

# The 22 SDI Researchers Who All Committed 'Suicide'

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Fifty-year-old Alistair Beckham was a successful British aerospace-projects engineer. His specialty was designing computer software for sophisticated naval defense systems. Like hundreds of other British scientists, he was working on a pilot program for America's Strategic Defense Initiative--better known as Star Wars. And like at least 21 of his colleagues, he died a bizarre, violent death.

It was a lazy, sunny Sunday afternoon in August 1988. After driving his wife to work, Beckham walked through his garden to a musty backyard toolshed and sat down on a box next to the door. He wrapped bare wires around his chest, attached the to an electrical outlet and put a handkerchief in his mouth. Then he pulled the switch.

With his death, Beckham's name was added to a growing list of British scientists who've died or disappeared under mysterious circumstances since 1982. Each was a skilled expert in computers, and each was working on a highly classified project for the American Star Wars program. None had any apparent motive for killing himself.

The British government contends that the deaths are all a matter of coincidence. The British press blames stress. Others allude to an ongoing fraud investigation involving the nation's leading defense contractor. Relatives left behind don't know what to think.

"There weren't any women involved. There weren't any men involved. We had a very good relationship," says Mary Beckham, Alistair's widow. "We don't know why he did it...if he did it. And I don't believe that he did do it. He wouldn't go out to the shed. There had to be something...."

The string of unexplained deaths can be traced back to March 1982, when Essex University computer scientist Dr. Keith Bowden died in a car wreck on his way home from a London social function. Authorities claim Bowden was drunk. His wife and friends say otherwise.

Bowden, 45, was a whiz with super-computers and computer-controlled aircraft. He was cofounder of the Department of Computer Sciences at Essex and had worked for one of the major Star Wars contractors in England.

One night Bowden's immaculately maintained Rover careened across a four-lane highway and plunged off a bridge, down an embankment, into an

abandoned rail yard. Bowden was found dead at the scene.

During the inquest, police testified that Bowden's blood alcohol level had exceeded the legal limit and that he had been driving too fast. His death was ruled accidental.

Wife Hillary Bowden and her lawyer suspected a cover-up. Friends he'd supposedly spent the evening with denied that Bowden had been drinking. Then there was the condition of Bowden's car.

"My solicitor instructed an accident specialist to examine the automobile," Mrs. Bowden explains. "Somebody had taken the wheels off and put others on that were old and worn. At the inquest this was not allowed to be brought up. Someone asked if the car was in a sound condition, and the answer was yes."

Hillary, in a state of shock, never protested the published verdict. Yet, she remains convinced that someone tampered with her husband's car. "It certainly looked like foul play," Hillary maintains.

Four years later the British press finally added Bowden's case to its growing dossier. First, there appeared to be two interconnected deaths, then six, then 12--suddenly there were 22.

Take 37-year-old David Sands, a senior scientist at Easams working on a highly sensitive computer-controlled satellite- radar system. In March 1987 Sands made a U-turn on his way to work and rammed his car into the brick wall of a vacant restaurant. His trunk was loaded with full gasoline cans. The car exploded on impact.

Given the incongruities of the accident and the lack of a suicide motive, the coroner refused to rule out the possibility of foul play. Meanwhile, information leaked to the press suggested that Sands had been under a tremendous emotional strain.

Margaret Worth, Sand's mother-in-law, claims these stories are totally inaccurate. "When David died, it was a great mystery to us," she admits. "He was very successful. He was very confident. He had just pulled off a great coup for his company, and he was about to be greatly rewarded. He had a very bright future ahead of him. He was perfectly happy the week before this happened."

Like many of the bereaved, Worth is still at a loss for answers. "One week we think he must have been got at. The next week we think it couldn't be anything like that," she says.

This wave of suspicious fatalities in the ultrasecret world of sophisticated weaponry has not gone unnoticed by the United States government. Late last fall, the American embassy in London publicly requested a full investigation by the British Ministry of Defense (MoD).

