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Fiery Ball in Sky Over North Coast

What was described by witnesses as a multi-colored, fiery ball lit the sky above California's North Coast yesterday before it apparently exploded and vanished from sight.

Officials are calling the mysterious object a meteor for lack of any other information.

Police and fire department offices from Ukiah, 125 miles north of San Francisco, to southern Oregon reported numerous calls from residents startled by the sight.

Some witnesses reported a loud bang, others said the object appeared to explode silently just before 3 p.m.

"I was driving downtown on patrol when I saw a large ball-like figure," said Eureka Police Officer Leonard Johnson. "It was red and white and all different kind of colors. It came straight down out of the sky and just exploded.

"It left a trail hanging in the sky. I could see the ball and all of a sudden it completely disintegrated. I thought it was a plane at first," Johnson said. "It was really bright."

Coast Guard Lieutenant (j.g.) Gilbert Sena said he was flying a

helicopter along the coast about 20 miles north of Eureka at Patrick's Point State Park when he saw it.

"I observed a puff of smoke followed by a flash," he said, "There was no sound but it left a puff of smoke that appeared to last about 10 minutes."

Sena said he did not think that any bits of the object struck the earth. Coast Guard officials said the explosion appeared to be at the 5000-foot level.

"We got a lot of calls from the Shelter Cove area," said a spokesman in the Humboldt County Sheriff's Garberville sub-station, "I guess a lot of people thought a plane had fallen."

An official at Vandenberg Air Force Base in Southern California said he was unaware of any military activity off the California coast that might explain the sighting.

Federal Aviation Administration officials in Fremont said at least a half dozen pilots reported seeing the object, described by witnesses as brilliant.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado Springs said it was unable to fit the sighting into any predicted re-entry of a man-made space object.