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THE ASTRONOMER ROYAL ON 50 YEARS OF DISCOVERY



Where are all the aliens?

ROSWELL AT 75

Nick Pope looks at back at the most famous UFO story of all, and why more people are reporting strange sights in the sky

This summer sees the 75th anniversary of the Roswell incident, where believers say an extraterrestrial spacecraft crashed in the New Mexico desert, with debris – and possibly alien bodies – being recovered by the US government, marking the beginning of a decades-long cover-up. What really happened, and why does this mystery still attract such interest and controversy, decades later?

On 24 June 1947, a pilot, Kenneth Arnold, was flying over the Cascade Mountains of Washington State in the US, helping to search for a crashed military aircraft. He saw nine crescent-shaped objects flying in formation at a height of around 3km (10,000ft) and an estimated speed of approximately 1,900km/h: seemingly impossible at the time. Arnold described the jerky movement of the objects as being, “...like a saucer would if you skipped it over water”.

The mystery begins

The media got hold of the story, coined the phrase ‘flying saucer’ and a modern mystery was born. It wasn’t the first sighting of what we now call a UFO (unidentified flying object), but it was the first to capture the public imagination, making news headlines around the world. More reports were received, suggesting these sightings were commonplace but had previously gone unreported. As this ‘summer of the saucers’ progressed, media coverage intensified to a point of near-hysteria, until matters came to a head and it seemed the mystery might be resolved.

On 7 July a local rancher named ‘Mac’ Brazel contacted the sheriff in Roswell to say he’d discovered strange debris spread over the ranch. He’d found it

days earlier but hadn’t thought much of it until the stories about flying saucers. Thinking there might be a connection and guessing something might have crashed during a recent storm, he alerted the authorities. He’d brought some samples of the debris, and when the sheriff contacted the nearby Army airbase, intelligence officer Jesse Marcel went to the crash site with Brazel and recovered more debris.

The military base’s public information officer, Walter Haut, worked with a local journalist to release a newswire report about the event:

“The many rumors regarding the flying disc became a reality yesterday when the intelligence office of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disc through the cooperation of one of the local ranchers and the sheriff’s office of Chaves County.

“The flying object landed on a ranch near Roswell sometime last week. Not having phone facilities, the rancher stored the disc until such time as he was able to contact the sheriff’s office, who in turn notified Major Jesse A Marcel of the 509th Bomb Group Intelligence Office.

“Action was immediately taken and the disc was picked up at the rancher’s home. It was inspected at the Roswell Army Air Field and subsequently loaned by Major Marcel to higher headquarters.” ▶

▼ **Stranger things:** since the Roswell incident, bizarre UFO-related stories have emerged from across the world, including the alien abduction of cattle



Life, but not as we know it:
Roswell continues to celebrate
its historic link with UFOs





► The news sent shockwaves around the world, but it's the iconic front page headline of the local *Roswell Daily Record* (right) that's best-known: 'RAAF Captures Flying Saucer on Ranch in Roswell Region'.

Within 24 hours there was a stunning development. In a complete reversal of their position, the US military said a mistake had been made, and that the 'flying saucer' was a crashed weather balloon. The *Roswell Daily Record* printed a follow-up story that read 'Gen. Ramey Empties Roswell Saucer' – General Roger Ramey being the Commander of the Eighth Air Force, to whose Fort Worth headquarters the debris had been flown. A series of photos were published showing Ramey, Marcel, and other military personnel holding some of the debris. Sure enough, it looked pretty uninspiring and was entirely consistent with the 'tin foil' mentioned by the military in their explanation.

Nowadays, with the 24/7 news cycle, internet, social media and an activist community of UFO researchers, such a claim – followed by such an about-turn – would no doubt cause controversy and conspiracy theories on a massive scale. This is especially true given that the 509th Bomb Group was the only atomic bomb-capable squadron anywhere in the world at the time. It's hard to imagine these elite personnel – many of whom were familiar with weather balloons – being fooled in this way. But post-war America was very different from today, and in that calmer, more trusting-of-authority era, the weather balloon explanation was almost universally believed. While interest in flying saucers and UFOs went from strength to strength, Roswell disappeared from the narrative.

A voice from the past

The story of the Roswell UFO crash was rediscovered in 1978 by nuclear physicist-turned-ufologist Stanton T Friedman, who was tipped off that a retired military man had an interesting story to tell: none other than Jesse Marcel. Marcel told Friedman the weather balloon explanation had been a cover story and that the photos had been staged, with weather balloon debris being substituted for the real wreckage. He claimed that everyone involved in the retrieval was clear the object had indeed been an extraterrestrial spaceship.

