

CAA Official's Own Story

# How Radar Spotted Whatzits That Air Force Couldn't Find

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Written for NEA Service  
Shortly after midnight of the 19th of July Ed Nugent called me over to the radar scope and joked:

"Here's a fleet of flying saucers for you."  
As it turns out, Ed could very well have been stating absolute fact.

I am a senior air route traffic controller for the Civil Aeronautics Administration. I was in charge of the air route traffic control center that particular night at National Airport.

### SCANS D. C. AIRSPACE

Part of our job is to constantly monitor the skies around the Nation's Capital with the electronic eye of radar for purposes of controlling air traffic.

Our shift had been on duty about 40 minutes. Eight men were on this particular shift. It was a normal night for both flying and weather. The sky was cloudless. No storms were approaching. Air traffic was light, as is usual for that period. Those facts are important in connection with what came later.

### MYSTERIOUS PIPS

The "things" which caused Ed to call me over to the scope were seven pips clustered together irregularly in one corner. The scope is 24 inches in diameter. The pips show up as pale violet spots. Ordinarily they represent aircraft in the air. The radar we were using scans a 70-mile radius.

The seven pips indicated that the objects were in the air over an area about nine miles in diameter, 15 miles' south-southwest of Washington. We knew immediately that a very strange situation existed. First, from all the information we had at hand we knew that the spots were not aircraft—at least, not identified and friendly aircraft.

### THREE POSSIBILITIES

That left three possibilities: something wrong with the radar, enemy aircraft or some unexplained flying objects. We tracked the seven pips for about 5 minutes. We quickly determined that they were moving between 100 and 130 miles per hour, while we could observe them.

But their movements were completely radical compared to those of ordinary aircraft. They followed no set course, were not in any formation, and we only seemed to be able to track them for about three miles at a time.

The individual pip would seem to disappear from the scope at intervals.

Later I realized that if these objects had made any sudden burst of extremely high speed, that would account for them disappearing from the scope temporarily. Our radar is only designed to track known types of aircraft or objects in the air at speeds known to all of us.

After five minutes of watching the strange pips I asked Jim Copeland and Jim Ritchey, two experienced radar controllers, to check our observations. They confirmed our findings. Then I called the airport control tower to see what the radar showed there. The radar operator verified the same thing instantly.

At this time I notified the Air Force of our observation. This is a regular procedure, but some parts of it are secret. I am not at liberty to explain it in detail.

But we kept the Air Force informed of subsequent observations which continued for approximately the next six hours, until after daylight when we could no longer distinguish the objects from other aircraft.

Early Sunday morning is an especially busy time for both private flying and military reserve flying.

Before notifying the Air Force of our findings, our technicians had carefully checked the equipment to make certain that it was operating perfectly.

These are the important events of the next six hours:

• During the first hour the objects had moved over all sectors of our scope. That meant that they had been over the restricted areas of Washington including the White House and Capitol.

• At the first opportunity, Ritchey contacted Capital Airline pilot Capt. S. C. Pierman, a veteran of 17 years of flying. Shortly after taking off, Ritchey asked Pierman to look for the objects we were watching on the scope. He agreed to do this.

• All of a sudden, his voice came over the radio which we could all hear, with the words: "There's one, and there it goes." He described it as just a bright light moving much faster than a shooting star at times.

the movements of the objects coincided with the position of our pips at all times while in our range.

During the next 14 minutes he reported that he saw six such lights. He said they had no tail, no recognizable shape and were just bright lights in the dark sky.

Each sighting coincided with a pip we could see near his plane. When he reported that the light streaked off at high speed, it disappeared on our scope, for the apparent reason I cited.

While he was giving us reports of his sightings he was on a course from Herndon, Va., to Martinsburg, W. Va.

Some of the other pilots we contacted reported that they were unable to see the objects. I had the distinct feeling that some of them were just unwilling to discuss the subject over the radio.

However, one other commercial pilot did flatly confirm seeing a light off his left wing which we saw as a pip on the scope. He was coming in for his landing and the tower scope reported the same radar sighting. The light disappeared on our scope and from his view about four miles before he touched his wheels down.

During the whole period of observation we could detect no pattern to the movement of these objects. We did not see the pips in any recognizable formation at any time.

However, they did seem to become most active around the planes we saw on the scope.

The radar we were using does not show altitude, and it is faintly possible that the objects could have been in a vertical formation without our recognizing it.

At one point toward daybreak we counted 10 objects over Andrews Field, just outside of Washington. We sighted seven originally. Most of the time we could count eight of them.

The only recognizable behavior pattern which occurred to me from watching the pips was that they acted like a bunch of small kids out playing. It was helter-skelter as if directed by some innate curiosity. At times they moved as a group or cluster. Other times as individuals over widely scattered areas.

Other than some information in connection with our communications with the Air Force, which is classified, the above is a complete factual description of the important events which took place during those six hours. These facts I have set forth in my official report to CAA.

Speaking personally, and not officially for CAA, I would like to make these additional comments:

Radar is strictly an electronics device. It has no imagination. It reports only what it "sees." The equipment was in perfect operating order during that period.

There is no other conclusion I can reach but that for six hours on the morning of the 20th of July there were at least 10 unidentifiable objects moving above Washington.

### NOT USUAL CRAFT

They were not ordinary air-

Not in my opinion could any natural phenomena account for these spots on our radar. Neither shooting stars, electrical disturbances nor clouds could either. Exactly what they are, I don't know. Now you know as much about them as I do. And your guess is as good as mine.