THE "BENT HEADLIGHT BEAMS" CASE REVISITED

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Ever since I became deeply involved in investigating and researching UFO events in Australia, one remarkable event has held a particular fascination for me, namely the incident that became known as the "bent headlight beams case". It took place on April 4, 1966, at Burkes Flat, Victoria.

Despite its extraordinary nature, it has never been written up extensively in the literature other than in accounts largely based on newspaper stories and cursory investigations by civilian groups of the day.¹

The event is largely unique in the annals of ufology simply because it speaks of the headlight beams of a car being "bent" in the presence of a UFO. The only other cases I am aware of are those in which a searchlight appears to "bend" near a UFO on film (Norwood, Ohio, U.S.A., on October 23, 1949)² and a torch light bent, or reflected, during a spectacular UFO episode near Taizé in France.³

Other aspects of the case describe a physical trace (a depression) in the field where the "UFO" sat and a, perhaps related, car fatality at the same spot.

Because of my specific interest in this event, and my specialist research activity with the Australian Physical Evidence Study Group (APESG), I resolved to undertake an exhaustive retrospective investigation.

What follows is the result of that investigation. For the first time in the UFO literature, the original area newspaper accounts are given; an interview with the original witness is presented and hitherto unknown aspects of the case are described. For the first time, the actual sequence of the UFO behaviour, and alleged "light bending", is described and illustrated.

At the very least, this extraordinary episode in Australian UFO history has been given the extensive exposure it deserves. If there are any researchers with further data about this case, they are invited to present them within these pages and thereby facilitate further enlightenment about this most puzzling case.

April 4, 1966, ca. 1950 hrs, Burkes Flat, Victoria, Australia

Mr. Ron Sullivan (38), a steel construction businessmen from Maryborough, was travelling at 60 mph, and approaching St Arnaud, when, in the distance, he noticed a light in a field. At first he thought it was a tractor.

"Suddenly my headlights pulled hard over to the right for some unaccountable reason. Instead of lighting the road, they lit up the fence as though they were being attracted by a magnet. I braked as hard as I could and glanced over to the right. In the middle of the paddock was a column of coloured light about 25 feet high and shaped like an ice-cream cone. It would have been about 3 feet wide at the bottom and 10 feet wide at the top." (From the *Melbourne "Sun"*, Tuesday, April 12, 1966.)

"I saw) ... not far away, a brilliant white disc of about 3 feet in diameter. The object was hovering just above the ground and, from its upper surface, it projected a conical array of shimmering rainbow lights extended to a height of about 15 feet. Then suddenly the coloured cone rose to a height of 20 feet and the disc below climbed above it. In the next moment the whole light complex vanished." (From "AFSR & AUFOR".)

"The headlights of my car were suddenly diverted to the right for no apparent reason — and had I followed them I would have run off the straight stretch of road

"Just then I saw a display of gaseous lights in all the colours of the spectrum in a nearby paddock. The object rose about ten feet in the air. It later disappeared.

"The coloured gaseous lights seemed to be going through 2" to 3" diameter tubes which led into a bright phosphorous looking light on the ground. The lights were stretching upwards all the time until they disappeared after leaving the white phosphorous looking light on the ground." (From a letter by Mr. Sullivan to VFSRS, "AFSR", Victorian edition, 1966.)

With his car headlights bending away from the road, Mr. Sullivan thought he was driving in that direction and, with a quick reflex action, steered the car in the opposite direction. He suddenly found himself driving off the road and it was only his presence of mind and skill that saved him from an accident.

As the light complex rose from the ground without a sound, the car's headlights returned to normal and

focused on the road. When Sullivan arrived in Wycheproof, he checked his lights and they were operating perfectly.

Back in Maryborough, Mr. Sullivan told his wife and Hugh Hunter, a reporter, of his experience and it was arranged that Hunter and Sullivan would visit

the site on April 7.

On the night prior to this visit, April 6, 19-year-old Gary Taylor was killed when his car left the road and collided with a tree, in the same spot where Sullivan had started to leave the road two nights before. A motorist travelling about half a mile behind Mr. Taylor, alleged that Taylor had swerved suddenly off the road for no apparent reason. The accident occurred at about 10 p.m.

