
COLLISION COURSE

BY JENNY RANGLES

In the early 1950s the British government was still struggling to come to terms with UFO encounters. Sources at the Air Ministry (now the Ministry of Defense, or MoD) were reluctant to introduce a full-scale investigation project along the lines of Project Blue Book in the United States, and did so only in the wake of major activity during the NATO exercise Operation Mainbrace.

This several-day wave of sightings had occurred in September 1952 at a time when Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill had become personally intrigued by UFOs—especially as these events followed the Washington, D.C., wave so swiftly. Churchill had followed this series of events and was not easily fooled by casual explanations.

In a celebrated memo of July 28, 1952, Churchill wrote to his air minister demanding to know what the UFO mystery was all about. I was told by Ralph Noyes, a man then working as secretary to the air ministry, that this was because Churchill had been assured previously that UFOs were merely an “American craziness” sorted out by the CIA and there was nothing for the British military to worry about. Indeed, Noyes heard the air minister say somewhat testily, “I thought [U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt S.] Vandenburg had sorted this out in ’49,” apparently a reference to the decision to reject the Estimate of Situation report from Project Sign declaring UFOs to be of extraterrestrial origin. If so, it is interesting that the U.K. government knew of such things by 1952. Most American citizens did not.

The Washington events now suggested to the astute Churchill that the verdict on UFOs was not exactly true, and the rapid follow-on during which RAF planes and a U.S. aircraft carrier off the British coast were buzzed by daylight objects established the need for action in his mind. Recall that this was the same man who had actually been the first major statesman in the world to take sightings of mysterious objects seriously. For in the build-up to World War I, as head of his country’s Navy, a young Churchill had warned the British parliament that a major wave of airship sightings occurring around strategic locations (such as dockyards) could involve “enemy surveillance operations.” At least, he

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insisted, the threat from these incidents ought to be taken more seriously. So his unwillingness to be fobbed off 40 years later should not be a surprise.

Some information has recently surfaced about this period, thanks to the excellent research into Public Record Office files and interviews with surviving MoD figures conducted by researchers David Clarke and Andy Roberts. They report their findings in *Out of the Shadows* (London: Piatkus, 2002). Clarke and Roberts also located the Air Ministry briefing document evidently shown to Churchill in an attempt to persuade him that UFOs were no big deal—information the ministry seems to have had fed to them via the CIA.

While we have no documentation to back it up, Churchill must have soon realized (thanks to Operation Mainbrace) that complacency over the latest UFOs was unwise. It seems more than likely that the former war leader was aware that action was needed, hence the fairly rapid move toward setting up a British UFO project.

This project became active early in 1953. Edward J. Ruppelt mentions in his fine memoirs, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956, p. 130), that there was a visit made around this time by two British intelligence officers. He notes that they were in the United States on a classified mission and were asking Blue Book staff a list of single-spaced questions about UFOs. These questions spread over six pages. It is now possible to place that intriguing anecdote into some historical perspective. My guess is these men were there because Churchill wanted a more proactive stance on UFOs within the Air Ministry.

Against this background, I was fortunate enough to be given an insight from someone who became involved in these events and who was brave enough to speak out about them. This was several years before the recent declassification of MoD files. My source, then retired and terminally ill, heard me speak on a national BBC radio program and told me that he was impressed with my objectivity. He decided to take what might be his last chance to get the story of his UFO encounter on the record “before it is too late,” as he put it, and “because there is little anyone can do to stop me now.” But even then, concerned about what he was doing, he asked me to be discreet.

After we agreed to meet, there were unexpected prob-



The English Electric Canberra B2 aircraft, which first flew May 13, 1949, was the UK's first successful jet bomber and was used extensively on photo-reconnaissance and electronic intelligence missions.

lems before I could travel out with colleague Peter Hough to the man's home in the Pennines. After speaking to me by phone in the BBC studios, the witness had checked with former colleagues in the RAF and at the MoD science and technology unit where he had worked until a few years earlier. It was made apparent that some people there were not happy with his decision to talk about these matters, even though they had occurred almost four decades earlier.

