

CAPTAIN SCHAFER'S LAST FLIGHT

THE TANTALIZING STORY BEHIND THE "DITCHING" OF *LIGHTNING* FOXTROT 94 IN SEPTEMBER 1970.

© By Pat Otter, Assistant Editor of the Grimsby Evening Telegraph.

We are indebted to two FSR readers in Hull, Geoff Barker and Steve Bray, both of whom sent us the full text of this two-page reportage which had appeared in two sister newspapers, the Grimsby Evening Telegraph and the Hull Daily Mail (October 22 and 23, 1992), and which relates the exciting story, never published before, of how a veteran American fighter pilot was sent up from a British airfield on the night of September 8, 1970, to investigate an unidentified object over the North Sea and how, although his wrecked aircraft was later recovered from the bed of the sea, the pilot's body had mysteriously disappeared from the machine, while his ejector seat was still intact and in place.

We were so interested by the story (which put us in mind of the mysterious disappearance of the Australian pilot Frederick Valentich over Bass Strait in October 1978) that we wrote to Assistant Editor Pat Otter and secured his consent to our re-publishing it for our readers, for which we tender our thanks.

Over to Australia, for their comments. EDITOR.

PART 1 — HULL DAILY MAIL, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 1992.

Tonight we start our two-part detailed look at events leading up to the ditching in the North Sea of *Lightning Foxtrot 94*, a single-seat fighter from 5 Squadron at Binbrook whose final flight is at the centre of one of the most puzzling aviation stories since the war. Just what was it that its pilot, American, William Schafer, was sent to intercept out over the North Sea 22 years ago and why was he eventually ordered to ditch his aircraft off Flamborough Head rather than return to North Lincolnshire? Now new information has come to light. Pat Otter, assistant editor of the Mail's sister paper, The Grimsby Evening Telegraph, reports. At last, the sensational true story behind the ditching of *Lightning Foxtrot 94* in September, 1970.

CAPT. SCHAFER'S LAST FLIGHT

The chain of events which led to the crash of *Lightning XS894* from 5 Squadron at RAF Binbrook and the disappearance of its pilot began at 8.17 p.m. on the night of September 8, 1970, in an isolated building on the Shetland Islands.

Saxa Vord was one of the chain of radar stations whose task it was to spot unidentified aircraft approaching the North Sea or the sensitive 'Iceland Gap'. Remember, this was 1970 when the Cold War was at its height and Russian long-range aircraft made regular sorties into the North Atlantic and along the British

coast to test the reaction of NATO fighters. On this particular night, a radar operator at Saxa Vord picked up the blip of an unidentified aircraft over the North Sea halfway between the Shetlands and Alesund in Norway.

The contact was monitored for several minutes at a steady speed of 630mph, at 37,000ft holding altitude and on a south-westerly heading. Then Saxa Vord noted the contact turning through 30 degrees to head due south. It increased speed to 900mph (Mach 1.25) and climbed to 44,000ft.

Following laid-down procedures, radar controllers at Saxa Vord flashed a scramble message to the Quick Reaction Alert Flight at the nearest NATO airfield, RAF Leuchars on the east coast of Scotland not far from Dundee. There two *Lightning* interceptors, which had been ready on the flight line for just such a alert, were scrambled and within minutes were airborne and heading out over the North Sea.

After checking the position of their tanker, a *Victor K1A*, the two fighters were guided north by Saxa Vord. So far, it was a routine scramble for what was then assumed to be a Russian *Bear or Badger*, the long-range reconnaissance aircraft used to test the nerves of the Royal Air Force.

But it was then that the radar plotters on the Shetland Islands saw something on their screens which they found impossible to believe.

The contact they had been tracking at speeds and altitudes consistent with modern Russian warplanes, turned through 180 degrees on a due north heading and within seconds disappeared off their screens. Later they calculated that to do this its speed must have been in the region of 17,400 mph.

With the contact now gone, the *Lightnings* were vectored south to rendezvous with the tanker and remained airborne on Combat air patrol.

During the next hour, the mystery contact reappeared several times, approaching from the north. Each time the *Lightnings* were sent north to intercept, it turned and disappeared again.

