

# Crew remember the day UFO was spotted over Kaikōura 40 years on

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**NOW PLAYING • Focus: Crew remember UFO spotted over Kaikoura 40 years on**

It was New Year's Day, 1979, when the world awoke to the news that strange lights had been spotted by six people on a plane off the New Zealand's South Island. ...

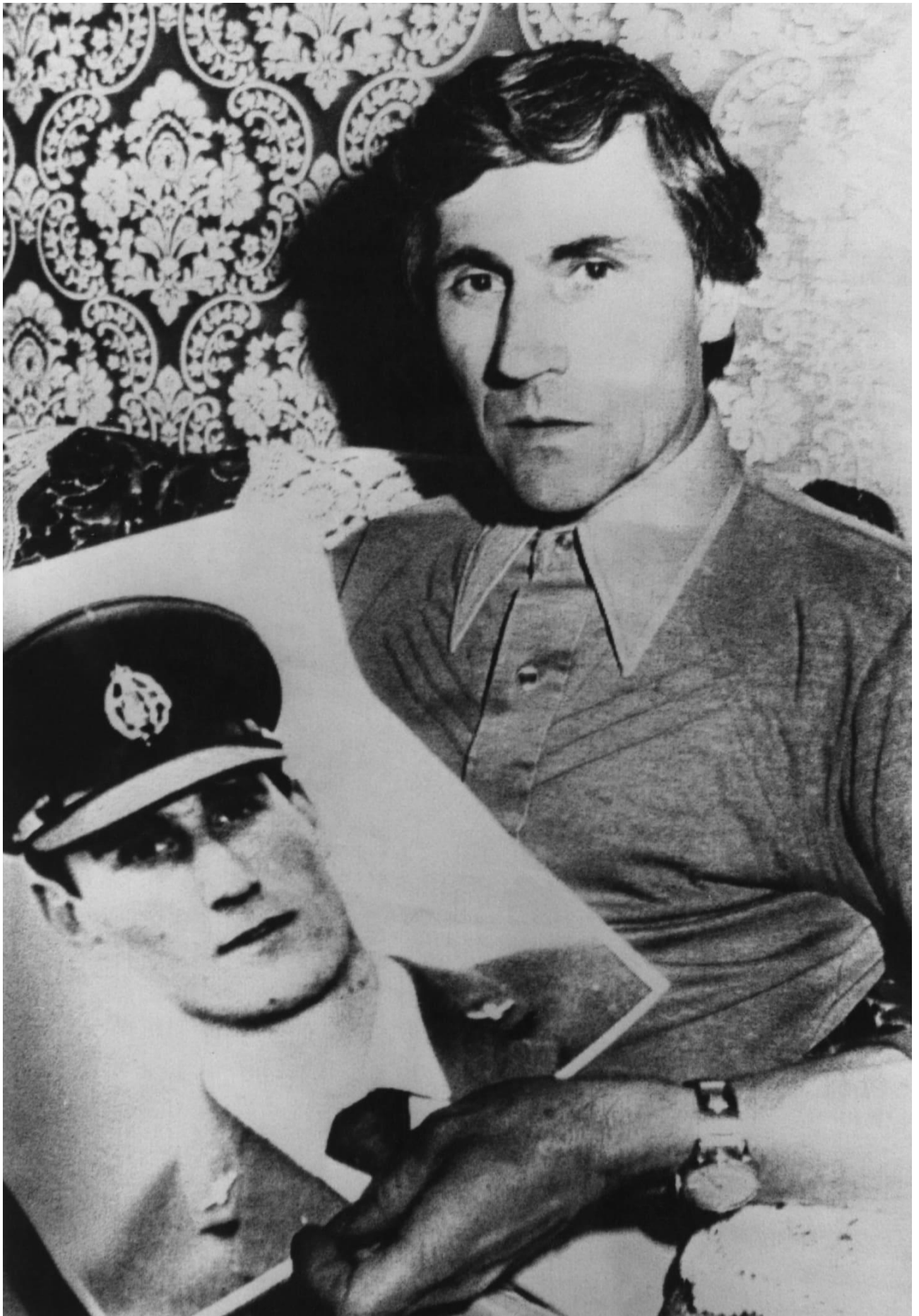
It was New Year's Day, 1979, when the world awoke to the news that strange lights had been spotted by six people on a plane off the New Zealand's South Island.

