

Coordinates: 31°20′N 117°10′W

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# USS *Nimitz* UFO incident

The **USS *Nimitz* UFO incident** was a radar-visual encounter of an unidentified flying object by US fighter pilots of the *Nimitz* Carrier Strike Group in 2004. The encounter also included an engagement with the UFO by the commander of Strike Fighter Squadron 41, and his weapon systems officer.<sup>[1]</sup>

The primary encounter occurred during a combat training exercise being conducted in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of southern California on 14 November 2004, with purportedly related sightings occurring in the days before and after this encounter. A 2015 account of the incident on FighterSweep.com, interviews with one of the pilots, and subsequent news reports describe the sighting of an "unidentified flying object" by six Navy Super Hornet fighter jets.<sup>[2]</sup>

Thirteen years after the incident, in December 2017, infrared footage of the encounter was released to the public.<sup>[3][4]</sup> According to *The Washington Post*, the video was released by former intelligence officer Luis Elizondo to shed light on a secretive Department of Defense operation to analyze reported UFO sightings, the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program.<sup>[5][6][7]</sup>

Numerous Freedom of Information Act requests were submitted regarding the incident. There was an FOIA obtained that indicated four Marine Lieutenant Colonels and a Marine Major were aware of the event and had witnessed the IR video of the unknown object. A number of documents were leaked to the Internet, with varying levels of credibility. Acceleration values for the performance characteristics of the object were based upon statements from the USS *Princeton* radar operators, the F/A-18 pilots that saw the object disappear within a second, and the IR video.<sup>[8]</sup> The Navy has since reportedly updated their protocols for pilots to report UFO sightings in an effort to reduce the stigma associated with such reports.<sup>[9]</sup>

Skeptics have called into question the veracity of the pilots' accounts, pointing out that the sighting might be explained by equipment malfunction or human error. One of the witnesses, retired United States Navy officer, Commander David Fravor, lamented the

## USS *Nimitz* UFO incident



Play media

Video released by the US military showing a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet intercepting a UFO

<b>Date</b>	November 10–16, 2004
<b>Location</b>	Pacific Ocean, off the coast of southern California
<b>Coordinates</b>	<span><span><span><span><span>31°20′N</span> <span>117°10′W</span></span></span></span></span>

amount "of misinformation that [was] starting to come out through third and fourth parties" during a June 2018 interview.<sup>[1]:11:58</sup> On 17 September 2019, the U.S. Navy acknowledged that the three UFO videos are of real unidentified phenomena.<sup>[10]</sup>

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## Encounter

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Prior to the incident, in early November 2004, the *Ticonderoga*-class guided missile cruiser USS *Princeton*, part of Carrier Strike Group 11, had been tracking mysterious aircraft intermittently for two weeks on an advanced AN/SPY-1B passive radar.<sup>[5][2]</sup> Navy Chief Petty Officer (NCO, E-7) Kevin Day, stationed on *Princeton*, recalls that he first noticed the clear radar traces of eight to ten objects around 10 November. They were travelling southwards in a loose though fixed formation at 28,000 feet (8,500 m) in the immediate vicinity of *Catalina* and *San Clemente* islands.<sup>[11][12]</sup> He was startled by their slow speed of 100 knots (190 km/h; 120 mph), but received confirmation of their presence from radar operators on other vessels. Regular observations were made of a similar number of objects over the following six days.<sup>[11]</sup> The objects were also faintly detected by an *E-2C Hawkeye* plane after *Princeton* sent them coordinates.<sup>[13][12]</sup>



USS *Nimitz* ahead of the USS *Princeton*

## Visual sighting

When the same event occurred again around 9:30 PST on 14 November 2004, an operations officer aboard *Princeton* contacted two airborne U.S. Navy Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornets from *USS Nimitz*, flying a combat exercise at the time. The aircraft were two-seat

variants, and each pilot was accompanied by a weapon systems officer (WSO). The lead Super Hornet was piloted by Commander David Fravor, commanding officer of Strike Fighter Squadron 41. The second fighter, flying as wingman, included Lieutenant Commander Jim Slaight as one of the two officers aboard.<sup>[5]</sup>

*Princeton's* radio operator, Kevin Day, directly instructed the pilots to change their course and investigate the unidentified radar spot observed by *Princeton's* own radar.<sup>[2]</sup> This was done to determine if the objects posed any collision danger to an upcoming air defense exercise.<sup>[11]</sup> A radio operator on *Princeton*, however, asked the pilots if they were carrying operational weapons, to which the pilots replied that they were not.<sup>[2]</sup> The weather conditions for that day showed excellent visibility with a blue sky, no cloud cover, and a calm sea.