By now two *F4 Phantoms* of the US Air Force had been scrambled from the American base at Keflavik in Iceland. They had much more sophisticated radar than the British *Lightnings* and were able to pick up the mystery contact themselves.

But when they, too, tried to get close enough to identify what was by now beginning to cause some alarm to NATO commanders, they found they were just as impotent as the *Lightnings*.

The alert had reached such a level that the contact was being monitored by the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System at Fylingdales Moor, near Whitby, along with a second BMEWS in Greenland. The information they were collecting was relayed to the North American Air Defence Command at Cheyenne Mountain and the US Detection and Tracking Centre at Colorado Springs.

In the meantime, the cat-and-mouse game over the North Sea between the *Lightnings* and *Phantoms* on one hand and the mystery contact, was still going on. Then at 21.05 after the fighters had made yet another abortive attempt to get close, the contact vanished off the radar screens.

The *Lightnings* were ordered to return to Leuchars while the *Phantoms* were instructed to carry out a Combat Air Patrol to the east of Iceland. Then, at 21.39, radar controllers picked up the contact again. This time its speed was accelerating to 1,300mph — almost the limit of both the *Lightnings* and *Phantoms* — at a holding altitude of 18,000ft. It was on a south-westerly heading coming from the direction of the Skagerrak, off the northern tip of Denmark.

Two more *Lightnings* were scrambled from Leuchars, and were ordered to rendezvous with a *Victor* tanker and then maintain a CAP on a 50-mile east-west front, 200 miles north-east of Aberdeen. As a precaution two further *Lightnings* were ordered into the air from Coltishall in Norfolk and, with another tanker, to form a CAP 170 miles east of Great Yarmouth. The contact was somewhere between these two lines of supersonic fighters.

While all this was going on, RAF staff at Fylingdales, which was in constant contact with NORAD at Cheyenne Mountain, heard, ominously, that the Strategic Air Command HQ at Omaha, Nebraska, was ordering its *B-52* bombers into the air. It was an order which could only have come from the highest level. What had started as a routine sighting of what was believed to be a Russian aircraft, had now reached the White House and, presumably, President Richard Nixon.

NORAD was told by officials at the Pentagon that a USAF pilot of great experience was presently on an exchange visit with the RAF and was stationed at Binbrook, the North Lincolnshire fighter base a few miles from Grimsby. Rapid enquiries were made and it was discovered the pilot was on the station and was, by coincidence, 'flight available'. At around 21.45 a request was made from a very high level within NORAD, through Strike Command's UK headquarters at High Wycombe, for RAF Binbrook to send Captain William Schafer "if at all possible" to join the QRA *Lightnings* looking for the mystery contact. By this time four *Lightnings*, two *Phantoms* and three tankers were already airborne and they were joined by a *Shackleton Mk3* from Kinloss, which was ordered to patrol on a north-south heading at 3,000 ft, 10 miles out from the

east coast.

Binbrook's QRA *Lightnings* were being held in reserve but it was decided to send out a single aircraft from the North Lincolnshire airfield — flown by Capt. Schafer. The Americans wanted one of their own at the sharp end when it came to cornering the mystery contact.

At precisely six minutes past 10 on the night of September 8, 1970, a single *Lightning* jet fighter took off from RAF Binbrook.

Ground crew on the flight line were accustomed to *Lightnings* being scrambled in a hurry at any time of night or day. Binbrook, after all, was a front-line fighter station and its aircraft shared QRA — Quick Reaction Alert — duty with other East Coast airfields to provide cover should any unidentified aircraft appear on the radar screens.

But there was something different about this scramble.

For a start, it was normal for QRA aircraft to take off in pairs. Two aircraft were kept at a state of instant readiness at all times ready for just such an emergency. But on this occasion only one aircraft took off. And it wasn't one of the QRA aircraft. Then there was the manner of the take-off. The pilot had raced out from the 5 Squadron crew room, adjacent to the apron, and had climbed aboard while a *Lightning* was in the process of being refuelled.

He angrily waved away ground staff who asked him to sign the appropriate form required before all military aircraft leave the ground and ordered the refuelling lines to be disengaged.

And this was no ordinary pilot strapped into the cockpit of the *Mach 2* interceptor. This was Captain William Schafer of the United States Air Force, who was on his second tour as an exchange pilot with the RAF. Schafer was a vastly experienced jet fighter pilot with combat time behind him in Vietnam. He had been at Binbrook for some time and his wife was living on the base with him.

