

'Winged Astronaut' Saw Strange Object

EDWARDS AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (UPI) — Maj. Bob White flew the X15 rocket ship to record altitude for winged aircraft of almost 59 miles, Tuesday and reported seeing a strange paper-like object tumbling in space.

"We've never seen anything like this before," the 38-year-old Air Force test pilot said with reference to past X15 flights. "I haven't the slightest idea what it was."

WHITE REACHED an altitude of 310,000 feet — or 58.7 miles, according to preliminary figures. That qualified him under Air Force regulations as America's fifth astronaut and the first in a winged aircraft to fly higher than 50 miles.

As White neared the end of his flight, he radioed "this gets better all the time, it's a fantastic view."

The altitude record is subject to adjustment after the National Aeronautics and Space Administration makes a final study of flight data.

White will be presented with Astronaut's wings at a ceremony in Washington Wednesday. He—along with three fellow test pilots in the X15—also will receive the Distinguished Service Medal and Collier Trophy.

White, whose 7-year-old son, Gregory, watched him land on Rogers Dry Lake bed after his

record-shattering 11 minute flight, said he suffered no discomfort, although he was subjected to five times the force of gravity in re-entering the earth's atmosphere. His pressurized flight suit protected him from extreme heat which the craft experienced.

SPEED on today's test was "only" 3,784 miles an hour.

A dark-haired, blue-eyed veteran of 51 combat missions in Europe during World War II, White said he was puzzled by the sight of the small foreign object during re-entry.

"As I went over the top," he said, "I saw a couple of particles go by the airplane. They showed up again. They were very small, flaky objects and I thought they were from the residue of peroxide which the engine burns.

"Then I saw another larger object to my left. It looked like a piece of paper about the size of my hand. I haven't got the slightest idea what it was. We've never seen anything like this before."

White said the object was visible for "a full 5 seconds," was grey in color, and was about 30 or 40 feet from the X15.

HE SAID he did not believe cameras on the X15 were in proper position to confirm his report of the objects.

White's flight was programmed for an altitude of 280,000 feet, or about 53 miles.

After the X15 was launched from a B52 mother ship at an altitude of 45,000 feet over Nevada, 60 miles northwest of Las Vegas, the 57,000-pound thrust engine burned for a total of 81 seconds rather than the planned 80.

"The engine burned an extra second," said White, "before I shut it down. That's why I went faster and higher than planned. A small variation adds up to something pretty important."

White's speed of 3,784 miles an hour was far short of the X15 record of 4,159. The previous altitude record, which White shared with NASA pilot Joe Walker, in the X15 was 46.7 miles.