

Excerpt from the chapter 'The Cover-Up', *Open Skies, Closed Minds* (Nick Pope, 1996)

There is some evidence that Aurora, if it exists, has been operating over Britain. A report sent to the Ministry of Defence tells of two men out walking at Calvine, a remote area twenty miles north of Pitlochry near Blair Atholl in Tayside. It was 4 August 1990. The two men became aware of a low humming sound and turned to see a large diamond-shaped object which hovered for about ten minutes before flying off vertically at great speed. What was really intriguing was that a Harrier jet also made a number of low-level passes, as if the pilot had seen the object as well and was homing in for a closer look. One of the men on the ground had a camera and sent the photographs he took to both the ministry and the Scottish Daily Record. The Harrier remains untraced; the object unidentified. I kept a blow-up of one of his photographs on my office wall until one day my Head of Division noticed it and took it away.

Expert analysis had revealed that the photographs were not fakes, but neither the experts nor I accepted the Aurora theory. And even if it exists, it is most unlikely that Aurora could function in the way described in the encounter. It seemed to me to be the perfect way for UFO sceptics to explain away a difficult sighting. The Calvine report remains one of the most intriguing cases in the Ministry of Defence's files. The conclusions, however are depressingly familiar: object unexplained, case closed, no further action.

Calvine was not the only possible Aurora sighting. On 5 November 1990, a patrol of RAF Tornados was flying over the North Sea when they were overtaken at high speed by what the pilots could only describe as a large aircraft of some sort.

In 1991 came the most peculiar reports. The United States Geological Survey recorded on their earthquake-monitoring equipment a series of strange sonic booms. They were able to calculate from their data that an airborne object had been travelling at a speed of at least Mach 3. In other words, it was moving at three times the speed of sound, some 2,100mph. And it was heading for the Nellis Air Force Base in the middle of Area 51. At around the same time, an RAF air-traffic controller reported having tracked a target in the vicinity of RAF Machrihanish on the remote Kintyre Peninsula on Scotland's west coast at a similar astonishing speed. Other witnesses claimed to have seen odd aircraft shaped like paper darts in the area. The rumour grew that not only did Aurora exist, but that it was undergoing test flights between the United States and the UK, stopping overnight at RAF Machrihanish. The remote base would certainly be suitable for such a purpose: it is as forbidding in its own way as Area 51, with watchtowers and miles of barbed wire fences. It looks like a prison camp.

The American authorities have always vigorously denied the existence of Aurora. The then secretary of the air force, Donald Rice, stated categorically that the United States had no aircraft remotely resembling the descriptions being circulated about Aurora. If there really is no Aurora, what is it that are we dealing with?

Questions were asked in the House. Did the government know about Aurora or any other craft operating clandestinely in our airspace? The MP's question, together with the response from the minister for the armed forces was as follows:

Mr Liew Smith: To ask the secretary of state for defence how many Aurora prototype aircraft of the United States Air Force are based at the Machrihanish Air Force Base in

Argyll, and for what period permission has been given for basing these aircraft in the United Kingdom.

Mr Soames: There are no United States Air Force prototype aircraft based at RAF Machrihanish and no authorisation has been given by Her Majesty's government to the United States Air Force, or any other US body, to operate such aircraft within or from the United Kingdom.

It was a cheeky question, because it made the assumption that Aurora exists.

Another MP tried an oblique approach, not mentioning Aurora at all. Mr Soames' response was as follows: 'No new types of high-altitude, long-range reconnaissance aircraft have been based or are being considered for basing in the UK.'

Formal inquiries were made through the American embassy in London and all relevant American military branches. They were all pressurised to tell us whether such an aircraft exists, and they all assured us it didn't.

If this is a lie, the consequences for Anglo-American relations would be dire, and it would seem foolish in the extreme to jeopardise such a strong alliance for the sake of an aircraft, however technologically dazzling. In fact, when inquiries were made with the Americans, they intimated that they themselves were wondering whether some of their own UFO sightings might not be British experimental aircraft. This was either the most brilliant of double-bluffs or the Americans — those I spoke to, at least — do not have an Aurora at all.

There is a lighthearted side to the Aurora controversy. An American toy manufacturer has produced a model which they claim is a faithful representation of the phantom craft. It is shaped like an arrowhead and has a smaller, piloted craft mounted on top, rather as the space shuttle was mounted on top of a Jumbo jet as part of its initial testing programme. When speculation was rife about the Stealth fighter, similar excited rumours spread. Toys were produced, aviation experts wrote critiques and drew sketches. When the Stealth fighter was finally unveiled to the world, some were right, some were not. We shall have to wait and see whether the Aurora toy lives up to expectations — assuming that Aurora roars, of course!

The serious question is, if there is an Aurora and it isn't American, who does own it? And are they flying, unimpeded, over our airspace? If Aurora does not exist, and never has done, what is it that has been seen in our skies? My Head of Division would have had to do some serious rethinking about the photograph that he took off my wall. If military planners are using the UFO phenomenon to mask the development of increasingly advanced aircraft, are these machines, as Bob Lazar and others contend, in fact the product of research into genuine alien vehicles? Or, just as sinister, could alien intelligence be using 'black' projects as a cover, relying on scientists and military and government personnel to write off an unexplained triangle in the sky as just another secret prototype they don't know about? Who exactly is fooling whom?