

Keith Ford On The 31st Of March

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This is loosely based on a true story, honest.

It was Alec Freeman who was on duty in the control room when things started to go wrong. His first thought was to call Straker, not so much because things were going wrong but because that was what you did whenever something unexpected happened. The unexpected thing in this case was not that an alien spacecraft had been sighted - that was normal - but that the reports were coming in not from Moonbase or SID or any of their own sources but instead via police channels and the television and radio news.

Commander Straker had been above ground in the film studio. He stormed in. "How did that get past us?"

Freeman stopped swearing. "No idea. There was no indication of it, none whatsoever, until it was sighted from the ground. It's headed towards central London, blatant as you like."

"Is it firing?" Straker asked, moving over to Ford's station to check the information coming in.

Freeman joined him. "No, thank goodness, no sign of hostility and it's moving really slow. This is not making any sense."

Ford kept his head down and studied his monitors, as ever. His frown grew as he did so. "Commander, Colonel, we have TV pictures. You're going to want to see this."

Freeman groaned.

"Henderson is going to love this." was Straker's comment. "The whole of London seeing a UFO. The whole world via the BBC. Don't you just love public service broadcasting?"

Someone had switched on Radio 4 in the control room. For once even Brian Perkins sounded animated. "... A glowing, circular, slightly conical..."

Ford looked up at the two senior officers. "Sirs, you really do need to see this." He put it on the screen.

Freeman looked up. "That's not -"

"No," said Straker "it's not."

The thing on screen was undoubtedly an unidentified flying object but not like any UFO they had ever seen. It did glow, with a kind of orange fire rather than the pale green shimmer they were used to, and was slightly blobby in shape with what might be a cockpit on top. In the night sky it was unmissable.

Freeman looked at Straker. "Somebody else?"

Straker sighed. "I have no idea."

"Shall I send out the Mobiles?" Ford asked.

"Mobiles? In central London?" Straker barked.

Ford winced.

"Send a film crew," the Commander continued "the place must be full of them. I want information and I don't want people to know we're looking for it. Where's Colonel Foster?"

Within ten minutes Paul Foster was leading a security team, comprised of people who could actually use the recording equipment as well as their weapons, towards the latest location. It was fortunate the thing was not moving fast. Straker himself was taking another crew in a helicopter. A protesting Alec Freeman was left behind.

As Straker said: "We don't know what this thing is. And we don't want it taking out all our senior officers."

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The traffic was jammed both in and out of the affected area and for several miles surrounding. People were either trying to get a glimpse of this once-in-a-lifetime experience, this possibly world changing event, or were running for their lives in fear that the War of the Worlds might really be happening. Paul Foster steered his little team through with as much skill and technical assistance as he had available to him but still the going was slow. Even the emergency services were having problems getting past. He thought about declaring himself to a police officer and trying to get a blue light escort but he knew Straker would never stand for that.

At one point they were alongside a BBC outside broadcast unit and Foster realised that he knew the director. "Hey, Tony, I thought you lot were already getting pictures?"

Tony stuck his head out of the window. "We are, we've got two teams keeping them in sight but the boss wants every available man on this. This could be the biggest thing since World War Two. Bigger."

"Tell me about it." Foster groaned.

Tony frowned at him. "But what are you lot doing here? You're a film studio, not news. You don't even make documentaries, do you?"

"Sometimes but like you said, it's the biggest think for years. If we don't do a documentary we can use the footage in... Something, anything. Anyway, the boss wants it in the can."

Tony nodded. "I'll see if I can get you a look at some of our stuff. You know what? We'll be the last people to see it. We'd be better off in front of the telly."

* * *

The situation in the air was not much better. A couple of news helicopters were buzzing around, their lights and cameramen clearly visible from SHADO's chopper, but the area was already being patrolled by the RAF. Three helicopter gunships were circling the unknown craft, though whether they were there to keep an eye on it or on the other aircraft was not clear. Up above, fighters overflew them.

"We're not going to get close without making ourselves conspicuous." the pilot told Straker. "What do you want me to do, sir?"

The Commander thought for a moment. Through the windscreen he could see the glow of the alien craft in the distance. It was quite obvious, even from here, that it was not one of the UFOs that they were used to but he could make out little else. The slow speed made him wonder if it was displaying itself, if it wanted to be seen by as many people as possible. That did not seem like the prelude to an invasion. A hostile force might want to make itself known but surely it would do so with a display of power, not simply a display of its existence?

