**Project Sign**

**From The Black Vault Encyclopedia Project**

**Project Sign** was an official U.S. government study of [unidentified flying objects](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Unidentified_flying_object) undertaken by the [United States Air Force](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Air_Force&action=edit&redlink=1) in late 1947 and dissolved in late 1948.

Sign was instigated following a recommendation from Lt. General [Nathan F. Twining](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Nathan_F._Twining&action=edit&redlink=1), then the head of [Air Materiel Command](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Air_Materiel_Command). Just before this, Brig. Gen. [George Schulgen](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=George_Schulgen&action=edit&redlink=1), of the [Army Air Forces](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Army_Air_Forces&action=edit&redlink=1) air intelligence division, had completed a preliminary review of the many UFO reports--then called "flying discs" by military authorities--which had received considerable publicity following the [Kenneth Arnold](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Kenneth_Arnold) sighting of [June 24](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=June_24&action=edit&redlink=1) [1947](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1947&action=edit&redlink=1). Schulgen's study, completed in late July 1947, concluded that the flying discs were real craft. Schulgen then asked Twining and his command, which included the intelligence and engineering divisions located at [Wright-Patterson Air Force Base](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wright-Patterson_Air_Force_Base&action=edit&redlink=1) (then [Wright Field](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wright_Field&action=edit&redlink=1)), to carry out a more exhaustive review of the data.

In his formal letter to Schulgen on [September 23](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=September_23&action=edit&redlink=1) [1947](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1947&action=edit&redlink=1), Twining concluded that (somewhat shortened):

* a. The phenomenon reported is something real and not visionary or fictitious.
* b. There are objects probably approximately the shape of a disc, of such appreciable size as to appear to be as large as a man-made aircraft.
* c. There is the possibility that some of the incidents may be caused by natural phenomena, such as meteors.
* d. The reported operating characteristics such as extreme rates of climb, maneuverability (particularly in roll), and action which must be considered evasive when sighted or contacted by friendly aircraft and radar, lend belief to the possibility that some of the objects are controlled either manually, automatically or remotely.
* e. The apparent common description of the objects is as follows: ...
* f. It is possible within the present U.S. knowledge... to construct a piloted aircraft which has the general description ...
* g. Any development in this country along the lines indicated would be extremely expensive...
* h. Due consideration must be given to the following:

(1) The possibility that these objects are of domestic origin - the product of some high security project not known to AC/AS-2 or this command.

(2) The lack of physical evidence in the shape of crash recovered exhibits which would undeniably prove the existence of these objects.

(3) The possibility that some foreign nation has a form of propulsion, possibly nuclear, which is outside of our domestic knowledge.

He recommended that " ... [Army Air Forces](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Army_Air_Forces&action=edit&redlink=1) issue a directive assigning a priority, security classification and code name for detailed study of this matter." (Clark, 489) Though conducted by the [Army Air Force](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_Army_Air_Forces&action=edit&redlink=1), the study’s information and conclusions would be made available to all the armed services, and to scientific agencies with formal government ties.

Twining’s suggestion was approved on [December 30](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=December_30&action=edit&redlink=1), and on [January 22](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=January_22&action=edit&redlink=1) [1948](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1948&action=edit&redlink=1), Project Sign formally began its work at [Wright-Patterson Air Force Base](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Wright-Patterson_Air_Force_Base&action=edit&redlink=1), under the direction of Captain [Robert R. Sneider](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Robert_R._Sneider&action=edit&redlink=1). Though it was classified "restricted", the study’s existence was known to the general public, and was often called "Project Saucer". However, UFO historian Wendy Connors established, through an interview with a surviving Sign secretary, that "Project Saucer" was the project's original informal name and had started a year earlier in late 1946. If this was the case, then the Army Air Force had already begun investigation of UFOs well before the [Kenneth Arnold](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Kenneth_Arnold) sighting that launched the first flood of UFO reports of June-July 1947 in the United States. (See, e.g., WWII [foo fighter](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Foo_fighter) UFOs and the post-war [ghost rockets](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Ghost_rocket&action=edit&redlink=1))

Studies were undertaken by Air Intelligence at the Air Force base nearest to any particular UFO report, though some cases were studied directly by [Air Materiel Command](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Air_Materiel_Command). [Allen Hynek](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Allen_Hynek), then teaching [astronomy](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Astronomy&action=edit&redlink=1) at [Ohio State University](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Ohio_State_University&action=edit&redlink=1), was hired as a consultant to help weed out UFO reports which could be misidentified [meteors](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Meteor&action=edit&redlink=1), [stars](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Star&action=edit&redlink=1) and the like. In 1985, Hynek reported that "I was quite negative in most of my evaluations. I stretched far to give something a natural explanation, sometimes when it may not have really had it."

