

Navy Reports Describe Encounters With Unexplained Flying Objects

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By **Ralph Blumenthal and Leslie Kean**

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Navy fighter pilots reported close encounters with unidentified aerial vehicles, including several dangerously close, in eight incidents between June 27, 2013, and Feb. 13, 2019, according to documents recently released by the Navy.

Two happened on one day, according to one of eight unclassified Navy safety reports released in response to requests filed under the Freedom of Information Act by news outlets, including The New York Times.

Last month the Defense Department authenticated three videos of aerial encounters previously published by The Times, accompanying accounts of Navy pilots who reported such close encounters.

The incidents in the videos were investigated by a little-known Pentagon program that for years looked into reports of unidentified flying objects, the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program. The existence of the office was first reported by The Times in December 2017.

While some of the encounters have been reported publicly before, the Freedom of Information Act releases include the Navy's official records documenting the incidents, including descriptions from the pilots of what they saw.

The Navy records, known as "hazard reports," describe both visual and radar sightings, including close calls with the aerial vehicles, or "unmanned aircraft systems."

One incident, on March 26, 2014, over the Atlantic Ocean off Virginia Beach, involved a silver object "approximately the size of a suitcase" that was tracked on radar passing within 1,000 feet of one of the jets, according to the report.

Some of the incidents involved fighter squadrons aboard the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt. One of the former F/A-18 Super Hornet pilots, Lt. Ryan Graves, last year described a close encounter off Virginia Beach with what looked like a flying sphere encasing a cube, as recounted by a fellow pilot and later reported to the squadron safety officer.

The incident was documented in a report with few details on June 27, 2013, which stated that the Navy jet crew saw something pass about 200 feet away on the right side. With a visible smoke plume emitting from the rear section, "the aircraft was white in color and approximately the size and shape of a drone or missile," according to the report.

No other agencies were conducting drone flights or missile launches in the area at that time, the report said. "Unmanned aerial vehicles represent a significant midair collision threat," the commanding officer reported.

The incidents included more than just that squadron, the VFA-11 "Red Rippers" out of Naval Air Station Oceana, Va. The documents show that the commanders took the incidents seriously, warning of the likelihood of a midair collision.

Defense Department officials do not describe the objects as extraterrestrial, and experts emphasize that earthly explanations can generally be found for such incidents. Even lacking a plausible terrestrial explanation does not make an extraterrestrial one likely, astrophysicists say.

In interviews, five of the pilots involved avoided speculating on the source of the objects. The Navy, in its reports, also avoided any such conjecture.

Three incidents occurred within exclusive use airspace, meaning no other aircraft were authorized to fly in that area.

Another report on an incident on Nov. 18, 2013, expressed alarm. "Due to their small size, many U.A.S.'s are less visually significant and radar apparent and therefore pose a significant risk for midair collision," the report said, using an abbreviation for unmanned aircraft systems.

Less than a month later, a pilot who had been assured there was no traffic in his area detected a radar track at an altitude of 12,000 feet and less than a mile away. "He was able to identify a small white visual return at the location of the radar track," the report said.

A "near midair" collision report from March 26, 2014, also in exclusive use airspace, involved two F/A-18E Super Hornet aircraft from squadron VFA-106. One pilot closed in and reported seeing a small, silver metallic object the size of a suitcase. "Pilot passed within 1,000 feet of the object. Could not identify it," the report says.

The pilot passed the information to the local Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility, which had received multiple sighting reports in recent months. "This presents a significant safety concern, given that this unknown aircraft was detected in an exclusive use area," the commanding officer stated. "I feel it may only be a matter of time before one of our F/A-18 aircraft has a midair collision with an unidentified U.A.S."

On April 23, 2014, two objects were tracked on radar, not communicating, and two other relatively small objects were observed at the same time flying at high speed off the coast of Virginia, another report states. The events were said to pose "a severe threat to naval aviation."

"It is only a matter of time before this results in a midair in W-72," the report said, using the airspace designation. "This was the squadron's second occurrence in the last 10 months."

The most recent incident included in the Freedom of Information Act documents did not appear to be related to an unidentified flying object. On Feb. 13, 2019, a red weather balloon was spotted at 27,000 feet by four aircraft, when none were supposed to be in the area. The report concluded "weather balloon released without notifying the appropriate channels."