Thankfully, his desire to put the story on record in what proved his final months of life outweighed this pressure (which never amounted to a formal instruction not to speak to me but I suspect would have caused lesser men to think again). And I was able to make a record of this fascinating close encounter, told below in his words.

I should add that, despite searching the Public Record Office files, no trace of this incident survives in available government sources. There are two possible reasons.

Perhaps it was so secret that the file is maintained off the usual path of UFO data, which tend to involve more low-grade material, such as letters sent to the ministry by members of the public. If so, then this file might exist but still be classified. The U.K. still lacks a Freedom of Information Act to establish that for sure.

But the other option to bear in mind is that few data exist regarding other 1950s RAF encounters. There is almost nothing about the complex Lakenheath/Bentwaters radar-visual sightings of August 13, 1956, as a typical example. The reason cited by the MoD for this glaring omission is that many early files were routinely destroyed before the decision to retain them was taken in the 1960s. Yet some records do exist on lower-level, often solved, cases from that earlier

decade. It will be seen as either a pity (or as a suspicion) that the more impressive events appear to be the ones that have unfortunately disappeared.

Whatever the case, this incident is a fascinating close encounter, well described by what was still a very lucid witness. His story has made me wonder just how many similar encounters have taken place but never reached the UFO community in the fortuitous manner with which this one came to light.

THE WITNESS AND HIS STORY

Cyril George Townsend-Withers began his flying career in 1939, had a distinguished war record, and by 1953 was an RAF flight lieutenant. On retirement from the MoD in the 1980s, he had reached the rank of wing commander. Having a science and engineering background, Townsend-Withers was made a radar and technology troubleshooter. At the age of 47 he retired from active flying duty to take on a post as a principal science officer for the Air Ministry. In this role he developed experimental and usually secret radar and aircraft in-flight technology systems as part of the unit based at RAF Boscombe Down in Wiltshire.

Townsend-Withers was stationed at this base in 1953 and working both in that scientific capacity and as active aircrew on experimental missions. This, if you recall, was around the time when the Air Ministry first set up their covert UFO project.

Here, from my interview, is Townsend-Withers's account of what happened.

JR: Why have you decided to tell this story after many years of secrecy?

TW: I am now retired and none too well. The 30-year rule has expired on this matter. So far as I am concerned, this means that I can now talk about it. [In the British MoD a “30 year rule” prevents information that is deemed secret from being released to the public record for that period, though some data are withheld for 50 or even 100 years.]

JR: So what did happen?

TW: It was the spring of 1953, I believe. I was asked to test some new ECM [electronic counter measure] equipment. This technology attempts to disrupt enemy radar but we had experienced problems with ground interference during earlier tests. Because it was important work, a pilot [also a flight lieutenant] and I were given a prototype Canberra aircraft. It did not even yet have internal fittings. Pared down like this we could fly much higher than in a normal Canberra and put the equipment through the motions well clear of any interference from below.

JR: Where were you flying at the time?

TW: We were above Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, out of Boscombe Down, and we got up to over 60,000 feet. It was just after noon on a cloudless day as we set off on a northwesterly heading when my radar picked up a target at five miles behind pacing us like an echo. Fearing the return of the interference problems, we switched off the system, reset it, and did a number of internal checks. This did not clear the target. Now we knew that something really was following us. But that was virtually impossible at this height.

JR: Could it have been a secret flight or a spy plane?

