

Churchill's secret war

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CHURCHILL feature – panel 1

Phantom airships and Foo-fighters

Churchill's famous memo to the Air Ministry on flying saucers was one of the first UFO-related documents to emerge in 1986 when Cabinet papers were released at The National Archives under the '30 year rule'. But even then his interest in unidentified aerial phenomena had a long pedigree – stretching back to before the First World War. In 1912 he launched what could be described as the first government inquiry into a UFO sighting. As First Lord of the Admiralty in the Liberal government of Herbert Asquith he was drawn into high level questions about a phantom airship flap. The panic was worked up by press accounts of strange lights and shapes in the sky that had been seen hovering above strategic dockyards and military bases along Britain's east coast. Some politicians and military officials came to believe that Germany's giant Zeppelin airships had breached the Royal Navy's control over the North Sea and were involved in a massive aerial espionage operation. Churchill did nothing to dispel that idea.

On 13 October 1912 the naval Zeppelin L1 completed a 30 hour, 900-mile endurance flight that took it out over the North Sea from its base in northern Germany. It landed in Berlin at 3.45 pm on the following afternoon. Just after sunset ~~that afternoon~~, an unidentified aircraft was seen and heard flying over the Royal Navy torpedo school and naval flying station at Sheerness in Essex. News of the sighting reached the Admiralty who asked the captain of the torpedo school to investigate. His report was sent to Churchill who was quizzed in the House of Commons on 21 November about the incident. In a written response he said an inquiry had 'ascertained that an unknown aircraft was heard over Sheerness' on 14 October. Flares were lighted at Eastchurch airfield but the pilot did not make a landing. Questioned as to where our own airships were, Churchill said: 'I know it was not one of our airships'. The Sheerness mystery was never solved but the outcry it caused led Count Zeppelin to send a telegram to the editor of the *Daily Mail* with a blunt denial that any German airship had approached the English coast. The Zeppelin diaries, released after the war, corroborate his denial.

This incident was not the only time Churchill's name has become intertwined in wartime stories involving UFOs. In August 2010 news headlines proclaimed that Churchill had ordered a 'wartime cover-up' of another strange incident. This story emerged in August 2010 when The National Archives released 5000 pages of information from the MoD's UFO files. Among them was a rather strange letter from a scientist – name redacted - who claimed that, at the height of WW2, Churchill had ordered the concealment of a wartime UFO incident in order to avoid a mass panic of the type generated by Orson Welles's radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*.

In 1999 the scientist asked MoD for official confirmation of a story that sometime during the early 1940s, whilst returning from a mission over Europe a RAF reconnaissance aircraft was 'intercepted by an object of unknown origin'. The metallic object appeared suddenly at the side of the aircraft as it approached the English coast, hovered noiselessly for a time whilst matching its course and speed, then accelerated away at high speed. Photographs were taken

by the crew. This daylight incident occurred during the same period when Allied aircrew had begun to report strange balls of fire that appeared to pursue their aircraft in night-time raids over Axis-held territory in Europe. US Air Force pilots described these pre-1947 UFOs as 'foo fighters' but oddly, the scientist makes no reference to them in his letter to MoD.

The source of his story was the letter-writer's grandfather, a RAF officer, who was 'part of the personal bodyguard' of the Prime Minister during WW2. He was present during a discussion between Churchill and Gen Dwight Eisenhower, the Commander of Allied Forces and future US President, when the incident was discussed. After taking scientific advice, Churchill declared the incident 'should be immediately classified for at least 50 years and its status reviewed by a future Prime Minister'. Churchill justified this extreme measure because he believed its release '*...would create mass panic amongst the general population and destroy one's belief in the church*'.

Despite ~~its~~ **the** tenuous nature **of this story** the mere mention of Churchill in the context of a UFO cover-up was a gift was the media. Out of the ten separate media events that formed part of the National Archives UFO project the release of the sixth tranche of records, that contained the reference to Churchill, received the most coverage. It reached an estimated print/online readership of 25 million people. The massive exposure it received was out of all proportion to its evidential content. The writer pleaded 'not to dismiss my attempts to pursue this matter as trivial or motivated by "crackpot" thinking' and, to be fair, his request for confirmation of the story was taken seriously. It was passed via MoD Security to the Cabinet Office records officer who made some checks before responding to say 'we know of no closed records from World War 2 on this subject'.

When examined closely the 'Churchill ordered UFO cover-up' story resembles a modern legend of the type frequently found in the UFO literature. The letter writer reveals that his grandfather died in 1973 so the information was not first hand, or even second hand. He claims that, fearful of his obligations under the Official Secrets Act, he only mentioned the incident once to his daughter (the writer's father) *when she was nine years old*. When in 1999 she saw a TV programme on UFOs that featured an interview with a retired RAF foo-fighter witness, she decided to pass the story to her son.

Although just an anecdote, it may still contain a grain of truth. Files at The National Archives reveal how, during the Second World War, both the British Air Ministry and the US Army Air Force collected and studied unusual sightings reported by fighter and bomber aircrew. Details of some of the more reliable sightings were passed up the chain of command and scrutinised by Dr RV Jones and others in Churchill's scientific intelligence organisation. Given the concern within Churchill's War Cabinet about Nazi secret weapons, his scientists were on the alert for any hint of new technology from the theatre of war. So it is possible that a garbled account of a foo-fighter experience may form the core of the account that emerged in 2010. It may also help explain Churchill's later desire to know 'the truth' about flying saucers.

Note: National Archives references: AIR 1/2455-56 (Sheerness incident); DEFE 24/2013/1 (WW2 incident).