

UFO - The Battle Continues
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TARGET REACQUIRED Interlude 1
by Jeff Stone

EARTH ORBIT

2-21 pm GMT

DECEMBER 25, 1983

Amos Burke watched the SuperPatriots from his Shuttle speed towards their targets with anxious hope. If the blockade failed to destroy the remaining UFOs, or at least force them to retreat back into deep space, all six of the NASA vessels would be in deep trouble. Space Shuttles were not Interceptors; they had no armour and their main engines weren't even vaguely capable of providing enough speed to evade or outrun the invaders. If the worst came to the worst, Burke would give the order for the Shuttle Fleet to perform an EDOM (Emergency De-Orbit Maneuver) and just hope they could reach the SkyBolts' operational altitude.

With luck, it wouldn't have to come to that. Atomic fire blotted out the stars as, one after the other, the SuperPatriots of all six Shuttles went off at their pre-set target locations. Burke nudged his ship's attitude thrusters in order to have its underfuselage heat-shield take the brunt of the shockwave.

The blast-front was surprisingly weak, and a look at the tactical read-out showed Burke that three of his own missiles hadn't detonated. *Atlantis* and *Enterprise* were also reporting missile-destruct-negative conditions; a babel of seriously worried Shuttle pilots chattered in Burke's headset. Five blips still showed on the 'scope. Could **nothing** stop these bastards?

"OK, OK, keep the Goddamn crosstalk down!" he finally spat, quelling the panicked intercommunications. "We can't do anything about it now." He looked out of the windshield; a UFO was coming straight at him! "All Shuttles, go for EDOM!"

Without waiting for confirmation from the other Shuttles, Burke reached up and pulled a large yellow lever on the overhead console. The view of space outside the windows suddenly shifted, and the de-orbit procedure began. If all went smoothly, they'd be out of danger in about eight minutes.

The EDOM proceeded with agonising slowness, but finally flickers of fire began licking at the bottom of the cockpit windows; *Challenger* was hitting the atmosphere. Not much longer now...

Discovery, *Atlantis*, *Enterprise* and *Endeavour* dropped towards the Earth after *Challenger*, swiftly becoming man-made shooting stars. *Newton*, however, remained in orbit as if it were nailed into position.

Inside, it's crew was frantically trying to track down the cause of the numerous systems failures that had lit up the Shuttle's status screen the second EDOM was initialised. One by one, alert lights winked on, until the whole Situation Board was a scarlet rectangle.

"MoonBase from *Newton*!" Shuttle Captain Glenda McGowan yelled into the radiolink. "We have massive systems failures across the board! Cause unknown! UFOs closing on this position!" There was no reply. She looked at her status screen; comms had gone offline too.

The five blips on the eutroniscope (one of the few devices still working) crept closer and closer. Seconds stretched into hours, then everything became fast and terrifying as the interior lights went out. Someone screamed; after that, an eerie silence descended. McGowan's ears roared with the sound of her own rapid heartbeat. God, even the life support had packed up. She tensed, then abruptly relaxed as she saw that the UFOs were now right on top of them.

She looked down sadly at the dead radio...she couldn't even tell anyone they were about to die.

The UFO's beam weapon hit *Newton* square in the area of its main fuel tank; hundreds of gallons of liquid hydrogen went up in a matter of a few split-seconds. The resultant fireball utterly vaporised the fragile craft, leaving nothing but a small cloud of flaming gas. That too flickered out after a moment, and there was now no sign that anything had ever been there.

The UFO that had destroyed *Newton* altered its trajectory again and rejoined it's four sisters. The Earth rushed up to meet them.

MOONBASE

2-23 pm GMT

"*Newton! Newton* from MoonBase, come in!" Ellis was grasping the stalk of her mike as if she was trying to throttle it. Lt Barry's eyes were fixed on her eutroniscope, waiting to see, against all hope, the blip she knew wasn't there anymore.

It never came. *Newton* was gone. Barry turned round to look at Ellis, as did everyone else. All attention in the room was focussed on the base commander, everyone wanting to be given some excuse not to just sit there and grieve. But the realisation that nothing was left to be done was all-encompassing.

Abruptly, Ellis coughed and leaned forward. "SHADO HQ from Moonbase. We are reporting a confirmed shoot-down of Shuttle *Newton*. All other Shuttles have completed de-orbit procedures and are on landing approach to Area 51."

"Roger, MoonBase." Freeman's voice was leaden with desolation. MoonBase's job was over; now, it was all up to the SkyBolts.

**RAF EGLINTON
NATO DEFENCE FORCES AIRBASE
SOUTHERN ENGLAND
2-32 pm GMT**

Straker was down the SST's embarkation stair almost before it was in place, forcing Robinson and the rest of the crew to hurry down it themselves with more haste than was perhaps safe. A black limousine was waiting on the tarmac, and the Commander was waving from the back passenger seat.

"Captain Robinson! Kurt! You're with me!" he barked. The two pilots jogged over and slid into the car's leathery interior. The door slammed shut, and they were off; Robinson found herself sliding around on the bench seat's highly polished surface.

