

How to Impersonate a UFO

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

It all started with a chance remark last year, a question I put to my father.

My old man was a pilot in the Royal Air Force for many years, in that interesting period of world history after the Second World War known as the Cold War. He had flown all over the world, in an age where this was very unusual. He had even dropped bombs on Suez during that ill-advised political embarrassment.

Dad is, or was, I should say, a great raconteur, a pillar of the local Rotary Club and very much in demand for his after-dinner speeches. He had a great fund of stories and anecdotes, often based on his flying experiences. But there was one tale which I had not ever heard him tell, one which I discovered buried in the draft of his autobiography when I was reading the proofs. He had written that he “felt sure he had caused a UFO scare on one occasion”.

So, here’s how to do it – how to provide a convincing imitation of an Unidentified Flying Object. Don’t try this at home, kids.

For this trick, you need a night with completely clear skies – no cloud to form a visual reference – and with no moon to provide undesirable illumination.

Pick a time of year when the jet streams are blowing strongly – you know, those fast-moving stratospheric air currents that the pilots of commercial airlines like to blame for their late arrival. Wintertime is preferred. Oh, and you’ll need a military jet. My Dad did this in a Canberra, but I dare say that any modern jet fighter would work just as well.

So, off you go. Fly up to 45,000 feet over some major conurbation, and head into the wind. Now, the jet streams are probably running at around 150 knots, so you throttle back until your airspeed is about one-fifty. From the ground, you are now more-or-less stationary. If you’re equipped with a radar ground speed indicator, you can fine-tune your direction and airspeed until you are completely stopped, just hanging in the air.

Then, you turn on all the landing lights. These lights are typically distributed fore-and-aft, and on the wing-tips, and around the undercarriage. So, from the ground, you look like a disk with illuminated portholes, or engines, or whatever, all around the circumference.

You sit there in the jet stream for ten minutes or so, chuckling with your co-pilot about the stir you're probably causing on the ground. What a wizard wheeze. Then, you turn about and throttle right up, so that you are streaking through the skies. Then, just when you've reached your maximum speed, turn the lights off again. Your observers have just seen a hovering object suddenly accelerate from rest to a phenomenal speed – “no known aircraft can fly like that” – and then disappear.

Now you're a UFO. Good, huh? With a bit of luck, your appearance and sudden disappearance will be reported in the more sensationalist newspapers with banner headlines, and some no-doubt anonymous government spokesman will be quoted in the small print explaining that this was a just “an ordinary unscheduled military training flight”.

Now my old Dad has something of a reputation as a prankster. He's always ready with a joke or two, often highly politically-incorrect and downright filthy, but usually irresistibly funny for all that. He was the editor of the Rotary Club newsletter, which also gave him an outlet for his personal sense of humour and, since he was a bit of a Silver Surfer, he had taken to trawling the Internet for humorous material. I would occasionally send him ‘funnies’ in the electronic mail which I feel sure became newsletter material and I would often get something hilarious in return.

Having re-read the words from his book, I had simply assumed it was a practical joke, a lark. I tackled him on the topic during one of my inexcusably infrequent visits.

We were sitting in the small but well-maintained garden at the back of the house last summer, basking in the early evening sunshine and enjoying a glass of sherry before dinner. My wife was occupied elsewhere in the house with our children. My mother was busying herself in the kitchen, producing one of those splendid roast dinners I remember so well from my childhood, but which I feel I must resist most of the time these days, if only to keep my weight and blood pressure down.

Dad went uncharacteristically quiet for a few moments. Then, in low and serious tones, he told me what actually happened on that night back in the fifties, an episode which occurred before I was even born. He made it clear that this was not a prank, a whim, but that he had been specifically instructed to go up and perform this trick.

I already knew that, for many years, my old man was a pilot instructor and flight examiner, flying Canberras. He had countless old comrades and acquaintances that he had met in the service, many of whom he had actually trained at one time or another. Night training flights were a standard part of the instruction programme, an essential part of the military role to be able to be airborne at any time and under any weather conditions.

He reminded me that there was a three-man crew for these early-version Canberras – a pilot, a co-pilot and a navigator-bombardier. The aircraft were equipped with twin controls, highly suitable for pilot training – indeed, Dad had done his own jet training in one of these aircraft not so long ago.