TW: We were a secret flight and because of the importance of our job that day we were given cleared air space. I knew this was something important—and, of course, that it could have been an enemy aircraft. So I clambered into the rear gun turret to investigate. Sure enough, there was an object trailing behind. It was round and silvery, reflecting sunlight like a giant mirror. I told the pilot to increase speed. Although we got to 225 knots the object stuck with us so I recommended “a big radius turn” in order to shake it. The object vanished from the radar now because the system was only operating in a rearward-facing mode. However, the object was not visually absent for long. Within moments it was dead ahead. As we came out of the turn, we flew towards the glinting object and closed the gap very fast. For about 30 seconds we were on a collision course. During this period we had a close-up view.

JR: What did it look like?

TW: It was silvery and very thin in body shape. Overall it appeared to be a remarkably flat oval without any sign of wings or windows and just the faintest hint of a tail fin at the rear.

JR: Could it have been a balloon?

TW: No. I had seen many of them before, being used to flying at great height. This was something very strange.

JR: Did your pilot make an emergency turn to avoid collision?

TW: At first we were just stunned, but we were preparing to pull out and fly around the object. It never gave us the chance. Suddenly the thing just shot vertically upwards without acceleration—going from zero to an incredible speed in moments. It climbed up like a rocket—60 or 70 thousand feet, as quick as you could say it. We soon lost sight of it far beyond any height that we could hope to emulate.

JR: What happened when you landed?

TW: Back on the ground we reported it, of course. But I was really surprised by the reaction. Nobody seemed that interested. They pressed us really hard to be sure it was not a Soviet aircraft, but this idea was absurd, and I said so. Nobody was much interested beyond that point.

JR: Do you mean that there was no official investigation?

TW: Oh yes, there was one. I was instructed to work with the radar manufacturers. We stripped the equipment and reassembled it. There was nothing wrong. Eventually the Ministry accepted that there was no fault with the equipment and I expected a full debriefing about what we saw, now that they knew it was real. It never happened. They were only concerned that we get the equipment working and reminded us that the real threat came from the Russians, not UFOs. But I got the definite impression that our sighting was of interest to sources other than the channels that I dealt with.

JR: Do you mean that there was a covert investigation unit?

TW: I was not satisfied by this apathetic response and started to ask questions. It was then that I trod on some toes. I discovered that there was a newly formed research team at Farnborough who were handpicked to study the evidence and were assessing incoming reports. I even heard whispers that they had developed a working assumption that alien craft might be coming to earth. But it was made very clear that none of this was for public discussion and I was not to dig further into that situation.

JR: So, after all these years, what do you think that you saw that day?

TW: I think that I was privileged to get a close-up view of a reconnaissance device from someplace else. To the best of my knowledge this was a constructed object—a controlled device.

ASSESSMENT

Over the years I have interviewed a number of RAF aircrew who have had close encounters with UFOs. None have impressed me in the way that this man did. He was highly educated, with a scientific knowledge far beyond my own and a no-nonsense way of describing what he saw. He left me in little doubt that he believed that he had seen something extraordinary and had become persuaded that a (still) covert government study was looking into such evidence.

Yet, as with other witnesses (such as the two navigators involved in the 1956 Lakenheath/Bentwaters chase), there

was a puzzling lack of debriefing by the powers that be. Why ignore what ought to have been a primary witness? Why was Townsend-Withers, like the crew in the two Venoms that were scrambled to pursue a radar target over East Anglia three years later, not given a major interrogation by the authorities?

Even if the truth about UFOs was suspected by government to be fairly inconsequential (as skeptics usually assert), this attitude makes little sense. It beggars belief that the crew members of two RAF planes sent up during a vectored mid-air intercept as at Lakenheath/Bentwaters were never even interviewed. It defies all common sense that a witness of the caliber of a science officer and RAF navigator who was part of a top-secret mission should not be subject to even greater scrutiny, given that he was describing a phenomenon seen visually and on radar at close quarters and that behaved in a way beyond the capabilities of known technology of the day—especially since this incident happened so soon after Churchill's initiative.