No pre-flight checks were made and, as bemused ground crew looked on, the *Lightning* taxied out to the end of the runway, turned and immediately took off, using reheat to gain speed and height as quickly as possible.

The aircraft, *XS894*, a *Lightning F6* of 5 Squadron, whose call-sign that night was Foxtrot 94, turned out over the North Sea — and disappeared into what is fast becoming one of the great aviation puzzles of recent times.

Early the following morning *XS894* ditched in the sea off Flamborough Head. The ditching was witnessed by the crew of a *Shackleton* reconnaissance aircraft. Flares were spotted by the Grimsby trawler *Ross Kestrel* as reported in the *Hull Daily Mail*. But no trace of Captain Schafer was ever found.

More than a month later the wreckage of the aircraft was found on the sea bed by Royal Navy divers. Despite earlier reports to the contrary, the cockpit was empty and the canopy closed. Captain Schafer had vanished. Completely and utterly.

Later the aircraft was recovered and taken, unusually, to RAF Binbrook. There it was kept under wraps in the corner of a hangar.

When a team from the MoD's Crash Investigation Branch arrived from Farnborough they were permitted to spend only a very brief time examining the wreckage of *XS894*. What they did discover disturbed them. And what happened later disturbed them even more.

I first came across the mysterious story of *XS894* six years ago. An outline of the story was related to me by Barry Halpenny, an aviation enthusiast and author who lived at the time in Market Rasen, who was researching for a book on aviation mysteries at the time.

He suggested I dig out the cuttings on the crash and look further into it. There was more to the story of *XS894* than met the eye, he told me.

I anticipated difficulties in investigating a 16-year-old ditching accident in the North Sea, but not on the scale I was to encounter over the next few weeks.

Normally helpful press contacts at the Ministry of Defence responded initially by promising to help, but then became very reticent. Similar inquiries to the United States Embassy and to the US Air Force at Alconbury proved also to be dead-ends. Calls were not returned. Contacts were unavailable.

At this stage I enlisted the aid of Bob Bryant, then Northcliffe Newspapers' aviation correspondent and a man with close links with both the RAF and USAF. Bob was to spend weeks checking out a story he found more intriguing by the hour. He paid numerous visits to the Ministry of Defence and spent hours on the telephone to contacts in the United States. But everywhere he heard the ominous sound of doors being slammed. He finally admitted defeat. But Bob was absolutely certain there was an official blanket of secrecy over the events surrounding the crash of that *Lightning* in the North Sea all those years ago. Barry Halpenny finally published an abridged version of the story in a book which appeared in September, 1988. Subsequently we were contacted by two former airmen who had both been at Binbrook at the time and added further fuel to the mystery by recalling their own memories of that night.

It was a story which puzzled and intrigued readers. But, perhaps most interestingly of all, it was a story which grabbed the attention of a man spending 10 days in a Cleethorpes guest house. Sixteen years earlier he had been one of the crash investigators who went to Binbrook to examine the remains of *XS894*. He was so puzzled by what he saw and the treatment the investigation team received that he was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery once and for all.

Now, four years on, he believes he has peeled back a little bit more of the mystery surrounding *XS894* and the disappearance of Captain Schafer. I now have a copy of his account of what he believes happened that night. Some has come from his dogged investigations. Some from official documents he has obtained. And some, most tellingly, from what he maintains is a transcript of the final conversations between Captain

Schafer, a radar controller at Staxton Wold, near Scarborough, and the crew of the *Shackleton* which witnessed the crash.

This is the story we are going to tell tomorrow. The information in it is quite remarkable.

Our source has to remain anonymous and we cannot corroborate all the information in his report. What information we can is certainly in line with the results of my own inquiries four years ago.

All we ask you to do is to read our stories carefully — and make up your own mind.

PART 2 — HULL DAILY MAIL, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23,
1992

In yesterday's *Mail* we revealed how an unidentified flying object evaded fighter aircraft. Today, we reveal what happened when contact was finally made.