During the following afternoon, Sullivan and Hunter went to the spot and found a saucer-shaped impression, about 70 yards from the roadway in a bare paddock. The impression, 3 feet across and 5 inches deep, was cleanly scooped out of the sandy soil without any debris around. There were no human or animal tracks around the area.

Although investigating police were at a loss to explain the fatal accident, or the sighting, it was rumoured that they had gathered other supporting evidence.

The above details are basically as the account was known, and became known, in the UFO literature. Because of the intriguing nature of the incident, the author (BC) sought to uncover all the contemporary documentation extant, but little publicised at the time, conduct a detailed retrospective investigation, field investigation, and interview with the original percipient. These objectives were largely achieved and some of the results are included here:

This is the full account from the "Maryborough Advertiser", of Wednesday, April 13, 1966, pg. 5: "THE CASE OF THE DIVERTED HEADLIGHT BEAMS" — WHAT CAUSED THIS PHENOMENON!:

"Reports received in the past week tend to indicate that strange things have been happening in this area of Victoria. Strangest of all was the case of the turned headlight beams.

"The 'Advertiser" was told last Wednesday night that a local man, while driving in the Burkes Flat area on the previous Monday night, had found that his headlight beams had diverted to the right 'almost as

though drawn by a magnet'.

"The man, Mr. R. F. Sullivan, was driving along a straight stretch of sealed roadway on the Dunolly-St. Arnaud Road near Burkes Flat when the headlight beams moved to the right and illuminated the fence. The car continued straight. The lights were diverted for only a short time.

"Mr. Sullivan said that before the beams diverted they flickered in similar manner to that of a television screen when interference takes place.

Coloured Lights

"He said he looked across into the paddock, and, at what appeared to be a short distance from the fence, was a display of gaseous lights — 'all the colours of the spectrum'. He did not stop but glanced at the paddock as often as he could while driving, and the last he saw was the lights about 20 feet from the ground. The lights appeared to move rapidly up and down in a narrow area. When he reached St. Arnaud he checked the light fittings and found them to be normal.

"He continued his journey to the northern area of the State and told the 'Advertiser' of his experiences when he returned on Wednesday.

"On Good Friday afternoon Mr. Sullivan and Mr. H. Hunter of the 'Advertiser' visited the scene where the phenomenon had occurred. Mr. Sullivan had said he could pinpoint the spot.

Fatal Accident at Same Spot

"In the meantime a fatal accident had occurred near Burkes Flat on Thursday night, a 19-year-old youth was killed when his car left the roadway and struck a tree.

"Mr. Sullivan had said the spot was roughly about a mile from a brick home and dam. One stop was made prior to reaching the correct one, but he soon said he was not in the area where his lights had moved. The drive then continued until Mr. Sullivan passed a brick home with a dam beside it. He continued for about a mile and then said he was at the spot.

"After parking the car Messrs. Sullivan and Hunter decided to enter the paddock to see if there were any marks where he had seen the coloured lights on the

previous Monday night.

"It was only then that it was found that the car was parked 20 feet from a tree against which a car had crashed. This was the tree struck by a car driven by Gary Taylor, of Carnegie, on Thursday night. Taylor was killed in the crash.

Coincidence

"Was it coincidence that the accident occurred at the same spot where, a few nights before, the lights of Mr. Sullivan's car had 'been drawn to the right as though by a magnet'? Mr. Sullivan's lights had moved to the right; the tree against which Taylor's car had crashed was just at the left edge of the road.

"In view of the coincidence the matter was reported to Bealiba police who are handling the accident

investigations.

"The driver of a car which had been following Taylor's car at a distance of about a mile saw nothing unusual. There appeared to be no reason for Taylor to swerve.

Depression

"When Messrs Sullivan and Hunter examined the adjacent paddock on Friday the only unusual thing found was a depression in the fallowed ground. This was a little over 3 feet in diameter and only a few inches in depth. It looked odd in the fallow.

