

# UFO becomes IFO

Greg Roberts

*December 2012 proved to be a frantic period with some interesting space activities, including the predicted end of the world on 21 December 2012. A spectacular event occurred that gave rise to numerous UFO reports and terrified those that believed Doomsday was at hand.*

## UFO or IFO?

Despite what hundreds of people, in particular Flying Saucer enthusiasts, would like to believe that the spectacular event, widely sighted in the Western and Southern Cape sky at about 20:40 SAST on the 11 December 2012, was nothing more dramatic than the de-orbit burn of the Centaur rocket that had just launched the third mission of the Orbital Test Vehicle, also known as X-37B. An Unidentified



Composite of some of my CCD images, read bottom right to top left.

Flying Object (UFO) thus became an Identified Flying Object (IFO)!

In gathering material for this article I did an internet search and was dismayed to discover that it would appear that the general public are still unaware of the true identity of what they saw and it has gone down in UFOLOGY as a well observed Unidentified Flying Object sighting. It has even been quoted as the best UFO sighting of the month by one UFO network. It is quite eye-opening and mind boggling(!) to read some

of the reports of people who saw this and what they believed it was. In some cases people were convinced an alien invasion was taking place, or that the end of the world was nigh – especially if we recall that Earth was predicted to end on the 21 December 2012!

Now I would like to keep an open mind about the subject of UFOs. But after seeing the garbage spewed forth on the Internet and the refusal by some to accept the explanation of the true nature of the event, just proves to me once again that the

vast majority of reports of so called UFOs by the mass public are hardly suitable for any kind of scientific study. It actually destroys the case for the existence of any such phenomena. Of course matters are not helped by the numerous programs on television about UFOs and alien visits to Earth in the distant past, fuelling the fertile imagination of some people. So, for future UFOlogists who (hopefully) will refer to back-issues of *MNASSA* when investigating reports of strange lights in the sky, it is necessary to document events.

Slightly off-topic, I was recently asked to investigate an old report of what was possibly a satellite re-entry that had been found in a UFO magazine. After searching through *MNASSA*, I found the original report which proved it was indeed a satellite re-entry.

### Third OTV mission

On the 11 December 2012 the United Launch Alliance (ULA) – which sounds



Launch of OTV-3 - photograph United States Air Force.

like an alien alliance but certainly not the case – launched the third mission of the Orbital Test Vehicle (known as OTV-3), also known as the X-37B. This is a miniature unmanned “space shuttle” (full details of this vehicle will be found in “Sleuthing the New Spaceplane”, *MNASSA* Vol 69, Nos 5&6, June 2010).

As usual with the X-37B, being a classified mission, very little information was available before launch. The amateur tracking group’s orbital expert, Ted Molczan, estimated a probable orbit. As luck would have it, it was to pass over Cape Town 35 to 40 minutes after launch with excellent

optical visibility, being shortly after sunset and at a reasonable elevation. On my Facebook page I gave details of the launch, giving details of when and where to look. This at least educated some of the viewers to interpret what they were seeing.

### Surprise!

Despite this I do not think anyone, including myself, were prepared for what we did see. My video- and CCD cameras were aimed at a predicted position. I was busy watching the video monitor, when suddenly, about a minute before the predicted time, a very bright light started crossing the field of view! Initially I thought it was

## satellite tracking



**Brilliant light crossing field of view- initially mistaken for aircraft lights!**

an aircraft flying over my house (I could hear one at the time) as they frequently do, complete with flashing lights. I actually swore at it!

I continued waiting for my satellite after the 'nuisance object' left the camera field. After a couple of seconds it suddenly dawned on me that this spectacle might have been the satellite! I rapidly stepped the mount ahead to the next predicted point and quickly caught up with the objects. I now knew that it was the satellite and managed to follow the two visible objects until they disappeared behind some local obstructions. Fortunately my video- and CCD cameras had been imaging the entire time. So, despite my rather hap-hazard tracking, I actually



**Two views extracted from the video recording.**

managed to record some unusual footage which contained very useful data.

### **Analysing the Footage**

Examination of the video recording and the CCD image stills, revealed two objects, each preceded by a "light cone". As this was a classified mission, no information was available as to the identification of the individual objects. There was some initial confusion as to which was the satellite and which was the rocket and why each object appeared to have a "cone" associated with it. After careful analysis of the positional observations from my footage, Ted Molczan was able to determine which was the Centaur rocket and which was OTV-3. His analysis in fact showed that the Centaur was decreasing height above the earth, explaining the presence of

the two retro-burn cones.

It would appear that there was in fact only one object being active. The Centaur rocket had in fact done two burns in quick succession to de-orbit the rocket. The leading cone was from the first burn and a short time later (by which time the rocket had fallen behind the OTV3), did a second burn. Hence the separation and appearance of two cones were in fact due to two spaced burns by the same object. Initially ULA had indicated that the Centaur would be de-orbited roughly two hours after launch and provided the approximate area over the Indian Ocean where it would re-enter. This actually confused amateur trackers – perhaps deliberate mis-information by ULA? – since it was quite difficult to find an orbit that would

## ufo becomes ifo



Impact zone for the Centaur rocket - courtesy of <http://www.zarya.info/Diaries/US/OTV3Impact.php>

match this impact zone. However, it now appears that the de-orbit was in fact done during the first orbit, just 35 minutes after launch, which is what was observed over Cape Town.

### YouTube Video

As mentioned earlier this event was very widely observed – one report as far away as Kimberley – and also quite well photographed by several people. With the kind assistance of Willie Koorts, my video was edited into a usable form, some of the photographic stills added and then all uploaded to YouTube (<http://youtu.be/b-VlwheIPPw>). The video appears to have been an instant hit, but unfortunately, in many cases, to the

wrong people! The UFO believers had a field day! One person extracted selected footage, ignoring the text explaining what it was, and presented it as a genuine UFO sighting. This got Willie pretty excited and he complained about this, both to YouTube and the author of the “UFO” video document. All Willie achieved was to be blocked from seeing any of this author’s YouTube postings! Fortunately the Johannesburg Planetarium used part of the original video in their December Christmas show, presenting the true facts. Hopefully this

has undone some of the “damage” caused by UFO fans.

### IFO Indeed

As is usually the case with alleged UFO sightings, there is mostly a rational explanation given by equipped and knowledgeable observers around the globe, thereby turning them into IFOs. If readers do observe “strange” lights in the night sky, try and make your observation as detailed as possible. Things like time, compass direction, direction of movement, colour, angular distance above the horizon (a fist at arm’s length is about  $10^\circ$ , and an open palm with fingers spread, about  $20^\circ$ ), your geographical location as accurately as possible, etc. ☆



Photograph of OTV3 moving from bottom to top, obtained on 20 Dec. 2012 by the author.