'HELL, THAT'S BRIGHT, VERY BRIGHT'

NATO forces were being brought up to full alert by a mystery object picked up on radar over the North Sea. At first it appeared to be yet another Russian aircraft out to test the reflexes of Allied forces. But then the object began behaving in a way which baffled radar controllers. Nuclear bombers in the United States were ordered into the air while the Pentagon decided that its man-on-the-spot, an experienced Vietnam veteran then on an exchange visit with the RAF at Binbrook, should take a look. Pat Otter concludes the story of the last flight of *Foxtrot 94*.

Captain William Schafer was sitting in the crew room of 5 Squadron when the call came from High Wycombe. The room overlooked the apron where a line of silver-finish *Lightnings* stood, illuminated by the high-intensity sodium lighting. The crew room itself was sparsely furnished, with ageing chairs which had seen better days, a bar which dispensed nothing stronger than black Nescafe, and walls adorned with plaques and photographs donated by visiting RAF and overseas air force units. Schafer was still in his flying suit, after returning earlier that evening from a training sortie in one of the squadron's aircraft. He is remembered by those at Binbrook as a small, powerfully-built man who loved to fly the single-seat *Lightnings*, so different from the new generation of sophisticated aircraft then starting to come into service in the USAF.

When the call came, Schafer was helped into the remainder of his flying gear by other 5 Squadron aircrew, went out through the door, turned right, and raced across the apron. Two *Lightnings* in the line-up were virtually ready for flight. One, *XS894*, was in the process of having its fuel tanks topped up and was already connected to a power starter.

Schafer climbed the steep ladder, hauled himself into the cockpit, strapped in and started the engines. He waved aside the ground crew, who were

expected to help carry out the standard pre-flight checks, ordered the refuelling to stop and failed to sign the regulation form signifying he was happy with the aircraft. It was armed with two *Red Top* air-to-air missiles, one of which was live and the other a dummy, and enough 30mm cannon shells for a six-second burst.

One of the men on the ground crew at the time was Brian Mann of Grimsby, who was driving one of the fuel bowsers. He remembers *XS894* being refuelled at a rate of 150 gallons a minute when suddenly the engines started. "The windows on the tanker almost went in. I panicked, took the hoses off and got out of the way," he was to say later. Mr. Mann remembered Schafer disregarding the ground marshal, who was the eyes and ears of the pilot on the ground, as he swung the *Lightning* round. "His actions were unorthodox to say the least," he said.

At 22.06 *XS894* blasted off from Binbrook's main runway into the night sky. Those on the ground saw it disappear with a sheet of flame from its twin tail pipes as Schafer used reheat. It turned over the Wolds and the last they saw was its navigation lights heading out towards the North Sea.

By now the mystery contact which had led to five *Lightnings*, two *Phantoms*, three tankers and a *Shackleton* being scrambled over the North Sea was being tracked by radar controllers at Staxton Wold, which stands on high ground overlooking Scarborough.

The contact was flying parallel to the east coast 90 miles east of Whitby at 530mph at 6,100ft — an ideal course for an interception by a Binbrook *Lightning*. What follows next is drawn from what we have been told is the official transcript of the conversation which took place between Schafer and the radar station at Staxton Wold.

Schafer: I have visual contact, repeat visual contact. Over.

Staxton: Can you identify aircraft type?

Schafer: Negative, nothing recognisable, no clear outlines. There is... bluish light. Hell, that's bright... very bright.

Staxton: Are your instruments functioning, 94? Check compass. Over.

Schafer: Affirmative, GCI. I'm alongside it now, maybe 600ft off my... It's a conical shape. Jeeze, that's bright, it hurts my eyes to look at it for more than a few seconds.

Staxton: How close are you now?

Schafer: About 400ft, he's still in my three o'clock. Hey wait... there's something else. It's like a large soccer ball... it's like it's made of glass.

Staxton: Is it part of the object or independent? Over.

Schafer: It... no, it's separate from the main body... the conical shape... it's at the back end, the sharp end of the shape. It's like bobbing up and down and going from side to side slowly. It may be the power source. There's no sign of ballistics.

Staxton: Is there any sign of occupation? Over.

Schafer: Negative, nothing.

Staxton: Can you assess the rate...?

Schafer: Contact in descent gentle. Am going with it... 50ft... no about 70ft... it's levelled out again.