"A check with the property owner has shown that the depression was not in the ground when he finished fallowing. There were no foot or paw prints around it - just a bare impression in the ploughed ground...

"During the weekend several people visited the Burkes Flat area to have a look at the area where Mr. Sullivan had seen the coloured lights and where his headlight beams had been diverted. No one could offer an explanation nor could they decide what had

caused the depression in the paddock.

"(Footnote — Mr. H. Hunter of the 'Advertiser' said vesterday he believes that Mr. Sullivan saw something very strange at Burkes Flat on Monday of last week so strange that Mr. Sullivan felt obligated to report it to police although all along he did not want his name mentioned. It was only on Monday, under persuasion from Mr. Hunter, that Mr. Sullivan would allow his name to be used. Certain exaggerations have occurred in reporting the incident elsewhere, but they have the main facts correct ... — Ed. Maryborough Advertiser.)

In the April 15, 1966, edition of the "Maryborough Advertiser", pg 8, the editor replied to a letter to him, suggesting a meteor for the Burkes Flat incident:

"There was no sign of any burning in the immediate area where Mr. Sullivan saw the lights. There were some signs on the other side of the road where tree branches had been burned. The depression which has received so much publicity gave no indication of burning."

In a recent interview with the author (BC), along with David Reneke and Michael Hough, Ron Sullivan recalled the strange experience. It should be pointed out that predictably, after such a long period of time, some of the quantitative details were either inconsistent with the original accounts or in error. However, the qualitative aspects of the account still stand as largely in keeping with the original version:

RON SULLIVAN: I was going up to Wycheproof. I had a general steel fabrication factory at Maryborough at the time and I was going up to one of my job sites and, whilst travelling on the St. Arnaud Rd, at a place called Burkes Flat, at 8 p.m. ... it was a clear night ... it wasn't moonlight ... you could see the

I was driving on a straight stretch of road ... near Burkes Flat. I noticed there was another vehicle behind me ... I never took any notice (of it).

Then, all of a sudden, in front of me, about 200 yards (away), I noticed a light on the ground in a paddock, 25 ... 20 yards from the fence ... I wasn't really surprised at it. At first viewing it, it seemed like the back light of a tractor in the field.

Anyway I got close to it ... it wasn't a brilliant light a white phosphorous glow — then it came to a rather brilliant light not that there was enough brilliance to blind you, because it was a white light ...

As I closed off near it, I noticed the headlights of my car sort of bent towards it ... like a giant magnet, pulling the headlights on the car off course. I was quite surprised. Everything happened within say 2 minutes ... 11/2 minutes.

As I got opposite, I noticed with all the confusion with the headlights going, the right-hand side of the road lighting up ... (as if I) was heading towards the fence, which I virtually wasn't. I pulled over to the left. I was going too close. I saw the trees on the left-hand

side of the road. So I kept on going.

But also in that time when I first saw the light, it was just like a brilliant oval on the ground - white phosphorous type light in the ground, approximately 15 feet in diameter. Then it opened up and there was another white oval on top of it, about 30 feet (in) height, coming down making the shape of a cone (with) 15 feet bottom diameter and 20 feet top diameter — and in that cone were tubes of coloured lights — all the lights as you see as you look through the spectrum ("all the colours of the rainbow") ... red, blue, indigo and purple ... travelling up and down ... or they seem to be ... from the small oval to the bigger oval at the top. They were going up and down in

Then gradually the top seemed to come to meet the bottom ... They seemed to close in, and as they closed in, just making a transition of one light oval — similar to first view — everything then just disappeared.

BILL CHALKER: It went down then just disappeared?

RON SULLIVAN: The top came to the bottom. It came down, yes. First of all, there was the light on the ground, approximately 15 foot diameter. Then another light came on top, a bigger diameter, making a cone. Then the cone shrunk to a transition of one light again on the ground and that was the end of it.

BILL CHALKER: What was the last thing you saw? RON SULLIVAN: Just a spot in the ground — a light spot, becoming smaller and smaller, to nothing ... I was sort of confused. (But) I wasn't scared or anything.

