

Looking for a Sign of Life:  
World War II's "Foo Fighters"

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Foo fighters are more than just Dave Grohl's post-Nirvana rock band. The name was derived from that of unknown flying objects seen by pilots during World War II—a real phenomenon observed numerous times throughout the war.<sup>1</sup> Reports of this phenomenon demonstrate that unidentified flying objects are neither a new occurrence nor one observed strictly by ufologists. Though these sightings were ultimately dismissed as harmless, there was never a definite answer to their identification.<sup>2</sup> Multiple explanations have been proposed, but none are proved with certainty or agreed upon by pilots who witnessed the phenomenon. Though the U.S. Government has publicly dismissed foo fighters as unknown but benign, everyone else is left wondering which explanation is the truth.

UFOs have been observed around the world for as long as history can attest.<sup>3</sup> As one can imagine, frequent fliers, such as pilots, see more than the average person. During war times, it's easy to assume unknown objects in the sky are enemy planes or other weapons. During World War II, many UFOs were seen and reported, and many still have no known explanation. In his book *It Didn't Start With Roswell*, Philip Rife presents many accounts of UFO sightings around the world that took place before the 1947 Roswell incident.<sup>4</sup> He details many sightings from the World War II years, saying that 1939-1945 saw, "... a major increase in UFO sightings worldwide," and that the origin of such things are still debated.<sup>5</sup> Due to the ongoing war, initial assumptions were that the UFOs were new enemy planes, but, even now, no one has claimed ownership.

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<sup>1</sup>ReelinInTheYears66, "Foo Fighters • Interview (Name/Songwriting/Nirvana/Touring) • 1999 [Reelin' In The Years Archive]", November 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxXByZGvESo>

<sup>2</sup> John Greenwald Jr, "The Black Vault," Accessed May 2, 2025, <https://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/ufos/robertsonpanelreport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> George M. Eberhart, "UFO and Intelligence: A Timeline," May 4, 2025, <https://cufos.org/PDFs/pdfs/UFOsandIntelligence.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Philip L. Rife, *It Didn't Start With Roswell*, Writer's Club Press, 2001, <https://archive.org/details/it-didnt-start-with-roswell-50-years-of-amazing-ufo-crashes-close-encounters-and/mode/2-up>

<sup>5</sup> Rife, *It Didn't Start With Roswell*, 54.

One of the most famous sightings, and widely regarded as the first "foo fighter" sighting, occurred near the end of the war on November 29, 1944.<sup>6</sup> Lieutenants Ed Schlueter, Fred Ringwald, and Donald J. Meiers of the 415th Night Fighter Squadron were flying over the Rhine Valley near the French-German border.<sup>7</sup> With Lt. Schlueter piloting their aircraft, Lt. Ringwald noticed a row of eight to ten orange lights glowing over a hill and flying at a high speed, a sight Lt. Schlueter noticed reflected off of the plane's wing.<sup>8</sup> The plane that the three were in was the only one registering on ground radar, as well as Lt. Meiers' in-plane radar.<sup>9</sup> Under the assumption that the lights were coming from a new, unseen German air weapon, Lt. Schlueter turned the plane in preparation to fight, only for the lights to disappear.<sup>10</sup> For fear of ridicule or punishment, the three did not mention the sighting when they returned.<sup>11</sup> However, more sightings from other pilots proved that their experience was not unique and not a hallucination.<sup>12</sup>

Since no one knew exactly what they had seen, members of the 415th began referring to the phenomenon as "foo fighters,"—a name that stuck and was adopted by other pilots after numerous other encounters.<sup>13</sup> The term came from the comic strip "Smokey Stover," where a catchphrase is "where there's foo, there's fire."<sup>14</sup> On New Year's Eve, members of the 415th were

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<sup>6</sup> Dirk de Klein, "Foo Fighters WW2 UFO's," June 14, 2016, <https://dirkdeklein.net/2016/06/14/foo-fighters-ww2-ufos/>; Eberhart, "UFO and Intelligence."

