

Left: An aerial view of an unexplained crop formation discovered in 2007 in Wilbur, Washington state. Above: Detail of the crop circle from the southern-most point of the formation.

Photographs courtesy Peter Davenport

Seeking UFOs Underground

By TOMAS ALEX TIZON

Peter Davenport runs the nonprofit National UFO Reporting Center from an abandoned missile complex in Washington state. He is passionate that there is something out there.

That door,” he says with dramatic pause. “That door weighs 4,000 pounds [1,815 kilograms]. It’s been reinforced to withstand a nuclear blast.”

Peter Davenport has a radio voice, the kind of exaggerated baritone that cuts through walls and most doors, but not this one. This is solid steel and a foot thick.

It is Davenport’s door, which opens into a tunnel leading below ground to what was once a nuclear missile complex here in the desert of eastern Washington state.

The U.S. Air Force decommissioned the site in the mid-1960s and it sat empty for most of the time since.

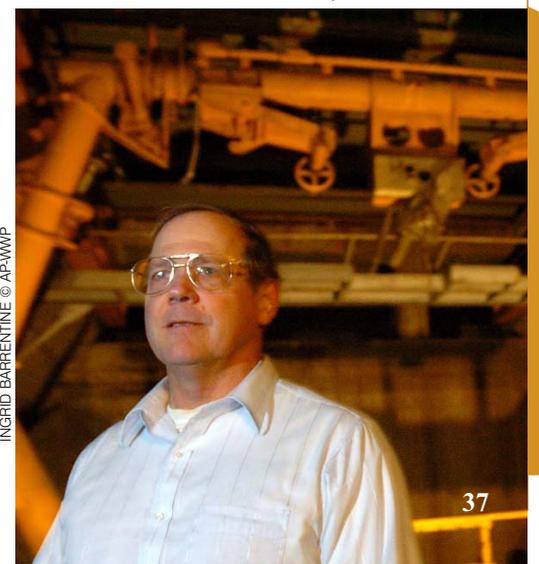
Davenport, longtime director of the National UFO Reporting Center, a nonprofit clearinghouse and 24-hour hotline for Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) sightings, bought it for \$100,000 in 2006 to turn into his new headquarters. [A clearinghouse is an informal channel for distributing information or assistance.]

Why does a man buy an old, windowless missile complex deep underground, only to

spend his days tracking unidentified objects flying through the sky?

Davenport doesn’t have an answer. Furthermore, he doesn’t need one. As a full-time UFO investigator and possessor of one of the world’s most comprehensive, though unofficial, UFO databases, his life already runs counter to convention.

The center, in continuous operation since 1970, is known worldwide among those interested in UFOs: scientists as well as people surfing the Web. The hotline is posted on various UFO Web sites, and calls—as



INGRID BARRENTINE © AP/WIDEWORLD

Peter Davenport at his UFO center.

UFOs

many as 20,000 in a year—come from people who believe they have seen or experienced something beyond the ordinary, potentially involving extraterrestrials.

If the case seems compelling and is a short flight away, Davenport will investigate in person. He takes written reports, records testimony and consults experts in specialty areas.

Davenport, 60, is a passionate, cerebral man with a haughty disdain for the media.

“I do not countenance fools,” he says. “The work of studying UFOs is of immense consequence to every living thing on this planet. If I sense you are wasting my time, I will be blunt.”

His life revolves around a question, namely: “*Are we alone in the universe or are we not?*” He believes there are clues behind the monstrous door that he now faces.

He picks up a shovel. He has not been to his missile site in weeks, and a meter of snow blocks the doorway. He breaks up chunks and shovels them to the side.

It is [1 degree Celsius] on a late March afternoon, the sun just beginning to set over this patch of land 80 kilometers west of Spokane. Not a single house can be seen—only snow and mounds of barren terrain and the occasional frozen tumbleweed, like rolled-up cobwebs in the distance.

A wrenching sound breaks the silence. Davenport has pried open the door. He tilts his head, then squeezes through sideways before disappearing into darkness.

“He’s not the normal guy on the street, but crazy? No. He’s not crazy,” Robert B. Frost says of Davenport, whom he’s known for most of the last two decades. The former chief engineer for Boeing’s portion of the B-2 bomber project, Frost met Davenport, a fellow techie, in Seattle, Washington.