Over the next few years, researchers dug deeper into the mystery, tracking down many of the key

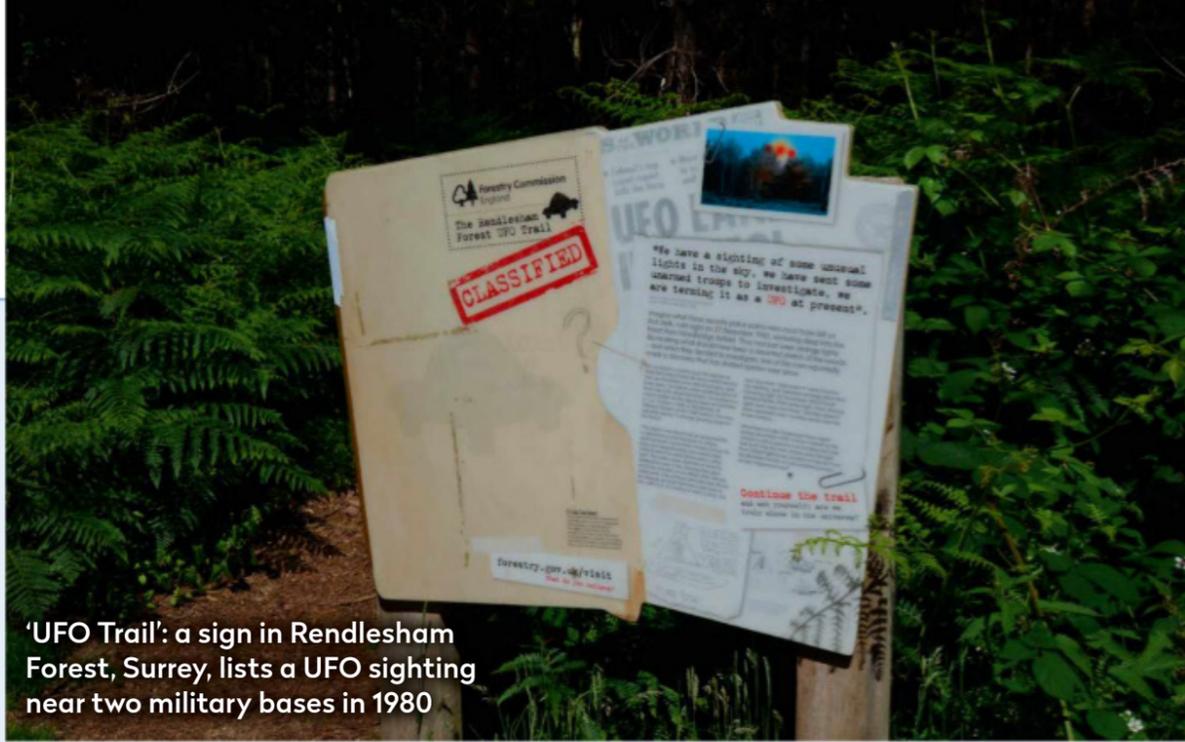


▲ Breaking news: in July 1947, the *Roswell Daily Record* generated a media frenzy about a 'flying saucer' captured by the US military

◀ After saying that a mistake had been made about the capture, the US military released photos, like this one of Major Jesse A Marcel at Fort Worth, showing pieces of a foil-lined material...



◀ ...and it claimed the wreckage was in fact from a weather balloon. This picture shows a weather balloon being used in military tests in July 1947 at Fort Worth, five days after the Roswell UFO incident



'UFO Trail': a sign in Rendlesham Forest, Surrey, lists a UFO sighting near two military bases in 1980

In recent years the MoD has declassified and released nearly 60,000 pages of UFO documents. The most bizarre case in these real-life X-Files was the Rendlesham Forest incident of December 1980, near two military bases in Suffolk. An object briefly landed in the nearby forest, leaving indentations in the frozen ground, scorch marks on the sides of trees and radiation levels assessed by MoD scientists as being "significantly higher than the average background". Another was a highly-classified intelligence study that suggested some sightings might be attributable to a previously-unknown atmospheric plasma phenomenon.

In June 2021 the US government published an intelligence assessment stating that UFOs "clearly pose a safety of flight issue and may pose a challenge to US national security". By then the UK, which wasn't consulted on the US study, had terminated its own investigations and it declined to re-engage on the subject.

As the US government continues to investigate, it seems the truth may be out there - but the UK government won't be finding it anytime soon.

The UK's X-Files?

The British government once played its own part in investigating strange objects in the night sky

Between 1953 and 2009 the UK's Ministry of Defence researched and investigated UFO reports to assess defence implications. Investigations involved interviewing witnesses, checking radar tapes, analysing photos and videos and cross-checking against military activity, weather balloon launches, satellite paths, meteor showers

and more besides. Most sightings turned out to be misidentifications of ordinary phenomena, but around 5 per cent remained unexplained, including sightings from pilots and cases where UFOs were tracked on radar, performing seemingly impossible speeds, manoeuvres and accelerations.