Members of British Parliament, such a Labour MP Doug Hoyle,

copresident of the Manufacturing, Science & Finance Union, had been making similar requests for more than two years. The Thatcher government had refused to launch any sort of inquiry.

"How many more deaths before we get the government to give the answers?" Hoyle asks. "From a security point of view, surely both ourselves and the Americans ought to be looking into it."

The Pentagon refuses comment on the deaths. However, according to Reagan Administration sources, "We cannot ignore it anymore."

Actually, British and American intelligence agencies are on the situation. When THE SUNDAY TIMES in London published the details of 12 mysterious deaths last September, sources at the American embassy admitted being aware of at least ten additional victims whose names had already been sent to Washington. The sources added that the embassy had been monitoring reports of "the mysterious deaths" for two years.

English intelligence has suffered several damaging spy scandals in the 20 century. The CIA may suspect the deaths are an indication of security leaks, that Star Wars secrets are being sold to the Russians. Perhaps these scientists had been blackmailed into supplying classified data to Moscow and could no longer live with themselves. One or more may have stumbled onto an espionage ring and been silenced.

As NBC News London correspondent Henry Champ puts it, "In the world of espionage, there is a saying: Twice is coincidence, but three times is enemy action."

Where SDI is concerned, a tremendous amount is at stake. In return for the Thatcher government's early support of the Star Wars program, the Reagan Administration promised a number of extremely lucrative SDI contracts to the British defense industry--hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars the struggling British economy can little afford to lose.

Britain traditionally has one of the finest defense industries in the world. Their annual overseas weapons sales amount to almost \$250 billion. The publicity from a Star Wars spy scandal could seriously cut into the profits.

It would appear that only initial promises made to Prime Minister Thatcher hold the U.S. from cutting its losses and pulling out. A high-ranking American source was quoted in the SUNDAY TIMES saying, "If this had happened in Greece, Brazil, Spain, or Argentina, we'd be all over them like a glove!"

The Thatcher government's PR problem is that the scandal centers around Marconi Company Ltd., Britain's largest electronics-defense contractor. Seven Marconi scientists are among the dead.

Marconi, which employs 50,000 workers worldwide, is a subsidiary of Britain's General Electric Company (GEC). GEC managing director Lord Wienstock recently launched his own internal investigation.

Yet, the GEC and the Ministry of Defense still contend that the 22 deaths are coincidental. A Ministry of Defense spokesman claims to have found "no evidence of any sinister links between them."

However, an article in the British publication THE INDEPENDENT claims the incidence of suicide among Marconi scientists is twice the national average of mentally healthy individuals. Either Marconi is hiring abnormally unstable scientists or something is very wrong.

Two deaths brought the issue to light in the fall of 1986. Within weeks of each other, two London-based Marconi scientists were found dead 100 miles away, in Bristol. Both were involved in creating the software for a huge, computerized Star Wars simulator, the hub of Marconi's SDI program. Both had been working on the simulator just hours before their death. Like the others, neither had any apparent reason to kill himself.

Vimal Dajibhai was a 24-year-old electronics graduate who worked at Marconi Underwater Systems in Croxley Green. In August 1986 his crumpled body was found lying on the pavement 240 feet below the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol.

An inquest was unable to determine whether Dajibhai had been pushed off the bridge or whether he had jumped. There had been no witnesses. The verdict was left open. Yet, authorities did their best to pin his death on suicide.

Police testified that Dajibhai had been suffering from depression, something his family and friends flatly denied. Dajibhai had absolutely no history of personal or emotional problems.

Police also claimed that the deceased had been drinking with a friend, Heyat Shah, shortly before his death, and that a bottle of wine and two used paper cups had been found in his car. Yet, forensic tests were never done on the auto, and those who knew Vimal, including Shah, say that he had never taken a drink of alcohol in his life.

Investigating journalists found discrepancies in other evidence. "A police report noted a puncture mark on Dajibhai's left buttock after his fall from the bridge," explains Tony Collins, who covered the story for Britain's COMPUTER NEWS magazine. "Apparently, this was the reason his funeral was halted seconds before the cremation was to take place.

