whether one leans toward an extraterrestrial encounter or a misinterpreted night-time exercise, Rendlesham’s legacy challenges us to **critically analyze evidence** while maintaining an open but disciplined mind. It teaches that the truth, however prosaic or profound, is worth pursuing, as it enriches our understanding of not just what happened in those woods, but how we perceive and narrate the mysteries in our world.

## Footnotes

1. [File:RAF Woodbridge East Gate.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)
2. [Rendlesham Forest incident - Wikipedia](#)
3. [Rendlesham Forest incident - Wikipedia](#)
4. [File:Halt Memorandum.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)
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