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5 August 1953

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Rapid City, South Dakota

Description

Since this sighting was a combined air-visual, ground-visual, air-radar, and ground-radar report, it was decided that Project Blue Book would send an investigator to the scene. The controller on duty at the time of the incident was interviewed. His account of the incident was almost identical to that given in the initial TWX. He was on duty at 2005 MST when a GOC post observer called in an unidentified flying object sighted northeast of her post at Blackhawk, South Dakota. (Note: Sunset 1920 MST - Twilight 33 minutes.) She reported through the Rapid City Filter Center. She reported that the object was stationary, then moved south toward Rapid City. When the controller got the report that the object or light was headed toward Rapid City, he sent 3 airmen from the radar site to look for it visually. They reported a light moving from generally north to south at a high rate of speed. At this time the controller observed 2 blips going south on the scope. He could not get a distinct track because of ground clutter in the area. In a few minutes the GOC post in Blackhawk called in that the light was back in nearly its original position. An airborne F-84 was vectored into the area and after a search made visual contact. The F-84 was vectored into the blip that was remaining stationary at about 15 miles northeast of Blackhawk. The controller said that he believed the F-84 pilot saw the target that was on the scope. Shortly after the visual sighting by the pilot, the target started to move on a heading of about 320 degrees magnetic. Four good blips were obtained. Photos of this track were taken but the camera malfunctioned and the photos were no good. The last blip occurred at 70 miles and at that point the aircraft was returned to the base. The GOC observer reported seeing the aircraft and the object, and both were moving. The object seemed to be out-distancing the F-84. As soon as the F-84 landed, another F-84 took off for CAP. Just about that time, the Blackhawk GOC post called the third time stating that the object was back again. Nothing was on the scope (there was possibly a target in the ground clutter), so the F-84 was vectored in on the visual report. The pilot soon got a visual and started an intercept. About that time, the controller picked up both an unknown target and the F-84. Both were on a heading of about 360 degrees magnetic. The blip seemed to stay about 5-10 miles ahead of the F-84. The chase continued until the aircraft was about 80 miles out, then the intercept was broken off. The target continued off the scope. At this time the Bismarck Filter Center was alerted to look for unidentified flying objects. When the pilot got back over the base, he saw another light. This was not picked up on the scope, but the controller did get a return on the height finder equipment in the general direction of the light, it was 8000 feet. At 0023 MST, Bismarck began to call in reports.

The pilot who was on the first CAP was interviewed next. He stated that he had been making passes at a B-36 north of Rapid City when GCI called and said they had a target west of Rapid City. He searched for

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about 20 minutes west and south of Rapid City but saw nothing. He returned to base and was about to land when he observed a light northwest of the base. He started out on a heading of 350 degrees magnetic, the object was high (30 deg - 45 deg) at 11 o'clock from him. He checked the possibility of a reflection and determined that this was not the cause. He continued his course keeping the object at 12 o'clock for a better view. After about 30 seconds, it disappeared then reappeared for another 30 seconds at the end of which it abruptly faded and was not seen again. The object was silver in color and varied in intensity. It appeared to "pull away" because it got smaller. The comment as to size was that it was "brighter than the brightest star I've ever seen".

The pilot who flew the second CAP was interviewed next. He stated that he took off and started to climb when GCI told him that GOC had a light. He was north of Ellsworth AFB on a heading of 360 degrees magnetic when he saw a light 30-40 degrees to his right and level. He thought it was a star or planet but as he looked away it appeared to "jump" 15-20 degrees in elevation. (Note: Due to the speed of the aircraft and the fact that the pilot was intent on identifying the object, he was not exactly sure of his positions. All positions are subject to some error.) The light seemed to be paralleling his course. The first thing the pilot did was to check for reflections in the cockpit (i.e., canopy, gunsight head, etc.). He was sure the light was no reflection in the aircraft. The light, which the pilot estimated to be considerably brighter than a star, changed intensity and changed in color from white to green. When the object was first sighted, the aircraft was at 15,000 feet. The pilot started to climb and the light appeared to climb faster. This was because the angle of elevation increased. He climbed to 26,000 feet. All this time both the radar blip of both the object and the aircraft were being carried and the pilot was talking to the controller on UHF. As the pilot turned into the light on his initial sighting, he turned on his radar gunsight. As he swung onto the target, the warning light came on. No range was obtained since the sight starts to measure at about 4,000 yards. All this might indicate was that something was beyond 4,000 yards. The light remained on until the chase was broken off. After the chase, on the way home, the light blinked on and off several times indicating a possible malfunction. The sight was not checked by maintenance on return and had not been checked since.

The F-84 chased the light for about five minutes, or to about 80 miles north of the base. The light appeared to make slow changes in color and intensity. The pilot stated that the light definitely moved in relation to the stars. After the intercept was broken off, the aircraft returned toward base.

About 20 miles out of base he got a visual on a similar light that changed from red to white. He was on a heading of 180 degrees magnetic at 12-14,000 feet and the light was 10 degrees low to the right. He thought it was a car going around curves in the hills but changed his mind when the red and white lights were of equal intensity. This target was in the ground clutter of the radar but something at 8000 feet was picked up on the height finder radar. The light slowly went out then

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came back in. It seemed to be west moving since the aircraft was kept on a constant heading and the angle of azimuth and elevation increased. The light was first observed for 30 seconds, it faded, reappeared, then faded again after 30 seconds.

As the pilot came around the west side of the air base and up the east side, he saw another light and turned into it to take gun camera photos. (The photos were no good).

Discussion

A visit was made to the Weather Bureau station at the Rapid City Municipal Airport to check weather and balloon launches (Note: The air base launches no balloons). The observer on duty looked up the balloon track for the balloon launched at 2000 MST on 5 August 1953 and it went south from the Municipal Airport. This puts it out of the area of the sighting. Data on inversions was not available as it had been forwarded to Asheville, North Carolina. (Note: The balloon tracks and weather for 2000 MST on 5 August has been requested from Asheville.)

No attempt was made to contact the GOC observers at Blackhawk. They had been interrogated by base personnel and were "all excited". It was believed that an investigator talking to them would only further excite them needlessly. All the sightings at Bismarck are doubtful. The AC&W Station called the Bismarck Filter Center and told them to "look for flying saucers", a perfect set up to see every star move around.

The upper air research balloon tracks at Lowry were checked. Two balloons were lost and could have been in the area at the time of the sighting.

A few comments on the sources can be made:

Controller left the impression that he was trying to prove the existence of an unidentified flying object. It is very unfortunate that no scope photos were available to collaborate his story. He saw targets on the scope, there is no doubt about it, but whether they acted exactly as he stated is unknown.

The two airmen that went outside to observe the object that was being carried on radar and reported by the GOC were not sure of what they saw, at least this is the impression they left. They were told to go out and look for a light so they saw one. Their description fits that of a meteor. They only saw a "streak" in the sky. They did not see it return north, only go south.

The first pilot only got a glimpse of a light so he could not add much.

The second pilot gave the impression of being "on the ball". He obviously was trying to convince himself the light was a star, but was

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having difficulty. He took a realistic approach and had done some logical reasoning. He was worried about the fact that the light moved relative to the stars.

~~By eliminating doubt~~ sightings, the only thing that can be reasonably assured is that a GOC post observed a light. This could be a balloon or star. Radar picked up something in the general area of the GOC post and vectored an aircraft toward it. The pilot saw a light and chased it. He got a radar lock on it, but this could have been a malfunction. The star Capella is possibly visible low on the horizon to the north and the pilot could have seen this. Pending further study, this incident is carried as Unsolved.

Conclusion

Unsolved.

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