Indeed, it makes more sense to believe that a secret investigation project was underway and that its findings still have not been made public, for whatever reason. Skeptics prefer to argue that cases such as this one were not subject to investigation because, beyond logging the story, there was little to investigate. UFOs were considered to be largely a collection of misperceptions and so posed no "defense interest." If, as Townsend-Withers was told, the UFO was not regarded as a Russian spy plane, then it was of no interest to the Air Ministry. But, surely, unless they had a very good idea what the UFO was, such disinterest seems foolhardy.

The other factor to consider must be the potential explanation of this sighting as a weather balloon. I have to say I believe some military encounters that took place during the 1940s and 1950s are probably properly explained as sightings of balloons. The presence of fast-moving jets at great altitude where weather balloons were operating came together in this period for the first time in history. This brought about a set of unique circumstances during which the strange appearance and apparent odd behavior of balloons were perceived from mid-air by aircrews unfamiliar with the operating characteristics of balloons at high altitudes.

It is more than likely that in some instances startled aircrews would come upon a balloon (visible as a mere dot, if visible at all, from lower levels) that would look like a huge disc at the altitude modern jet aircraft were then starting to fly. Given the novelty and public interest in UFOs, is it really a surprise that these might be mistaken for such a weird craft?

In addition, a fast-moving jet closing in on a stationary weather balloon would enhance the impression of a collision with, perhaps, both objects moving toward one another rather than just the jet's being in motion. But if the balloon was stationary (and perhaps much higher than the jet was flying), then, as the aircraft closed, the angle subtended between jet and balloon would increase rapidly, creating an

apparent illusion of the balloon rocketing upwards.

The similarities between this description and various 1940s and 1950s mid-air encounters are plain. But do they solve the Boscombe Down case? Certainly, the aircrews in the two Venoms during the 1956 Lakenheath/Bentwaters case offer useful comparisons. These two navigators tell the same story. The object they were vectored onto was essentially stationary. They closed in on it and flew right past it, observing it by radar; it did not move. In the dark night they saw nothing, and so they concluded that they had encountered a weather balloon.

So, I am hesitant to completely reject the weather-balloon theory for the Boscombe Down encounter. Yet we need to recall some important facts. Townsend-Withers stated he had a close familiarity with weather balloons. He had seen them often during the dozens of high-altitude flights that he had made, and he was familiar with their teardrop shape. He alleged that this object had no resemblance to any balloon he had seen before or in the many flights he made subsequently. His report apparently made that clear. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that the Air Ministry merely ignored such a well-qualified assessment.

Moreover, the Boscombe Down object was apparently both seen visually and tracked on radar, which, if true, negates the balloon hypothesis—since on first sighting it was moving behind the Canberra for several miles without losing ground on a jet traveling at over 200 mph.

Nor was this radar target an anomalous-propagation effect. Withers used all his know-how to get rid of such an anomaly, using tactics that in previous flights had purged the interference effects that they had experienced before taking a flight to this great altitude. The radar target was of a real object and was in the same location as the silver disc confronted visually when the science officer stepped into the observation turret. Only as the aircraft turned to try to close in on the object did it appear (both by vision and on radar) to become stationary. Balloons do not suddenly stop like this.

Overall, this case remains intriguing, because it describes such a strangely shaped craft recorded both visually and instrumentally and recounted by a well-trained witness. In short, if Townsend-Withers's account is reasonably accurate, we are left with a highly impressive close encounter. And its proximity to such a covert mission (during which the Canberra had set a new altitude record for the aircraft, by the way) is even more intriguing.

Unfortunately, we were not able to talk with the pilot on the flight (he was already dead) and the case will, therefore, likely remain contentious as a single-witness incident. One case proves nothing about the true nature of UFOs; however, it certainly does prove that impressive encounters involving skilled scientific observers have taken place. Nothing ought to be concluded from one incident, but it is the sum of such evidence upon which the case for UFOs as genuinely anomalous rests. And this suggests that the skeptics have not answered all the questions. ♦