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NATION & WORLD

WHAT IN THE WORLD?

A close encounter off the California coast

By HELEN COOPER, LEE REEGAN and RALPH BLUMENTHAL • New York Times

Cmdr. David Fravor and Lt. Cmdr. Jim Slaght were on a routine training mission 100 miles out into the Pacific when the radio in each of their F-35B Super Hornets crackled: An operations officer aboard the USS Princeton, a Navy cruiser, wanted to know if they were carrying weapons.

Two CATM-9s, Fravor replied, referring to dummy missiles that could not be fired. He had not been expecting any hostile encounters off the coast of San Diego that November afternoon in 2004.

Fravor, in a recent interview with the New York Times, recalled what happened next. Some of it is captured in a video made public by officials with a Pentagon program that investigated UFOs.

"Well, we've got a real-world vector for you," the radio operator said, according to Fravor. For two weeks, the operator said, the USS Princeton had been tracking mysterious aircraft. The objects appeared suddenly at 80,000 feet and then headed toward the sea, eventually stopping at 20,000 feet and hovering. Then they either dropped out of radar range or shot straight back up.

The radio operator instructed Fravor and Slaght — who has given a similar account — to investigate.

The two fighter planes headed toward the objects. The Princeton alerted them as they closed in, but when they arrived at "merge point" with the object — naval aviation

parlance for being so close that the Princeton could not tell which were the objects and which were the fighter jets — neither Fravor nor Slaght could see anything at first. There was nothing on their radars, either.

Then Fravor looked down to the sea. It was calm that day, but the waves were breaking over something that was just below the surface. Whatever it was, it was big enough to cause the sea to churn.

Flowing 50 feet above the churning was an aircraft of some kind — whitish — that was around 40 feet long and oval in shape. The craft was jumping around erratically, starting over the wave disturbance but not moving in any specific direction, Fravor said. The disturbance looked like frothy waves and foam, as if the water were boiling.

Fravor began a circular descent to get a closer look, but as he got nearer the object began ascending toward him. It was almost as if it were coming to meet him halfway, he said.

Fravor abandoned his slow circular descent and headed straight for the object. "It accelerated like nothing I've ever seen," he said in the interview. He was, he said, "pretty wretched out."

The two fighter jets then conferred with the operations officer on the Princeton and were told to head to a rendezvous point 60 miles away, called the cap point, in aviation parlance.

They were en route and closing in when the Princeton radioed again. Radar had again



For two weeks in the fall of 2004, the USS Princeton tracked mysterious aircraft, above, the USS Princeton heading out from Pearl Harbor in Hawaii in July 1998.



Video from the Defense Department's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program shows a 2004 encounter near San Diego between two Navy F-35B fighter jets and an unknown object.

"It accelerated like nothing I've ever seen."

Credit: David Fravor, a retired Navy pilot

picked up the strange aircraft. "So, you won't believe it," the radio operator said, "but that thing is at your cap point." "We were at least 40 miles away, and in less than a minute this thing was already at our cap point," Fravor, who has since retired from the Navy, said in the interview.

By the time the two fighter jets arrived at the rendezvous point, the object had disappeared.

Back to the Minita

The fighter jets returned to the carrier USS Minita, where everyone on the ship had learned of Fravor's encounter and was making fun of him.

Fravor's superiors did not investigate further, and he went on with his career, deploying to the Persian Gulf to provide air support ground troops during the Iraq war. But he does remember what he said that evening to a fellow pilot who asked him what he thought he had seen.

"There's no idea what I saw," Fravor replied to the pilot. "It had no planes, wings, rotors and couldn't fly." But, he added, "I want to fly."

Editor's Note: The above story recounts an incident in 2004 that advocates of research into UFOs have said is the kind of event worthy of more investigation. That encounter was studied by a Pentagon program that investigated UFOs. Experts caution that such incidents often can be explained by known aircraft, but that knowing the explanation does not mean that the event has interstellar origins.

UFOs real? Pentagon tried to find out

Defense Dept. acknowledges secret effort to investigate unidentified flying objects.

By HELEN COOPER, RALPH BLUMENTHAL and LINDSEY EDELMAN • New York Times

WASHINGTON — In the \$600 billion annual Defense Department budget, the \$22 million spent on the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program was nearly invisible to find.

Which was how the Pentagon wanted it. For years, the program investigated reports of unidentified flying objects, according to Defense Department officials, interviews with program participants and records obtained by the New York Times. It was run by a military intelligence official, Luis Elizondo, on the fifth floor of the Pentagon's Ring, deep within the building's maze.

The Defense Department has never before acknowledged the existence of the program, which it says it shut down in 2012. But its backers say that, while the Pentagon ended funding for the effort at that time, the program remains in existence. For the past five years, they say, officials with the program have continued to investigate episodes brought in them by service members, while also carrying out their other Defense Department duties.

The shadowy program — parts of it remain classified — began in 2007 and initially it was largely funded at the request of Harry Reid, the Nevada Democrat who was the Senate majority leader at the time and who has long had an interest in space phenomena. Most of the money went to an aerospace research company run by a billionaire entrepreneur and longtime friend of Reid's, Robert Bigelow, who is working with NASA to produce expendable craft for humans to use in space.