Was it a UFO? No, said the skeptics. It was Venus, it was squid boats, it was radar returns from a field of cabbages.

But 40 years later, the two pilots and four passengers are adamant it was none of the above and are frustrated at being unable to find answers.

The Herald on Sunday tracked down each member of the group around the world. One is a mango farmer in Hawaii, while another is an 80-year-old newlywed after her royal wedding-themed ceremony at her retirement village the night before Meghan and Harry's big day.

The case bought instant fame - but no fortune - for some, before bringing shame and anger when they were accused of hoaxing the sighting. It broke up a marriage.



Guido Valentich holds a photograph of his son Frederick, a pilot who went missing while on a flight to King Island in a Cessna in October 1978. Photo / Getty

At the end of 1978, Australasia was in the grip of UFO fever. In October, 20-year-old Frederick Valentich disappeared while piloting a small Cessna 182 aircraft over Bass Strait while heading to

King Island in Tasmania. Described as a "flying saucer enthusiast", Valentich informed Melbourne air traffic control he was being accompanied by an unknown aircraft. Two months later across the Tasman, on December 21, Safe Air pilots Vern Powell and Ian Pirie spotted strange lights while flying from Blenheim to Christchurch. A producer for Melbourne's Channel 0 (now Channel 10), Leonard Lee heard the news and tracked down reporter Quentin Fogarty, who worked for the channel but was on holiday with his wife and children in Christchurch, staying at TV One journalist Dennis Grant's home.



Quentin Fogarty presenting the news in 1979 after the sighting. Photo / File  
Freelance Wellington cameraman David Crockett was also hired, along with his wife Ngaire, who operated the audio tape recorder.  
The group were invited to jump aboard Safe Air's Blenheim-based Argosy plane, named Merchant Enterprise, late on December 30, which pilots Bill Startup and Bob Guard were taking on a newspaper run between Wellington and Christchurch.





Bob Guard, left, and Bill Startup in 1979. Photo / Paul Davidson

Shortly after takeoff, the pilots noticed strange lights appearing and disappearing over the Kaikōura coastline about 20 miles west.

"While we were filming a standup to camera, Captain Bill Startup shouted to us that we should go to the flight deck immediately as something was happening again," says David Crockett.

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He managed to film a rapidly moving, bright white light.

"With the conversation coming through my headphones from the pilots and radar from Wellington, it all started to get very scary," says Ngaire Crockett.

"I was able to stand up a couple of times and was able to see these bright light coming and going. [Quentin] was a real mess and grabbed hold of both my hands and started shaking. I didn't have time to worry about myself, I had to help him."

The plane landed at Christchurch to unload newspapers and the pilots asked the news team if they wanted to go back through the area they had traversed. Ngaire was too frightened so stayed in Christchurch. The others re-boarded the plane with Dennis Grant in Ngaire's place.