Staxton: Is the ball object still with it? Over.

Schafer: Affirmative. It's not actually connected... maybe a magnetic attraction to the conical shape. There's a haze of light. Ye'ow... it's within that haze. Wait a second, it's turning... coming straight for me... am taking evasive action... a few... I can hardly...

Staxton: 94? Come in 94. *Foxtrot 94*, are you receiving? Over. Come in 94. Over.

Just as the controller at Staxton Wold lost contact with Captain Schafer, a radar operator, who had been tracking the *Lightning* and the mystery object it had intercepted, watched in disbelief. The two blips on the screen, representing the fighter and its quarry, slowly merged into one, decelerated rapidly from over 500mph until they became stationary 6,000ft above the North Sea 140 miles out off Alnwick.

What exactly happened inside the ground control centre at Staxton is open to conjecture. But our information is that one suggestion was the two *Lightnings* then on Combat Air Patrol off the Scottish coast should be sent south immediately but it was overruled by the senior fighter controller, who continued to try to re-establish contact with Captain Schafer in *Foxtrot 94*.

Two-and-a-half minutes after the single blip on the radar screen came to a halt it started to move again,, accelerating rapidly to 600mph and climbing to 9,000ft, heading south back towards Staxton.

Shortly afterwards, the single blip separated into two, one maintaining its southerly heading, somewhat erratically at between 600 and 630mph and descending slowly, the other turning through 180 degrees to head north-westerly and vanishing at a speed later calculated to be round 20,400mph. While all this was going on, a *Shackleton* MR3, which had been on patrol off the Firth of Forth, was ordered south to hold station around Flamborough Head.

Then, Staxton Wold re-established contact with Captain Schafer.

Schafer: GCI... are you receiving? Over.

Staxton: Affirmative 94. Loud and clear. What is your condition? Over.

Schafer: Not too good. I can't think what has happened... I feel kinda dizzy... I can see shooting stars.

Staxton: Can you see your instruments? Over.

Schafer: Affirmative, but, er... the compass is u/s...

Staxton: *Foxtrot 94*, turn 043 degrees. Over.

Schafer: Er... all directional instruments are out, repeat u/s. Over.

Staxton: Roger 94, execute right turn, estimate quarter turn. Over.

Schafer: Turning now.

Staxton: Come further, 94. That's good. Is your altimeter functioning? Over.

Schafer: Affirmative, GCI.

Staxton: Descend to 3,500ft. Over.

Schafer: Roger, GCI

Staxton: What's your fuel state 94? Over.

Schafer: About thirty per cent, GCI.

Staxton: That's what we calculated. Can you tell us what happened, 94? Over.

Schafer: I don't know. It came in close... I shut my eyes... I figure I must've blacked out for a few seconds.

Staxton: OK 94. Standby.

At this stage the *Shackleton* arrived over Flamborough Head and began circling before *XS894* was vectored into the area by the Staxton controllers.

Schafer: Can you bring me in, GCI? Over.

Staxton: Er... Hold station, 94. Over.

Several minutes then elapsed as Schafer was left to circle the Flamborough area along with the *Shackleton*.

In the meantime, Strike Command HQ at High Wycombe had instructed Saxon Wold to request Schafer to ditch his *Lightning* off Flamborough.

Although he had plenty of fuel to reach either nearby Leconfield or his home base of Binbrook, it appears the reason for High Wycombe's decision was a fear that the *Lightning* had somehow become contaminated during its mystery interception over the North Sea. It may well be that the fear was that the aircraft had suffered radiation contamination although some weeks later when the wreckage was examined at Binbrook, there was no trace of contamination by anything other than salt water.

Staxton: *Foxtrot 94*. Can you ditch aircraft? Over.

Schafer: She's handling fine, I can bring her in. Over.

Staxton: negative, 94. I repeat, can you ditch aircraft? Over.

Schafer: Yeah... I guess.

Staxton: Standby 94. Over Oscar 77. Over.

Shackleton: 77. Over.

Saxon: 94 is ditching. Can you maintain wide circuit? Over.

Shackleton: Affirmative GCI. Over.

Staxton: Thanks 77. Standby. 94, execute ditching procedure at your discretion. Over.

