

# Close encounter of some kind puzzles airline officials

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — The National Weather Service doubts it was theirs. The Defense Department insists it wasn't theirs. About the only thing the Federal Aviation Administration can say about the object that encountered a Delta Air Lines jet at 29,500 feet is that no one is likely to find it.

The pilot of Delta Flight 1083, en route from Pittsburgh to Atlanta, told investigators an object that appeared to be a missile seemed headed straight for his Boeing 737 on Thursday morning before passing to the side and slightly

below.

"The pilot described it as a rocket or a missile about 4 feet long, with fins that were each about a foot or a foot and a half in height," said Delta spokesman Bill Berry. "It went so fast that's all he saw. He didn't see it long enough to recognize any markings.

"He saw it. It was there. It was gone."

FAA said Friday it will probably never know what had the close encounter with the jet, carrying 60 people,

at 29,500 feet 31 miles northeast of Charleston.

"It may have been a blimp-shaped helium balloon," said Kathleen Bergen, a spokesman for the FAA's regional headquarters in New York. "It's unlikely we'll ever find it, for a lot of reasons."

For one reason, the prospect of finding a 4-foot-long object somewhere in the hills and woods of West Virginia isn't good.

"We'll never know," Bergen said. Inspector Richard Madden of the

Charleston FAA office said he had no one searching for the object because no one knows what to look for.

The pilot, whose name was not released, told investigators the object was moving north at high speed. Bergen said the pilot reported seeing no exhaust.

The National Weather Service said the jet stream, a fast current of air at high altitudes, was not crossing West Virginia at the time of the encounter and wind in the area was not strong

enough to make an unpowered object like a balloon move fast.

"At 30,000 feet, we had a west wind of 25-30 knots, which is about 30-35 miles per hour," said Ken Batty of the National Weather Service in Charleston. "They might have been a little southerly (pushing the object slightly north), but not that strong."

The weather service sends up observation balloons each morning and afternoon.

But the time for Thursday's launch was just 25 minutes before the encounter, and the nearest station that launches such balloons is Huntington, about 50 miles west of Charleston, said Jim Harrison, a NWS meteorologist at Huntington.

In summer, the balloons generally climb to 100,000 feet before exploding and lowering weather instruments to the ground by parachute, but "I can't imagine a pilot not recognizing one," if that's what it was, he said.

Maj. Larry Icenogle, a spokesman for the Pentagon, said that while other agencies were dealing in speculation, he could offer one fact: "The Defense Department had nothing going on yesterday that would have anything to do with that."

Bergen said that left the FAA with two explanations: The official one is that it was a promotional balloon that escaped, and she said she preferred not to talk about the other option.

"Balloons can travel pretty far," she said. "We don't acknowledge the existence of UFOs."

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the first sighting of an unidentified flying object, by pilot Kenneth Arnold, who said he saw something while flying over Mount Rainier, Wash.