

UFO - The Battle Continues
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TARGET REACQUIRED
by Jeff Stone

Prologue
WESSEX,
ENGLAND

6-29 p.m. GMT - SEPTEMBER 13, 1983

The silver Mustang tore through the English night, headlamps cutting circular holes of light in the almost velvety black. Nocturnal countryside scrolled past the windows, the driver's attention fixed solidly on the island of illuminated road ahead. Briefly, the driver's eyes flicked to a faded Polaroid stuck on the dashboard. The faces of a woman and a young boy stared back at him. Their eyes seemed to draw his attention.

Dead eyes. Accusing eyes.

What is done is done the driver told himself. *You made a decision to . . .*

The carphone rang, the harsh tone smashing his reverie back into the attic of his mind. He picked the receiver up, clearing his throat beforehand.

"Straker," he barked. There was a second of silence as the secure line accepted his voiceprint and unscrambled the call.

"Commander?" said a crackly but cultured English-accented voice.

"Yes, Lt. Ford."

"Watchdog 12 reports possible UFO in Area NHU 10. Speed, Sol 3."

"Sol 3?"

"That's right, sir. It's slow, but it looks like a UFO all right Do we go to Yellow Alert, sir?" Straker took in a breath and released it slowly, grueling himself for potentially yet another chapter in the nightmare drama he had become far too accustomed to over the past thirteen years.

"Yes. I'll be arriving at HQ in . . ." he looked at the car clock . . . "roughly 8 minutes. Moonbase is to go to Amber Alert immediately."

Straker applied the gas and sped up. The photo's haunting plea was banished into memory, and The Job took over. His Job.

In the end, that was the only thing that was still his.

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S.H.A.D.O. HEADQUARTERS
BENEATH HARLINGTON-STRAKER STUDIOS, WESSEX
6-40 p.m. GMT

The blip was traveling at Sol 3 . . . definitely too slow for a normal Intruder, but then their adversaries were nothing if not changeable.

Ed Straker glanced at Lt. Ford, who was peering at the eutronic radar scope screen before him with an almost religious intensity. Behind them, the men and women under Straker's command were working like a well-oiled machine. Each had their own task: manning consoles, consulting reports and raw data, and co-coordinating the disparate elements of the secret organisation's forces, in a smooth manner that had become second nature.

"It's maintaining it's present course?" Straker asked, eyes back on the blip. Ford rechecked the readings coming through on his other screen.

"Yes, sir. Holding on 123 mark 8 mark 16, Sol 3."

Colonel Paul Foster handed a clipboard to an operative, after signing the report it contained, then joined Straker and Ford at the radar console. He glanced at the trace, and nodded slightly. "It's a UFO. I mean, it's *got* to be."

He glanced at Straker, analysing his superior's reactions as much as he was checking the radar trace. Someone had once said that the commander was SHADO's most important piece of hardware, and whoever that person was was right. The commander's mood and reactions were like a barometer; unwavering, precise, born of gut instinct and a deep knowledge of the common enemy's tactics. Going by his slightly bemused frown, Foster deduced that the commander had been thrown a curveball here. All bets were off. "What are they trying?" Straker muttered, then spoke up at Ford. "Get me Moonbase."

SHADO MOONBASE HQ
SEA Of TRANQUILLITY, LUNA
6-43 p.m. GMT

Amber Alert came as no surprise to Lt. Ellis and her team; when the order had come through, Ellis merely nodded to Lt. Harrington, and the other woman pressed the button her finger had been hovering over for a minute or so already. The AA klaxon went on, and right now in the Launch Sphere the Interceptor pilots would be standing ready for the go command. That slow speed was concerning Ellis. She asked for confirmation from the Space Intruder Detector, and got it. Was the UFO damaged? "That go order better come in soon, or else it'll be past us," Harrington murmured. Lt. Barry heard her and nodded.

"It'll come. Straker's playing this one cool, by the looks."

"Doesn't he always?" Harrington replied, raising an eyebrow.

At that second, Straker reappeared on Ellis's monitor. "Red Alert, Gay," was all he said.

"Yes sir." She pressed the RA button, and thus began the latest in an unending series of jousts between Human and Alien.