“The guy’s brilliant,” Frost says. “Personally, I think he’s going to prevail on this thing.”

By that, Frost means time will prove Davenport correct on his hunch that UFOs represent a real phenomenon.

Although mainstream science tends to dismiss the subject, along with Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster, a number of

prominent scientists and much of the [American] public—as many as 60 percent, according to polls—believe UFOs exist and should be studied. As a corollary, a large number of astronomers believe life in other parts of the universe is not only possible but likely.

Among the famous, former President Jimmy Carter, anthropologist Margaret Mead, psychiatrist Carl Jung and astronaut Gordon Cooper reported seeing a UFO or proclaimed a belief in UFOs as representing visitations from extraterrestrials.

In 2007, Representative Dennis J. Kucinich, at the time running for the Democratic presidential nomination, made headlines by admitting he had seen, in the 1980s, a strange “triangular craft” hovering above a rural area of Washington state.

In a way, Davenport’s destiny was sealed, by his own reckoning, at age 6. In 1954, while sitting in a car with his mother and brother at a drive-in theater in St. Louis, Missouri, he looked out the window and, there in the sky, a bright red disc hovered, then—whoosh—disappeared into the horizon.

“If there was a seminal moment,” Davenport had said earlier, “that would be it.”

He read and eventually wrote widely on the subject as a sideline to his education, which included earning degrees in biology and Russian at Stanford University in California and graduate degrees in genetics and the biochemistry of fish at the University of Washington. He became founding president of a Seattle-area biotechnology company, BioSyn Inc., and nine years later, in 1994, sold his stock and made a small fortune.

That same year, he got a phone call from Robert Gribble, a

For more information:

NASA UFO investigation

http://www.nasa.gov/vision/space/travelingin/space/no_ufo.html

The National UFO Reporting Center

<http://www.nuforc.org/>

UFO Planet

http://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/watchtheskies/03may_maximumvenus.html

retired firefighter in Seattle, who for two decades had acted as a one-man clearinghouse for UFO information and as the operator of a 24/7 national UFO hotline (206-722-3000).

Gribble wanted to pass the torch. Davenport accepted and has been director of the National UFO Reporting Center since, keeping the same hotline and funding the operation out of his own pocket. Costs can range from \$500 to \$5,000 a month, depending on travel.

Davenport has few other expenses. He never married, never had kids. He drove old cars. [Davenport is a candidate in the August 19, 2008, election for the Washington State House of Representatives.] For a dozen years he ran the center out of a rented home near Seattle’s University District. Then he got the notion that he wanted his own missile site.

“There was an allure to the idea,” he says he told friends. Davenport, who had long been interested in aircraft and rocketry, had heard of missile silos for sale in eastern Washington. [A silo is an underground vertical container for storing and launching intercontinental ballistic missiles.]

One in particular was going for a bargain price; Atlas Missile Site No. 6, in which the previous owner had killed and dismembered a visitor. Long-haul truck driver Ralph Benson was convicted of murder in 2003 and was suspected in at least one other murder when he died in prison. Davenport bought the site from Benson’s sons.

“I don’t know about the kind of people who buy these things,” Davenport says, his voice trailing off in the darkness. He leaves the steel door propped open, and fumbles for lights.

A series of clicks and the room turns pale yellow. He stands in an entryway, all concrete and steel, and dank like a cave. On each side is a tunnel.

He takes the tunnel to the right, clomps down a metal tube about 46 meters long. It is large enough for him to walk through without bending. The tube leads to a cave about the size of a basketball court. Piles of debris can be seen in the semi-darkness.

“Launch control room,” he says with

his radio voice.

Davenport offers up specs (corroborated by military documents): The ceilings are five meters high, the walls 46 centimeters thick. The complex, made of 3 million tons of concrete, can withstand a blast 50 times the power of the Hiroshima bomb at a distance of 2.5 kilometers.

He returns to the vestibule and enters the other tunnel, similarly constructed, which opens into another cavernous space: the missile room.

The complex was known as a “coffin launcher.” This is where the Atlas missile rested flat. Above, the ceiling was a sliding metal door, which opened as hydraulics raised the rocket for launching.

