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COLUMN ONE

A UFO cold case



Robert Durrell / Los Angeles Times

SLEUTHS: Private eyes Frankie Dixon, left, and T.K. Davis at a park in Capitola, Calif., where they're investigating reports that a UFO was photographed by a man with the Internet name of Raji, who later vanished into cyberspace

Where's that power pole? And the guy who said he photographed a flying saucer above it? Two down-to-earth private eyes want to know.

By John M. Glionna, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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CAPITOLA, CALIF. -- Private eye T.K. Davis has worked his share of oddball cases. Once he tracked down a one-armed woman wanted for child endangerment. He staked out a backyard to catch a guy throwing dirt clods into a pool. When you make your living answering life's mysterious questions at \$100 an hour, you take a few calls out of the blue.

He works the streets of this suburban town near Santa Cruz, where dog-walking mothers and aging hippies compete for beach time. Oh, sure, it might seem innocent enough, but it can get a little creepy if you let it. People might see things -- unusual objects in the sky, for instance -- and not say a thing for fear of being ridiculed.

At times like that, a private eye comes in handy. He can look around, ask a few hard questions -- even if it means risking his reputation built over 30 years as a deputy sheriff.

That's more or less where Davis finds himself now, behind the wheel of his blue Ford Explorer, with his partner Frankie Dixon. They're cruising down streets, looking at utility poles and trying to figure out: Is that the one in these three pictures, the pictures with the unidentified flying object?

The photographs came from -- surprise! -- the Internet. In May, someone using the name Raji posted them on Craigslist. All three show a lone wooden power pole with its jumble of crossbeams and wires. Hovering just above it is some kind of flying saucer.

The thing looks part campy "Star Trek" prop, part slapdash collection of handyman tools, with metallic limbs jutting from a cylindrical sphere. Examined closely, one of the arms bears some kind of writing.

Raji told people he took the photos in Capitola. Then he vanished into cyberspace.

UFO hunters around the world started buzzing. Apparently, Raji wasn't alone. Elsewhere, other alleged eyewitnesses posted pictures and video of the quirky little craft. It became known as the "California drone" because it was clear from the photos that no human could have fit inside to fly the thing.

Soon, the mystery became too tantalizing to be left to Internet speculators. Somebody who knew what he was doing had to be hired to locate that pole, which might lead to finding the elusive Raji.

Enter Davis, 62, and Dixon, 60.

Men in Black they're not. To cover his middle-age paunch, Davis prefers windbreakers and blue jeans to the crisp suits of Hollywood's extraterrestrial sleuths. Dixon is more Man in White. On this day, he's wearing a Vegas-bright white sweater suitable for the first tee at the golf course -- which is where he spends most of this time since retiring from police work seven years ago.

"See how close that one is?" Dixon says of one power pole, comparing it with a photo. Their SUV is easing along a shady street, its cab cloudy with smoke from Davis' cheap Hav-A-Tampa cigars.

"I like *that* one," Davis says.

"No," Dixon says, "it's turned the wrong way."

They motor on, scanning the sky.

A onetime captain in the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Department, Davis considers himself an expert in scam artists and nut cases. So his radar went up in January when he got the call from a woman in London.

She said she was from the Open Minds Forum, an Internet group specializing in "UFOlogy." She said she represented people who were interested in the drone and wanted to contact Raji and others who claimed in Web postings to have seen the craft. There was the guy in Bakersfield who called himself Chad. There was the hiker and the bicyclist, both from the San Jose area. Nobody used last names. So far, nobody could be found.

Before calling Davis, the Open Minds group had e-mailed Raji. He told them he snapped the picture from his fiancée's parents' home. They hoped to ask more questions, but he suddenly closed his e-mail account. They spent months looking for him before deciding to hire a professional.

Find the power pole in the photo, the woman told Davis, and you'll find the house. And Raji.

Oh, and one more thing: She didn't want to be identified.