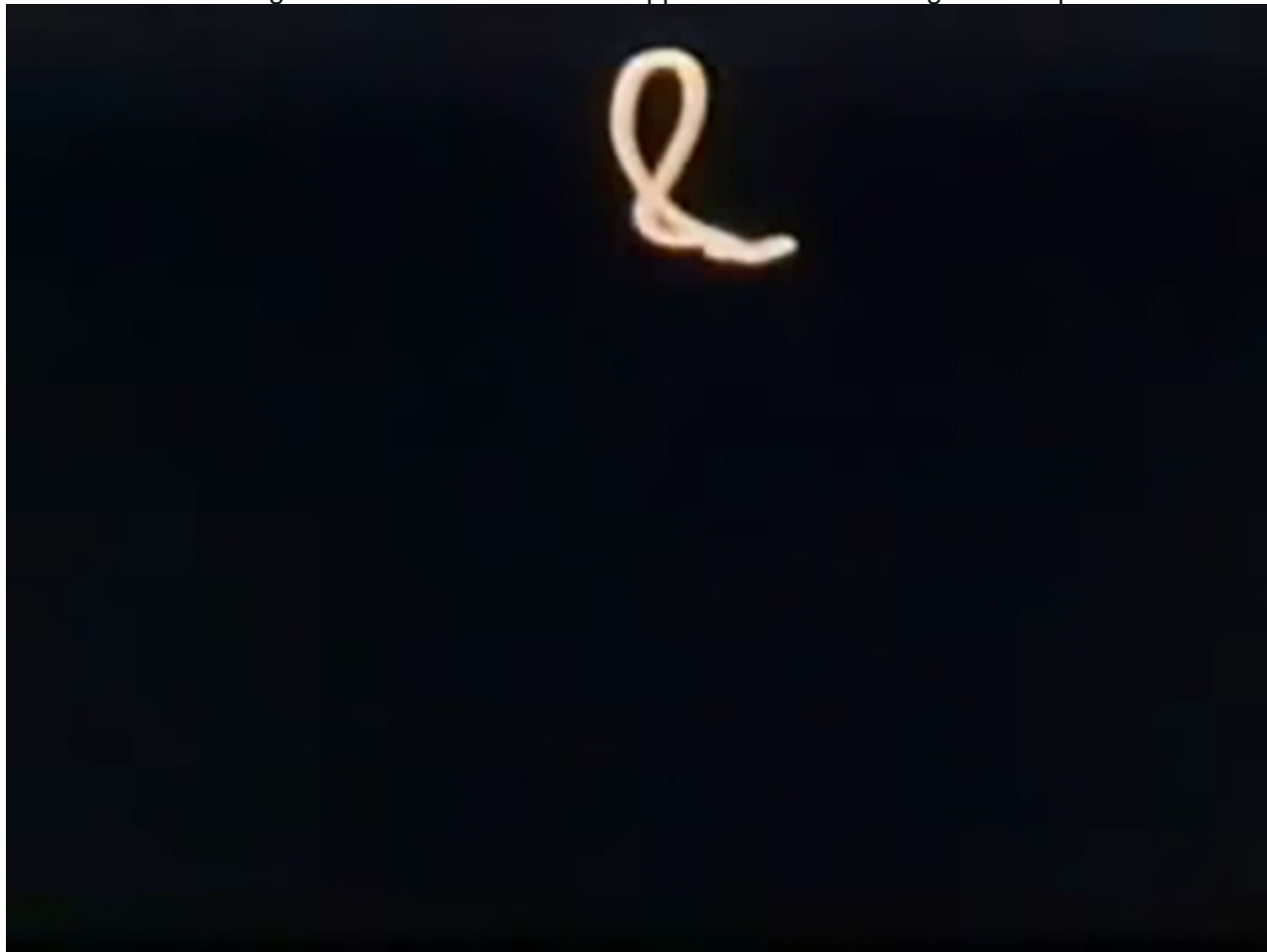
"David had used up all the film in his 16mm camera," Grant says.

"Quentin called me sometime after midnight from Christchurch Airport to see if I could provide a fresh roll of film. I could - but there was a catch - I wanted to get on the plane for the flight to Blenheim."

The plane took off at 2.16am. About three minutes after takeoff, the group saw a bright, round light to the right. The airplane radar showed a target in the same direction about 18 nautical miles.

Fogarty would later be heard saying on camera: "Let's hope they're friendly."

Crockett filmed the light for several minutes as it appeared to travel along with the plane.



Footage of an unidentified flying object. Photo / File



The footage caused a frenzy worldwide. Photo / File

When they turned toward it, the light seemed to react by moving away from the airplane.

"The experience itself was extraordinary," Fogarty says.

"Just being on the cramped, noisy flight deck of the Argosy barrelling down the coast in the dead of the night was exciting. Factor in a row of pulsating, hypnotic lights hovering outside the window, and it goes to another level."