A minute later, the Interceptors of SHADO's elite Eagle Squadron were on their way. Lifting off from crater-concealed launch-pads, the triad of space fighters shot away into lunar orbit, and then out into space proper. They would reach attack positions in a matter of minutes, if all remained constant. Ellis watched them go from the Command Sphere viewport. Looking down after a moment, she found that she'd crossed her fingers involuntarily.

EARTH-MARS LAGRANGE POINT
DEEP SPACE
6-50 p.m. GMT

It had crossed light years to be here, and its long journey was nearly over. But now came the most dangerous part of the trip; a race through a gauntlet of fire.

The UFO looked like a beautiful Christmas ornament, Interceptor Leader John Hammond decided. The glittering, pyramidal shape of the alien craft seemed too . . . too . . . *elegant* to be a thing of evil. But evil it nonetheless was. It was a harbinger of a fate most of the inhabitants of Earth had no idea they were threatened by.

Hammond was sure it was a UFO a minute before SID had confirmed it. He'd managed to get it on the new long-range laser telescope that SHADO's brain trust had jury-rigged to the Interceptors' 70s technology. The rounded conical shape and pearlescent glint, even at extreme range, was unmistakable.

"Eagle Leader to Moonbase. Target acquired. Awaiting missile timing data." Hammond's request was answered a moment later, Lt. Ellis's crisp diction cutting through the static in his headphone.

"Eagle Leader, your MT coordinates are 3479-9115 decimal 34."

"Roger, Moonbase. Going for intercept. Eagle Leader to Eagle Squadron . . ."

The three Interceptors of Eagle Squadron peeled off to assume attack positions. As the UFO crawled sunwards, the human ships fanned out ahead of it in a rough arc. The alien vessel was moving inexorably into a net of death. The fact that the Aliens ought to know better than this long before now didn't stop them trying the same old incursion method time and again. Bloody-mindedness on their part, Hammond had decided.

The final seconds ticked away, and Hammond's Interceptor fired first. The huge nuclear missile jutting from the front of his fighter surged off into the star-filled night, its electronic brain altering its course every few milliseconds. At the programmed distance and vector, the missile detonated.

A shockwave equivalent to eight Hiroshimas blossomed in space before the onrushing alien. The spheroid bubble of force spread out at lightning speed, catching the UFO across the width of its hull.

For a few seconds, Hammond was blinded; his ship's polarized windshield had automatically blacked itself out just before detonation. When the glare faded, he anxiously checked his onboard radar. His first wingman, eighteen thousand miles distant to his port, loosed off his missile.

"Moonbase from Eagle 2. Missile away."

A second man-made sun dawned in the vacuum; this time, the UFO was hit head-on. This was a very rare occurrence, and one that basically ensured destruction of the target. Hammond crossed his gloved fingers. "Die, you bastard," he hissed.

The nuke blast disappeared from the scope, and Hammond searched for the UFO. Ignorant of logic and fairness, the Earthbound blip was still there, still coming! *Shit*. "Moonbase from Eagle Leader. Missiles One and Two destruct negative. Target still on course."

"Understood, Eagle Leader. Stand by for escape co-ordinates."

As the escape vectors came in, and he began punching the data into his flight computer,

Hammond's racing mind pondered if the Aliens had figured out a way to proof their ships against nuclear missiles; the idea and its implications made his stomach clench icily. He prayed that Missile 3 would do the trick. It *had* to, or else it was up to Sky One.

Hammond and Moonbase anxiously awaited the report of missile launch from Eagle 3's pilot, Gary Byrne. The moment came . . . and went. Byrne hadn't fired!

The distance between UFO and Interceptors was now shrinking alarmingly quickly. Hammond was about to raise Byrne when the seemingly negligent wingman came though on the link.

"Moonbase, this is Eagle 3. Malfunction. Missile launch negative."

Oh nooooo... Hammond linked up with his friend. "Gary, what's up?"

"Dunno, skipper. Missile just won't fire. Going for evasion. Out."

