

In 1953, many military personnel saw a UFO near Ellsworth Air Force Base



On August 5, 1953, shortly after nightfall, Ellsworth Air Force Base, at the time one of the Strategic Air Command's most sensitive installations in South Dakota, became the stage for what Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, the first director of Project Blue Book, would later call "the best UFO report in the Air Force files." Within a few hours, military radar operators, fighter pilots, and some forty-five civilians would all converge on the same unsettling conclusion: something was flying over the skies of South Dakota, and it obeyed no known law of aeronautics.

The alert from Blackhawk

It all begins in Blackhawk, a small town about ten miles west of the base. Mrs. Phyllis Kellian (sometimes spelled "Killian" in secondary sources), a volunteer observer with the Ground Observer Corps — the civilian network tasked with watching for enemy bombers at the height of the Cold War — spots a bright red light low on the northeastern horizon around eight o'clock in the evening. Motionless at first, the light suddenly shifts thirty degrees, shoots straight up, then returns to its original position before streaking off toward Rapid City at high speed. Trained in the proper procedure, Mrs. Kellian immediately reports the sighting, and is put through directly to the on-duty radar controller at Ellsworth.

Radar confirmation and the first scramble

The duty officer immediately picks up a solid, well-defined return on his scope, stationary at 16,000 feet, exactly where Mrs. Kellian places the light. Three airmen are sent outside and visually confirm a light moving north to south at high speed. At 8:24 PM, Lieutenant John W. Stockham, on combat air patrol aboard an F-84D Thunderjet, is vectored toward the area. He acquires a silvery light "brighter than any star" and begins his approach. But as he closes to within about three miles, the object suddenly accelerates to the northwest, stubbornly maintaining the gap.

A 120-mile pursuit

The chase continues for nearly 120 miles, with the object and the F-84 crossing into North Dakota under the unbroken

watch of ground radar, which tracks both blips without interruption. Low on fuel, the pilot is forced to turn back. He would later tell Ruppelt he was "damn glad" he was running low on gas, given how unsettling it was to be alone, at night, over such desolate country, chasing something he simply could not outrun.

The radar controller, for his part, would remember the extraordinary composure the night demanded of him. According to the account he later gave Ruppelt, the object seemed to carry some kind of automatic warning system tied to its propulsion: every time the fighter closed to within three miles, the target would "automatically pick up speed and pull away" — a distance-maintaining behavior that would become one of the most closely studied aspects of the case.

The second interceptor and the locked-on gunsight

Back at the base, Stockham's F-84 crosses paths with a second aircraft already on alert: the squadron's pilots, having followed the radio traffic, refused to believe it. One of them, a World War II and Korea veteran, insists on taking off himself. Lieutenant David K. Needham takes the controls. Climbing to 15,000 feet, he spots the object below and to his right: a light shifting from white to green, moving erratically. Needham climbs to 26,000 feet in pursuit. According to his official report, filed in writing in the days that followed, he switches on his radar-ranging gunsight — not to open fire, but to confirm the object's solidity. The lock-on light comes on and stays lit throughout the pursuit, a detail the Air Force would later attribute to a malfunction, though no maintenance record for the equipment turns up in the weeks that follow.

Blue Book's verdict, and the doubt that remains

Astronomer J. Allen Hynek, then scientific advisor to Project Blue Book, was initially convinced of the phenomenon's material reality, writing in November 1953 to Captain Charles A. Hardin that "solid objects are certainly indicated by the evidence." The case would later be reexamined by the Condon Report in 1968, whose investigators proposed an explanation involving anomalous radar wave propagation caused by a temperature inversion — the object's echo, under this theory, being nothing more than an artifact of the F-84's own radar signature. But this hypothesis struggles to account for why the echo remained distinct and unwavering from the jet's own return across the full 120 miles of pursuit, all the way until it passed out of radar range over North Dakota. For Ruppelt, in the end, the Ellsworth case would remain, for lack of a better explanation, officially unidentified.

"The controller saw it begin to move, the spotter saw it begin to move, and the pilot saw it begin to move — all at the same time."

— Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, former director of Project Blue Book

Archival document: report by Lieutenant David K. Needham (translated excerpt)

Excerpt from the official AF Form 112-Part I report, dated August 5, 1953, from the declassified files of the U.S. Air Force:

"At 2115 hours, Mountain Standard Time, on 5 August 1953, I took off in an F-84 to conduct a Combat Air Patrol. Approximately three minutes later, I contacted Grady Control by radio. Grady informed me that the Ground Observer Corps had spotted a flying object (a light) in the air northeast of Black Hawk, South Dakota. Grady requested that I investigate the object, but was unable to give information concerning the object's speed, heading, or altitude. After making three requests to Grady for a vector to the vicinity of Black Hawk, I finally saw what was apparently the object. At the time of detection, I was on a course of 330 from Ellsworth AFB at 15,000 feet. The object was approximately thirty degrees to the right of my course, and appeared to be paralleling my course at a lower altitude. The object was a light of varying intensity and alternated from white... [document partially illegible]. As for the exact size of this craft, it would be a little hard to say, but considering the altitude it seemed to be at, and judging from its apparent relation to the contours of the surrounding terrain, I would estimate it was between twenty and thirty feet in diameter. I say this because of the few seconds during which I was able to observe this craft; I also saw its wake, or path."

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