

Stomping around, goofing off

Why the US Air Force and the British MoD kept quiet about the Rendlesham Forest Incident

by Peter Brookesmith

To the devoted connoisseur of skeptic-versus-believer debates, the argument over the 'Rendlesham Incident' of December 1980 has become a classic of its kind. The case was early dubbed 'Britain's Roswell'—an appropriate sobriquet, for claims and counter-claims about both cases have unfolded along strikingly similar lines over the years. Believers and star witnesses have elaborated the story, some in fantastical ways, while intrepid truth-seekers with nothing to gain—decried in the trade as fact-shy debunkers and government shills—keep digging up bits of evidence that indicate nothing anomalous happened.

One phase of this decades-long debate revolved around the suggestion—and it was only a suggestion, not a 'claim'—by the former USAF law enforcement officer, retired Senior Master Sergeant Kevin Conde: that a prank he played while on patrol at Woodbridge may have been behind one feature of the case.

Briefly stated, Conde—then a Technical Sergeant—on one occasion adapted a USAF police car's fancy lighting system to generate a brilliant display of coloured illuminations in a foggy night sky. This could have created the impression that mysterious beams of light were being shone not up from, but down onto, the Woodbridge base from above. Conde was not sure, but thought it possible that he had perpetrated his jape at the time Lt Col Charles Halt and his party were stumbling around in the dark in Rendlesham Forest. If so, these exchanges, on the tape-recorded commentary that Halt made at the time, make sense:

LT COL HALT: Now we're observing what appears to be a beam coming down to the ground.

M/SGT BALL: Look at the colours... shit.

LT COL HALT: This is unreal.

[Break in recording]



LT COL HALT: 3.30: and the objects are still in the sky, although the one to the south looks like it's losing a little bit of altitude. We're turning around and heading back toward the base. The object to the sou... the object to the south is still beaming down lights to the ground.

[Break in recording]

LT COL HALT: 0400 hours: one object still hovering over the Woodbridge base at about five to ten degrees off the horizon. Still moving erratic and similar lights beaming down as earlier.¹

Interestingly enough, two other witnesses—local residents—had said they saw coloured lights moving around in the region of the East Gate at the same time.² So Conde's practical joke, or one like it, looked for a while as if it might be a good explanation for that otherwise puzzling aspect of the case. On the other hand, Ian Ridpath's analysis of which stars were scintillating, and subject to autokinesis, near the horizon on the night Halt was in the woods, could equally well explain the remarks about 'light beams' on Halt's tape.³ And as Kevin Conde can't be certain when he played his prank, and no testimony has so far emerged to pin something similar on someone else on the Night In Question, Ridpath's explanation becomes the most parsimonious.

I mention all this simply to give Kevin Conde his due *locus standi* in the Rendlesham affair. Inevitably, if now perhaps to his chagrin, Conde was drawn into what one can only call an argy-bargy on the Internet with the late Georgina Bruni, author of the True Believer's Bible on the Rendlesham incident, [You Can't Tell](#)

The People⁴, over his possible part in the events of the second night. Equally inevitably the question of a 'cover-up' arose in the course of the exchange. In responding to that idea, Conde wrote:

Knowing the USAF as I do I am still convinced that if the USAF was covering anything up, it was a vice base commander leading a search for UFOs off base [emphasis added] accompanied by people responsible for guarding nuclear weapons. The fact that senior leadership did nothing to Halt can be attributed to their desire to keep the situation low key. Relieving Halt would have made a splash, especially if he threw a public fit, coupled with a lack of firm evidence. They may have believed he was a wacko, but could not prove it.⁵

Conde's hint that Halt was out of order in rambling about off base was echoed by Col Sam Morgan, who in the summer of 1981 succeeded Col Ted Conrad as Lt Col Halt's immediate commanding officer. In a 1984 phone conversation with famously horned, hoofed, and tailed commentator on ufology, Phil Klass, Col Morgan said: "Halt really had no authority out there in that forest anyhow. So he was a kind of hobbyist on his own lurking around. When I... looked into it I concluded that it was just a bunch of guys screwing around in the woods."⁶ This last phrase in turn is strangely redolent of Kevin Conde's fellow 81st SPS security policeman Chris Arnold's words, in a message to the e-zine UK UFO Network.⁷ Apart from some exceedingly dry remarks about the event (such as it was—"It just was not an issue," said Arnold) and some of its latter-day stars, Arnold describes the venture into the woods as "just a half-dozen or so of us stomping around goofing off."