"How far is it to SHADO HQ from here?" she asked, watching trees and buildings blur past them.

"Twenty minutes if we stick to the speed limit," Straker replied. He smiled slightly. "Today, however, we'll do the trip in twelve." The car suddenly accelerated. Robinson, who was not enjoying being bounced around in this upper-class hot rod, wondered if there was a seatbelt to hand...or failing that, a good stiff drink.

ABOVE THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

2-35 pm GMT

Waterman got the jump on the UFO fleet, and managed to loose off a volley of rockets before the invaders even knew they were under attack. His shots ran true, slamming into the UFO at the rear of the phalanx and blowing it apart. The shattered spacecraft tumbled towards the clouds below; Waterman made a mental note to inform Straker that the 'bullet-proof' saucers were apparently no longer so upon entry into the atmosphere.

There was a purple flash; a UFO particle beam slashed past SKY 1's port wing, missing it by a matter of inches. Waterman broke out of his thoughts and sent his plane into a steep dive. His plan was to come up at the saucers from below and prevent them from using their laterally-firing weapons.

The four remaining UFOs followed him down, matching his pace. This wasn't going to work; Waterman throttled up and tried to loop up and round behind his pursuers. G-forces and the scream of turboram engines assaulted him on all sides.

A blip on the radar brought joyous relief; SKY 4 had arrived. It came in like a avenging angel, fire spewing from it's engine exhausts and SkyFire rockets spraying out before it. The attack missed, but it forced the UFOs to break off their pursuit of SKY 1 and head off on an escape course.

"Good to see you, Harry," Waterman called over his link. "We've got 'em on the run. Going for pursuit."

"Roger, Sky Leader," SKY 4 pilot Harry Brookes came back. "They're heading into a trap...SKY 2 and 3 are hiding behind the next cloud." Waterman grinned. Victory was in sight.

SHADO H.Q.

2-44 pm GMT

It was all business when Straker marched into the Control Room. Robinson and Shroeder were literally abandoned at the door to the nerve centre, the Commander instantly going into conference with Freeman and Lake. Robinson looked round for Colonel Foster, a man Straker had mentioned often. He wasn't around, by the looks.

"The SkyBolts are in pursuit of the UFO fleet. An attempt to ambush them failed, due to their superior speed, but our boys have reformed behind them and are slowly gaining. The UFOs' most likely destination, given their current heading, is Central Russia or the Arctic Circle," Freeman reported. "The four remaining UFOs don't appear to be damaged, but are making somewhat less than normal atmospheric speed."

Straker frowned. "What could be in those areas to interest them? In two of the most uninhabited spots on the entire planet...?" he trailed off, as Ford delivered him the latest situation report. The SkyBolts had split up, half staying behind the invaders and the other two engaging full TR thrust to overshoot them and double back. A skyborne pincer maneuver was coalescing in the skies above the Middle East.

"Maybe they're trying to set up a base there," Lake offered. Straker shook his blonde head dismissively.

"Unlikely. Any land base would be spotted by reconnaissance satellites before too long. No; it has to be something else."

"In any case, we'll have them before they land," said Freeman. "After losing an Interceptor and *Newton*, I wouldn't bet on it," the Commander spat with atypical harshness. "It was complacency that got us into this mess, and it's cautious efficiency that'll get us out of it."

ABOVE THE CENTRAL SIBERIAN PLATEAU RUSSIAN DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION

2-50 pm GMT

The pincer closed as snow fell on the frozen tundra beneath it. Sky 1 and 3 let loose the last of their SkyFires, their pilots switching to cannons the second the projectiles were on their way. The double salvo exploded to the left and right of the fleeing UFOs, and the saucers applied extra speed as a result. They leapt ahead, clearing a cloud-bank...

...and running head-on into a SkyFire volley from SKY 2 and 4. This time, the rockets struck dead-on.

And didn't explode.

Waterman had expected to see at least one UFO dropping like a stone as he cleared the cloud bank, but all four craft were intact and coasting serenely on as if the SkyBolts hadn't even existed.

Baffled and enraged, Waterman opened up at point-blank range on the nearest UFO with his nose-mounted 40mm cannons. The shells ricocheted off the target's ablative energy shield, as Waterman thought they might. He was about to swear loudly to himself, and then contact SHADO HQ for further orders, when his plane's engines cut out.

SHADO H.Q.

2-51 pm GMT

"We've lost contact with the SkyBolts." Lt Ford felt like the doomed messenger of antiquity as he said this to Straker. "All four planes have just vanished off the radar, and so have the UFOs."

"What happened...were they shot down?" Straker snapped. Ford assumed he meant the SkyBolts.

"Very doubtful, sir. Our equipment's sensitive enough to detect mid-air explosions, and there haven't been any since SKY 1 shot the last UFO down. It's more likely that they've crashed...or it could be that the Aliens have some kind of detection shield. The SkyBolts could be within its radius." It was a weak suggestion, and Ford admitted it by his rather weak tone of voice.