My father explained that, on the night in question, the routine pre-mission briefing for what was originally a standard night training flight was unexpectedly interrupted by the Wing-Commander himself. The Wingco was a RAF officer of the old school, right the way down to the ginger handlebar moustache. He had served with distinction during the war and was widely regarded as one who did not suffer fools gladly.

On this occasion, the Wingco seemed extremely annoyed at the disruption and the sudden change of plan, though my father thought he had detected an undercurrent of nervousness uncharacteristic of the Old Man.

The Wingco was accompanied by three other men, two of whom were not wearing any kind of uniform but nevertheless had the bearing of military men. Dad never did discover the origins of these two men, but he strongly suspected that they were from the US Central Intelligence Agency. At that time, CIA pilots were required to resign their military commission at the time of joining the Agency, a process wittily known as ‘sheep-dipping’.

The third man was in the uniform of the US Air Force. This in itself was not unusual; the RAF maintained a close collaboration with the Americans at this time. In those Cold War days, there were American airbases all over Southern and Eastern England, many of

which were reputed to house air-delivered strategic nuclear weapons. As a child, I clearly remember disparaging remarks being made by my father, when passing by in the car, about the bra-less anti-war protesters at Greenham Common with their “ban the bomb” slogans and CND posters.

Of course, in spite of the close collaboration, there was a certain amount of friendly (and occasionally not-so friendly) rivalry between the air forces. My Dad summarised it thus: the Americans considered the RAF tiny and under-equipped to the point of irrelevance, while the Brits found the erstwhile colonials both arrogant and unwilling to take risks.

The USAF officer took immediate charge of the training briefing, leaving the Wingco fuming at being required to do nothing other than to lend his authority to the instructions being issued by the American.

The trainee pilot was quietly but firmly instructed to return to barracks. His place on the mission was replaced by an unsmiling man my father was instructed only to refer to as Rex, one of the officer’s near-silent companions in mufti. The navigator was retained, although it turned out that his role was very limited, since they wouldn’t be flying very far. Dad said that he was killed a few years later in a freak accident, one which was never satisfactorily explained.

At the time, the Canberra was one of the few aircraft capable of flying extremely high – well above the heights achieved by modern commercial jets. My father pointed out that this aircraft was designed as a Cold War bomber, capable of delivering nuclear weapons to foreign capitals whether they wanted them or not.

Early versions of the aircraft had a service ceiling of 48,000 feet, but in the late fifties, Canberra variants set a series of height records, in one case in excess of 70,000 feet. In fact, I understand from Dad that the official maximum height for late-model aircraft is still officially restricted information.

Of course, there were a very few other aircraft then capable of reaching these kinds of height. Dad had heard rumours of a classified aircraft he later discovered to be the Lockheed U-2 spy plane, which was by then in service with the CIA, flying intelligence missions over potentially hostile foreign soil. The U-2 could travel higher and further than the Canberra, but had a reputation of being tricky to fly and with difficult – even dangerous – handling in poor weather conditions.

The point is that there was very little else up there – still isn't, really. All modern subsonic commercial traffic is at 40,000 feet or below and, now that Concorde has been grounded, anything you see at that height is likely to be military in origin.

Dad's first thought, given the haste and obvious secrecy surrounding this mission, was that there was some military emergency, some reconnaissance that was urgently needed, and that for some reason the U-2 could not be used. But that aircraft was not equipped with cameras – although Canberras were used as flying camera platforms well into the twenty-first century – and, from that height, the human eye is more-or-less useless as a way of spotting anything on the ground.

The mystery man Rex was clearly familiar with modern military aircraft. He also made it clear that Dad was to concentrate on flying the crate while he gave directions over the intercom to the navigator, confirming the directions to set a direct course to over-fly central London, climbing to 48,000 feet and making best possible speed. He also instructed my father to keep a close lookout.

My father was a very experienced pilot, having spent at least thirty years of his life flying various craft around this planet. He also had exceptionally good eyesight. Even in later life, well into his sixties, he was more able to spot objects in the sky and to provide an instant aircraft identification much more quickly than I could ever manage.

So it was no surprise that it was Dad who first spotted the multi-coloured lights in the sky, flying on what he thought was a roughly parallel course. The laconic instruction from the mysterious American came over the intercom: "head towards the object at eleven o'clock".

At first, my father thought the other aircraft was only a mile or two away, but the true size of the other craft soon became apparent after some minutes flying towards it at 600-plus knots. As Dad described it, it was as large as an ocean-going liner, circular in overall shape and smoothly rounded at the periphery. The bodywork was a deep black, but there were lights streaming from multiple openings or windows all the way around the disk.