When the jet fighters arrived on site, the crew of four saw nothing in the air nor on their radar. On *Princeton's* radar however, it was noticed that the object had now dropped from 28,000 feet to near sea level in less than a second.<sup>[11]</sup> As the pilots looked down at the sea, they noticed a turbulent oval area of churning water with foam and frothy waves "the size of a Boeing 737 airplane"<sup>[14]</sup> with a smoother area of lighter color at the center, as if the waves were breaking over something just under the surface.<sup>[14]</sup> A few seconds later, they noticed an unusual object hovering with erratic movements about 50 feet (15 m) above the churning water. Both Fravor<sup>[15]</sup> and Slaight later described the object as a large bright white Tic Tac, 30 to 46 feet (9.1 to 14.0 m) long, with no windshield nor porthole, no wing nor empennage, and no visible engine nor exhaust plume.<sup>[16][15][17][18]</sup>

Fravor began a circular descent to approach the object.<sup>[14]</sup> As Fravor further descended, he reported that the object began ascending along a curved path, maintaining some distance from the F-18, mirroring its trajectory in opposite circles.<sup>[14][15]</sup> Fravor then made a more aggressive maneuver, plunging his fighter to aim below the object, but at this point the UFO accelerated and went out of sight in less than two seconds, leaving the pilots "pretty weirded out".<sup>[14][18]</sup>

Subsequently, the two fighter jets began a new course to the combat air patrol (CAP) rendezvous point. "Within seconds" *Princeton* radioed the jets that the radar target had reappeared 60 miles (97 km) away at this predetermined rendezvous point. According to *Popular Mechanics*, a physical object would have had to move greater than 2,400 miles per hour (3,900 km/h) to cover that distance in the reported time. Two other jets went to



Fighters were approximately 100 miles from the coast of San Diego when they were directed to intercept the UFO<sup>[2]</sup>

100 miles from San Diego County coast  
 100 miles from San Diego coast

investigate the new radar location, but "By the time the Super Hornets arrived [...] the object had already disappeared." Both F-18s then returned to *Nimitz*.<sup>[2]</sup> Commander Fravor reflected on his sighting: "I have no idea what I saw. It had no plumes, wings or rotors and outran our F-18s. But I want to fly one".<sup>[5]</sup>

## Infrared footage

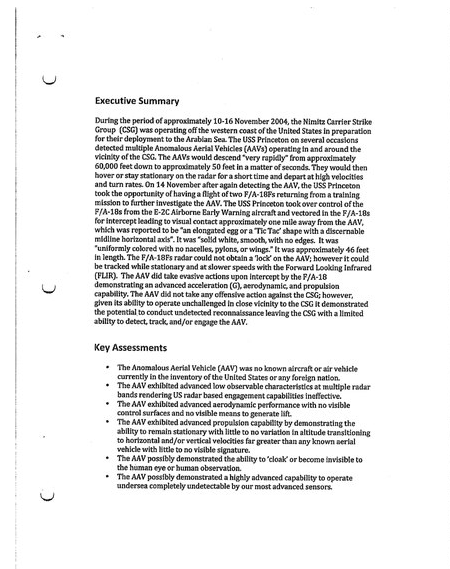
After the return of the first team to *Nimitz*, a second team took off at approximately 12:00 PST, this time equipped with an advanced infrared camera (FLIR pod). This camera recorded an evasive unidentified aerial system on video. The footage was publicly released by the Pentagon more than 13 years later, on 16 December 2017, alongside the revelation of the funding of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program.<sup>[6][3][7]</sup>

This footage is known as the *2004 USS Nimitz FLIR1 video*. It officially shed some light on a decade-old story that had been largely unknown and unreported, aside from a 2015 secondhand story on FighterSweep.com that, in spite of providing many details, remained unconfirmed at that time.<sup>[2]</sup> A second film of infrared footage, known as the *GIMBAL video*, was released by the Pentagon alongside the 2004 FLIR1 footage. Although the media often present the two videos together to illustrate the 2004 USS *Nimitz* UFO incident, the GIMBAL video is unrelated, and was filmed on the East Coast of the United States at an unknown date.<sup>[14]</sup>

In May 2019, journalists from Las Vegas station KLAS 10 determined that the videos were indeed released by the Pentagon, and not by any private individuals or organizations.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Skeptical views

Defense and security writer Kyle Mizokami suggested three possibilities that could explain the sightings. The first is equipment malfunction or misinterpretation; USS *Princeton*'s radars and the Super Hornets' electro-optical sensors and radars could have all malfunctioned, or the crew could have misinterpreted a number of natural phenomena. The