BILL CHALKER: What was the total duration of

that sequence?

RON SULLIVAN: Oh, I would say about threequarters of a minute. That's a pretty long time, not very long, but it's quite a time.

BILL CHALKER: Did you slow down to look?

RON SULLIVAN: I slowed down ... I didn't stop, but I slowed down to about 5 mph and, of course, at the time, I never thought about that other car behind

me and I looked behind, I couldn't see a thing. I put my head out (the driver's window) and around. I said, what in bloody hell was that? I kept on going and thought, and thought after a little while, it's something wrong with me, but I was convinced there was nothing wrong. There was no hallucination. I've never had hallucinations anyway ...

I got up to the next town, got out and inspected the car, looked around it, looked at the headlights, checked everything. Everything seemed normal.

Anyway, I had to book into a motel at Wycheproof. At 9 I got to Wycheproof. I never mentioned anything. I just sat in my room and thought, what in hell was that? I just couldn't believe it. I never told anyone...

The next day, I'd done my business ... I went up to the farm where we were putting up prefabricated steel buildings. I mentioned to the farmer what had happened. He sort of sympathised with me ... "Something strange happened to me when I was driving up last night ... coloured lights in the paddock"! I said.

Anyway, I got back to Maryborough next day and got home. First thing I said to my wife, I said, "God, I

had an experience last night you know".

DAVID RENEKE: How did you sleep that night? RON SULLIVAN: No, I couldn't sleep ... it was impossible to sleep ... it was something you didn't know ... it worries you.

DAVID RENEKE: Did you have anything when you slowed down?

RON SULLIVAN: I never stopped. DAVID RENEKE: Why was that?

RON SULLIVAN: I was a bit scared ... it did frighten me, yeah ... but it didn't frighten me that much ... it was unusual ..

Anyway, I got back home ... I told my wife. She sympathised with me. We heard on the news, the day after, a chap got killed there. I said, "gee, Burkes Flat.."

Anyway, I said I better do something about this, so I went up to the police station in Maryborough ... I reported it to the police. Of course, the police knew me. No way did they indicate, you know, that I was "letting off". They wanted to go right through ..

Hughie Hunter got to hear about it ... Hughie and I drove up there the next day and we see the accident right opposite where that light was. We found a depression in the paddock ... you could see the tree ... where the car hit ... you can see where all the bark is taken off it, all the broken glass and the wreckage, the headlights and everything ... that was where the chap was killed. His name was Gary Taylor, from Carnegie. And right opposite that tree, about 20 yards (in), we found this depression which was newly made ... (the paddock) was ploughed and fallowed ... had the rake over it just prior to sowing ... (it was all dirt in the paddock) (interview ends).

Further details were elicited from the author's enquiries — Sullivan was driving an XP Falcon Futura sedan car, light blue in colour. High beam was operating in the headlights. Sullivan estimated that his headlight "beams" had remained "bent" for between 10 to 20 seconds. He was quite familiar with the roads, having travelled along the same road as much as two or three times a week. Locals said at the time that all sorts of things have happened in the area, principally, ghostly experiences. These references mainly seemed to refer to accounts in "the early days". One story refers to a ghost coming out of a dam at Burkes Flat. Other accounts of "ghost lights" came from nearby Natte Yallock in 1911 and much earlier. To quote Ron Sullivan, who in turn was quoting the local lore, "Burkes Flat was haunted"!

During March 1978, Victorian investigator Paul Norman reported that, upon investigation of a reported "discoloured circular patch in a paddock on the Bendigo-St. Arnaud Road", in the Bealiba area, he verified that it was the same depression discovered by Ron Sullivan and Hughie Hunter, twelve years earlier, at the site of the "bent headlight beams incident" and the car fatality. Paul Norman stated that "the patch is precisely in line with the tree the car hit". Photos of the spot showed a distinct green circular patch "still visible twelve years after it was first discovered". This author (BC) visited the site in 1980 and, after careful lining up with photos, taken of the site back in 1966, could not confirm that a patch was clearly distinguishable from the surrounding paddock. However, the paddock was largely fallow with only stubble present. Samples were taken of the soil and analyses undertaken have, to date, not confirmed anything of significance.