It was completely unclear how the strange craft could possibly stay in the air at all. It was making no attempt to get away from the following Canberra. Despite flying at nearly full throttle, Dad reported that he got the strangest sensation that the mysterious flying machine was merely ambling along, deliberately allowing itself to be observed.

Now, it's difficult to see any kind of facial reaction inside a flying helmet and oxygen mask. Looking around at his companions, Dad reported that the navigator's eyes were wide in shock. By contrast, Rex seemed unsurprised but his eyes seemed to have a slightly manic gleam of exultation reflecting the lights from the instrument panel.

The mysterious American had come aboard equipped with several cameras and a powerful torch. As Dad flew in formation with the giant craft, under and over – 'like a tom-tit on a round of beef', as my old man put it – the American shot off reel after reel of film. He also shone the torch through the canopy; they were flying close enough so that the beam of light could clearly be seen passing over the smooth black hull.

After a few minutes, the other craft dimmed its lights to almost nothing, with just an eerie blue glow remaining around some of the orifices which Dad took to be its engines. Rex's twang came over the intercom, breaking into Dad's thoughts.

"OK, I've seen enough. Break off and descend to 45,000. Head west."

Dad complied immediately. Looking behind, he could see that the mysterious craft seemed to darken and then recede into the distance. It was only after a moment that Dad realised that the machine was going straight up. It disappeared after only a few seconds.

There was an instant of strange stillness in the cabin, despite the ever-present roar of the engines. The moment was broken by Rex's voice, instructing my father to perform the strange manoeuvre I described earlier, the significance of which he did not appreciate until he heard about the reports in the those 'sensationalist newspapers'.

Why? What was the purpose of the ruse? Dad wasn't sure, but I'm convinced it was what these days we would call 'plausible deniability'. It was a provable matter of record that, yes, a military aircraft was flying over London on that day, on a course which corresponded to any sighting which might have been reported, and which had genuinely been practicing 'unconventional manoeuvres' which might have confused an observer.

In the post-mission de-brief, it was made very clear that the RAF crew were not supposed to tell anyone about this, not now, and not ever. There were appeals to patriotism, which rankled a bit in the presence of so many Americans, and there were vague threats, not

least of which was a blunt reminder of the provisions of the Official Secrets Act.

Just at that moment, Mother appeared at the kitchen door to summon us for dinner, effectively terminating the topic of conversation. Dad and I never spoke of the UFO incident again.

Dad had continued his flying career for many years, first with the RAF and more recently with a number of commercial organisations before heart problems detected by the stringent tests that are required of all commercial pilots forced him to retire. Since then, he has lived the quiet life, cultivating his garden and his little circle of cronies, and occasionally acting as a chauffeur for funeral companies.

As far as I can see, his only rebellious act was writing that autobiography, laboriously typing up his stories and anecdotes for what is likely to be, I'm afraid, a frankly miniscule audience. I don't suppose that the book will actually be published now. But I do know that he also vaguely mentioned something about lights in the sky in the same chapter where he reports his antics, although he notes that there was probably a "mundane explanation to this phenomenon". It was probably a huge mistake to write this stuff down at all.

My father died very suddenly, only last week. The funeral is tomorrow. My mother is distraught, inconsolable. I'm pretty upset about it myself, as I'm sure you can imagine. I'll miss him

In one of her more coherent moments, Mother expressed her surprise at Dad's sudden death. She said that he had remained fit and active, walking the dog twice a day and keeping the kitchen garden in good order. (I remember those runner beans lined up with military precision.) He had been watching his diet after his open-heart surgery, and stimulating his brain by contributing to his Rotary Club meetings, engaging with his circle of friends, and tackling crosswords and puzzle books.

So, despite his age, his death came as a considerable surprise, especially to his GP. I spoke to his doctor while I was helping to tidy up his remaining financial affairs. The quack said to me privately that he could see no reason why he should have passed away, but there had been some subtle but distinct official pressure to avoid an inquest, so he felt he had to enter 'death from natural causes' on the death certificate.

Which leads me to a really important question – does anyone know that he talked to *me* about the UFO incident? Now I'm looking over my shoulder all the time. Are they out there, coming for me too?

2841 words

8 pages

24/10/2010 10:09