"Members of the Family were told that the body was to be taken away for a second postmortem, to be done by a top home-office pathologist. That's not normal. Then, a few months later, police held a press conference and announced that it hadn't been a puncture mark after all, that it was a wound caused by a bone fragment.

"I find it very difficult to reconcile the initial coroner's report with what the police were saying a few months later," Collins contends.

Officials didn't fare any better with the second Bristol fatality. Police virtually tripped over themselves to come up with a motive for the apparent--and unusually violent--suicide of Ashaad Sharif.

Sharif was a 26-year-old computer analyst who worked at the Marconi Defense Systems headquarters in Stanmore, Middlesex. On October 28, 1986, he allegedly drove to a public park not far from where Dajibhai had died. He tied one end of a nylon cord around a tree and tied the other end around his neck. Then he got back into his Audi 80 automatic, stepped on the gas and sped off, decapitating himself.

Marconi initially claimed Sharif was only a junior employee, and that he had nothing to do with Star Wars. Co-workers stated otherwise. At the time of his death, Sharif was apparently about to be promoted. Also, Ashaad reportedly worked for a time in Vimal Dajibhai's section.

The inquest determined that Sharif's death was a suicide. Investigating officers maintained that the man had killed himself because he'd been jilted by an alleged lover. Ashaad hadn't seen the woman in three years.

"Sharif was said to have been depressed over a broken romance," Tony Collins explains. "But the woman police unofficially say was his lover contends that she was only his landlady when he was working for British Aerospace in Bristol. She's married, has three children, and she's deeply religious. The possibility of the two having an affair seems highly unlikely--especially since Sharif had a fiancée in Pakistan. His family told me that he was genuinely in love with her."

Police suddenly switched stories. They began to say that Sharif had been deeply in love with the woman he was engaged to, and that he'd decapitated himself because another woman was pressuring him to call off the marriage.

Authorities claimed to have found a taped message in Sharif's car "tantamount" to a suicide note. On it, officers said, he'd admitted to having had an affair, thus bringing shame on his family. Family members who've heard the tape say that it actually gave no indication of why Sharif might want to kill himself.

Sharif's family was told by the coroner that it was "not in their best interest" to attend the inquest.

"It's been almost impossible to get to information about deaths that should be in the public domain," Tony Collins laments. "I've been given false names or incorrect spellings, or I've not been told where inquests have taken place. It's made it very difficult for me to try to track down the details of these cases."

In the Sharif case, two facts stand out: Ashaad had no history of depression, and there was absolutely no reason for him to be in Bristol.

A widely held theory among the establishment press is that the mysterious

deaths are stress-related accidents or suicides. Such theories may not be far off the mark.

According to a high-ranking British government official, for the past year and a half the Ministry of Defense has been secretly investigating Marconi on allegations of defense- contract fraud--overcharging the government, bribing officials. The extensive probe has required most of the MoD's investigative resources, conceivably reaching as far as Marconi's sub-contractors and into MoD research facilities such as the Royal Military College of Science and the Royal Air Force Research Center.

Almost all of the dead scientists were associated with one or more of these establishments.

If Marconi employees were being forced by management to perform or to cover up illegal activities, it may be that the stress did indeed get to them.

"In America, there are considerable incentives for people to blow the whistle if they're being asked to perform illegal acts like ripping off the government," a confidential source in Parliament explains. "However, in this country there have been perhaps 20 people who've blown the whistle, and none of them have ever worked again. They didn't receive any compensation. Here, you don't get any recognition. You get threatened with prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. They can fire you. Then they can take away your home and get you blacklisted.

"It's an impossible position to be placed in," the source adds. "It's quite conceivable that these people could have killed themselves because they felt terribly ashamed of what they'd done. For that matter, some of the accidents or suicides could have been men who'd taken bribes but who couldn't face the embarrassment of public disclosure."

If Marconi was systematically defrauding the government for millions of pounds each year, perhaps an employee stumbled upon incriminating evidence and had to be done away with. It would be easy enough to make it look like an accident.