* * *

SID, SHADO's Space Intruder Detector satellite, hung over Africa in geo-stationary orbit, its sensors probing out into the heavens and coldly observing as the spaceships battled it out. A change in the Intruder's vector came through, and in half a second SID had processed the new information.

"THIS IS S.I.D.," the satellite reported to Moonbase. "UFO HAS ALTERED COURSE. PROJECTED NEW TARGET....INTERCEPTOR 3. SPEED INCREASED TO SOL 6."

* * *

Now that the UFO was after Eagle 3, it was headed for the Moon instead of the Earth. This gave Hammond an idea. They had no way to stop the thing now; the only missile left was the dud one on the UFO's quarry. Perhaps if they could lure itMoonbase and take it out with a Missile Tank . . . it was worth a try, at any rate. Hammond contacted Lt. Ellis and requested new course data for this risky move.

SHADO HQ
6-58 p.m. GMT

Straker raised an eyebrow. "It's an original idea, I'll give it that. Tell Hammond to do it."

"Understood."

"And Gay?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Keep your heads down up there."

Ellis smiled. "We'll do our best, sir."

LUNAR SPACE

6-59 p.m. GMT

Byrne was over-running his Interceptor's engine, trying to coax a little more thrust out of it. The UFO was gaining rapidly, and would be within firing range in less than a minute. This was the time in which those promised new Interceptors would've come in handy, Byrne mused. Straker had told them last month that the Mark II Interceptor prototypes were running into problems at the Rand Corporation test facility. Trouble with the independent targeting sensors, faults in the thrust control system and glitches in the VTOL engine valves. Byrne could handle all that manually. What he needed now was what Interceptor II had and could do that this ship couldn't; namely, go a lot faster, and have an ejection system.

'Go a lot faster' was the most important factor right at this minute.

The UFO was *letting* him run, Byrne knew. Even damaged, a UFO could usually manage Sol 6. This one was at Sol 3.5, and it wasn't even scratched. "Moonbase, this is Eagle 3. ETA to fire zone?" he called sharply, glancing every few seconds at the rear camera display. The UFO was growing bigger in it by the second.

"Eagle 3, you will enter Missile Tank range in one minute ten seconds . . . mark" Ellis was a robot in this sort of situation, Byrne had often said to Hammond. That had a lot to do with her not being the one in the cockpit, but it was also her way of dealing with this sort of stress situation. Stay calm, and your pilots out there are calmer. It was the only way to really handle the defence of an entire *planet* from an unknown and hostile force. No wonder Straker liked her, Hammond had replied with a smile; they were so alike.

"Roger, Moonbase. Here I come. You ready?"

"Go ahead and fall. We'll catch you, Byrne."

SKYDIVER ONE
BENEATH THE PACIFIC OCEAN, OFF HAWAII
7-02 p.m. GMT

Waterman was on the bridge, checking the submarine's dive plane readings, when the call from HQ came in. The captain took the call in his tiny cabin. He lit a Dunhill and keyed the mike.

"Lew, hi. How long before you're in a launch position?" Foster's image asked.

"We'll get there if we have to, Paul, but the engines don't like flank speed for this long." Captain Waterman stubbed out his cigarette (a captain's privilege that the mostly non-smoking remainder of SHADO members found unusual) and consulted a chart. "We have to let the reactor cool down before too long . . . Paul, how were we caught napping by this one?"

"You know how." Foster frowned. "We got cocky. We can handle the Aliens, we're the kings. We're not, not anymore. They have a bullet-proof UFO design now, or so it seems."

"Christ. Can Sky One handle it?"

"If Moonbase can't, you'll have to. Unless we go nuclear in the atmosphere."

"And we can't do that."

"Not really."

"We'll be there, Paul. I'll shoot it down if I have to. Any way how."

Foster signed off, slightly disturbed by what Waterman had just said.

MOONBASE SHADO HQ
SEA OF TRANQUILLITY, LUNA
7-04 p.m. GMT

"Here he comes!" Lt. Barry called.

Ellis fought the urge to duck as Eagle 3 shot over the Command Sphere at nought feet. The Interceptor pulled up with an effort and assumed a shaky level course. The Sphere staff breathed with relief.

"It's not over, people," Said Ellis. "UFO approaching."

