

Flying saucers – fact or fiction?

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Many Australians were so convinced they had seen a flying saucer that they reported it to the government – usually the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) which had special forms to document the details. National Archives reference officer Bill Edwards investigates – did UFOs really visit our planet?

The public's fascination with flying saucers in the postwar years resulted in the Commonwealth government recording possible sightings. While not convinced of little green men from Mars, they thought it worth taking an interest in the subject. With the Cold War and the space race in full swing, it was prudent to keep an open mind – if only for the sake of national security.

RAAF records of possible unidentified flying object (UFO) sightings have been retained in the national archival collection.

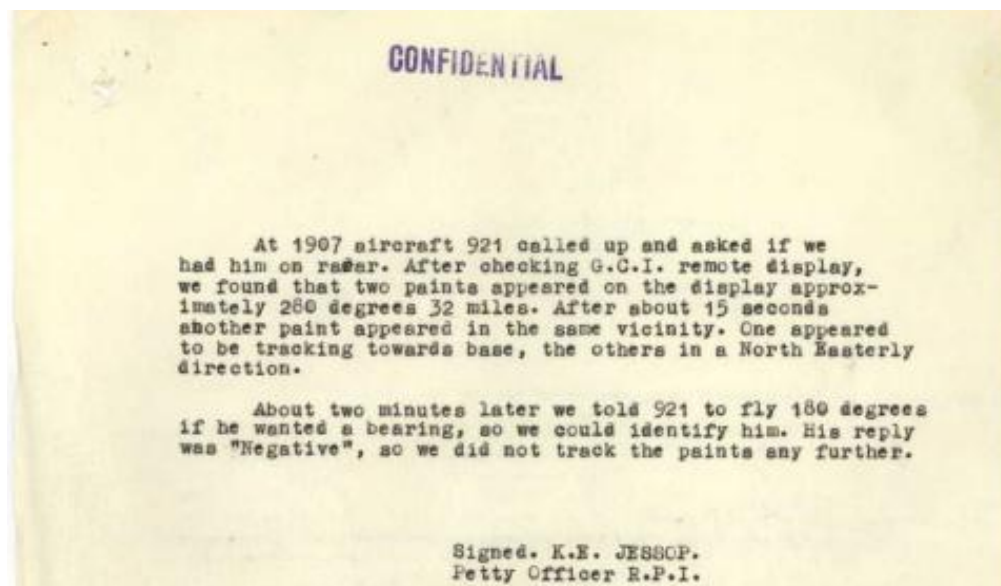
Sightings by members of the public were often dismissed as the result of an overactive imagination – or identified as aircraft or ordinary celestial objects. The moon and Venus cropped up regularly. But sightings by highly trained defence personnel were not so easily dismissed.



The Sea Fury incident

One such case was the Sea Fury incident of 1954

On 31 August Royal Australian Navy (RAN) pilot Lieutenant JA O'Farrell was returning to the RAN air station at Nowra on a night flight in his Hawker Sea Fury. He noticed first one, then a second bright light flying nearby. O'Farrell described each object as 'a vague shape with the white light situated centrally on top'. As the strange objects kept pace with his plane, O'Farrell radioed Nowra, which confirmed that the unknown craft were indeed registering on radar. After a while the lights took off to the north-east at tremendous speed and disappeared. On returning to base, a shaken O'Farrell made a detailed report which, along with the radar operator's confirmation, is in the record. The nature of the fast-moving objects still remains a mystery.



In October 1978, young civilian pilot Frederick Valentich and his Cessna vanished over Bass Strait on a night flight from Moorabbin to King Island. Before radio contact was lost, Valentich reported a strange object with four bright lights hovering above him. The disappearance of an aircraft while the pilot was reporting a UFO created a media sensation and led to theories of alien abduction. But subsequent researchers have suggested a more prosaic and tragic explanation. Valentich was a UFO enthusiast, and had reported a sighting on a previous occasion. At the time of his last flight, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and the star Antares were in a diamond formation, and highly visible. This bright heavenly conjunction – combined with his relative inexperience – could have led the young pilot to imagine an alien craft above him, fatally distracting him from his instruments.



The RAAF ceased investigating UFO sightings in 1994, reasoning that only 3 per cent of reports could not be explained by natural phenomena, and these presented little or no threat to security.

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