At the same time (March 1978), Paul Norman indicated to local press (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 1978), that "a former service-station attendant" told him "that a driver, who had been following Taylor's car, had pulled in for petrol and told her he had seen bright lights near the scene of the accident".

More recently, in an article in the MUFON UFO Journal, December, 1983, No. 190, Paul Norman indicated that VUFORS had received a phone call, a few days after the original incident, from a motorist who alleged he had seen the UFO in the Burkes Flat paddock while driving in the opposite direction. Paul Norman also stated that another driver, ostensibly following Taylor, also saw the "UFO" and reported that it looked like the "lights" had "blinded" the unfortunate Taylor.

It is my hope that Paul Norman and VUFORS will publish a detailed account of their investigations into this extraordinary case.

A headlight, ostensibly retrieved from Taylor's car at this time by Paul Norman twelve years after the event, was studied by Dr. Geoff Stevens. However, the poor condition of the artifact prevented it from being used to determine whether the car to which it belonged had been in the presence of a powerful electromagnetic field effect.

Conclusions

Ultimately, since so much time has passed, definitive conclusions about this provocative episode are impossible.

We can say with some certainty that some sort of extraordinary light display was present in the field near Burkes Flat. We can be equally reasonably certain that it was that phenomenon that produced the

depression found.

We are certain that the perception of the "UFO" and apparent "bending" of the headlight beams was in response to the unusual light display in the field. The mere fact that Mr. Sullivan almost had an accident, which would have had him colliding with the same tree that the unfortunate Gary Taylor hit, is indeed sobering. That argues for some sort of persuasive connection. The coincidence is, at the very least, extraordinary.

However, did a UFO really bend Mr. Sullivan's car headlights? Certainly there were enough stimuli pres-

ent to give him that profound impression.

An exhaustive investigation at the time might have been able to answer the question with some certainty. Now, after eighteen years, it is impossible to say.

We can deduce that, for the "effect" to have occurred, either water vapour, dust, or other particulate or airborne matter would need to be present in the air so that a beam could have been clearly resolved. Mr. Sullivan is not certain on this point but seems emphatic that beams were apparent. One could argue, with little evidence to confirm it, that the "illusion" was somehow created by the illumination of the car headlights of the surroundings (the road etc), not the perception of discrete beams.

It is frustrating not to be able to approach this case with certain facts. Assumptions, based on memory, are

our only guides.

If it was argued that the "beam-bending" was an illusion, or misinterpretation of some sort, a consider-

ation of possible mechanisms is required.

I guess one could weakly argue that stray light reflections may have caused the perception of "beambending", but no evidence supports this. Equally, the concepts of "time gap", hypnagogic and hypnopompic imagery, or other illusions, seem inappropriate.4

One could argue that the UFO caused some sort of perceptual effect on Mr. Sullivan, causing him to think he saw the beams bend. This illusion could be variously deemed a genuine effect, caused by the object itself, or a prosaic perceptual effect created by its

For example, the concepts of "flow-patterns" and "motion parallax" in driving may be relevant. When driving, the nature of the flow-pattern of the outside world is quite complex and it changes with the distance of fixation of the driver's eyes. If he watches the midground, the foreground rushes past him, the midground appears almost stationary, and the background appears to move in the same direction as the car's direction of travel. Indeed, everything appears to flow round the spot at which the observer is looking. The difference in movement, or relative flow-patterns,

produces the motion parallax effects.