The official position

In April 1998, I became intrigued by this question of US airmen wandering around, apparently on duty, en masse, in the Suffolk woods. It struck me as strange that they should feel free to do so. I lifted my electric telephone, and spoke at length with the RAF and British Army press officers at the Ministry of Defence. I didn't mention the Rendlesham case. I merely asked, à propos any RAF base leased to the USAF, where the USAF's territorial responsibility ended and who would defend the perimeter if it were at-

tacked.

The answers were interesting, for they suggested that Lt Col Halt had put himself in a potentially embarrassing position. They were:

- USAF responsibility starts (and ends) with the fence line of an RAF base leased to the USAF.
- Beyond that, i.e. outside the base, responsibility for security rests with the local police.

That's the strict legal position: Mr Plod is in charge. If hordes of Red Army Spetsnaz⁸ troops were to have parachuted into the Suffolk countryside as Soviet ICBMs rained down on Birmingham, Knotty Ash, Stow-in-the-Wold, &c, the protocol, at face value, would have been as follows. The US base commander complains to the RAF base commander, who passes on American expressions of distaste to the local police who, duly incensed at the Soviets' offence of armed trespass, request (in suitably clipped tones) the Army to give military aid to the civil community. Note that formula: the strict legal and constitutional position is that the British military would come to the assistance of the police and thus to the defence of the British sovereign, her subjects, and her realm—not to the aid of the US military.

This protocol may seem quaint and curious, even Byzantine, to those unaware of the delicate constitutional position of the British Army. This is commanded by the sovereign but exists only by consent of parliament, which may decline to raise taxes to support it. The arrangement has its roots in the causes of the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of the 17th century, and revolves around the British distaste for standing armies, which historically have been seen as potential instruments of regal tyranny. A similar suspicion of standing armies is built in to the US Constitution, which insists that funding for the military must be reviewed every two years. But, as will become clear, the British position is important to the 'Rendlesham Incident' and the nature of any cover-up by the authorities.

As part of a series of safeguards against the politicization of the Army on the one hand and the abuse of power by the

Crown on the other, the separation of military and police powers is taken rather seriously by the British. Given Lt Col Halt's position and responsibilities,⁹ it would be surprising (or at least depressing) if he hadn't been apprised of the subtleties of the British constitution and where he stood in relation to it.

Wars and rumours of wars

It's not hard to see that the intricacies of the British constitution could create problems, unforeseen in the 17th century, for those wanting to defend a USAF base in the UK against a common enemy. But in the interests of pragmatism much may be done by way of laws, leases and treaties when a country enjoys (and sometimes suffers from) an unwritten constitution. Even the egregious Nick Pope, devotee of an ET interpretation of the Rendlesham incident and of whom more later, recognizes as much:

The legal position with regard to United States Visiting Forces (USVF) is complex, and there are a number of different laws and treaties governing what USVF personnel can and cannot do in the UK. The general rule is that US jurisdiction ends at the perimeter fence, though there are a number of circumstances where it would be quite proper for on-duty USVF personnel to go off-base.¹⁰

One such circumstance is certainly the defence of the base. USAF security police are also trained as infantrymen, fulfilling the same role as the RAF Regiment does on a British air base. As Kevin Conde explained it:

In the event of real tensions, and the belief that the Russians were coming, we would ... have operated freely off base. The exercises that have figured into some of this controversy are an example. The majority of the hard core 'combat' occurred off base.

When in the air base ground defense mode we knew that if we waited until we had Russians in the wire we were already too late. It was our mission to go off base and engage them as far from the flight line as possible.¹¹

In the prelude to what turns out to be a shooting war, the preliminary stages

from political crisis to outbreak of hostilities generally take a long time. By the mid Sixties it had been calculated that there were some 40–50 discrete stages an international crisis would pass through before an exchange of nuclear missiles became inevitable.¹² During that time US bases in the UK would have ample opportunity to prepare their defences.

