

Profitable Nightmare of a Very Unreal Kind

A tabloid writer's revealing inside experience with the Travis Walton UFO case shows that not all was as it was represented

Jeff Wells

When "UFO madness" swept Australia in 1979, it prompted journalist Jeff Wells to recall his own earlier involvement in what many American UFOlogists consider to be a "classic case," the alleged abduction of Travis Walton on November 3, 1975, near Heber, Arizona. At the time, Wells was employed by the National Enquirer and was one of a team of its reporters dispatched to Phoenix to interview young Walton shortly after he reappeared claiming to have spent five days aboard a UFO. The National Enquirer team was joined by James A. Harder, professor of civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley and director of research for the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), a large UFO organization whose leaders fully endorse Walton's tale. The lie-detector test described by Wells, which Walton flunked, was administered by John J. McCarthy, the most experienced polygraph examiner in the state of Arizona. The results of this test were kept secret from readers of the National Enquirer, from APRO members, and even from members of a blue-ribbon panel of UFOlogists, who later selected the case as the most impressive UFO incident of 1975 and awarded Walton and his six co-workers a prize of \$5,000. Journalist Wells offers some interesting, humorous, and, we think, significant insights, based on his own brief involvement in the incident, in the following article, reprinted through the courtesy of The Age, a Melbourne, Australia, newspaper.—ED.

The characters in this UFO story are real even if they appear more like the inventions of a Hollywood hack.

A haunted young man, a ruthless cowboy, a strange professor, a hard-drinking psychiatrist, and a bunch of reporters.

All were thrown together in the desert heat by a close encounter of the third kind, and maybe they did contribute to some Hollywood thinking.

I was there and I can vouch for the motley human cast — but you will have to make up your own minds about the extraterrestrials with the fishbowl heads.

Some of the characters are still growing fat repeating their versions of the story in the seemingly limitless American market for the bizarre.

The so-called facts, the carefully woven tapestry of circumstance that has become the “official story,” can now be counted as UFO lore, pabulum for those who turn their heads to the sky in search of meaning for their lives.

I will never get rich on my version and I only tell it because of the UFO madness the papers tell me is sweeping this part of the world.

The UFO phenomenon is really rolling here, as it has rolled for many years, and it has snowballed into juggernaut proportions in other countries where it is very big business.

The stronger it gets here, the closer the attention that will be paid to the so-called classic cases of UFO encounters.

You may recognize elements of this story among them. If so, you will realize that my story is a warning that, in such cases, even the most celebrated and supposedly well documented, there is nothing so pragmatic as proof. This incident happened a few years ago and made world headlines.

I was working in San Francisco as a bureau man for a national weekly that has grown rich and powerful in catering to the middle-country craving for cancer-cures, Jackie Onassis, Hollywood gossips, psychic predictions, and like ingredients of the crumbling cake that is the American mind.

It was naturally a matter of interest that a 22-year-old forestry worker was missing and that six witnesses had passed lie-detector tests when saying that he had last been seen running toward a huge UFO. [Because local law-enforcement officers suspected that Travis Walton might have been a victim of foul play at the hands of his co-workers, three of the four questions asked during their polygraph tests dealt with whether Walton had been killed or injured. The fourth question asked only if the subject had seen a UFO. Five of the six co-workers passed the tests. The sixth was inconclusive. —ED.]

My paper had offered tens of thousands of dollars to anybody who could positively prove that aliens had visited our planet — in the know-



Cover of Travis Walton's
book about his abduction

ledge that exclusive rights could be worth millions.

When, five days later, the young man we came to call “the kid” stumbled into town, phoned his cowboy brother and claimed that he had been kidnapped by the crew of an alien spacecraft, we were ready.

Within an hour I was on a plane to rendezvous in a desert city with a team of reporters and photographers flying in from Los Angeles and the East Coast.

At the desert airport I bumped into one of them, a dapper young Englishman from the L.A. bureau, who briefed me. One reporter was at the cowboy’s home talking money; the kid was inside in a state of shock.

The office was wiring \$1,000 to help ease the kid’s discomfort and a celebrated UFOlogist, a California professor, was being flown in, all expenses paid, to lend a hand.

Our immediate task was to bribe the brother with the thousand to hole up with us in a luxury motel on the outskirts of town, no names registered, where the rest of the press, who were about to descend, and the sheriff, who was calling the whole thing a hoax and demanding that the kid take a lie-detector test, would not bother them.

“It isn’t going to be easy,” said the Englishman as we pocketed our credit cards and headed for our rented Pontiacs. “The brother has taken charge and the brother is some kind of psychopath. The kid is scared to death of him, and so is our reporter.”

The cowboy was no disappointment. He was one of the meanest and toughest-looking men I've ever seen — in his late twenties, a rodeo professional and amateur light-heavyweight fighter, a total abstainer, broad shouldered, T-shirt packed with muscle, chiseled-down hips, bow-legged, eyes full of nails, tense, unpredictable.

He leaned against a pick-up truck with a gun rack in the cabin and raked us with beams of cunning and hatred as strong as the flash from the spaceship that had pole-axed his brother as the witnesses fled in terror.

"Nobody is going to laugh at my brother," he said. Nobody wanted to laugh at his brother, we said. We wanted only to give his brother a chance to tell his story to somebody who would understand.