Schafer: Descending now GCI. Over.

Between six and seven minutes then elapsed.

Shackleton: He's down, GCI. Hell of a splash... he's down in one piece though. Over.

Staxton: Can you see the pilot yet? Over.

Shackleton: Negative. We're going round again, pulling a tight one.

Two minutes later:

Shackleton. The canopy's up... she's floating OK... can't see the pilot. We need a chopper out here, GCI. No, no sign of the pilot. Where the hell is he?

Staxton: You sure he's not in the water, 77? Check your SABRE receptions. Over. (Note: SABRE was the search and rescue beacon carried by all RAF aircrew).

Shackleton: No SABRE yet. No flares, either. Hang on. We're going round again.

Another two minutes elapsed.

Shackleton: GCI. Over.

Staxton: GCI. Over.

Shackleton: This is odd, GCI. She's sinking fast but... the canopy's closed up again. Over.

Staxton: Can you confirm pilot clear of aircraft? Over.

Shackleton: He's not in it, we can confirm that. He must be in the water somewhere.

Staxton: Any distress signals or flares yet? Over.

Shackleton: Negative, GCI. Going round again. Over.

Ninety seconds later the crew of the *Shackleton* were back in contact.

Shackleton: She's sunk, GCI. There's a slight wake where she was. Still no sign of the pilot. I say again, GCI, we need a chopper here fast. Over.

Staxton: A Whirlwind's on the way from Leconfield. Are you positive you saw no sign of the pilot? Over.

Shackleton: Nothing GCI. The first pass we assumed he was unstrapping. He must have got out as we went round for a second pass... but why shut the canopy? Over.

Staxton: That's what we were thinking. Maintain patrol 77, he must be there somewhere. Over.

Shackleton: Roger, GCI. Over.

Shortly afterwards the search and rescue *Whirlwind* from nearby Leconfield arrived on the scene and began a systematic search of the ditching area. The aircraft were shortly joined by lifeboats from Bridlington, Flamborough and Filey as the weather began to deteriorate.

The search continued well into the next day but there were no transmissions from the beacons carried by the pilot and on board the aircraft and the official reports say no distress flares were seen. However the following day it was reported flares had been seen about 10 miles offshore and the Grimsby trawler *Ross Kestrel*, which was passing through the Flamborough area, had gone to investigate but, even though more flares were seen, she found nothing.

It was also reported that Captain Schafer's wife was at Binbrook waiting for news of her husband. But the Ministry of Defence were doubtful whether there would be any good news for her. "I don't think he got out of the plane," as spokesman told a reporter. "No wreckage has been found."

Three weeks later it was reported that the fuselage of the aircraft had been located on the seabed and noted that the ejector seat was still intact "giving rise to the belief that the body of the pilot is still in the wreckage."

On October 7, it was reported that divers from *HMS Keddleston* had inspected the wreckage and said Captain Schafer's body was still in the cockpit. When the wreckage of *XS894* was finally lifted from the seabed some five miles off Flamborough Head, it was taken in some secrecy straight to RAF Binbrook.

Air crashes in the North Sea in those days were relatively common and much of the wreckage found its way into Grimsby where often photographers were on hand to record the event. But not with *XS894*. It was also common practice for wrecked aircraft to be taken to the MoD's Crash Investigation Branch at Farnborough where detailed examinations were carried out in an attempt to find the cause of accidents. But this didn't happen with *XS894*.

Instead, the remains of the aircraft, which was in remarkably good condition, were taken to Binbrook where it was placed behind shutters in the far corner of a hangar.

A team from Farnborough arrived one wet winter's day at Binbrook in the belief that they were about

to start a detailed investigation which, in turn, would lead to the preparation of a report on the incident to the Ministry of Defence, the report being used as the basis for an eventual inquiry into the loss of *Lightning XS894*. But they were in for a surprise.

They were astonished to find many of the cockpit instruments missing. These included the E2B compass, voltmeter, stand-by direction indicator, stand-by inverter indicator and the complete auxiliary warning panel from the starboard side of the cockpit. This was a serious breach of regulations and, although the investigation team was promised the instruments would be returned shortly they never were.

