



Who Went There?

By A. Stuart Williams

The place stank. A queer, mingled stench that only the ice-shrouded, poorly-ventilated modules of a British Antarctic Survey camp at Christmas knew, compounded of reeking humanity, mould-streaked plastic walls and the greasy stench of overcooked turkey and carbonised stuffing. An overtone of near-liquidised sprouts and stewed tea fought against the musty waft of sweat evaporating from snow-drenched protective clothing hanging on a rack near the entrance hatch.

The animal, not-unpleasant smell of dogs, diluted by time, also hung in the air. Lingering odours of machine oil contrasted sharply with the tang of sparking electric motors in ventilation ducts and the taint of harness dressing and leather. Yet somehow, cutting through all that would have normally blunted the senses of noses jaded by close contact with colleagues for months on end, came a queer, neck-hair stiffening rankness, the faintest suggestion of an odour alien among the smells of industry and life. And it *was* a life-smell. It came from the blubbery thing that lay bound in ice and covered with cable and plastic sheeting on a bio-lab table, drip-drip-dripping over the side and onto the synthetic floor panels, slowly revealing more and more of an oddly-rounded silhouette under the unshielded blaze of the dull fluorescent light.

Blair, the miserable-looking administrator of the expedition – ‘Winter Station Leader’ was technically his job title - twitched nervously at the wrappings, exposing clear, dark ice beneath and then pulling the heavy sheeting back into place restlessly. The pvc was too clear for his liking. He retreated for a moment to a nearby desk, took a clipboard from a drawer and began scratch-scratch-scratching on the cheaply-printed forms with an almost-dry biro. Normally he loved paperwork, but this thing was going to need twenty pages in triplicate, and since Skynet was down tonight due to polar ionization, he would have to do it all manually. He sighed. Stiff upper lip and all that, as his colleagues at the far-away ministry would have told him. Stiff, ice-cold feet, more like.

Still, there was the consolation of being able to blame much of the present situation on the Americans, he mused, chewing on the blunt end of the yellow Bic with a wry smile. After all, it was they who had shot down the blasted ship, or whatever it had been out there beneath the wind-swept, crackling, cracking ice.

It was dark now, but it had been difficult enough in daylight to tell what it was that had come shrieking down from the stratosphere that morning and buried itself under the upper layers of the Brunt Ice Shelf. All sixteen of the staff of the Halley VI Research Station had poured out onto the ice, but from a distance of several kilometres all they could see was a massive plume of superheated water vapour intermixed with black smoke and a vivid, electric-blue glow.

Everyone had assumed at first that it was a conventional aircraft, at least until they got the datagram from the Yanks at McMurdo Station on Ross Island. Apparently, their North American Aerospace Defense Command had been so busy ‘tracking Santa Claus’ last night they’d nearly missed something relatively small but dense entering Earth’s atmosphere over the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Nearly was the operative word, however, since as soon as they’d spotted the mystery object and realised it was being controlled, not just some falling piece of space junk, they’d sent up a barrage of anti-missile missiles which, on impact, did not destroy it but merely sent it skipping along the curve of the atmosphere and down to the Antarctic.

A half-hour after receiving the news, the bewildered Brits at the scientific station southeast of the Weddell Sea had been almost swamped by a company of US Marines; thankfully the Special Boat Service had gotten there first, and the next twelve hours had been taken up with long-distance wrangling between the two governments who, as usual, missed the point entirely.

The reduced station personnel in winter was mostly non-scientific in composition, at the moment; apart from Blair they comprised of a chef, a doctor, mechanics, an electrician, several electronics engineers and a heating and ventilation engineer. The remaining five were an astronomer, a geologist, their two assistants and a marine biologist.

As it was, the Russians had been waiting for them by the time the joint Anglo-US party arrived at the crash site, replete with Sno-Cats, white parkas, semi-automatic weapons and a kettle. The British scientists, naturally enough, set about making a pot of tea while the military types beat their chests and argued about jurisdiction. It was all a moot point as, not long after they had grudgingly agreed to stand back and let the scientists get a look in, something strange began to occur.

Dr Tom Standish, the chief astronomer, was talking to one of the SBS chaps who had his weather-proofed tablet out and was consulting military satellite coverage via Skynet.

“Something came down out of space, a ship of some kind is our best guess, but like nothing we’ve ever seen, at least officially. These infra-red images show it way down there in the blue ice, a rectangular, blocky thing with no streamlining that we can see. Eighty-six metres long and almost fourteen metres in diameter at its thickest. Whatever it is, it’s big – bigger than anything humanity has ever gotten off the ground, never mind into space...” his voice trailed off.

There was a long, melted groove some fourteen metres across which ran off into the distance for a kilometre or so, terminating at this end in the massive patch of melted ice which was now rapidly re-freezing before their very eyes. And there was, yes, the hint of a dark shadow far below.

While all this was going on, the Yanks and the Russkies were off in their own separate huddles, presumably looking up similar data while the British boffins directed the setting up of high-powered sonar transponders at the edge of the melted patch. They hoped to at least get some idea of the exterior shape of the mysterious object before it froze over again and night fell, the days being so short at this time of year. Finally, all was prepared and one last consultation with the military resulted in the last connection being made by the two British geologists to Dr Standish’s specially-insulated, hardened laptop. He’d been chosen to lead by default, as if he actually knew anything about extra-terrestrial life. Now, it seemed, was his chance to learn. He had punched the key to scan and waited.