After landing at Woodbourne Airport at about 3am, the group stayed at the two pilots homes in Blenheim.

Startup's daughter Tracy Moore remembers her father coming home in the middle of the night.

"Everyone was at our house talking about it in the middle of the night. They were talking about lights, unexplained radar.

"At one point, I remember dad saying it might be a good idea to report it to the police. It was during the Cold War, there was a bit of paranoia around. Mum said: 'You can't sit on this information'.

"It was scary at the time. It was a big unknown thing that had happened and we had all the adults around discussing it. There were certainly no jokes being made."

Fogarty interviewed the pilots before flying to Melbourne to give the recordings to Channel 0. The footage featured on prime time news that night and a longer documentary piece screened later.

The news went around the world and was featured by major news media, including by the Herald and by CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite.

# AIR FORCE PLANE HUNTS FOR UFOs

- 3 JAN 1979

A Royal New Zealand Air Force Orion anti-submarine reconnaissance aircraft was patrolling the night sky above Kaikoura early today in search of unidentified flying objects.

The Orion is equipped with radar, cameras and a host of other sophisticated tracking and monitoring equipment.

Its mission was to patrol the north-eastern region of the South Island from about midnight till just before dawn in an official attempt to solve a series of mysterious sightings during the last 12 days.

The crew, under Squadron Leader R. J. Carran, will be in constant touch with civil aviation radar operators at Wellington who claim to have tracked scores of unidentified flying objects over the Clarence River area.

Air Force operations decided yesterday morning to put the aircraft into the air as the debate grew over UFO sightings made by Safe-Air pilots on December 21 and again early last Sunday morning.

## No Threat

A Ministry of Defence spokesman, Squadron Leader G. T. Clarke, said last night the sightings were not regarded as a threat to the country but they were interesting enough to warrant investigation.

appeared to be near Wellington Airport, it was believed to have been one set off accidentally.

But defence public relations officer, Squadron Leader G. T. Clarke, said the search and rescue organisation was being alerted.

Worldwide attention was focussed on the sky above Kaikoura after a film of Sunday morning's sighting beamed out over British, American and Australian television on Monday night.

The film was shot from a Safe-Air Argosy freighter by New Zealand cameramen accompanying a journalist working for a Melbourne television channel. New Zealand viewers saw the film last night.

An international debate has erupted over possible explanations of the large, white, glowing ball captured on film.

And it has sparked off a flood of reports of sightings of UFOs in Britain and of balls of red light and cigar-shaped discs spitting fire over Italy.

A British astronomer, Sir Bernard Lovell, has dismissed the objects as "most



The image filmed by the Melbourne television channel over New Zealand's east coast.

appear to be moving at about the same speed because of its great distance.

## Pilot Sure

The pilot of the Argosy night, Venus remains a from which the television, bright light to the naked film was shot and the first, eye and the crescent shape

Society of New Zealand, Mr D. Calder, said yesterday that the objects were "clearly not astronomical."

He said many UFO reports could be traced to meteors, bright planets and bright stars seen in unusual circumstances, but this was not the case with the recent sightings.

"All I can say is that they were not astronomical objects, but the evidence does not preclude other natural phenomena."

Adding to the mystery, the director of the physics and engineering laboratory of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Mr M. A. Collins, said that it would be stretching the imagination to think of any natural causes that could explain the sightings.

He said the fact that the objects registered on radar meant that they were "electro-magnetically solid." The least they could be was a dense mass of electromagnetic particles.

## Difficult

And a Canterbury University scientist, Mr J. A. Webb, who has been making a long study of UFOs, said it was

A copy of the Herald from January 3, 1979



# COUNTRY IN GRIP OF UFO FEVER

4 JAN 1979

UFO fever gripped New Zealand yesterday as people from Whangarei to Invercargill reported strange sightings and another television crew filmed a bright, glowing object in the sky over the Kaikoura area.