On CBS' "60 Minutes" in May, Bigelow said he was "absolutely convinced" that aliens exist and that UFOs have visited Earth.

Working with Bigelow's

Las Vegas-based company, the program produced documents that describe sightings of aircraft that seemed to move at very high velocities with no visible signs of propulsion, or that hovered with no apparent means of lift.

Officials with the program have also studied videos of encounters between military objects and U.S. military aircraft — including one released in August of a whitish oval object, about the size of a commercial plane, chased by two Navy F-35B fighter jets from the aircraft carrier Minita off the coast of San Diego in 2004. Reid, who retired from Congress this year, said he was proud of the program. "I'm not embarrassed or ashamed or sorry I got this thing going," Reid said in a recent interview in Nevada. "I think it's one of the good things I did in my congressional service. I've done something that no one has done before."

Two other former senators and top members of a military spending subcommittee — Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, and Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii — also supported the program. Stevens died in 2010, and Inouye in 2012.

Word of caution

While not addressing the merits of the program, Sen. Scotts an astrophysicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, cautioned that not knowing the origin of an object does not mean that it is from another planet or galaxy.

"When people claim to observe truly unusual phenomena, sometimes it's worth investigating seriously," he said. But, he added, "what people sometimes don't get about science is that we often have phenomena that remain unexplained."

James Oberg, a former NASA space shuttle engineer and the author of 30 books on spacecraft who often debunks UFO sightings, was also doubtful. "There are plenty of possible events and



Top: Robert Bigelow, a billionaire aerospace entrepreneur and friend of former Sen. Harry Reid. Above: Luis Elizondo led the Pentagon effort to investigate UFOs until October, when he resigned to protest what he characterized as excessive secrecy.

human perceptual traits that can account for these stories," Oberg said. "Lots of people are active in the air and don't want others to know about it. They are happy to talk unrecog-nized in the media, or even to sit it up as a conspiracy."

Gill, Oberg said he welcomed research. "There could well be a past there," he said. In response to questions from the Times, Pentagon officials this month acknowledged the existence of the program, which began as part of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Officials insisted that the effort had ended after five years, in 2012.

It was determined that there were other, higher-priority issues that merited funding,

resignation letter to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

Elizondo said that the effort continued and that he had a successor, whom he declined to name.

Many investigations

UFOs have been repeatedly investigated over the decades in the United States, including by the military. In 1947, the Air Force began a series of studies that investigated more than 12,000 claimed UFO sightings before it was officially ended in 1969. The project, which included a study code named Project Blue Book, started in 1952, concluded that most sightings involved stars, clouds, conventional aircraft or spy planes, although 701 remained unexplained.

Robert Seamans Jr., the secretary of the Air Force at the time, said in a memorandum announcing the end of Project Blue Book that it "no longer can be justified either on the grounds of national security or in the interest of science."

Contracts obtained by the Times show a congressional appropriation of just under \$22 million beginning in late 2008 through 2011. The money was used for management of the program, research and assessments of the threat posed by the objects.

The funding went to Bigelow's company, Bigelow Aerospace, which hired subcontractors and solicited research for the program.

Under Bigelow's direction, the company modified buildings in Las Vegas for the storage of mental alters and other program contractors said had been recovered from unidentified aerial phenomena. Researchers also studied people who said they had experienced physical effects from encounters with the objects and examined them for any physiological changes. In addition, researchers spoke to military service members who had reported sightings of strange aircraft.

"We're not of the position of what would happen if you gave Leonardo da Vinci a group-door opener," said

Harold Pathoff, an engineer who has conducted research on extraterrestrial perception for the CIA. "First of all, he'd try to figure out what is this plastic stuff. He wouldn't know anything about the electromagnetic signals involved or its function."

The program collected video and audio recordings of reported UFO incidents, including footage from a Navy F-35B Super Hornet showing an aircraft surrounded by some kind of glowing array traveling at high speed and rotating as it moves. The Navy pilots can be heard trying to understand what they are seeing. "There's a whole fleet of them," one exclaims. Defense officials declined to release the location and date of the incident.

"Internationally we are the most backward country in the world on this issue," Bigelow said in an interview. "Our scientists are scared of being ostracized, and our media is scared of the stigma. China and Russia are much more open and work on this with huge organizations within their countries. Similar countries like Belgium, France, England and South American countries like Chile are more open, too. They are proactive and willing to discuss this topic, rather than being held back by a juvenile taboo."

Elizondo, in his resignation letter of Oct. 4, said there was a need for more serious attention to "the many accounts from the Navy and other services of unusual aerial systems interfering with military weapon platforms and disrupting beyond-need-generation capabilities." He expressed his frustration with the limitations placed on the program, telling Mattis that "there remains a vital need to ascertain capability and intent of these phenomena for the benefit of the armed forces and the nation."

Participants said they did not know where the objects had come from. "I suppose they're fooling themselves," he said. "We do not know."

But, he said, "we have to start something."