As the pilot continued to explore the edges of the RAF perimeter, Straker contacted

Foster.

"Sorry, Ed," the Colonel told him "but there's no way we can get through this traffic without giving ourselves away. Even if we kicked up a fuss, I'm not sure we'd get there."

"Fine," Straker said "do what you can."

Foster told him about the offer from the BBC and Straker agreed they should take them up on it - "though I doubt they'll have anything we're not picking up in Control already."

The pilot recalled Straker's attention. "Sir, they're descending. Slowly but they definitely are."

The Commander looked up. "Do we have their exact location?"

"No but I can extrapolate from where we are. Sir, judging from their direction, I think they may be aiming for a landing in Hyde Park. It's the obvious place."

"And the centre of London." Straker groaned.

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Back at HQ, Keith Ford was staring intently at the television pictures. Colonel Freeman had taken him off his usual duties and given him the job of overseeing the information coming in from irregular sources. That meant, in practice, that he was covering two television screens, BBC and ITV, and keeping an eye on various technicians who were listening intently to muted radio broadcasts. He had already sent out orders for every newspaper to be delivered as soon as it was in print but that would not be for several hours yet. Someone else was checking on the impact this was having on the international media.

The thing was, the UFO did not look right. It was not just that it did not look like their regular enemy: to Ford's mind it somehow looked unreal, not even solid. It was there, obviously. It had put a scare into half the country, at least the half that was awake. He checked his watch, it was just gone eleven o'clock. He speculated that their own special effects department could probably make something that looked more convincing. Then again, who said real life had to be convincing? He could think of things that had happened to him that would never get included in a film because no one would believe them. That had to apply to the way things looked as well.

He checked his watch again, then checked the clock on the wall. 23.07, 31 March. He stopped still, understanding hitting him like a thunderbolt. He knew why the thing looked so flimsy, why it glowed so oddly, why it was there. At least, he hoped he did. He shouted to one of the technicians to keep an eye on the screens and ran to Control to find Colonel Freeman. He was exceedingly glad he was not going to have to explain this to the Commander.

Freeman looked up as he dashed in. "You've got something?"

Ford nodded manically. "I think I'd better tell you in private, sir."

Freeman gave him a weary look. "It's that bad?"

"Not exactly, sir."

The Colonel led the way to Straker's office, shut the door and turned to the Lieutenant. "Well? Go on then."

Keith Ford took a deep breath. "I think I know what the UFO is and if it is, it's not our problem."

A smile started to work its way onto Freeman's lips. "Not our problem? Sounds good. Whose is it?"

Ford nodded again. "First, sir, answer me one question. What's the date today?"

Freeman gave him a look but played along. "It's the 31st of March."

"And the time?"

He looked at his watch. "Just coming up to quarter past eleven."

"Which means that in less than fifty minutes it will be...?"

Freeman frowned. "The first of April but I don't..." Suddenly the frown turned into an amazed smile. "April Fool's Day? You're telling me this is an April Fool? Can you prove it?"

Freeman sat down and gestured Ford to a seat as the Lieutenant spoke. "I can't prove it, not with what I have but it ought be fairly easy to do. I can tell you what I think it is and who's done it. It's a hot-air balloon. That explains the colour, the speed, pretty much everything. As to who's done it... Well there is one person with a reputation for this sort of thing. Publicity stunts, hot air balloons and the money to do it."

And Freeman was laughing. "Oh Lord, if he has we ought to recruit him. Any time we needed a diversion..."

A moment later he was on the radio to Straker, explaining.

There was a long silence. "Ed? Can you hear me, Ed?"

"He's right." Straker sounded resigned more than anything else. "I can see it now. OK, pull everyone out, fast as you can. No, not the film crews, that would look suspicious. I guess now it's a question of whether we put the fear of God into him for pulling such a stupid stunt or just let it go."

Freeman chuckled. "He's tied up half the traffic in London, air-traffic control, all the broadcasting services... I think somebody else might put the fear of God into him without us having to bother. You've got to admit, though, that was a good one."

"That's in the spaghetti harvest class, so I guess it might be useful to have the footage - they'll be using it for years to come." Straker signed off. "Oh, and tell Ford well done. This could have been embarrassing."

Freeman turned and clapped the Lieutenant on the shoulder but Ford was already smiling. A well done from the Commander? Now that did sound like an April Fool.

(For those who want to know: yes, in real life it was Richard Branson.)