The ejector seat also seemed to be 'wrong' and there was a suspicion later among the investigators that it was not the one fitted to the aircraft when *XS894* took off from Binbrook on its final flight. They were even given an assurance by the OC of 5 Squadron that the seat had not been tampered with. But some of the investigators were not convinced.

Interestingly, the reader, who was serving at Binbrook at the time, told us in 1988 that he recalled seeing an official report on the crash which suggested that the seat was faulty and this was why Captain Schafer failed to eject. Brian McConnell, a former sergeant at Binbrook, said the cartridge on the seat had failed to fire because of faulty installation. However, this is very much at odds with the eye-witness account of the *Shackleton* crew who saw the canopy raised. Had any attempt been made to fire it, it would have been blown off. It also seems to conflict with the account we have been given of the order from Staxton Wold to Captain Schafer to ditch his aircraft rather than attempt to return to Binbrook or land at Leconfield, only a few minutes flying time from Flamborough. And, remember, Schafer had told his ground controllers that *XS894* was still handling "fine" and he had plenty of fuel left. During the few hours the investigators were allowed to examine the aircraft, they themselves were constantly supervised by five civilians, two of them Americans.

At the end of the day the investigation team

was told curtly that as nothing useful had been discovered, their job was over. The following day they were all called into the main office at Farnborough and told in no uncertain terms they were not to discuss any aspect of the ditching of *XS894*, even with their own families. The reason given was simple — national security.

And that's where the trail of the mystery of *XS894* goes cold. Well, almost. There is just one further item of information available. On the night of September 8, 1970, a couple and their daughter were walking their dog along the coastal path at Alnmouth Bay, Northumberland — almost opposite the point over the North Sea where Schafer made his interception — when they saw and heard something strange.

"We had been walking for maybe 10 minutes when we heard a very high-pitched humming noise," they later said in a statement to MoD personnel. "It seemed impossible to tell from which direction the noise was coming, it seemed everywhere. It lasted for maybe 10 to 15 seconds. About five minutes later the eastern sky lit up rather like sheet lightning, only it took about 10 seconds to die down again. Over the following three minutes this happened many times, but the 'lightning' was only visible for a second or two at a time. It appeared very similar to the Northern Lights. The whole spectacle was completely silent.

"After two or three minutes there was another flare-up of 'sheet lightning'. This was followed by that awful shrill sensation, only this time it was worse. You could actually feel your ears ringing."

The family called in at the local police station to report what they had seen and heard. Their's was one of many similar reports that night to both the police and the RAF at nearby Boulmer. The time and the location fit in exactly with events going on 60 miles south at Staxton Wold and they could have been watching some kind of natural phenomenon.

Or there could be another explanation. What do you think? ■

MORE NEWS FROM PUERTO RICO

The following note will be found highly corroborative and interesting. It has been supplied, in November 1992, by FSR reader Dr. Eugene Bauer of Dover Plains, New York State, USA, and came to him from the family (residents of Puerto Rico) of one of his work colleagues. EDITOR.

"In the south-western part of the Island of Puerto Rico, in the towns of Cabo Rojo and Lajas, there are many reports about UFOs for the last couple of years, and at present the reports are still coming in from these two towns more than ever, especially from Lajas, where Lake Cartagena is located.

"Near that Lake there is a small village named Parmarejo, whose residents have on many occasions seen strange flying objects. This small village is one of the "hottest flap spots" for UFOs that have been reported anywhere since the great "Flap" some years ago over the Hudson Valley in New York State.

"At Parmarejo the people are living in fear. They are

seeing UFOs flying noiselessly over Lake Cartagena and hovering above their own houses and their farms, shooting down beams of light on to groups of teenagers in the parks at night. These UFOs are described as orange-coloured, with white domes on top, and many square rotating lights or windows of many colours on the bottom. One lady residing there has had many sightings of these "strange lights", over and over again. She has seen a "small red object" pass by her front door one night and another night a huge white dome-shaped UFO with a rotating light hovered over a nearby hill shooting down beams of light towards the ground. On yet another night, the same hill was lit up by an enormous bright light so vivid that it hurt the eyes to look at it. All these strange happenings, they say, are caused by the "OVNIs" (Spanish for "UFOs")."