There was the sensation of being encased in effervescent water for a moment as the saucer swooped over the base. This was due, the scientists said, to an oscillation in air molecules caused by close proximity to a UFO drive source. Whatever it was, it was unnerving.

"It didn't attack the base," Barry spluttered. "It didn't even TRY."

Already it, and the Interceptor, were lost to view behind a mountain range far away. "This isn't right, Gay."

"When it is ever right?" she replied dryly, and keyed her mike.

"Missile Tanks, it's up to you. Fire at will."

"Roger."

OCEANUS PROCELLARUM, LUNA

7-07 p.m. GMT

Eagle 3 hurled itself across the sky, too fast to be even made out clearly to the Missile Tank commander. The UFO was twelve seconds behind the Interceptor. Teutonic sensor eyes lay in wait for the Intruder.

And then, it came, appearing over a mountain and dropping down into the valley beyond it. Wedged in massive and dark crevices, the five Missile Tanks were invisible from the sky. Their positions allowed for double cross-fire triangulated firing points.

It'd be a turkey shoot.

The computer-controlled SuperPatriot AHBM(Anti-Hostile Ballistic Missile)s fired automatically, and blasted skyward at a frightening speed. As they reached the UFO's altitude, the heads of the missiles split apart. Hundreds of micro-nuclear charges were scattered in the alien's path, and detonated as one, creating a wall of fire a mile wide. The AHBM radars guided all the charges to the optimum position, and the destruction wave the charges put out was virtually impenetrable.

The UFO penetrated it. But now, things were different. It was wobbling dangerously, spewing orange gas from a rent in it's side. The Tank Commander grabbed his mike and said joyfully: "Moonbase, this is MTC. Hit positive. UFO damaged, but still in flight!"

"Roger, MTC."

7-08 p.m. GMT

The UFO sped **up** for its death dive. The Tank Commander watched the crippled UFO accelerate and catch up with Eagle 3 in a matter of seconds. "Speed . . . Sol 10?!", his gunner reported, amazed.

Byrne knew he was dead long before anyone else did, and had his thumb on the DESTRUCT switch. The UFO was damaged, but still flying. He had to stop it. He owed it to his wife and kids.

"See you guys," he said quietly in the mike. "Make this one count, huh?"

He pushed the button, and the ship and missile exploded. The UFO hit Eagle 3 a full second later.

This time, the UFO didn't come out the other side. Smashed apart, the ship plummeted Moonward and crashed violently into the Lunar dust.

There was no sign of wreckage from Eagle 3.

SHADO HQ
7-12 P.M. GMT

"Prepare a cover story for Byrne's death, and make sure his family is never poor again." Straker looked gaunt and tired, but his eyes still glittered with shock and suppressed anger.

"Yes, sir," said Ford, going off to find the authorisation forms.

"Did you know Byrne well, sir?" Foster asked, after an appropriate interval.

Straker just stared. "I know all my pilots, Colonel. Brave men, the best."

"That they are."

Though he appeared calm, Straker must be dying inside, Foster noted. Whenever they lost pilots, the commander would brood for days. Even fouling up a mission and living was a crisis. Every loss was personal, a reflection on him and the assurances he had given his operatives.

"At least Byrne ended this," Ford noted upon his return.

"On the contrary, Lieutenant," Straker replied flatly. "Byrne's sacrifice only brought this event to an end." He smacked his fist into the other palm in frustration and shook his blonde head.

"This is just the start of some new Alien offensive?" asked Foster.

"Precisely. That UFO was something new on us. The Aliens have upped the stakes. We have to match it, or find an adequate defence. And soon."

Foster knew what that decision would mean and demand. MORE MONEY. A lot more. And Foster also knew who'd have to OK that.

"Henderson's gonna LOVE you after tomorrow," he said ruefully. "Pity Ginny's not here; she gets on with Henderson a lot better than you do."

"I won't be *trying* to get on with Henderson tomorrow. I'm going to do the talking, and he'll be doing the signing."

And with that, Straker marched off towards his office.

Ford and Foster exchanged knowing looks.

"You know what?" Ford said. "I believe him."