An unclassified and redacted summary of the event released by the US military



A Raytheon ATFLIR Targeting Pod

second is classified government technology: If the objects were aircraft operated by the United States government, it would make sense that they were kept secret, as the object reportedly easily outmaneuvered multiple Super Hornets, a jet that was considered state-of-the-art in 2004. The third possibility is that the sightings were caused by objects of extraterrestrial origin.<sup>[2][3]</sup> *The New York Times* included a disclaimer in its reporting of the incident: "Experts caution that earthly explanations often exist for such incidents, and that not knowing the explanation does not mean that the event has interstellar origins".<sup>[5]</sup>

Physicist Don Lincoln suggested that it was "very unlikely that what these pilots are reporting turns out to be an unfriendly superweapon or an alien craft," however he explained that he would like to see the reports investigated "under the premise that the best science is done when as many opinions are considered as possible, preferably in the open and subject to peer review." According to Lincoln, "unidentified doesn't mean flying saucer or a Russian superweapon. It merely means unidentified."<sup>[20][21]</sup>

Science journalist Dennis Overbye argued a "stubborn residue" of unexplained aerial phenomena remain after review. Overbye highlighted that some of these accounts are obtained from respected observers such as military pilots. However, he cautioned, "as modern psychology and neuroscience have established, the senses are an unreliable portal to reality, whatever that is."<sup>[22]</sup>

According to Steve Cummings of Raytheon Space and Airborne Systems, the video images captured by a Raytheon-made Advanced Targeting Forward-Looking Infrared (ATFLIR) sensor are not definitive proof that the jet pilots were chasing an actual UFO. Cummings noted, "To really be sure, we would need the raw data. Visual displays alone are not the best evidence".<sup>[23]</sup>

According to Joe Nickell writing for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, there are differing versions of Fravor's account, including a "truly curious document that tells Fravor's story in the form of a military-style briefing" designed to create a "pseudo top-secret appearance". Nickell identified the document as "a third-person account of an interview with Fravor, produced by a fringe-ideas group called To the Stars Academy of Arts and Science". Regarding the visual sightings reported by Fravor, Nickell questioned how he could see "what a forty-foot object was doing from forty miles away" and characterized the "confusion and incompleteness in the reports" of the training mission as a "comedy of errors".<sup>[24]</sup> Nickell and astronomer and former Air Force pilot James E. McGaha speculated that reports of churning water could have been caused by a submerging submarine, the visual sightings could have been of a reconnaissance drone, and that "one video image showing an object suddenly zooming off screen was likely caused by the plane's banking while the camera was stopped at the end of its sweep".<sup>[24]</sup>

Nickell further explains that this was Fravor's first military assignment with the U.S. Navy's

F-18 Super Hornet, and as a result, the experience "obviously rattled him."<sup>[24]</sup> He comments that several reports of the incident mention that when Fravor returned to the USS *Nimitz* following the encounter, most of the personnel on the carrier did not take the encounter seriously, reportedly making fun of Fravor and playing alien movies on the ship's onboard closed-circuit TV system, implying that perhaps they knew something Fravor did not. Nickell also notes that the incident had apparently not been considered serious enough to warrant a debriefing of either Fravor, the other pilots, or the radar operator.<sup>[24]</sup>

*The Washington Post* identified David Fravor as "the commanding officer of the VFA-41 Black Aces," at the time of the 2004 incident.<sup>[25]</sup> *The Blade* of Toledo, Ohio stated Fravor retired from military service in 2006, after a 24-year career, including 18 years as a Navy pilot and deployments in Iraq that began during Operation Desert Storm. Fravor stated the identities of other Naval officers aboard the two fighter jets during his mission on 14 November 2004 had not been released publicly as they were still active in the military at the time of *The Blade* publication in 2018.<sup>[26]</sup>

## In popular culture

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### Television

- The *History Channel* featured the incident in the 2019 television show *Unidentified: Inside America's UFO Investigation*.<sup>[27]</sup>
- *The Nimitz Encounters*, a short documentary film released on 26 May 2019 and produced by David C. Beaty.<sup>[28]</sup> ("*The Nimitz Encounters Updated USO*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-e9NoKp8EnE>) on YouTube-Channel "The Nimitz Encounters" (32:24 Min.))

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## External links

- 2015 FighterSweep.com account of the incident (<https://fightersweep.com/1460/x-files-edition/>)



- "Strike Fighter Commander Details Incredible UFO Event" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCaruUtiPHo>) on YouTube-Channel from the company To The Stars, interview with Commander David Fravor (6:38 Min.)

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