

Why Some Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers Don't See UAP

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NARCAP headquarters received an interesting report concerning a UAP sighting on August 1, 2001 near Chicago's O'Hare airport at 2015 local time. A cylindrically shaped self-luminous, orange/gold colored object without wings or tail was seen between O'Hare and Midway airports and appeared to fly faster than other jet aircraft seen at the same time but at similar altitudes. It allegedly slowed down as a B-757 commercial aircraft took off to the west from Midway and then accelerated out of sight to the NE. Both passed the witness's location in clear view.

Since this part of the nation handles some of the highest air traffic density in the country there is extensive radar coverage available to help maintain traffic separation. The airport control towers at these airports also afford excellent 360degree visibility for tens of miles in good visibility conditions. We asked our ATC specialist, Jim McClenahen to comment on this interesting case. Here are his surprising comments.

"Nice to hear from you.

My first take on this is that it would be like finding a needle in the haystack but would be worth a try.

The reason I say this, the controllers and cockpit crews in the Chicago terminal area are extremely busy. There is so much information being passed between controllers and cockpit crews due to traffic volume which requires everyone to really pay attention to all details, so, when something like this happens the chances of the controllers or cockpit crews experiencing it are slim.

I will try to find a contact source in the tower, but we have somewhat of a blind spot, because of the complexity of the airspace. Example, the report made reference of a B 757 departing Midway, the cockpit crew of this flight was in the middle of departing, climbing, cleaning up the aircraft for initial climb, and making a radio change to departure control (Chicago TRACON).

My point is, this crew is busy and on top of that they are listening for any traffic and watching their TCAS for traffic too! The B727 mentioned was probably on Chicago Approach talking to either a feeder controller or the final controller, being set up for the runway complex the flight to land on.

The report indicates the weather was VFR and it is a good possibility the approaches in use were ILS and Visuals. This means the cockpit crew was also extremely busy. Not only were they setting up the aircraft for landing, they were probably looking for traffic they were following so they could conduct the visual approach. They were also watching for other traffic and monitoring their TCAS equipment while expecting a frequency change to the tower once they completed setting up for the visual.

In addition, the approach controller would not really have time to observe anything unusual on the radar (ASR-9, which is a digital presentation). If that controller was busy, he would be watching only the aircraft he was working.

This holds true for the tower controllers as well. When they get more traffic to handle, they concentrate on the aircraft they are working. They focus out surrounding items that are not important to them. I

hope this makes sense to you and please ask questions or if you want. I can call you and discuss this further on the phone. I would guess if anyone saw anything from the tower, it would be someone not directly working aircraft such as a supervisor, a coordinator, or traffic management specialist, maybe even a person working flight data/clearance delivery.

Of course, this is just a guess based on my experience.”