Davis doesn't believe in UFOs, but he said that "she seemed like a logical person who wanted answers." Besides, he loves the challenge of working cold cases. And the nice hourly pay. So he started nosing around.

He thought the thing in the pictures looked far too intricate and sophisticated to be the work of some bored teenager using Photoshop. So what was it?



[Out there](#)

He went to the Internet, trawling for witnesses.

Some who said they saw the craft likened it to a dragonfly or an upside-down egg beater. They described it variously as an exploratory craft dispatched by a mother ship and a top-secret government project.

But in chat rooms, Davis also found plenty of drone doubters, who made comments such as "Looks like a new kind of torque wrench" and "Did you folks get a picture or two of the crop circles?"

In one exchange, when someone asked about the meaning of the writing on one of the craft's arms, the snide responses flooded in: "Made in China." "Martians for Obama."

Word of Davis' case quickly spread among his ex-cop cronies. T.K. had gone galactic, they joked at their weekly drinking sessions. He was seeing little green men. Davis let them laugh, just as they had when he'd taken a night class in meteorology and spent weeks chasing tornadoes in the Midwest.

"I'm not chasing flying saucers," he said. "I'm knocking on doors, looking for people, just like I've always done."

Then he got a call from Dixon, a fellow retiree he'd known since the two worked on a 1970s narcotics task force. Dixon, also a private eye, had heard about the case on the golf course. He wanted in. "I'm your man," he said. "I can find that pole." When Davis said yes, Dixon went out and bought a book about Roswell, N.M., the site of a notorious UFO sighting in 1947.

The pair devised a strategy: Don't buy into any far-fetched "Star Wars" theories. And don't admit the case has *anything* to do with possible alien spacecraft. If you start talking about flying saucers, Davis warned, people will start closing doors.

"We were working for people who didn't want to be identified," Davis said, "looking for people who didn't want to be found."

Dixon quickly became an expert on utility poles.

Like fingerprints, he says, each pole is different. Some carry only telephone wires. Others also have cable-TV hookups. Most, but not all, have short rods for climbing.

He visited the power company with one photo -- with the drone carefully edited out. He said he was working an auto accident. Could they tell him where the pole was?

No luck.

He then visited the website of the Mutual UFO Network, dedicated to extraordinary sightings, where a man named Isaac claimed that strange craft resembling the one Dixon and Davis were investigating were part of a U.S. government project. Isaac said he knew this because he worked for a top-secret government program in Palo Alto in the 1980s, devising commercial technology from extraterrestrial artifacts confiscated by U.S. scientists.

Isaac wrote that he worked five stories below ground. Dixon consulted fire officials, who keep records of building heights and depths, but could find no record of such a place.

Running into such dead ends, Davis took a chance and began mentioning the real reason for his search.

Sometimes, it actually seemed to help.

"They'd call it baloney and then admit, well, maybe they *had* seen something funny one night in their lives," he said. "Everybody's in the closet."

One person said she'd seen the drone in Sequoia National Forest. "It was broad daylight. I was sober," she said. "I'm not known for seeing things." Dixon had his doubts, because she couldn't even recall what day it happened.

Before hiring Davis, the woman from the Open Mind Forum called Capitola police to report the photo and request an investigation. Chief Richard Ehle considered the whole matter a farce, but assigned a detective to it just in case.

Sgt. Mark Gonzales found nothing.

"We're a small beach town, and residents report everything from cat feces on lawns to sick sea gulls," he said. "If someone saw something, I'd know about it."

But he said he wouldn't immediately close the case. "I keep an open mind," he said.

So do Davis and Dixon. They recently uncovered some new leads. At a party, Davis mentioned the drone to a friend. "I thought he would have thrown me out of the room." Instead, the man offered a theory about the location of Isaac's secret Palo Alto laboratory.

Davis has started a website for tips: www.tkdavisinvestigations.com.

"The more I get into this, the more I want to know," he said. "It's weird."

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