Consider the peculiar death of Peter Peapell, found dead beneath his car in the garage of his Oxfordshire home. Peapell, 46, worked for the Royal Military College of Science, a world authority on communications technology, electronics surveillance and target detection. Peapell was an expert at using computers to process signals emitted by metals. His work reportedly included testing titanium for its resistance to explosives.

On the night of February 22, 1987, Peapell spent an enjoyable evening out with his wife, Maureen, and their friends. When they returned home, Maureen went straight to bed, leaving Peter to put the car away.

When Maureen woke up the next morning, she discovered that Peter had not come to bed. She went looking for him. When she reached the garage, she noticed that the door was closed. Yet she could hear the car's engine running.

She found her husband lying on his back beneath the car, his mouth directly below the tail pipe. She pulled him into the open air, but he was already dead.

Initially, Maureen thought her husband's death an accident. She presumed he'd gotten under the car to investigate a knocking he'd heard driving home the night before, and that he'd gotten stuck. But the light fixture in the garage was broken, and Peter hadn't been carrying a flashlight.

Police had their own suspicions. A constable the same height and weight as Peter Peapell found it impossible to crawl under the car when the garage door was closed. He also found it impossible to close the door once he was under the car.

Carbon deposits from the inside of the garage door showed that the engine had been running only a short time. Yet, Mrs. Peapell had found the body almost seven hours after she'd gone to bed.

The coroner's inquest could not determine whether the death was a homicide, a suicide or an accident. According to Maureen Peapell, Peter had no reason to kill himself. They had no marital or financial problems. Peter loved his job. He'd just received a sizable raise, and according to colleagues, he'd exhibited "absolutely no signs of stress."

We may never know what is killing these scientists. Everyone has a theory.

The National Forum Foundation, a conservative Washington D.C., think tank, believes the deaths are the work of European-based, left-wing terrorists, such as those who took credit for gunning down a West German bureaucrat who'd negotiated Star Wars contracts. The group also claims the July 1986 bombing death of a researcher director from the Siemens Company--a high-tech, West German electronics firm. They have yet to take credit for any of the scientists.

A more outrageous theory suggests that the Russians have developed an electromagnetic "death ray," with which they're driving the British scientists to suicide. A supermarket tabloid contends the ultrathin waves emitted by the device interfere with a person's brain waves, causing violent mood shifts, including suicidal depression.

The genius of such a weapon is that the victim does all the dirty work and takes all the blame. Yet, if the Soviets have actually developed such a weapon, why waste it on 22 British defense workers?

Are the scientists victims of a corrupt defense industry? Have they been espionage pawns? Are the deaths nothing more than an extraordinary coincidence? Guess.