<sup>7</sup> Adam Janos, "Mysterious UFOs Seen by WWII Airman Still Unexplained," *History*, last updated February 18, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/wwii-ufos-allied-airmen-orange-lights-foo-fighters>; History, "Project Blue Book: Declassified – The True Story of the Foo Fighters | History," March 2, 2019, Video, 2 min., 21 sec, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf41CD5INGU>

<sup>8</sup> Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."; Zoe Krasney, "What Were the Mysterious 'Foo Fighters' Sighted by WWII Night Flyers?," *Smithsonian*, August, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/what-were-mysterious-foo-fighters-sighted-ww2-night-flyers-180959847/>

<sup>9</sup> Jo Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery," *The American Legion Magazine*, December, 1945, <https://www.project1947.com/articles/amlfoo.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."; Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."; Krasney, "Mysterious 'Foo Fighters.'"

<sup>11</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."; Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey A. Lindell "The Real Foo Fighters." *Skeptic Magazine*, 2012. <https://research.ebsco.com/c/ptznvp/viewer/pdf/6d47aicrv5?route=details>

<sup>14</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."; History, "Project Blue Book."; Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."

interviewed about their strange sightings and were reported in newspapers the following day.<sup>15</sup> In January of 1945, *Time Magazine* ran a story about foo fighters in their science section, calling it "... the most puzzling secret weapon that Allied fighters have yet encountered."<sup>16</sup> The story in *Time* reported that, for over a month, pilots had been seeing or followed by bright, unknown "balls of fire."<sup>17</sup> Physical descriptions vary, but reports converge in their claim that the lights followed closely at high speeds for miles but displayed no clear motive.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Jo Chamberlin, who interviewed the 415th about their foo fighter encounters, sightings in Germany ended when Allied forces captured the area east of the Rhine.<sup>18</sup> In what Chamberlin claims is the last instance with the 415th, the pilot turned to face the lights as soon as he could, only for them to still disappear as they did in other sightings. Also like the other encounters, nothing other than the pilot's plane appeared on radar. Later, he saw lights again. He maneuvered through a cloud and watched the lights emerge after him as well before disappearing. While Chamberlin's December 1945 article cites that as the end of the foo fighter mystery, his article focused on the 415th's experiences—the most famous ones. Similar sightings were reported, before and after the 415th, by various other pilots from other squadrons, other nations, and in other airspaces.<sup>19</sup> Though the term "foo fighter" originated and was primarily used by the 415th squadron, it was eventually used to describe any UFOs from the time.<sup>20</sup>

All these sightings yet, still, no solid explanation. That has never stopped people from presenting possibilities. The initial thought by most pilots was that they were encountering new

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<sup>15</sup>Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."; History, "Project Blue Book."; Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."

<sup>16</sup> Time. "Foo-Fighter." *Time Magazine*, January 15, 1945, 70.  
<https://time.com/vault/issue/1945-01-15/page/72/>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."

<sup>19</sup> Krasney, "What Were the Mysterious 'Foo Fighters'"; Rife, *It Didn't Start With Roswell*.

<sup>20</sup> de Klein, "Foo Fighters WW2 UFO's."

enemy planes.<sup>21</sup> This belief is why reports were taken as seriously as they were—pilots needed to be prepared if they were going to go up against new aerial weapons.<sup>22</sup> As previously mentioned, the ongoing war put pilots on high alert. The most reasonable assumption was that anything flying that wasn't theirs was an enemy. However, when attacks never came, they were left scrambling for other answers. Even now, no nation has taken credit for the reported foo fighters.<sup>23</sup> A common proposed explanation is St. Elmo's fire, which the 415th pilots vehemently rejected.<sup>24</sup> St. Elmo's fire is an electrical phenomenon that appears during stormy weather as lights or flames at the tip of objects—something pilots are familiar with and should be able to identify.<sup>25</sup> Supporters of this idea cite the absence of foreign aircrafts on radar, saying that, were a physical object creating real lights, radar would have picked it up.<sup>26</sup> Other explanations are more psychological, such as stress, fatigue, or intoxication. Combat fatigue is a common suggestion, arguing that war stress was effectively driving the pilots crazy and causing them to hallucinate.<sup>27</sup> Another suggestion is lingering effects of alcohol, which a majority of pilots interviewed by Jeffrey A. Lindall admitted to consuming within a 72-hour window before missions.<sup>28</sup> While none flew while inebriated, long-term effects of alcohol were not known at the time, meaning pilots would not be aware that they were affected at all.<sup>29</sup>