THE CHINA SCENE

By Gordon Creighton

Early in December 1993 we saw several brief but amusing little news agency reports in British newspapers (for example, a *Reuter's* report in the *Times* and the *Independent*, both of December 8), about the "UFO situation" prevailing between the "Two Chinas", the Communist Mainland and the free and democratic Nationalist Chinese Government on the Island of Taiwan (Formosa).

The reports made it clear that while — on account of the prevailing hostility between the two regimes — no direct air-link can possibly exist between Beijing and Taipei (Taiwan's Capital) — "Aliens" haunting Far Eastern skies are patently under no constraint to pay heed to such trifles as our man-made frontiers and boundaries or for that matter to any other "artificial constructs" of our wee terrestrial minds. Consequently, so the reports said, the UFOs have been coming and going very frequently indeed between Taiwan and the Mainland.

And even those few Chinese in the two camps whose consciousness has expanded sufficiently to take in such a thing as the concept of "alien craft" also seem to have shown scant respect lately for political distinctions, because they have just recently concluded their very own first *Joint Mainland/Taiwan UFO Conference*, held in Beijing!

According to a statement put out by the Communist regime's *Xin-Hua News Agency*, the delegates at the conference spoke of possessing logged records of almost 6,000 of these UFO trackings to and fro across the Formosa Strait!

We are indebted to FSR's Malaysian Consultant, Ahmad Jamaludin, for the following rather fuller account, published in the English-language newspaper *The Star*, of Kuala Lumpur, on December 9, 1993:

UFOs SEEN ABOVE TAIWAN STRAITS

BEIJING-AFP. Bewildered onlookers have spotted nearly 6,000 unidentified flying objects (UFOs) hovering above the Straits separating China from rival Taiwan, the Chinese *Xin-Hua News Agency* quoted experts as saying.

Some of the UFOs — seen by astronomical observatory workers and civil and military pilots above Taiwan Strait — defied rational explanation, said the 50 experts from the two sides who have just concluded a three-day symposium here.

The *Xin-Hua Agency* said that more than 5,000 of the 6,000 "flying saucers" were seen from the Mainland.

Some of the experts believed that they came from remote galaxies, while the more rationalist delegates argued that they were natural phenomena like

lightning bolts or man-made objects such as balloons or satellites, the report said.

The last sighting was on August 7, when two linked hat-like objects floated above Taipei International Airport for 15 minutes.

There have been more than 400,000 UFO sightings worldwide since the first was reported in the United States in 1947, said *Xin-Hua*, adding that China herself set up a body to investigate the phenomenon in 1978.

CHINA'S UFO RESEARCH JOURNAL

This is a suitable moment for brief mention of the Communist Chinese journal on UFO Research, FEIDIE TANSUO. We have no idea how long it has existed. It is published in Lanchow, an inland city far to the south-west of Beijing, and we first received a few copies in 1987. It is said to be produced monthly, and is printed on very poor paper, of the size and general format of the American *Time Magazine*. Its monthly circulation is claimed to be no less than 300,000, a figure that would sound staggering anywhere else in the world. And I find it difficult to credit.

In theory they are now sending the journal to me regularly, but so far only about twenty issues have reached me since 1987. The contents usually include a great deal of padding (articles about Space Travel, Astronomy etc.) and they seem to be careful never to publish anything of serious interest from China itself except humdrum reports of the usual type about sightings of objects seen at great altitudes, spirals in the sky, and sky phenomena in general. They have indeed often carried excellent translated accounts of exciting close encounters with UFOs, and with entities, but in all the issues that I have seen they have been careful to select these from the early (foreign) writings of Antonio Ribera, Aimé Michel, Donald Keyhoe, and so on. In other words, all nice "safe" material, because from far-away foreign sources.

To judge, then, by the few issues of FEIDIE TANSUO that have been permitted to reach me (I assume that somebody either in China or here avidly purloins them, along with a great deal of other material that never reaches me) the magazine strikes me as very much of a write-off. However, I might possibly be wrong on that, for all those missing issues since at least 1987, and maybe even earlier, could possibly have contained something of value to us. If it has been running for at least seven years to date, that means at least 84 issues to date — of which I have just 22.

With regard to kidnappings and disappearances and killings in China, our readers will be aware that a few such reports have arrived on the FSR editorial desk, but these have always come *via other channels*, not by