The television crew, sent to the Clarence River after film of an unidentified object was shot for Australian television last Sunday morning, filmed a brightly lit object from 3.15 am until after dawn.

Their film, shown on New Zealand television last night, fanned a UFO controversy which had been in danger of being grounded by an inconclusive air force search earlier in the day.

The film was last night sent by satellite around the world as the debate over last Sunday's film and sightings continued.

A Royal New Zealand Air Force Orion anti-submarine reconnaissance aircraft spent from midnight to dawn yesterday in the north-eastern sky of the South Island, vain-

ly looking for unexplained objects.

Satisfied the area has been given a good look over, the Ministry of Defence has decided against further patrols, but Wellington radar will continue to report any strange readings to the ministry.

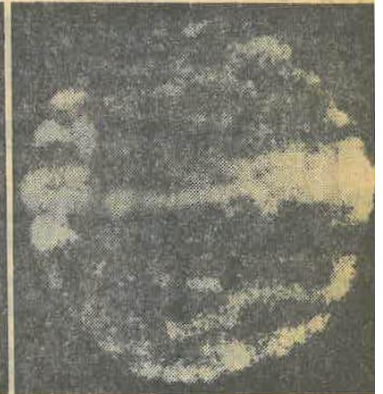
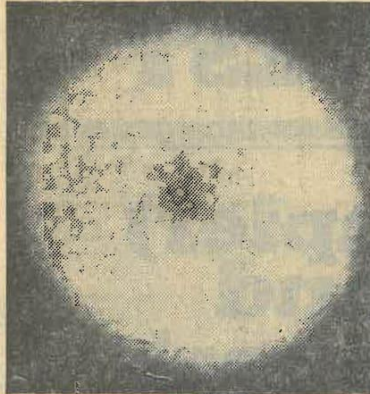
The cameraman with the TV-1 crew sent to Kaikoura, Mr Frank Kazukaitis, of Christchurch, described the object he filmed as "an illuminated ping-pong ball with a tinge of red in the centre."

## Red Tinge

He said it was continually moving and was difficult to keep in the viewfinder.

The reporter on the team, Mr Terry Olsen, said he first saw the object about 3.15 am. It was a bright light with a reddish tinge which turned yellowish.

It was about three times the brightness of the average star and appeared to be at



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE . . . The "UFO" image filmed by the TV-1 filmcrew above the Clarence River and the image filmed by the Melbourne television channel.

found a ship lying at anchor. But between the ship and the radar was a 920-metre mountain.

Theories about the Japanese fishing fleet did not impress Captain W. E. Start-

formed along the Kaikoura coast when the cold air from the valleys met onshore winds and they raised distant lights, he said.

## Peas Flat

duced a strange, unexplained incident.

A Rapaura farmer has reported parts of a paddock of peas flattened for no parent reason — the c

A copy of the Herald from January 4, 1979

The sceptical reaction was immediate. Explanations included that it was Venus, drug runners, light reflected from cabbages or squid boats.

The Robert Muldoon Government ordered an enquiry by the Air Force, which concluded that the sightings could be explained by natural but unusual phenomena.

Leonard Lee travelled to the US to give the film to Bruce Maccabee, an optical physicist who specialised in laser technology and worked for the US Navy in Maryland, Virginia. He was also flown to New Zealand and Melbourne to interview witnesses.





Former Channel 0 producer Leonard Lee. Photo / Paul Davidson

He concluded the event involved unknown objects or phenomena fitting the definition of UFOs.