Lindell also posits that autokinetic illusions had to do with sightings.<sup>30</sup> This is a phenomenon in which stationary lights appear to move and swing, which sounds like a solid explanation for the pilots' perceptions that the lights seemed to play and trick them. The U.S.

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<sup>21</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."

<sup>22</sup> History, "Project Blue Book."

<sup>23</sup> Krasney, "What Were the Mysterious 'Foo Fighters.'"

<sup>24</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."

<sup>25</sup> Chamberlin, "The Foo Fighter Mystery."; Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."

<sup>26</sup> Krasney, "What Were the Mysterious 'Foo Fighters.'"

<sup>27</sup> Janos, "Mysterious UFOs."; Krasney, "What Were the Mysterious 'Foo Fighters.'"

<sup>28</sup> Lindall, "The Real Foo Fighters."

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Navy didn't experiment with these illusions until February of 1945, meaning the 415th and other pilots at the time would have been unaware of this possibility and put full trust in their vision.<sup>31</sup> There are other similar visual illusions that could have been at play that pilots would have been unaware of and uneducated about at the time. It is Lindell's opinion that a combination of these explanations are true when trying to debunk the foo fighter sightings.

The 1953 Robertson Panel consisted of experts in various scientific fields brought together by the CIA to investigate the UFO phenomenon as a whole and determine if they could be explained and if they were a threat.<sup>32</sup> They examined photos and interviewed military officials, including Dr. J. Allen Hynek of Project Blue Book.<sup>33</sup> Foo fighters were cited as UFOs during the panel, but they were overall dismissed as "... unexplained but not dangerous."<sup>34</sup> They did present possible explanations already covered here, but eventually dismissed them as unimportant. The panel's final feelings are recorded as believing that the foo fighters have a reasonable, scientific explanation that is not beyond their present knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Like most UFO sightings, World War II's foo fighters are not free from scrutiny from the public. Based on the lack of attacks and no country taking credit for the aerial phenomena seen during World War II, it's reasonable to say they were not enemy planes or weapons. Further proving this is the fact that UFOs were seen by Allied and Axis powers in many countries, as well as in non-combat zones, throughout wartime.<sup>36</sup> With that established, the world is left wondering if the foo fighters were objects at all or if they were simply light reflections or illusions. While the pilots don't know exactly what they saw, they are sure that they know what

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<sup>31</sup> Lindall, "The Real Foo Fighters."

<sup>32</sup> Seth Shostak. "unidentified flying object." Last updated May 3, 2025.  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/unidentified-flying-object#ref247540>

<sup>33</sup> Shostak, "unidentified flying object."; Greenwald, "The Black Vault."

<sup>34</sup> Greenwald, "The Black Vault."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Rife, *It Didn't Start With Roswell*.

they *didn't* see, and many are sure that they were not light reflections or illusions. However, as Lindell argues, pilots were not educated on these illusions or psychological aspects, making it difficult for anyone to know for sure. It seems that the pilots themselves would not accept any answer that is not a physical object since they trust what they saw with their own eyes. That does not negate the fact that foo fighters could very well be illusions from fatigue or prior intoxication. Since the U.S. government has not investigated further than declaring them nonviolent and seeing no cause for further research, we may never truly know what all those pilots saw.

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