

The Woodbridge UFO Incident

Investigation of a claimed UFO landing near a U.S. Air Force base in Britain puts it in a new light.

Ian Ridpath

In December 1980, something remarkable allegedly occurred in Britain outside the U.S. Air Force base at Woodbridge, near Ipswich. News of the event leaked out slowly, finally hitting the headlines in October 1983: "UFO Lands in Suffolk—and That's Official," screamed the front page of the *News of the World*, Britain's best-selling Sunday tabloid.

The story was sensational. It told of a group of American airmen who were confronted one night with an alien spaceship in Rendlesham Forest, which surrounds the Air Force base. According to the story, the craft came down over the trees and landed in a blinding explosion of light.

The airmen tried to approach the object, but it moved away from them as though under intelligent control. The following day, landing marks were found on the ground, burns were seen on nearby trees, and radiation traces were recorded. There was even talk of aliens aboard the craft, and allegations of a massive cover-up. It had all the ingredients of a classic UFO encounter.

The *News of the World's* informant was a former U.S. airman. He was given the pseudonym Art Wallace, for he claimed that his life would be in danger if he talked. Yet here he was freely giving interviews to newspapers and television.

While his fantastic story might be doubted, it was impossible to shrug off a memo written by the deputy base commander, Lt. Col. Charles I. Halt, to the Ministry of Defence, which was publicly released in the United States under the Freedom of Information Act. Halt's memo, reprinted in full here, is not as sensational as Wallace's story, but it is prime documentary evidence of a type rarely encountered in UFO cases.

UFO researchers in Britain could scarcely believe their luck. The *News of*

Ian Ridpath is a well-known science and space writer and a member of the U.K. branch of CSICOP. He is author of several books and editor of the Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Space.

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UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK

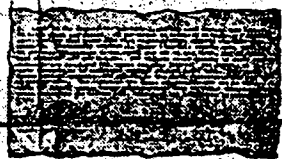
A UFO has landed in Britain and that staggering fact has been officially confirmed.

Despite 17 massive searches, none of the World's great powers have proved that the mysterious craft came to earth in a red ball of light at 3 A.M. on December 27, 1964.

It happened in a place known as Rendlesham Forest, Suffolk, England. At that time the British Air Force was on high alert. The UFO was seen by several witnesses, including a Colonel who reported the sighting to the Ministry of Defence.

And that's OFFICIAL

NEWS-WORLD INVESTIGATES
By KENNETH DEANEY



EVIDENCE - The Rendlesham Forest UFO landing site. The photograph shows the area where the UFO was reported to have landed on December 27, 1964.

the World paid £12,000 for the story. A subsequent book about the case, *Sky Crash*, by UFOlogists Brenda Butler, Dot Street, and Jenny Randles, described it as "unique in the annals of UFO history . . . the world's first officially observed, and officially confirmed, UFO landing and contact." Cable News Network made a documentary about the case.

All that evidence, backed up by the word of the U.S. Air Force, could not possibly have a rational explanation. Or could it?

I have my own detective story about the Rendlesham Forest UFO. Soon after the *News of the World* story appeared, I went in search of local opinions about the case. I made contact by telephone with a forester, Vince Thurkettle, who lives within a mile of the alleged UFO landing site. Immediately I was brought down to earth. "I don't know of anyone around here who believes that anything strange happened that night," he told me.

So what did he think the flashing light was in Rendlesham Forest? I was astonished by his reply. "It's the lighthouse," he said.

That lighthouse lies at Orford Ness on the Suffolk coast, five miles from the forest. Thurkettle plotted on a map the direction in which the airmen reported seeing their flashing UFO, and he found that they had been looking straight into the lighthouse beam.

Could this really be the answer? I visited the site with a camera crew from BBC-TV's "Breakfast Time" program. On the way there, the cameraman indicated that he was skeptical about the lighthouse theory. I didn't blame him.

Colonel Charles Halt's memo on official American Air Force notepaper was headed "Unexplained Lights," dated 13 January 1981, and sent to the RAF. It said:

1. Early in the morning of 27 Dec 80 (approximately 0300 L), two USAF security police patrolmen saw unusual lights outside the back gate at RAF Woodbridge. Thinking an aircraft might have crashed or been forced down, they called for permission to go outside the gate to investigate. The on-duty flight chief responded and allowed three patrolmen to proceed on foot. The individuals reported seeing a strange glowing object in the forest. The object was described as being metallic in appearance and triangular in shape, approximately two to three meters across the base and approximately two meters high. It illuminated the entire forest with a white light. The object itself had a pulsing red light on top and a bank(s) of blue lights underneath. The object was hovering or on legs. As the patrolmen approached the object, it maneuvered through the trees and disappeared. At this time the animals on a nearby farm went into a frenzy. The object was briefly sighted approximately an hour later near the back gate.

2. The next day, three depressions 1½" deep and 7" in diameter were found where the object had been sighted on the ground. The following night (29 Dec 80) the area was checked for radiation. Beta/gamma readings of 0.1 milli-roentgens were recorded with peak readings in the three depressions and near the center of the triangle formed by the depressions. A nearby tree had moderate (.05-.07) readings on the side of the tree toward the depressions.