"If they had a shield, they'd have used it before now," Freeman noted.

"Well, whatever the reason, we've lost the UFOs and our pilots, and we have to find both of them," Straker said firmly. "Ford, how long before we can get a S&R flight on it's way to Russia?"

"I'll have to check on that, Commander." Straker nodded, and Ford moved off. Lake put his hand on Straker's arm, making him jump. She withdrew the hand.

"My mother always told me that until you know the worst, assume the best," she offered quietly. "Maybe Waterman and his team were able to bail out..."

"My mother always said that someone who always expects the worst can never be disappointed," Straker declared with barely-concealed irritation. "Colonel Lake, you'll remain here with Alec and co-ordinate the search for the UFOs. I want every recon plane we have at the North Pole yesterday. Colonel Foster and I will go with the rescue flight."

"Yes, sir." Straker departed to find Foster, leaving Lake and Freeman to exchange worried glances once again.

"I don't think Ed can take any more bad news," Freeman said.

"That goes double for all of us."

CENTRAL SIBERIA

3-00 pm GMT

A tiny, mobile brown shape marred the otherwise pristine whiteness of the steppe, a particle of stubborn humanity amidst icy lifelessness. Waterman had broken his left arm and sustained a wicked gash to his chest upon bailing out of SKY 1; the ejection seat had misfired and thrown him bodily up and rearwards against the fuselage of the plane. The pain of the wounds was intense, but the freezing wind was starting to numb him all over. Waterman wondered which would kill him first...hypothermia or shock from his injuries. And he was also concerned about his fellow SkyBolt pilots...had they all managed to eject safely too?

He'd seen Harry's parachute off to the north on the way down, so that meant at least one other person had.

He just hoped the tracking device in his survival pack was still working. Taking a break in the lee of a huge snow-hill, he dugged in the pack and retrieved the tracker and a single-use injector-spray of morphine. After making sure that the tracker's operation light was still winking steadily, and shooting the drug into his veins, he repacked his gear and moved off towards what looked like a small forest some distance to the west. There lay possible firewood and a chance to construct shelter. Right now, that was all he could do.

ARCTIC CIRCLE

3-10 pm GMT

The four UFOs hung in the air above a vast ice floe, spinning swiftly. They arranged themselves into a square formation, and as one began descending. When they were about fifty feet from touchdown, bright red beams of energy stabbed downwards from each saucer and blew massive holes in the ice. Into these 'doors' the UFOs dropped; the water turbulence from their spinning died away after a moment, leaving nothing but the four rents in the ice as evidence of the ships' arrival.

At a depth of thirty fathoms, the quartet finally split up. Each craft set off on it's own course through the semi-darkness of the polar ocean. Beneath the ice the Aliens could travel in perfect safety; on this occasion all the more so, given that the nearest SkyDiver sub was 3500 miles from their 'landing'-point.

The first phase of the operation was complete...nothing could or would now stop the second from also becoming a reality.

RAF EGLINTON

3-21 pm GMT

Celeste Robinson hadn't had any real sleep for almost three days now, but something was preventing her from feeling tired. Maybe it was the meta-hypnotic, perhaps it was the cumulative shock of so many crazy things all happening at once. Even so, she was hoping for a few hours' nap on the flight to the rescue zone.

Straker had clearly decided she was 'the woman'; why else would he take someone that wasn't even an official member of SHADO with him? It was as if he didn't want her out of his sight. Maybe Jay-ROD's approval of her had shown that she was someone very special, intended for big things...if that meant heading up the Oort Cloud mission, then so much the better. That is, if there ever WAS an Oort Cloud Mission after this business...

Right now, she and Shroeder were watching a Lockheed StarLifter rolling into position on RAF Eglinton's main runway. Already loaded aboard were four winterized SHADOMobiles, a Blackhawk helicopter and a squad of SAS commandos specially trained for operations in the Russian theatre. If anyone could find Waterman and the other pilots, it would be these troops and their vehicles.

The StarLifter came to a halt, its engines idling. The cargo door in the nose cracked open, and the last of the rescue supplies were carted into the hold on an electric forklift. Shroeder gestured.

"That's our cue, Captain," he said, starting off towards the plane.

"Call me Celeste", she muttered at his retreating back, before running to join him.

NORTH POLE

3-30 pm GMT

At the exact position of the Earth's magnetic north pole, illuminated by weak sunlight that flickered through holes in the ice-cap, one of the UFOs hung motionless. Even its blindingly fast spinning has ceased, and all was still and quiet in the frigid, trackless gloom.

Then light and sound; the UFO suddenly glowed bright orange, as if a tinted floodlight at its centre had been switched on. The eerie fire-glow turned the ice above the saucer the same colour, and the fish that shared the pole area with the newcomer darted off in all directions.

The glow faded slightly and then began slowly pulsing on and off. Any whales in the immediate vicinity would have been able to hear an ultra-low buzzing tone that accompanied the pulses.

The UFO continued to send out its message of sound and light, waiting for the answer it would soon receive from the other UFOs. When it came, Phase II could begin.