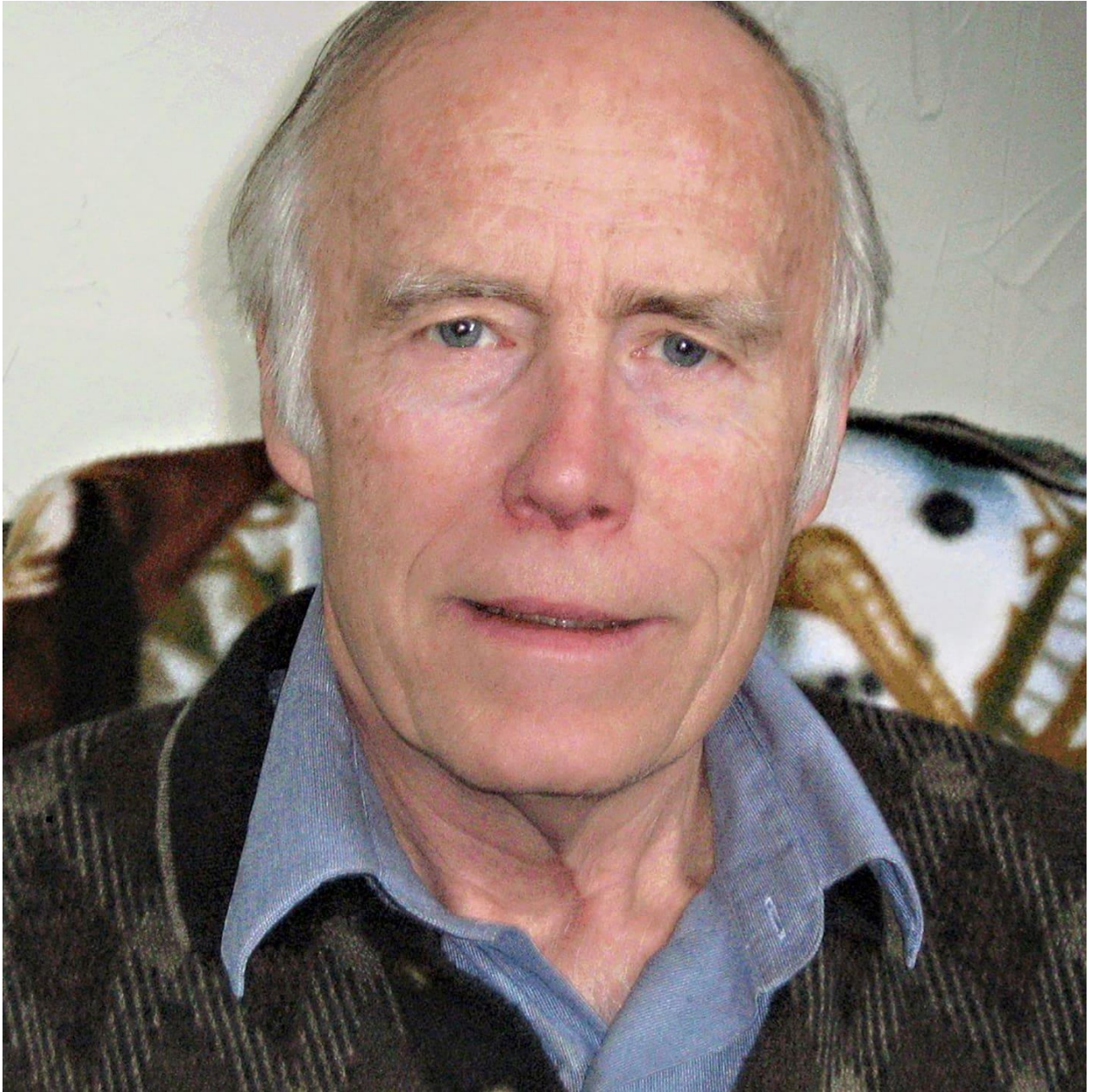
"One would think that the conclusion that several of the sightings involved unidentified objects flying with impunity in the New Zealand air space would have been sufficient to start an even deeper study of the UFOs," Maccabee says.

"But it wasn't. The sightings were relegated to the dustbin of history, forgotten by all except the witnesses and a few ufologists who discussed the various sighting events for years afterward."



Bruce Maccabee, pictured in 1979, examined footage of the supposed UFO. Photo / Supplied





Maccabee pictured recently. Photo / Supplied

He says that 39 years after the Kaikōura footage emerged, in December 2017, major media carried reports of UFO sightings by US Navy personnel during training exercises.