In the case of Ron Sullivan, one could argue that he became fixated on the "UFO" in the field, therefore, it becomes relatively stationary, the foreground seems to rush past him, i.e. including the near part of the headlight beams, and the background behind the UFO, possibly including the extremities of the headlight beams, appears to travel in the same direction of motion of the car. Therefore, due to the UFO becoming the "fixation point" of Sullivan's field of vision, the headlight beams suffer from a form of motion parallax that resolves itself into the illusion of the beams "bending", i.e. the nearest section of the "beams" seemingly fall back to the car in the direction of the "UFO" and the more distant sections of the beams largely move consistently with the car's motion. The "parallax" becomes more acute as the fixation angle of view, relative to the correct direction of travel, increases, i.e. reaching a maximum of 90° as Sullivan is directly opposite the light display in the field. The flow patterns and motion parallax, dicated by the fixation on the "light display", are then ended and the effect of the bent headlight beams ceases. Sounds plausible? Perhaps. However, I have read of no precedent in the psychological literature.5 Has anyone else? So, the "psychological explanation" of fixated motion parallax while interesting, falls short of being provable. If any reader is aware of evidence or actual experience that confirms such a theory, the author would be most intrigued to hear of it.

What about the situation where we make the assumption that Mr. Sullivan's perceptions of the Burkes Flat experience were totally accurate?

If we accept, however tentatively, that the car headlights were discreetly resolved and, further, that the bizarre bending effect occurred, how then can we account for it? Apart from extreme misinterpretation we

are seemingly left with "exotic" suggestions.

We "know" through Einstein's theories that light can be bent around bodies with massive gravitational fields.6 This led early theorists to suggest that the Burkes Flat UFO was a body with a magnetic field like a "mini-sun". This is, at best, a crude analogy and one that does not sit well with the "facts". Unless one goes for a directed gravitational field resolved in a dis crete beam or line (one which is hitherto unknown to science), then the presence of an exotic intense gravity field should have had marked effects on Mr. Sullivan's vision, his well-being and the car itself, and also the surroundings. Mr. Sullivan and his car emerged from the experience ostensibly unscathed. (Despite considerable efforts to locate the car, we were unsuccessful. A magnetic signature test would have been extremely interesting. We were able to examine the headlight of Taylor's car, but there was no evidence supporting the presence of an intense magnetic field.)

The only other suggestion with slightly more credibility than the wild suggestion of a "mini-sun" is that some sort of localised atmospheric "lens" effect, i.e. a discrete lens, was developed which acted as an interface with the incident headlight beams to bend through. This suggestion is, at least, partially compatible with the subjective geometry of the beam bending as perceived by Mr. Sullivan, i.e. as he drew closer to the spot on the road, opposite the light display in the field, the degree of bend became allegedly more acute, reaching its peak when he was opposite the "UFO". But, unfortunately, we have no hard evidence to support this idea.

So we are left with a tantalising UFO episode that baits us with provocative suggestions of bizarre interactions with one of our most revered technological expressions, namely, light and that expression par excellence of 20th century technology — the motor car.

My main hope is that, should such provocative episodes happen again, we would pull out all stops to document it quickly. Then, we might have a better understanding of such occurrences. For now we are left with evocative, haunting, glimpses of something

which still seems beyond our comprehension.

The author welcomes constructive dialogue and further information about this case and any other in the class of "physical evidence". He can be contacted at: PO Box 6, Lane Cove, NSW 2006, Australia.

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BRUNO FACCHINI: A FAMOUS ITALIAN CE-III CASE FROM 1950 RE-EXAMINED

Ezio Bernardini (Translation from Italian)

We are indebted to Dr Roberto Pinotti, Director of the Italian National UFO Centre (C.U.N.) for this interesting follow-up, taken by us and translated (précis) from C.U.N.'s Notiziaro UFO No. 104 (March 1985 — January 1986).

The story of Bruno Facchini, the Italian workman who came across a UFO undergoing repairs during a thunderstorm, is a famous classic, already reported by me, long ago, in two different articles in FSR.

It is now no less than 37 years since it happened, and 12 years since my last very full and complete account of it, which we published in FSR Vol. 20, No. 6 (April 1975). (Prior to that, on page 4 of FSR 9/2, March/April 1963, I had also given an even earlier résumé of it. There are no discrepancies so far as I can see in the three versions).

Because this interesting case is such an early one, most of FSR's readers today will not know of it at all. I am therefore now giving again below the full text of my translation from FSR 20/6, followed by my précis translation of Ezio Bernardini's account of his meeting with Facchini in 1981, thirty-one years after the original experience. — EDITOR