DOSSIER OF DEATH

1. AUTO ACCIDENT--Professor Keith Bowden, 45, computer scientist, Essex University. In March 1982 Bowden's car plunged off a bridge, into an abandoned rail yard. His death was listed as an accident.
2. MISSING PERSON--Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Godley, 49, defense expert, head of work-study unit at the Royal Military College of Science. Godley disappeared in April 1983. His father bequeathes him more than \$60,000, with the proviso that he claim it by 1987. He never showed up and is presumed dead.
3. SHOTGUN BLAST--Roger Hill, 49, radar designer and draftsman, Marconi. In March 1985 Hill allegedly killed himself with a shotgun at the family home.
4. DEATH LEAP--Jonathan Walsh, 29, digital-communications expert assigned to British Telecom's secret Martlesham Heath research facility (and to GEC, Marconi's parent firm). In November 1985 Walsh allegedly fell from his hotel room while working on a British Telecom project in Abidjan, Ivory Coast (Africa). He had expressed a fear for his life. Verdict: Still in question.
5. DEATH LEAP--Vimal Dajibhai, 24, computer-software engineer (worked on guidance system for Tigerfish torpedo), Marconi Underwater Systems. In August 1986 Dajibhai's crumpled remains were found 240 feet below the Clifton suspension bridge in Bristol. The death has not been listed as a suicide.
6. DECAPITATION--Ashaad Sharif, 26, computer analyst, Marconi Defense Systems. In October 1986, in Bristol, Sharif allegedly tied one end of a rope around a tree and the other end around his neck, then drove off in his car at high speed. Verdict: Suicide.
7. SUFFOCATION--Richard Pugh, computer consultant for the Ministry of Defense. In January 1987 Pugh was found dead, wrapped head-to-toe in rope that was tied four times around his neck. The coroner listed his death as an accident due to a sexual experiment gone awry.
8. ASPHYXIATION--John Brittan, Ministry of Defense tank batteries expert, Royal Military College of Science. In January 1987 Brittan was found dead in a parked car in his garage. The engine was still running. Verdict: Accidental death.
9. DRUG OVERDOSE--Victor Moore, 46, design engineer, Marconi Space Systems. In February 1987 Moore was found dead of a drug overdose. His death is listed as a suicide.
10. ASPHYXIATION--Peter Peapell, 46, scientist, Royal Military College of Science. In February 1987 Peapell was found dead beneath his car, his face near the tail pipe, in the garage of his Oxfordshire home. Death was due to carbon-monoxide poisoning, although test showed that the engine had been running only a short time. Foul play has not been ruled out.
11. ASPHYXIATION--Edwin Skeels, 43, engineer, Marconi. In February 1987 Skeels was found dead in his car, a victim of carbon-monoxide poisoning. A hose led from the exhaust pipe. His death is listed as a suicide.
12. AUTO ACCIDENT--David Sands, satellite projects manager, Eassams (a Marconi sister company). Although up for a promotion, in March 1987 Sands drove a car filled with gasoline cans into the brick wall of an abandoned cafe. He was killed instantly. Foul play has not been ruled out.
13. AUTO ACCIDENT--Stuart Gooding, 23, postgraduate research student, Royal Military College of Science. In April 1987 Gooding died in a

mysterious car wreck in Cyprus while the College was holding military exercises on the island. Verdict: Accidental death.

14. AUTO ACCIDENT--George Kountis, experienced systems analyst at British Polytechnic. In April 1987 Kountis drowned after his BMW plunged into the Mersey River in Liverpool. His death is listed as a misadventure.

15. SUFFOCATION--Mark Wisner, 24, software engineer at Ministry of Defense experimental station for combat aircraft. In April 1987 Wisner was found dead in his home with a plastic bag over his head. At the inquest, his death was ruled an accident due to a sexual experiment gone awry.

16. AUTO ACCIDENT--Michael Baker, 22, digital-communications expert, Plessey Defense Systems. In May 1987 Baker's BMW crashed through a road barrier, killing the driver. Verdict: Misadventure.

17. HEART ATTACK--Frank Jennings, 60, electronic-weapons engineer for Plessey. In June 1987 Jennings allegedly dropped dead of a heart attack. No inquest was held.

18. DEATH LEAP--Russel Smith, 23, lab technician at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment. In January 1988 Smith's mangled body was found halfway down a cliff in Cornwall. Verdict: Suicide.

19. ASPHYXIATION--Trevor Knight, 52, computer engineer, Marconi Space and Defense Systems. In March 1988 Knight was found dead in his car, asphyxiated by fume from a hose attached to the tail pipe. The death was ruled a suicide.

20. ELECTROCUTION--John Ferry, 60, assistant marketing director for Marconi. In August 1988 Ferry was found dead in a company-owned apartment, the stripped leads of an electrical cord in his mouth. Foul play has not been ruled out.

21. ELECTROCUTION--Alistair Beckham, 50, software engineer, Plessey. In August 1988 Beckham's lifeless body was found in the garden shed behind his house. Bare wires, which ran to a live main, were wrapped around his chest. Now suicide note was found, and police have not ruled out foul play.

22. ASPHYXIATION--Andrew Hall, 33, engineering manager, British Aero- space. In September 1988 Hall was found dead in his car, asphyxiated by fumes from a hose that was attached to the tail pipe. Friends said he was well liked, had everything to live for. Verdict: Suicide.

<http://www.fiu.edu/~mizrachs/sdi-deaths.html>

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