He says they involved multiple witnesses and multiple sources of information such as battleship radar at sea level, radar in the Navy jet airplanes, visible and infrared video cameras in the airplanes.

But the incident appears to have been forgotten.

"History appears to be repeating itself."

### **Where are they now?**

The Herald on Sunday caught up with the pilots and passengers.

**Journalist Quentin Fogarty, 72**





Quentin Fogarty in 1978

After his world scoop, Dunedin-born Quentin Fogarty suffered from "nervous exhaustion" and ended up in hospital for a couple of weeks.

"The level of initial scepticism both surprised and, at times, overwhelmed me. I certainly did not expect to be accused of hoaxing the whole thing. That cut deep, it still does.

"The local daily tabloid in Melbourne branded me as the 'UFO Reporter', and that stuck for a short time, but it did not take long for me to be back in my role as a TV journalist reporting on more mundane matters."

Fogarty, a father of four who still lives in Melbourne, says he endeavoured to report the story as accurately and as impartially as he could.

"We had film, our own eyewitness accounts and confirmation from the flight crew and air traffic controllers that we had stumbled into something astonishing.



Quentin Fogarty. Photo / Paul Davidson

Fogarty, who started his career at Dunedin's Evening Star wrote a book about the experience in 1982, Let's Hope They're Friendly, and remains convinced that enhanced computer analysis of the film might get closer to finding answers.

"Forty years down the track, this is still unfinished business."

**Pilot Bill Startup, 85**



Bill Startup in 1978. Photo / Supplied

Startup now lives in a rest home in Blenheim. He had a stroke a three years after the incident and had to retire from flying.

He wrote a book the following year, The Kaikōura UFOs, his daughter says, to clear up the misinformation doing the rounds. The same year, Startup then took his wife Shirley and children to visit Bruce Maccabee in the US.





Former Safe Air Pilot Bill Startup. Photo / NZPA

Shirley, who died in 2012, was interviewed in 2008 and said a psychiatrist had thought the men had lost their faith in God and were seeing angels.

Startup, who was not well enough to be interviewed by the Herald on Sunday, told a documentary in 2009: "What it was all those years ago ... I wish I knew. People can think what they want but they were not in the aircraft."

Startup did not dwell on the experience, Moore says.

"Over the years there has been periodic interest, so he was being visited every one to two years from reporters all over. But he didn't bring it up."

She didn't get the impression he truly believed it was UFO.

"He'd seen something that he did not know what it was, and his colleagues couldn't come up with an explanation. He had no thoughts that he ever communicated to us."

**Co-pilot Bob Guard, 73**





Bob Guard in 1978

Guard has never said too much about the strange lights.

"One of the issues for me is we were just doing our job. We suddenly had to justify ourselves. We didn't know what the hell it was.

"We didn't expect to see anything. It was a bit tense as it got closer to the aircraft."

"I got over it. Have I ever seen anything like that again? No I haven't. Do I believe in UFOs? No I don't. Pilots see a lot of unidentified flying things.

"Would I tell anyone if I saw anything like that again? No I wouldn't. It's not worth the hassle."

Research followed the sightings but he says "some were a sham - they used newspaper articles for their research".



**BOB GUARD**  
*Argosy First Officer*

Bob Guard recounting his experience in Paul Davidson's documentary *The Kaikoura UFOs*. Photo / Paul Davidson

Guard stopped working for Safe Air in 1990 and went on to work at Air Nelson. He was the flight operations manager when he retired, aged 65, in 2010.

His children and grandchildren were aware of the story but it is not "something that has taken over their lives".

**Sound recorder Ngaire Crockett, 80**



Ngaire Crockett in the 1970s. Photo / Supplied

The Crocketts, who had five children, separated soon after the incident.

Ngaire is now Ngaire Gilmore after her new marriage to husband Ray Gilmore.

The pair, who met during a blind date eight years ago, married in a surprise ceremony at the Julia Wallace Retirement Village in Palmerston North the day before Meghan and Harry's nuptials this year.

Residents dressed up in royal wedding theme for happy hour but didn't know they were attending a real wedding.



