

with voices from the Merced County Sheriff's Office.

"Did you see that light in the sky. I don't know if I'm going crazy," said one.

"No, you're not crazy, I see it, too," was the response.

Air Force officials said the huge white glow in the Western sky Thursday night was an unarmed Minuteman II intercontinental ballistic missile.

But not everyone was buying that account.

Dozens of calls poured into The Bee shortly after 7:30 p.m., as the missile began its spectacular light show.

A Modesto Police official said his office received "at least seven million calls, maybe more."

Lisa Klegg of Riverbank, who was shopping on McHenry Avenue, said: "It sure didn't look like a rocket.

"It stopped. It hovered. It looked like a helicopter and it didn't go away. It really scared me. I'm not a believer in UFOs or those sort of things. But I am in shock.

"I thought I was seeing things. There were six planes in the sky, all heading in the same direction toward it. I can't believe they didn't crash into each other. I cannot believe it was a rocket. The way the government is, how can you be sure?"

Alice Wright of Modesto wasn't sure either.

"I thought it was E.T.'s parents coming back. I've never believed in UFOs or anything like that before. But this was enough to make a believer out of anybody. You're sure now what it was?"

One motorist along J7 pulled his car to the side of the road.

He gasped, "Did you see that light? It was a plane that blew up in the sky."

Then he shouted, "You smell that gas? I'm gonna get out of here. That gas is poison."

Ira Fogel of Modesto said the light reminded him of a "flash-light going in reverse."

"It was quite a bright light. It had a very low-angled arc. It looked like small fragments going off from the tip where the light was coming from," he said.

"It was like a fireworks display, I could see a couple of these fragments. Then a large white aura where the explosion point was. Then the white cloud, this light, dimmed somewhat. Then the trail started turning blue. The most beautiful blue," he added.

One person who called The Bee said, "There were huge white flames moving toward the

west at about a 45-degree angle."

"It had four flames coming out of it sideways with a dot in the middle. It had four flames as big as Modesto. It was so huge it scared me. I'm just shaking," he said.

In a phone interview from Vandenberg, Air Force Lt. Col. Dick Heil had the official version.

He said the light was caused by a three-stage, 60-foot-long intercontinental ballistic missile. The missile has a range of 6,900 miles and is capable of carrying three nuclear warheads with a strength of 170 kilotons each.

He said the missile Thursday night hit its target site 4,000 nautical miles away in the Marshall Islands in the southwest Pacific Ocean less than an hour after the launch.

The launch was directed by the Strategic Air Command and was a test of the reliability of the Minuteman weapons system, Heil said.

The Minuteman was launched by a combat crew from the 351st Strategic Missile Wing based at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, Heil said.

The missile combat crew was selected at random to launch the missile and the crew and the missile were transported to California for the launch, he said.

He said the bright colors in the sky caused by the launch were seen throughout California.

Heil claimed the spectacular light show is caused either by the missile's rockets firing or by the missile's exhaust trail reflecting off the sun's rays.

"It was a three-stage missile," said Heil. "The first stage burns off and drops into the ocean, the second stage sometimes burns up in the atmosphere or sometimes drops into the ocean and the re-entry vehicle can burn up or also drop into the ocean."

Heil said the effect is known to the Air Force as the "Twilight Phenomenon," and happens whenever a launch is conducted near nightfall.

He said the launches are conducted at all times of the day and night.

Heil said his phone had been "ringing off the hook" and that he was surprised by the strong reaction of the public.

"I guess the conditions were especially good tonight (Thursday) for the lights to really glow," he said.

Bee staff writers Daryl Farnsworth and Rick Heredia and assistant metro editor Ed Willhild contributed to this report.

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The extraterres

By Jerry V. Cody
Longview resident

For many years mankind has been intrigued as well as puzzled by the phenomenon known as unidentified flying objects, UFO's.

Ever since Kenneth Arnold's sighting on June 24, 1947, of nine saucer-shaped UFO's between Mount Adams and Mount Rainier, there has been great concern expressed by citizens as well as military authorities. To this date the UFO mystery remains.

trial hazard

A special study was initiated by the United States Air Force on Jan. 22, 1948, to investigate the increasing number of UFO sightings in the United States. It was then called Project Sign. The study later was renamed Project Bluebook and continued until the late 1960's.

The impression given by Project Bluebook was that UFO's posed no threat to our national security or personal safety. A lot of case reports remained unexplained, however.

Many UFO stories have been published in countless books and magazines as well as aired by radio and television. Many stories have been probably exaggerated by writers hoping to capitalize on the UFO phenomenon.

One particular case that comes to my memory was done in October 1975 by CBS newsmen Walter Cronkite and Terry Drinkwater about UFO sightings in Oregon.

On Oct. 8, Richard Spiro wrote an editorial article titled, "How nice of NASA to protect all of us." The article focused on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's policy of cordoning off an area of a UFO sighting and quarantining the people in the immediate vicinity. The policy has been in effect since late 1969.

Extraterrestrial exposure can also include exposure to meteorite fragments as well as alien beings from other star systems.

The chance of a radioactive meteorite posing a threat to our community far outweighs the remote possibility of contact by people from another planet. Sealing off an area of a fallen meteorite with radioactive properties is absolutely necessary in the interests of public safety.

Regarding the remote possibility of contact with extraterrestrial beings, it is also necessary to seal the UFO sighting area off.

Any outside visitor, foreign or extraterrestrial, must be investigated if a hazard is posed to our national security. If an aircraft or UFO is able to slip by United States radar networks such as NORAD, it is absolutely necessary for the government to investigate.

It is also important to determine if the aircraft or UFO is hostile and, if so, respond militarily.

There are many unknowns facing us in modern times with UFO's being one. If any situation arises which compromises our national security or endangers our way of life, something must be done. Only through coverage and strength can the challenges of the unknown be met.