Hoax: the story behind the infamous 'Alien Autopsy' video of 1995...

players, locating additional witnesses and trying to piece together what happened. A number of retired military personnel who'd been based at Roswell corroborated some elements of the crashed spacecraft narrative and added their own details. Sceptics argued that they were simply telling the researchers what they wanted to hear, writing themselves into the story either as a prank, or because they were seeking attention. Either way, books were written, documentaries, drama series and a movie were made, and the idea of a UFO crash became so embedded in pop culture that even if people had no particular interest or belief in UFOs, there was a good chance they had heard of Roswell.

The stuff of legend

By now fact and fiction were getting blurred, and the narrative was incorporating other UFO conspiracies. It was claimed, for example, that the wreckage had been taken to Area 51 (a remote facility in the Nevada desert where the US developed and test-flew aircraft like the U-2, the SR-71 Blackbird, and stealth fighters and bombers), where attempts were made to reverse-engineer the alien craft. Such storylines would subsequently turn up as plots in movies like *Independence Day* and TV shows like *The X-Files*.

In 1995 a video emerged purporting to show an 'alien autopsy' which, it was implied, was connected to Roswell. The film was a fake, of course, but it generated international news, with the hoax footage subsequently forming the basis of a comedy film starring TV presenters Ant and Dec.

During the 1990s the US government succumbed to media and public pressure, launching their own ▶



..underwent a comedy treatment in 2006, in a movie starring Ant and Dec



PETER GRIFFIN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, FRANCK MARCHIS/SETI, IAN DAGNAL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, ZUMA PRESS, INC./ALAMY STOCK PHOTO, US GOVERNMENT

► retrospective investigation and publishing two reports, the first in 1994 and the second in 1997. The conclusion was that the culprit was indeed a high-altitude weather balloon, but that it had been carrying equipment designed to search the atmosphere for evidence of Soviet nuclear tests as part of something called Project Mogul. Sceptics say the highly-classified nature of this monitoring project explains any apparent oddities in the handling of the incident. It's even possible that the flying disc story was a local initiative designed to throw the media off the true story, with higher command subsequently overruling the plan and saying it was a weather balloon.

The second government report, the release of which coincided with the 50th anniversary of the incident, was arguably guilty of over-egging the pudding. None of the original reports had mentioned alien bodies, and even Jesse Marcel denied this

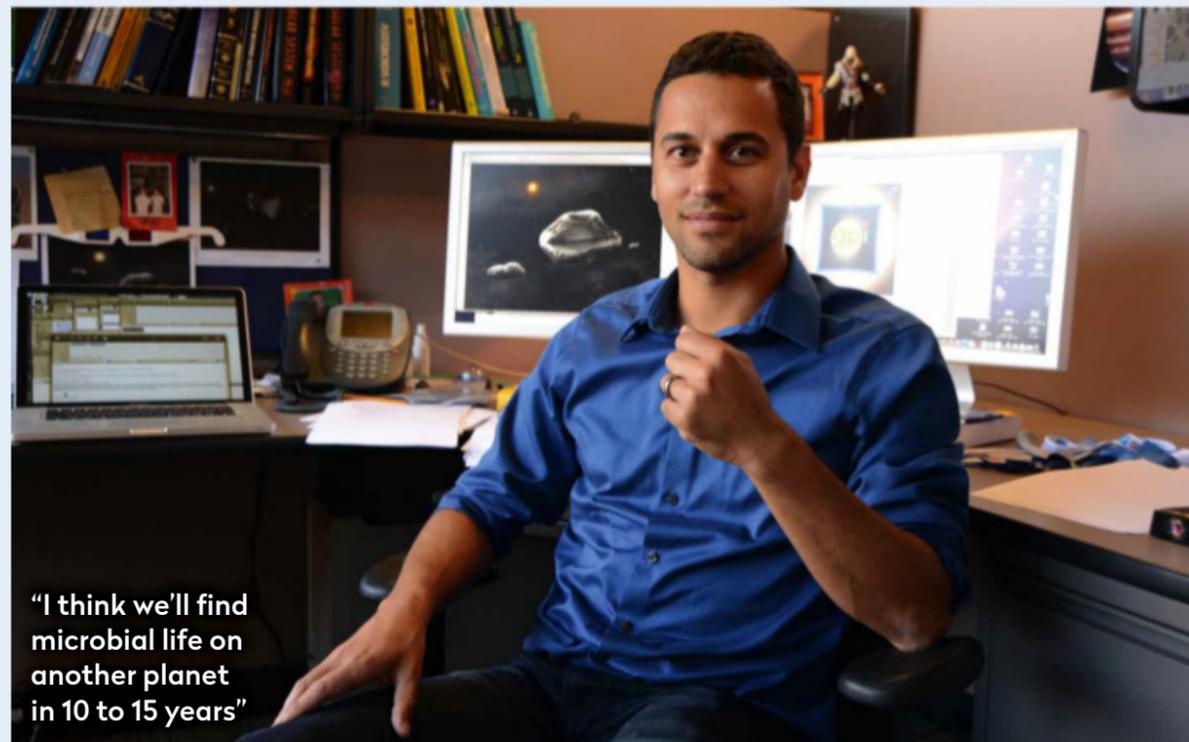


The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence

Franck Marchis of the SETI Institute reveals how scientists search for intelligent life beyond Earth