Ngaire Gilmore at her home in Palmerston North. Photo / Alexander Robertson

"Has this film changed my life?" asks Gilmore.

"I guess it did. We had phone call after phone call and people knocking on our door. David and the reporter became so obsessed that the doco was all they talked about. I switched off as we had five children and it was effecting all our lives."

**Cameraman David Crockett, 85**





David Crockett in 1978. Photo / Supplied

David Crockett dealt with health a handful of effects after filming the strange objects.

"To this very day, the incident has never left my mind. I am also reminded of the event by people who come up to me and say, 'I saw you the other night on the Discovery or Science Channel'.

"The effect this historic sighting has had on all of us has certainly included a fair amount of stress.

As for me, I was sleepless for several nights, and after having performed several overseas lectures on this sighting, became quite depressed.

Crockett, who now lives in Hawaii where he worked as a mango farmer, made a documentary about the incident, and gave lectures, which took him around the world. He is hoping to make a new documentary to mark the 40-year anniversary.

"It substantially changed my life. At that time in the history of the UFO phenomena, sceptics thought we were crazy, and criticised us in many ways. In 1978, most persons would not seriously consider that these were real object and may even originate from other planets."



Crockett now lives in Hawaii. Photo / Supplied

**TV journalist Dennis Grant, 66**

Over the years Grant has amassed a massive collection of a newspaper and magazine stories. He's scoured official records in Australia and New Zealand and lodged official information applications for long-forgotten files.

"The results are overwhelmingly unhelpful in explaining the lights and what they were doing in the lonely summer skies of New Zealand. Forty years on I'm still very curious.

"My grandkids love to hear the story of my brush with UFOs, I just wish I could provide an ending."





Dennis Grant. Photo / Supplied

Grant was working at TV One (now TVNZ 1) in Christchurch in 1978 and now lives in Australia.



"I was a young journalist back then, fired with the zeal of telling stories untold, and I helped tell this story. But the rest of the world, the scientists, the officials, the military and - saddest of all for me - the media, were all consumed with indifference. Incurious."

So does he believe in UFOs?

"I am entirely sceptical of the notion of little green men, Martian anal probes and all the rest of it. I note that the number of UFO sightings has greatly diminished since video and digital cameras and phone cameras have become readily available. However, what we saw that night over Kaikōura was unidentified and still is."

### **The Argosy**



Paul Davidson, of Blenheim, with his Argosy aircraft. Photo / Tim Cuff

The decommissioned Argosy now sits on land near the Marlborough Airport owned by Blenheim filmmaker Paul Davidson.

He purchased the aircraft in 1991 after hearing it was to be scrapped, telling the Safe Air general manager he would pay what he would have got from the scrap dealer.

The aircraft had special meaning to him - in 2009, Davidson made a documentary, featuring interviews with the pilots and crew from 1978.

Davidson, whose home is on land adjacent to the aircraft, has restored and refurbished the aircraft and runs flight simulation experiences, complete with inflight movies telling the story of Safe Air - and meals.

Passengers can dine at the Argosy Cafe, next to the plane, which acts as a terminal where they can collect their boarding passes and go to their gate for the experience. There is also memorabilia on display.



The aircraft sits opposite Davidson's home. Photo / Tim Cuff.

"We put it back together and tidied it up. It's unique to Marlborough."

From Thursday, to coincide with the first strange sighting, Davidson will be running a UFO-themed experience.

His documentary will be screened, lights will be dimmed onboard and a "spooky atmosphere" created.

"People can sit in actual seat Captain Startup sat in.

"It's the only place in the world where you can do that."

So, does Davidson believe in UFOs?

"I believe in the possibility of them.

"I got to know both pilots with my documentary. They got sick of people saying 'It was probably the lights of cars, or lights of squid boats'. These were professional pilots. 'We know what Venus looks like, this was not Venus'.

"Everyone on board has said the event had a traumatic effect on their lives."

- The accounts were pulled together with the help of Bruce Maccabee.