Dr. [Michael D. Swords](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Michael_D._Swords) writes that "The core personnel for the project were probably the most talented group to work on UFOs until the air force ended its investigation in 1969. Aiding chief officer, Capt. Robert R Sneider, were two outstanding aeronautical engineers, [Alfred Loedding](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Alfred_Loedding&action=edit&redlink=1) and [Albert B. Deyarmond](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Albert_B._Deyarmond&action=edit&redlink=1) ... Completing the group was nuclear and missile expert [Lawrence Truettner](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Lawrence_Truettner&action=edit&redlink=1) ... The quality of these people indicates the seriousness (and the comparative difference in later years) with which the air force considered the flying disk problem." (Swords, p. 91)

Sign’s first major undertaking was the study of a widely publicized UFO encounter known as the [Mantell Incident](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Mantell_Incident&action=edit&redlink=1). On 07 January 1948, Air Force pilot Thomas Mantell--in pursuit an aerial artifact Mantell reportedly described as "a metallic object ... it is of tremendous size." (Clark, 352)--died when his airplane crashed near [Franklin, Kentucky](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Franklin,_Kentucky&action=edit&redlink=1). Project Sign investigators determined Mantell had been chasing the planet Venus--a conclusion met with widespread incredulity.

According to later [Project Blue Book](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Project_Blue_Book) director [Edward J. Ruppelt](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Edward_J._Ruppelt), Project Sign investigators were less skeptical about the Chiles-Whitted sighting over [Montgomery, Alabama](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Montgomery,_Alabama&action=edit&redlink=1) on [24 July](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=24_July&action=edit&redlink=1) [1948](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=1948&action=edit&redlink=1). In this case, two airline pilots reported that a rocket-shaped UFO, glowing blue and seeming to emit reddish flames, approached them on a near-collision course. Pilots Chiles and Whitted reported the object appeared to show a double row of ports or windows emitting an intense bluish-white light. (A similar object with a double row of windows was also seen over [The Hague](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=The_Hague&action=edit&redlink=1), [Netherlands](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Netherlands&action=edit&redlink=1) a few days earlier and independently reported to Project Sign.) Some Sign researchers were deeply impressed by the close UFO sighting from two highly credible pilot-witnesses. The reports of "windows" also suggested the objects were possibly occupied. [[1]](http://www.nicap.dabsol.co.uk/480724arep.htm)[[2]](http://ufocasebook.com/Chiles.html)

As Swords notes, "The project members reasoned that they had several dozen aerial observations that they could not explain, many of them by military pilots and scientists. The objects seemed to act like real technology, but their sources said they were not ours. The flying fuselage encounter (Chiles-Whitted) intrigued them. The [Prandtl theory](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Ludwig_Prandtl&action=edit&redlink=1) of lift indicated that such an odd shape *can* fly, but it would need some form of power plant advanced well beyond what we could build (e.g., nuclear)." (Swords, p.93) Sign personnel generally accepted that the more reliable witnesses were describing accurately what they'd seen. Given that there was no evidence that either the U.S. or the U.S.S.R. had anything remotely like the UFOs reported, Sign personnel gradually began considering [extraterrestrial](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Extraterrestrial) origins for the objects. The result was the legendary [Estimate of the Situation](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Estimate_of_the_Situation&action=edit&redlink=1).

Swords argues that this consideration of non-earthly origin was "not as incredible in intelligence circles as one might think." Because many in the military were "pilots, engineers and technical people" they had a "'can do' attitude" and tended to regard unavailable technologies not as impossibilities, but as challenges to be overcome. Rather than dismissing UFO reports out of hand, they considered how such objects might function. This perspective, argues Swords, "contrasted markedly with many scientists characterizations of such concepts as impossible, unthinkable or absurd." (Swords, p93)

At about the same time the Estimate was working its way up the ranks, another group was arguing against any extraterrestrial origins for the saucers. Informally led by Major [Aaron J. Boggs](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Aaron_J._Boggs&action=edit&redlink=1), this group was profoundly skeptical of the saucers' reality; Dr. [Michael D. Swords](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Michael_D._Swords) noted that his peers described Boggs as "the Pentagon's 'saucer killer'" (Swords, 94)

Under Bogg's guidance, a competing document prepared by the anti-extraterrestrial group in the [Directorate of Intelligence](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Directorate_of_Intelligence&action=edit&redlink=1) was also making the rounds in military intelligence. With input from the [Office of Naval Intelligence](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Office_of_Naval_Intelligence&action=edit&redlink=1) this study (titled "AIR 100-203-79") argued that the flying saucers were probably real, though it suspected that they were craft made by the Soviet Union. There was concern in U.S. military intelligence circles that the Soviets could make aeronautical advances on the work of Nazi scientists, especially the [Horten Brothers](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Horten_brothers&action=edit&redlink=1), who Swords describes as "a pair of brilliant aeronautical engineers far in advance of their U.S. counterparts." (Swords, 87-88)