For a couple of minutes, nothing happened apart from data slowly coming in via the eight firewire cables from the sensors. Then, unsettlingly, a vibration had begun, seemingly far below, followed by a repeat of the blue glow they'd seen earlier, but way down in what was now ice. Suddenly the data coming in had dropped off, and the blue flickering had started to diminish into the distance, fading as it went. The ice shelf had collapsed under the 'ship', or whatever it was, and it was falling into the abyss beneath.

The rumbling had increased, followed by a cracking and a crashing, and as the surface ice also began to break up, the surrounding personnel all scrambled for the believed safety of the Sno-Cat's, though that proved an illusion as one of the huge Russian military vehicles which had been parked too close slid, slowly, terrifyingly, back and down, down into the icy wet darkness below. After that, for a few minutes at least, all was terrifying silence.

Then a cry came from one of the scientists, the marine biologist, who had been standing further away atop one of the icy ridges and was scanning the surrounding area with binoculars.

"Hey, over there! Look!" he'd pointed frantically, at first thinking one or more of the Russian navy men had managed to escape their plunging vehicle and struggled to the surface of the now once-more liquid, but near freezing, water which had opened up during the collapse. He was wrong.

A block of ice containing a dark shadow had bobbed up and was drifting towards the "shore". Naturally enough, the SBS chaps, being nearest, shot at it. No, not with assault rifles like the Yanks would have done, but with harpoon guns. They roped it in, pulled it out and, after more administrative kerfuffle, it was decided to haul the mysterious block, which had a dark, reddish shadow at its heart, back to Halley VI for examination. By then, the weather had begun closing in again, and the dark was almost upon them.

So now, just a few hours later, the remainder of the mixed British scientific and multi-national military party were squeezed tightly but as best they could into the five modules at Halley VI – including the dining and social module which, strangely enough, looked a bit like a red flying saucer. Something on which the American marines had commented jokingly, but nervously, when they arrived. It seemed appropriate.

Sharing the remains of the Brits' Christmas dinner and Boxing Day rations as well as a half-dozen pots of coffee, they all hunkered down to sleep the long, cold night out before next morning beginning the arguing over who got the mystery 'iceman'. For they thought the block contained, at very least, the now deep-frozen remains of perhaps some escaped member of the crew of the alien ship now far below. There hadn't been much under the station's Christmas tree that morning, but now they had a different kind of present to give the world, if ever they were allowed to tell their story.

Meanwhile Blair, who had gotten fed-up with hearty socialising, had, as described earlier, headed off to the laboratory module or 'pod', made a cursory examination of the ice block and begun filling out his forms. It was cold, bitterly so around his legs especially as he sat there, so he fetched a portable heater and popped it under the desk. After an hour, probably sometime past 2am, he felt sleep begin to overwhelm him and, shoving his clipboard back in the drawer, Blair shuffled off to bed down in his tiny office. Tired and distracted, he forgot to turn off the heater. More importantly, the key to the lab pod remained unused in his pocket. The drip-drip-drip continued, steadily, remorselessly.

It was about an hour later that Blair, who for some unknown reason had been dreaming about kissing a polar bear that then turned into his mother-in-law, struggled out of a fitful sleep. He could hear banging of doors and running and, hurriedly putting on a fleece, followed the sounds down towards the dining module where most of the military types had been bivouacked. Only the dim night lights were on in the connecting corridor, so he couldn't see much until he was almost there.

Just as he reached the entrance something huge, red and dripping reared up in front of him, outlined in the light from the doorway and, in a gurgling, fluid voice that sounded like an echo from beyond, shouted something incomprehensible.

There was a thunderous crash of assault rifle fire from inside the module and the huge, red figure fell back, landing atop Blair and crushing him to the ground.

“Ho, ho, ho! Take me tooo your leaderrr!” it gurgled to the heavily-armed US Marine Sergeant which stood over it, guns smoking.

Tentacles flailing pathetically from within its long, red, white trimmed sleeves, the crimson-suited thing from another world uttered its last words through the forest of writhing, white, worm-like appendages surrounding what presumably was a mouth in its dark-eyed, red-hooded head.

“You're on my naughhhty listtt, boyyy...” One last liquid gurgle and it expired.

The tentacles thrashed and became still. The body twitched one last time, and then, with a sound impossibly like tinkling sleigh bells, dissolved into a billion red sparkles which gradually vanished until there was nothing left.

“Errmm... You don't suppose?” said Blair, struggling up on one elbow then standing up.

“Nah. Couldn't be. Nope. Definitely not.” Sergeant ‘Chuck’ Norris looked uncertain for a moment, then the square-jawed, steely resolve returned to his watery blue eyes, as if all his childhood dreams had suddenly evaporated.

“We better not tell the kids back home about this...”

Sighing, Blair picked himself up from the deck and began wiping alien bodily fluids off his thermal Doctor Who pyjamas with the fleece.

Turning to the Sergeant and adjusting his thick-rimmed black plastic glasses on the bridge of his nose, he gave him a fed-up look.

“Well, whatever, I think America just cancelled next Christmas. And YOU can fill in the bloody forms this time...”

THE END?

This story is written in tribute to the 1938 novella 'Who Goes There?' by John W. Campbell (writing under the pseudonym of Don A. Stuart) and Howard Hawks' classic 1951 film 'The Thing From Another World'.