One can safely say that any necessary diplomatic niceties would, in one form or another, have been observed long before any actual shooting started. One can say this particularly safely because in October 2010 the aforementioned Nick Pope, former Ministry of Defence (MoD) clerk and would-be half-colonel of the British Army, stated at the Fortean Times Un-Convention that US forces in the UK had standing authorization under the Status of Forces Agreement to venture off-base if the security of a base was compromised. As the person who provoked this useful revelation, I regret not having had the wit to point out at the time that proceeding mob-handed off-base to debunk (Lt Col Halt's own word) a UFO or two, scarcely constitutes defending 'the security of the base' as that term might commonly be understood.

Such US exercises as occurred off-base, not being a reaction to a threat, would also have been cleared with everyone concerned in the proper order, including the British police. Constitutionally, 'clearance' would, after all, take no more than a telephone conversation between the base commander (an RAF officer) and the local chief constable to become legal—the latter is sufficiently autonomous—and thereafter it's up to him whom else, including no one, he might choose to tell about it.

Out of his own mouth

One circumstance in which it is legal and most definitely moral for US forces to move beyond base perimeters in formation is to deal with downed aircraft. But on the second night of the Rendlesham saga, the night Hall went snooping in the woods, there was no such triggering misapprehension about downed planes to inspire (or justify) an off-base expedition.¹³ According to Halt himself,

The duty Flight Lieutenant [Bruce En-

glund] came in, and he was quite shaken, and insisted upon speaking to myself and the base commander about a matter of utmost urgency. He said, "It's back," and I said, "What's back?" and he said, "The UFO is back." I assembled a small team of experts and we set off in the forest, ready to debunk it.¹⁴

Two points emerge from this revelation. In the first place, it suggests a high degree of psychological priming among the airmen involved in favour of some anomalous occurrence, deriving (one presumes) from reports or rumours of the events of the previous evening. In fairness, Englund may have been using the term 'UFO' in the strict technical sense it's employed by aviators and air traffic controllers. But Halt's retrospective claim that he 'set off in the forest, ready to debunk' the UFO suggests that he, at least, didn't take the term in that sense.

Second, Halt's formulation here fits the traditional template of believers' rhetoric—the claim to have started as a skeptic but to have been slowly converted to a belief in a favourite anomalous or paranormal phenomenon by the overwhelming nature of the evidence, etc. The intention, conscious or otherwise, of this ploy is to endow both the evidence and the adherent with authority; but implicitly, it depends on the fragile notion that personal 'authenticity' and experience outweigh the forces of logic and rational examination.

What happened next

In the original version of this article, I remarked at this point as follows: at the very least Halt should have known enough to be aware of the possible consequences of going for a mass hike off-base, on duty and in uniform. Then-Sqn Ldr (later Wing Cdr) Don Moreland, the British base commander, should have known that better than anyone. US forces overseas are subject to local law for crimes committed on the host's territory and, legally speaking, Halt and his men were trespassing. Even under the law of trespass as it stood at the time, had they caused significant damage in the forest, they would have been committing an offence, albeit minor, and could have been prosecuted. For diplomatic reasons it's perhaps unlikely they would have been

hauled up before the local beak, but it's not impossible.

Having discussed this with various parties, I'm less convinced today that the situation was quite so clear-cut. For example, the question of whether Charles Halt and all his cohorts were in fact 'on duty' (or regarded themselves as such) has never been fully answered.¹⁵ Even so, Halt himself had changed into a 'utility' uniform, and sallied forth to scratch among the trees with issue kit (a starlight scope and a Geiger counter, at the very least: the presence of light-alls is disputed) and certainly filed an official report. Lt Bruce Englund was certainly on duty. Chris Armold, by his own account, seems also to have been on duty. Sgt Monroe 'Greg' Nevilles, who operated the Geiger counter (and according to Col Sam Morgan had had little training on the machine and was none too bright), was also on duty: Halt recruited him as he was the on-call member of the base's Disaster Preparedness Unit. The status of Sgts Adrian Bustinza and Bobby Ball isn't clear. Larry Warren and John Burroughs seem just to have tagged along. In any case it seems hardly likely that any of these people would disobey Halt, whom they would regard as in charge by virtue of his rank. All of which makes Halt's position à propos the standing arrangements between the UK Government and the USAF ambiguous at best.