A combined air Force and Navy study speculated that if the saucers were of Soviet origin, then they were operated so openly in U.S airspace by the Soviets probably as a method of [psychological warfare](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Psychological_warfare&action=edit&redlink=1) "to negate U.S. confidence in atom bomb as the most advanced and decisive weapon." (Swords, 100) However, Sign researchers could find no hard evidence supporting this hypothesis. With the emergence of cases like the Chiles-Whitted sighting, a rift developed within Sign’s staff between those who thought UFOs might be extraterrestrial (see the [extraterrestrial hypothesis](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Extraterrestrial_hypothesis) or ETH) and those who rejected this idea in favor of a more prosaic explanation.

With Gen. [Hoyt S. Vandenberg](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Hoyt_S._Vandenberg&action=edit&redlink=1)'s rejection of The Estimate, Ruppelt said it was clear to the Sign personnel who supported ETH that there was no support at the top. As Swords writes, "Despite Vandenberg's negative reception of the estimate, Project Sign personnel did not back off." (Swords, 96) Sign continued their investigations of UFO reports, and continued favoring the ETH. In one case, seeking evidence of an advanced propulsion system, Sign personnel tested the [radiation](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Ionizing_radiation&action=edit&redlink=1) levels of a [National Guard](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=United_States_National_Guard&action=edit&redlink=1) airplane which was said to have had a "[dog fight](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Dog_fight&action=edit&redlink=1)" with a flying saucer over [Fargo, North Dakota](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Fargo,_North_Dakota&action=edit&redlink=1).

General [Charles P. Cabell](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Charles_P._Cabell&action=edit&redlink=1) asked Sign for a second, non-extraterrestrial opinion of the flying saucers. Sign submitted a report which did not explicitly mention extraterrestrial ideas, but strongly hinted at them. This led to a debate at the [National Bureau of Standards](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=National_Bureau_of_Standards&action=edit&redlink=1) in [November, 1948](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=November,_1948&action=edit&redlink=1) where the competing hypotheses were represented by Sneider and Boggs. As Swords writes, "When the smoke cleared, Boggs and AIR-100 were the victors." (Swords, 96)

By late 1948, Project Sign was discontinued in name and replaced by a much more negatively oriented [Project Grudge](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Project_Grudge). Ruppelt reported that the choice of the word "Grudge" to describe the new project was deliberate.

Ruppelt referred to the Project Grudge era as the "Dark Ages" of official Air Force UFO investigations. Still, by late 1949, some 20 percent of UFO sightings remained classified as "unknown" by Grudge. By late 1951, according to Ruppelt, some highly influential Pentagon generals had become so disenchanted with Grudge's debunking that Grudge itself was dismantled and replaced by [Project Blue Book](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Project_Blue_Book), with Ruppelt in charge.

Historian [David Michael Jacobs](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=David_Michael_Jacobs&action=edit&redlink=1) argues that, overall, Project Sign’s personnel did an admirable job. However, "Its main problem was that the staff was too inexperienced to discriminate between which sightings to investigate thoroughly. Because of unfamiliarity with the phenomenon, the staff spent inordinate amounts of time on sightings that were obviously [aircraft](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Aircraft&action=edit&redlink=1), [meteors](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Meteor&action=edit&redlink=1) or [hoaxes](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Hoax)." (Jacobs, 47)

**Sources**

* Jerome Clark, *The UFO Book: Encyclopedia of the Extraterrestrial*, Visible Ink, 1998; [ISBN 1578590299](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Special:BookSources/1578590299)
* David Michael Jacobs, *The UFO Controversy In America*, Indiana University Press, 1975; [ISBN 0253190061](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php/Special:BookSources/0253190061)
* Curtis Peoples, *Watch the Skies! - A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth*. [Smithsonian](http://www.theblackvault.com/wiki/index.php?title=Smithsonian&action=edit&redlink=1), 1994, IBSN 1-56098-343-4.
* Edward J. Ruppelt, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, Doubleday & Co., 1956 [online](http://www.nicap.dabsol.co.uk/Rufo.htm)
* Michael D. Swords, "UFOs, the Military, and the Early Cold War" (pp. 82-122 in *UFOs and Abductions: Challenging the Borders of Knowledge*, David M. Jacobs, editor; University Press of Kansas, 2000; ISBN)

**External links**

* [the Twining letter](http://www.roswellfiles.com/Articles/twining.htm)
* [Close Encounter with Dr. J. Allen Hynek, by Dennis Stacy, 1985](http://www.cufon.org/cufon/hynekint.htm)

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