



# Science: Foo-Fighter

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If it was not a hoax or an optical illusion, it was certainly the most puzzling secret weapon that Allied fighters have yet encountered. Last week U.S. night fighter pilots based in France told a strange story of balls of fire which for more than a month have been following their planes at night over Germany.\* No one seemed to know what, if anything, the fireballs were supposed to accomplish. Pilots, guessing that it was a new psychological weapon, named it the "foo-fighter."

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Their descriptions of the apparition varied, but they agreed that the mysterious flares stuck close to their planes and appeared to follow them at high speed for miles. One pilot said that a foo-fighter, appearing as red balls off his wing tips, stuck with him until he dove at 360 miles an hour; then the balls zoomed up into the sky.

Skeptical scientists, baffled by the whole affair, were inclined to dismiss the fireballs as an illusion, perhaps an afterimage of light which remained in the pilots' eyes after they had been dazzled by flak bursts.

But front-line correspondents and armchair experts had a Buck Rogers field day. They solemnly guessed: 1) that the balls of fire were radio-controlled (an obvious absurdity, since they could not be synchronized with a plane's movements by remote control); 2) that they were created by "electrical induction of some sort"; 3) that they were attracted to a plane by magnetism.

The correspondents further guessed that foo-fighters were intended: 1) to dazzle pilots; 2) to serve as aiming points for antiaircraft gunners; 3) to interfere with a plane's radar; 4) to cut a plane's ignition, thus stop its engine in midair.

Some scientists suggested another possibility: that the fireballs were nothing more than St. Elmo's Fire, a reddish, brushlike discharge of atmospheric electricity which has often been seen near the tips of church steeples, ships' masts and yardarms. It often appears at a plane's wing tips.

\*Last month pilots reported that they had seen mysterious floating silvery balls, apparently another "secret weapon," in daylight flights over Germany.