In turn this has some bearing on how Halt's commanders decided to respond to his adventure and his report. That would also depend to some extent on how they viewed Halt as an individual, an officer, and a gentleman. Halt was in the same position anyone might be in any large corporate enterprise: how his peers and superiors reacted to his behaviour would depend largely on their wisdom and urbanity, and their view of his character. Halt was fortunate in having his expedition viewed kindly by men of experience and insight. One says 'fortunate' because neither the officers nor the enlisted men around him seem to have formed an especially high opinion of Lt Col Charles Ignis Halt.

Col Sam Morgan called him "a kind of twit" in his 1984 conversation with Phil Klass. In an email exchange with me in December 2010 he called Halt's foray "flaky", and

added: "Halt was a bit like the boy scout who never grew up and was out looking for some kind of attention or excitement." Halt's now-famous habit of riding around at night with security police patrols would certainly suggest a certain Walter Mitty-ish tendency. Regarding this, Col Morgan commented: "I was concerned that he would usurp Major [Mal] Zickler's authority and often spoke with Major Zickler to ensure he was not irritated by Halt's actions. As long as Maj. Zickler could tolerate Halt's meddling and as long as Halt did not compromise his job performance, I did not interfere."

The enlisted men who chauffeured Halt around were not always so sanguine, while independently endorsing Col Morgan's perception that Halt was in search of attention and excitement. Kevin Conde observed:

Senior officers generally stayed out of our business, as they did not want to interfere or become part of something they [might] have to rule on later. Halt rode all the time—says something about his life or lack of... Folks that ride with cops want the excitement, and when they see something dramatic it is exciting. In the end though it is also frustrating, because they aren't cops and they can't share in the excitement. All they can do is just watch. That's Halt—he watched, but could not participate, and he hated that. Until Christmas 80-81. Then he had the chance to be a man of action.¹⁶

And Col Morgan's take today on Halt's story is this:

Halt was meddling as usual and went to check things out. Halt was over reacting when on the scene and it was recorded on a pocket tape recorder. I got this tape and... [it] started a story which, for Halt, shined a light on him. He could have addressed the facts or he could have inflated the story. He chose to inflate the story. Soon the story was much bigger than he expected and he does not now have a graceful way out.

Red peril, red faces

Halt's superiors' response to news of his sortie should also be seen in the general political context of the time, and against the backdrop of the presence of

nuclear weapons at the Woodbridge/Bentwaters complex.

At the end of 1980, there were US hostages still held in Iran (on 21 December, the recently self-installed ayatollahs had demanded \$10 billion for their release), and the Iran–Iraq war was in its opening stages; there was an IRA mainland bombing campaign in progress; the USAF base at Greenham Common was infested with ladies protesting against stationing US cruise missiles in the UK, while there had recently been a rise in militant anti-nuclear protest in general (for instance, the Sharpness incident of 8 July). The Soviets had renewed jamming of Western radio broadcasts to the USSR; Poland was in upheaval, threatening the integrity of the Soviet empire, and there was a real possibility of invasion by the Red Army; the Gang of Four was on trial in China; and Ronald Reagan, whose rhetoric promised an end to détente with the Communist bloc, had just been elected President of the United States.

In short, these were fairly jumpy times by Cold War standards. In their light, there was potentially a huge embarrassment for the USAF and for the US itself in the discovery that a bunch of American airmen from Woodbridge and Bentwaters had been distracted from what they were supposed to do—guard their base: the heart of the USAF police task was to guard the weapons systems and storage areas—and go for a ramble in the forest in search of a ‘UFO’. In a review in *Magonia* (No 74, April 2001) of Georgina Bruni’s *You Can’t Tell The People*, Peter Rogerson, admittedly with some exaggeration, put it this way:

...if you were the USAF or the British or American governments and you were pushed to into an absolute corner, which story would cause you the most embarrassment in the tabloids: “Drug crazed American servicemen fired on a lighthouse thinking it was an ALIEN SPACE-SHIP (shock horror), and these are the men guarding the CRUISE MISSILES” (even more shock horror); or, “Brave lightly armed US servicemen confront an ALIEN SPACESHIP, risking all to do their sacred duty and protect their precious charge”. No real contest is it? True or not, the first headline invites in all sorts of real investigative journalists, sniffing out tales of sex,

drugs and rock’n’roll, and a state of affairs too close to Bilko for comfort. The second invites cranks and makes sure that real journalists stay far away.