3. Later in the night a red sun-like light was seen through the trees. It moved about and pulsed. At one point it appeared to throw off glowing particles and then broke into five separate white objects and then disappeared. Immediately thereafter, three star-like objects were noticed in the sky, two objects to the north and one to the south, all of which were about 10 degrees off the horizon. The objects moved rapidly in sharp, angular movements and displayed red, green and blue lights. The objects to the north appeared to be elliptical through an 8-12 power lens. They then turned to full circles. The objects to the north remained in the sky for an hour or more. The object to the south was visible for two or three hours and beamed down a stream of light from time to time. Numerous individuals, including the undersigned, witnessed the activities in paragraphs 2 and 3.

**CHARLES I. HALT, Lt Col, USAF
Deputy Base Commander**

It was past midnight when Thirkettle took us to the site of the alleged landing, and it felt spooky. The area had by now been cleared of trees as part of normal forest operations, but enough pines remained at the edge of the forest to give us a realistic idea of what the airmen saw that night.

Sure enough, the lighthouse beam seemed to hover only a few feet above ground level, because Rendlesham Forest is higher than the coastline. The light seemed to move around as we moved. And it looked close—only a few hundred yards away among the trees. All this matched the airmen's description of the UFO.

The conclusion was clear. Had a real UFO been present as well as the lighthouse, the airmen should have reported seeing two brilliant flashing

lights among the trees, not one. But they never mentioned the lighthouse, only a pulsating UFO—not surprisingly, since no one expects to come across a lighthouse beam near ground level in a forest.

So startlingly brilliant was the beam that the TV cameras captured it easily. The formerly skeptical cameraman was convinced. My report was shown the following morning on "Breakfast Time," much to the dismay of the UFO spotters and the *News of the World* reporter.

The lighthouse theory soon had its supporters and its detractors. But there were still too many open questions for the case to be considered solved. For instance, what about those landing marks?

Some weeks later I returned to Rendlesham Forest in search of answers. The landing marks had long since been destroyed when the trees were felled, but I now knew an eyewitness who had seen them: Vince Thurkettle. He recalled for me his disappointment with what he saw.

The three depressions were irregular in shape and did not even form a symmetrical triangle. He recognized them as rabbit diggings, several months old and covered with a layer of fallen pine needles. They lay in an area surrounded by 75-foot-tall pine trees planted 10 to 15 feet apart—scarcely the place to land a 20-foot-wide spacecraft.

The "burn marks" on the trees were axe cuts in the bark, made by the foresters themselves as a sign that the trees were ready to be felled. I saw numerous examples in which the pine resin, bubbling into the cut, gives the impression of a burn.

Additional information came from other eyewitnesses—the local police, called to the scene by the Woodbridge air base. The police officers who visited the site reported that they could see no UFO, only the Orford Ness lighthouse. Like Thurkettle, they attributed the landing marks to animals. The case of a landed spaceship was looking very shaky indeed.

What had made the airmen think that something had crashed into the forest in the first place? I already knew from previous UFO cases that a brilliant meteor, a piece of natural debris from space burning up in the atmosphere, could give such an impression. But I was unable to find any record of such a meteor on the morning of December 27.

Here the police account provided a vital lead by showing that Colonel Halt's memo, written two weeks after the event, had got the date of the sighting wrong. It occurred on December 26, not December 27.

With this corrected date, I telephoned Dr. John Mason, who collects reports of such sightings for the British Astronomical Association. He told me that shortly before 3 A.M. on December 26 an exceptionally brilliant meteor, almost as bright as the full moon, had been seen over southern England. Dr. Mason confirmed that this meteor would have been visible to the airmen at Woodbridge as though something were crashing into the forest nearby. The time of the sighting matched that given in Colonel Halt's memo.

Finally, I turned to the question of the radiation readings. I learned that readings like those given in Colonel Halt's memo would be expected from

natural sources of radiation, such as cosmic rays and the earth itself. In short, there was no unusual radiation at the site.

As for the starlike objects mentioned in the final paragraph of Colonel Halt's memo, they were probably just that—stars. Bright celestial objects are the main culprits in UFO sightings and have fooled many experienced observers, including pilots. The object seen by Colonel Halt to the south was almost certainly Sirius, the brightest star in the sky.

If it seems surprising that a colonel in the U.S. Air Force should misidentify a star as a UFO, consider the alternatives. Is it likely that a bright, flashing UFO should hover over southern England for three hours without being spotted by anyone other than a group of excited airmen? And if Colonel Halt really believed that an alien craft had invaded his airspace, why did he not scramble fighters to investigate?

Although UFO hunters will continue to believe that an alien spacecraft landed in Rendlesham Forest that night, I know that the first sighting coincided with the burn-up in the atmosphere of an exceptionally bright meteor and that the airmen who saw the flashing UFO between the pine trees were looking straight at the Orford Ness lighthouse. The rest of the case is a marvelous product of human imagination.

But, somehow, I don't think that my version of the story will make the front page of the *News of the World*.

Postscript. The article above first appeared in the *Guardian*, a respected British daily newspaper, in January 1985. It was written before the U.S. Air Force released a tape recording made by Colonel Halt during his investigations of the "landing marks" and the "radioactivity" in the forest on December 29, 1980. The results of those investigations are referred to in paragraphs 2 and 3 of his memo. I have seen no reason to modify my article in the light of that tape recording.

Since the publication of the article and the release of the Halt tape, Jenny Randles, one of the authors of *Sky Crash* and a leading British UFOlogist, has altered her view of the event significantly. In the November 1985 *MUFON UFO Journal* she writes: "There is nothing on the Halt memo or tape which is inexplicable. Much of it is consistent with the Ian Ridpath lighthouse theory." But she does not accept my explanation. Instead, she now believes that the Halt memo and tape are both part of a coverup for some secret military test or weapons accident. ●