“The SETI Institute is a non-profit organisation of astronomers, biologists, philosophers: anyone searching for intelligent life in our Universe. We search

for technosignatures that could be coming from an advanced civilisation. Imagine one that knows we are here and beams lasers to send us messages. It may take a



“I think we’ll find microbial life on another planet in 10 to 15 years”

hundred years for us to receive it, but that’s the kind of signal we want to detect.

“Maybe intelligence, technological intelligence, is not supposed to live for a long time. But if we find an intelligent civilisation, we’ll know that we – a biological and technological species – have a future. We would have someone to talk to, to exchange information with.

“I love the Roswell story. It’s the start of modern UFO lore. Today, anyone can record a video in seconds on a smartphone, so we have multiple recordings of weird things happening in the sky. There is a movement now in SETI to create a group to analyse this footage, or even collect new data. There is something strange happening in the sky, because people are recording it, so let’s study this using the scientific method.

“We’ve only just begun the search for intelligent life. There are 400 billion stars in our Galaxy, and 3 trillion galaxies in the Universe, so it will take a long time.

“I think we’ll find microbial life on another planet in 10 to 15 years, but I’m betting that we’ll soon find a radio candidate, one that’s identical to Earth in terms of chemistry. And scientists will argue that this planet has life like ours.”

► For more on SETI, visit seti.org

More ONLINE
Turn to page 5 to watch our full interview with Franck Marchis



▲ Otherworldly: Roswell has embraced its alien associations, with a UFO Museum (above); and its annual UFO-themed parades (right)

▼ Close encounter: a video taken by US Navy jet pilots from USS Theodore Roosevelt, in 2015, appears to show a mysterious flying object that is rotating

aspect of the story, which only emerged later. But the United States Air Force felt they had to address the issue and their convoluted theory suggested that people had conflated the 1947 crash with tests in the 1950s, in which anthropomorphic crash test dummies had been dropped to test the efficacy of military parachutes. Even for neutral recipients, this was a stretch, and was met with predictable derision.

By this time, however, the story of Roswell had become the UFO community's flagship case. The city of Roswell had embraced its heritage, a UFO museum had been opened and annual events were held to mark the occasion. Roswell now has such name recognition that several US presidents have alluded to the UFO incident in speeches and interviews, usually making light-hearted quips, but sometimes – seemingly – playing it sufficiently straight to make people wonder.

Is the truth out there?

Fast forward to the present day. The topic of UFOs has been steadily transitioning from fringe

to mainstream over the last few years – at least in the US. This process started in December 2017 with two related scoops from *The New York Times*: firstly, the revelation that the US Navy had videos of UFOs taken from some of its fast jets, and secondly, the existence of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP). The exact role of AATIP is still the subject of dispute, but the Pentagon confirmed that it did – in part – study UFO data. This is significant because previously the US government said that official interest in the topic ceased at the end of 1969, when an old Air Force program, Project Blue Book, had been terminated.

The New York Times story was seized upon by Congress, and classified briefings followed, with a number of high-profile politicians – Republicans and Democrats alike – speaking out on the issue. In summer 2021 the Office of the Director of National Intelligence published an inconclusive preliminary assessment that stated most of the sightings studied remained unexplained. More recently, multiple UFO-related provisions were included in the Defense Bill, requiring the Department of Defense, the military and the intelligence community to work together to resolve the mystery. Congress wants to know if these mystery objects are drones operated by an adversary such as Russia or China, or something else. Seemingly, nothing has been taken off the table, and this has sent the UFO community into a predictable frenzy.

All this means that the 75th anniversary of the Roswell incident is significant. It isn't just an opportunity for the local community to put on its usual parade and conference. Rather, Roswell is in the spotlight again, representing a sort of 'ground zero' of the UFO phenomenon. As the event passes from living memory into history, we may never resolve the mystery, but the story speaks to our wider fascination with one of the biggest and most profound questions we can ask: whether or not we're alone in the Universe. 🛸



Nick Pope worked for the Ministry of Defence for 21 years. From 1991 to 1994 his duties included investigating UFO sightings to assess national security implications