We know what Halt’s superiors did in these circumstances, which was send a bland report by Halt up the line via Sqn Ldr Moreland to the MoD. They, having made some enquiries that established that nothing was seen on radar, came to their usual conclusion—“no defence significance”—and directed their attention and their long-suffering quills elsewhere. But Rogerson (as I did until quite recently) clearly thought, in 2001, that there had been a conscious, calculated decision by those on the ground at Woodbridge not to make much of Halt’s expedition. For the record, I’ve never assumed, as Rogerson seems to here, that the USAF or the MoD has throughout deliberately deflected attention from some Greater Secret hidden in the Rendlesham incident.

But from what I can gather, it seems not to have crossed anyone’s mind that Halt had, in the vulgar phrase, driven a coach and horses through the Status of Forces agreement. Whether this was inattention to fine detail or a case of turning a blind eye is, at the time of writing, anyone’s guess. The fact of Halt’s transgression may, of course, have crossed Don Moreland’s mind, but he hasn’t said so on the record. Halt seems not to have had an earwiggin’ over his foray. Col Sam Morgan told me: *“I don’t know of any wire brushing that Halt received here over his actions, nor did I find anyone concerned about the matter. It was dismissed as little more than Halt being Halt.”* The urbane and tolerant view prevailed. Rather more likely is that the wider implications occurred to the civil servants in the MoD, and perhaps to others such as Gen. Charles Gabriel, to whose notice the incident came. But however one looks at it, it wasn’t in anyone’s interests to make an uproar, since that would, inevitably, have become public.

And finally

None of the above bears on what ‘really’ happened in the forest. But it does reasonably, Occam-like even, explain why for years both the UK MoD and the US DoD were really not that keen to let much on about what no one now dis-

putes happened—that a bevy of US airmen, at the behest of a Deputy Combat Support Group Commander who should have known better, went blundering about where they should not have been. (No wonder the forest wildlife was in uproar.) It should be no great surprise that—in the interests of good relations, and most particularly good public relations, between long-standing allies—there was a policy of discretion; or cover-up, if you insist. But it was only a cover-up of sorts. For there is a fairly large distinction between studiously ignoring a potentially profoundly embarrassing infraction of English law because of what it revealed about the calibre of certain senior USAF personnel, and conspiring to remain silent about the arrival of an extra-terrestrial craft. Or perhaps time-travellers, as we are now invited to believe.

In sum: Lt Col Charles Halt should have known the law, the British constitution and the conventions before initiating his foolhardy expedition. If he did not, he was out of order; and if he did know, he was even more out of order. The USAF may be forgiven for wishing to draw a discreet veil over what may have been ignorance or foolishness on the part of a senior officer at a strategic air base. Unfortunately, as with many another attempt to conceal a cock-up, this one backfired massively—and the smoke is with us still, for an unnerving number of people seem to prefer breathing its enchanting fumes over the refreshing ozone of rational thought. Fortunately for Halt, however, he was commanded by officers who were more of the civilised and forgiving variety than they were a species of unrelenting martinet.

Ironically, if anyone is now touting a tale of sinister, premeditated cover-up, it is Col Charles Halt himself and his cronies. The final word on that should go to Col Sam Morgan:

Over the years Halt has expanded his story to the point of hinting at a cover up by the USA and UK authorities and I would certainly criticize him here. I have never believed that a national government would be capable of such a cover up, as there would just be too many people involved. If nothing else, I believe Halt has insulted both our governments with his accusations.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. A transcript of the 'Halt tape' can be found at URL: www.ianridpath.com/ufo/haltpape.htm, and an MP3 audio file can be downloaded from www.ianridpath.com/ufo/haltpape.mp3
2. Thanks to James Easton for pointing out this connection, by way of Jenny Randles: UFO Crash Landing?, in a post of 1 September 2003 to the UFORL e-mail list: In UFO Crash Landing?, Jenny Randles documents a witness, Sarah Richardson (only 12 at the time), who reportedly watched enigmatic 'light beams', when Halt was making a similar observation. ... At the time, she was at her mother's home in Woodbridge. It was between 1 and 3 am into Sunday, 28 December. "*From (Mum's) house you could see the river and the forests and the bases. You could hear the revving of the engines. You became familiar with all the spotlights and other activity. This night was different. Three bands of light appeared over the woods to the side of the runway ... They were star-like and they were bright, coloured red, blue and yellow ... the oddest thing was the colour changes. Blue, green, yellow and so on.*" Jenny also notes that on the same night, local garage owner, Gerry Harris, claimed to have observed near [the] East Gate and apparently emanating from within the forest, "*three separate lights*" which sometimes "*moved around in circles*".
3. See the analysis at www.ianridpath.com/ufo/rendlesham3.htm
4. Georgina Bruni: You Can't Tell The People: The Definitive Account of the Rendlesham Forest UFO Mystery, Sidgwick & Jackson 2000
5. Kevin Conde, e-mail message to Georgina Bruni dated 17 July 2003, quoted in a post to the UFORL e-mail list of 20 July 2003. This list is now defunct, but some posts may still be retrievable through the Wayback Machine, <http://web.archive.org/col-lections/web.html>
6. Klass's typed notes of his conversation can be found as a PDF at <http://www.ianridpath.com/ufo/morgan.pdf>
7. UK UFO Network, #80 Pt II, 5 Sept 1997. Archived at <http://ufoupdateslist.com/1997/sep/m07-029.shtml>
8. 'Spetsnaz' is an abbreviation of Spetsialnoye Nazranie—'troops of special purpose'. 'Although Spetsnaz units may be used for other purposes during peacetime, their primary role is to carry out strategic missions during the final days prior to war breaking out and in war itself. These wartime tasks would include: deep reconnaissance of strategic targets; the destruction of strategically important command-control-and-communications (C3) facilities; the destruction of strategic weapons' delivery systems; demolition of important bridges and transportation routes; and the snatching or assassination of important military and political leaders. Many of these missions would be carried out before the enemy could react and some even before war had actually broken out.' —John Keller, 'Spetsnaz', <http://www.systemauk.com/spetsnaz.htm>
9. Lt Col Halt's official title was Deputy Combat Support Group Commander, a post most often referred to as 'deputy base commander'. The Combat Support Commander was ultimately responsible for all roads and grounds, all buildings and structures, security, law enforcement, the schools, the Commissary, the Base Exchange (BX), behaviour of dependents, utilities such as water and sewerage, and many other such activities. It was the security and policing aspect of his job that gave Halt the licence to ride with the base law enforcement patrols and, of course, to call on security troops to join him on the night he went outside the wire and into Rendlesham Forest.
10. Post to UFORL e-mail list, 21 July 2003
11. Post to UFO Updates, 'Re: More Bentwaters Information', 30 Aug 2003.
12. I had this piece of information from Lord Birdwood, whose office was next to mine at the J. Walter Thompson Company in London, in the mid-1960s; he in turn had it as part of a briefing (which included a screening) concerning Peter Watkins's then-banned BBC film *The War Game* at the House of Lords. Having since searched in vain for some more concrete reference, I am forced to appear to be name-dropping.
13. I suspect that the responsibility of USAF police for finding downed aircraft was also covered in the leases and treaties to which Pope refers, and involved some kind of standing licence to cover such emergencies. Once again it would clearly be mad to have to go through a diplomatic rigmarole before getting people to twisted metal and roasting flesh. The UK's FOIA has yet to be fully exploited in finding out just what were (and are) the arrangements, agreements, contracts or treaties by which (even allied) foreign troops could go into action on British soil?
14. Interview with Col Halt, *Strange But True?*, UK ITV, 9 December 1994
15. At the time I was writing the final draft of this article I had had no answer to an enquiry on this precise point, forwarded via a third party to Col Halt on 21 December 2010.
16. E-mail dated 1 October 2010, to Ian Ridpath.

THANKS most especially to Kevin Conde and Col Sam Morgan, for clarifying a number of points raised while revising this article, and to Dr David Clarke, James Easton, Joe McGonagle, Jenny Randles, Ian Ridpath and John Stepkowski for various specific illuminations, as well as for continuing discussions of the Rendlesham incident over the years, and for keeping my interest in it alive.

Copyright © 2004, 2011 Peter Brooksmith

This article is adapted and expanded from 'Forgive Us Our Trespasses', published in *The Skeptic* Volume 17 Number 2-3, Summer and Autumn 2004