To prove our bona fides, and to keep away those other jackals of the press, who would embarrass the kid with foolish questions, we would hide them away and pay the kid a grand to tell his story.

If we liked the story, and it could be properly documented, and the kid could pass our lie-detector test, we would open our checkbooks all the way and start talking in five figures.

To our relief the cowboy agreed — but not, he said, because of the money, because his brother had a true story to tell which would enlighten the world.

Our first sight of the kid was at dinner in the motel dining room that night. It was a shock. He sat there mute, pale, twitching like a cornered animal. He was either a brilliant actor or he was in a serious funk about something.

But the arrival of the professor saved the day. He was as smooth as butter. He soon had the kid eating out of his hand.

"You are not alone," he crooned. "There are many people, more than you would think, who have been chosen to meet them."

Them? I began to wonder about the professor.

The cowboy was so impressed he began to talk about his own UFO experience, when he had been chased by a flying saucer through the woods as a child.

Within a couple of hours the professor had talked the brother out of taking the sheriff's polygraph test and into a hypnosis session in his room immediately.

It looked as if things were going smoothly enough, with no hint that we were faced with four days of chaos.

The next day the office announced that the whole story was to be filmed by a crew from the top-rated CBS muckraker TV show "60 Minutes." We were to be on guard because CBS was out to shaft us, my editor warned.

We were to present a bold front for good footage of dedicated

reporters sparing no expense to bring the public the true story of one of the most amazing incidents in recorded history.

The kid's fantastic story had been coming out under the hypnosis, but the brothers had become very conspiratorial with the professor and would speak only to him.

The professor seemed to have his own future on the lecture circuit and the paperback bookstands very much in mind, and we didn't trust him. [Professor Harder did not write a book on the incident, but a paperback, listing Travis Walton as its author, subsequently was published. —ED.]

So we taped everything and had the CBS crew film the kid's story given under hypnosis. It was a tale of little men with heads like fishbowls and skin like mushrooms.

But suddenly the strain began to tell on the kid and he lapsed into sobbing bouts. He was falling apart, and so was his story.

It necessitated flying in a husband-and-wife team of psychiatrists from Colorado to tranquilize the kid and keep the cowboy from exploding.

The kid was a wreck, and it was all the psychiatrists could do to get him ready for the lie-detector expert we had lined up. [Wells's recollection of the chronology of events is in error. The polygraph test was given by McCarthy in the early afternoon of November 15, 1975, and the two Colorado psychiatrists did not arrive in Phoenix until that evening. —ED.]

The test lasted an hour, and I was in the next room fending off the TV crew when I heard the cowboy scream: "I'll kill the sonofabitch."

The kid had failed the test miserably. The polygraph man said it was the plainest case of lying he'd seen in 20 years, but the office was yelling for another expert and a different result.

To head that off, we had the psychiatrists put the cowboy and the kid through a long session of analysis.

Their methods were unique. The next day the four of them disappeared into a room, and soon a waiter headed in there with two bottles of cognac.

At the end of it the psychiatrists were rolling drunk, but they had their story and the brothers were crestfallen.

It seemed that the kid's father, who had deserted him as a child, had been a spaceship fanatic, and all his life the kid had wanted to ride in a spacecraft.

He had seen something out there in the woods, some kind of an eerie light that had triggered a powerful hallucination that might recur at any time. There was no question of any kidnap by mushroom men. The kid needed medical help and the cowboy swore solemnly that he would shield him from further harassment.

Reports began to filter in that the witnesses' lie-detector tests were not

much help either — they supported the story that they had all seen the strange light but not that the strange light was identifiable as a spaceship.

The CBS crew had left in disgust and I sat down to detail everything that had happened in a 16-page memorandum designed to kill the story. It was all over.

I paid the \$2,000 motel bill — including a mammoth bar tab to which the psychiatrists' thirst had contributed nobly—for five days, and we all scattered for the airport.

It had been a lunatic experience from beginning to end, made more disturbing by the fact that on several occasions, with coaxing from the professor, I had almost believed that the story was real.

As I drove to the airport I was never so glad to be leaving a city, and to this day the whole experience there remains in my memory as some kind of nightmare.

As I neared the airport I switched on the car radio and heard familiar voices — the kid, the cowboy, and the professor giving an interview about the kid's shattering experience on board a flying saucer.

A few weeks later I picked up the paper I worked for and found that with the help of the professor it had turned my memorandum into a sensational front-page story. [This *National Enquirer* feature story, which appeared in the December 16, 1975, issue, was headlined: "5 Witnesses Pass Lie Test While Claiming: Arizona Man Captured by UFO." There was no mention of the test taken by Walton that he had failed. The article quoted Professor Harder as saying "after he had known all the facts" he was convinced that Walton had been abducted by a UFO. —ED.]

The professor was calling me up demanding tapes for his lectures, and the kid was signing contracts for books and TV documentaries.

And so another UFO hero was made. [On June 20, 1976, Philip J. Klass, chairman of CSICOP's UFO Subcommittee, after six months of investigation into the Travis Walton case, issued a privately published **White Paper** characterizing the incident as a hoax and revealing the heretofore secret McCarthy polygraph test and its results. Klass concluded that the incident was probably contrived to extricate Walton's boss from a timber-cutting contract with the government in which he was seriously delinquent because of "moonlighting" on other, better-paying jobs. —ED.] ●