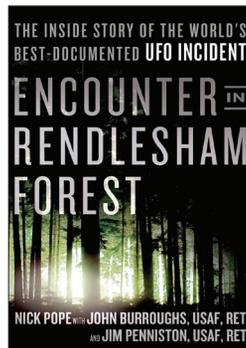


The Rendlesham UFO Incident: A Study in Folly

JAMES MCGAHA and JOE NICKELL

Arch UFO proponent Nick Pope served as an employee of the British Ministry of Defense and his varied duties included the part-time assessment of UFO reports for any possible defense significance. In 2009, the ministry determined there had never been any (pp. 168–169). Pope’s views were once relatively cautious. He emphasized he was “wary of the UFOlogical obsession with official cover-ups and conspiracies,” urging UFOlogists to “try to get away from the believers versus skeptic mindset,” and insisting that “undisputed proof that we are not alone in the universe is more likely to come from optical or radio astronomy than from UFOlogy,” according to Pope’s entry in Ronald D. Story’s 2001 *Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters*.

Yet Pope’s latest book, *Encounter in Rendlesham Forest*, is from the opposite perspective. Written with two retired U.S. airmen, John Burroughs and Jim Penniston (for a time stationed at twin U.S. air bases in Britain—RAF Bentwaters and Woodbridge—flanking Rendlesham), it describes what Pope calls “by far the best-documented and most compelling UFO incident ever to have taken place” (xvi). It also attempts to discredit skeptical theories and constantly speaks of secrecy, cover-up, and conspiracy.



Encounter in Rendlesham Forest: The Inside Story of the World’s Best-Documented UFO Incident. By Nick Pope with John Burroughs, USAF (Ret.), and Jim Penniston, USAF (Ret.). St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-250-03810-4. 311 pp. Hardcover, \$25.99.

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What has happened to Nick Pope? Several things: He seems newly interested in salesmanship, stating, “This is a timely book,” in part, he says, because of modern “concerns over government secrecy” (xix). Second, he has teamed up with Burroughs and Penniston, who have become the embodiment of what we call “The Roswellian Syndrome.”

As we explained in the May/June 2012 issue of *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, this syndrome refers to “a UFO incident’s occurring, being debunked, going underground, beginning the myth-making processes, and reemerging as a conspiracy tale with ongoing mythologizing and media hype.” That is what happened with the Roswell incident, the 1947 crash of a U.S. spy balloon array that morphed over time into a tale of crashed saucers and their humanoid occupants.

At Rendlesham, the initial sighting

of early December 26, 1980, occurred at the same time that a bolide (a brilliant meteor) streaked over southern England. As local police soon determined, an additional light visible from the area was from the Orford lighthouse that stood in the direction the airmen were looking and *flashed at the same five-second interval as the UFO*. Other claims were likewise debunked, including certain red and blue lights (a police car), “landing” depressions (rabbit diggings), and “burn marks” on pines (axe blazings oozing resin). The low radiation readings had been taken with equipment that was not intended to measure background radiation and so were meaningless. The “star-like objects” cited in Deputy Base Commander Charles Halt’s memorandum report from January 13, 1981, were probably indeed stars: Sirius, Vega, and Deneb.

Case closed—for nearly three years.

Then, in October of 1983 the story resurfaced and was hyped, first in the British tabloid *News of the World* and then in a book, *Sky Crash: A Cosmic Conspiracy*, published the following year. Although one of that book’s co-authors, British UFOlogist Jenny Randles, subsequently became a skeptic of the Rendlesham Forest case, the conspiracy was off and running.

Pope is bent on reviving the Rendlesham incident again. Unfortunately, in doing so he is shackled to Burroughs and Penniston. The two were USAF security personnel at Bentwaters/Woodbridge and were largely responsible for the initial misperceptions and hype—especially Airman Burroughs. After seeing unexplained lights, although lacking proper authorization, he went off base and saw the lights flashing red and blue. Soon, Sgt. Penniston (along with a few others) came on the scene and the two seemed to feed each other’s developing hysteria. At one point, with a flash of light Penniston “was fear struck” and he and Burroughs threw themselves to the ground (1–8).

Over the years since the incident, matters have become still more confused, and the duo have had trouble keeping their stories straight. For example, although the earliest source, the Halt memo, says the UFO left “As the patrolmen approached the object” (74), Penniston would later claim to have actually touched the hard, smooth object and to have observed symbols thereon like “ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs”

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(clearly evoking the “hieroglyphs” previously reported on the Roswell debris). At the same time, Burroughs remembers almost nothing after the flash of light. And while Penniston now claims (says Pope) “the inspection of the craft took many minutes,” for Burroughs, the interval between the time he hit the ground until the UFO departed “seemed like a few seconds” (6–9).

Even more unbelievably, over thirty years after the fact, Penniston produced his alleged notebook in which he had recorded an incredible secret from the encounter with the UFO. Not only had he touched the craft but he now claims in doing so to have received by “telepathic download” a “binary code message” (a string of ones and zeroes, run-

ning line after line, for sixteen pages). Under hypnosis, he says he learned that the entities were not ETs after all; “They are time travelers—they are us” (239). Who would venture to wager on what Jim Penniston will claim next?

Even Deputy Base Commander Halt’s statements have become inflated over time. Whereas in 2007—describing lights he had witnessed on the night following the initial incident—he said he had “no idea” what he had seen. However, in 2010 he gave an affidavit (for reasons that are unclear) stating his belief that the lights “were extraterrestrial in origin” and that security forces in the U.S. and U.K. had “attempted—both then and now—to subvert the significance of what occurred at Rendlesham Forest and RAF Bentwaters by the use of well-practiced methods of disinformation” (41–42).

Actually, the responses of the USAF and the RAF appear to be mostly passive, as if they wish the original comedy of errors would simply go away and their serious military agencies would not be further threatened to become laughingstocks. In contrast, left looking very much like fools, Burroughs, Halt, and most especially the remarkable Penniston appear unable to see how their increasingly strident and exaggerated “memories” are making them appear like loose cannons indeed. They will, of course, sell some books, get some attention, and fool some people. ■

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