Towards the back of the missile room, shrouded in darkness, sits Davenport’s life work: a collection of tens of thousands of reports on UFO sightings from all over the world. He has files from long before the television show *The X-Files* brought the paranormal to prime time.

The information is meticulously labeled and filed in a long row of mismatched metal file cabinets. They form the shape of a miniature city skyline.

The plan was to live and work in here. But the site needed more work than expected. The place leaks. The ventilation isn’t good, and there’s a little bat problem.

For now, the center’s phone and

answering machine will stay at Davenport’s Harrington apartment, a few kilometers away, until Missile Site No. 6 is fixed up. Davenport is doing most of the fixing up himself.

Shadows flicker as he shines his flashlight around. He walks to the nearest cabinet, opens a drawer and randomly pulls out a thick sheaf of files. Call logs. A file for every month. A sampling of entries:

Jan 6, 1995. 0:15. Warm Beach, Washington. Two women observe a strange “rope of light,” with a bright sphere attached.

Jan 6, 1995. 17:30. Glendo, Wyoming. Mother and son witness large glowing craft maneuver into cloud. Pursued by military aircraft.

Jan 7, 1995. 5:00. Makapuu Point, Hawaii. Man and wife observe bizarre hump-backed triangular object over sea. Opaque windows.

Davenport says that of the vast majority of UFO sightings, up to 90 percent are explainable: weather balloons, military aircraft, satellites and the like. Many more prove to be hoaxes.

But then there’s the tiny percentage, maybe only a handful each year, where something was definitely seen—often by multiple reliable sources—and that defy explanation.

He believes that clues lie buried in these hill-sized mounds of paper that he has

meticulously cataloged, if only the government or a university would do the research.

“I’m willing to share data,” he says. “I’m willing to throw all of it to anyone who wants to know.”

There have been few takers.

Someday, he says, a UFO event could take place that would prove irrefutable, and then people would be forced to make a leap in consciousness as big as stone-agers into cyberspace. If that happens, the files in this underground castle could take on new significance. Or not.

Either scenario comes with a burden. Arthur C. Clarke, author of the classic novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, who died in March in Sri Lanka, once said: “Either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.”

Davenport slams the drawer shut. He sighs.

Outside, the sun has set and the evening sky has darkened enough for celestial bodies to become visible. The constellation Orion appears in the southern sky, and Mars twinkles, too.

“Not many people would waste their lives pursuing such an elusive subject,” Davenport says on the drive home. His car is an 18-year-old gray Crown Victoria with more than 400,000 kilometers. The windshield is cracked. “Sometimes I don’t know why I do it.”

Then he remembers Elger Berg of Seattle.

Berg was a carpenter and mechanic. He had waited 64 years to tell the story of something he had seen outside a small village in Alaska when he was a young man: a cigar-shaped craft with blue-green lights that flew over his head and disappeared into the mountains.

After hearing Davenport on the radio, Berg sought him out to tell him about the UFO. Four months later, in early 2001, Berg died at 84.

His story, which Davenport captured on cassette, is the only record of the incident. If someone, anyone, ever wants to look into it for whatever reason, the tape and accompanying notes await in a safe place, in a city of file cabinets, under the desert.



Tomas Alex Tizon is a staff writer with the Los Angeles Times.

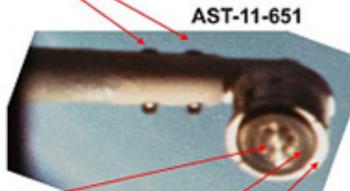
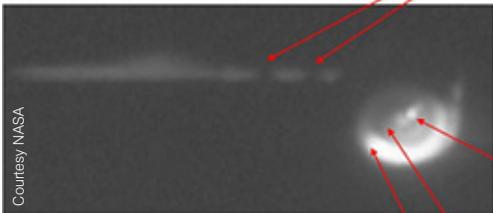
A NASA UFO INQUIRY

Left: A digital scan of a full frame from an original Apollo 16 video film showing a questionable object (center) and its position relative to the moon. Reflections in the spacecraft window are also visible. NASA had scientists investigate.

Dual Protruding Elements



Inquiry Footage



Reflections

Dark Central Region

Outer Highlight Region

Above: The scientists found that the object was part of the spacecraft. This enhanced Apollo 16 image (left) compares with features of the EVA floodlight/boom from the perspective of a Command Service Module window (right).