

DEC. 13, 1986

ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS-DISPATCH

Duluth cop's UFO was Soviet satellite breaking up

By Joe Musilek
Duluth News-Tribune & Herald

Duluth police officer Paul Stein doesn't normally spend his nights talking about little green men or spaceships from Mars.

But when he saw an unexplainable cluster of lights in the sky above east Duluth at 1:25 a.m. Friday, he dutifully reported it over his squad car's radio and

filed a report headed "Unidentified Sighting."

The mystery turned out to be short-lived, however.

A spokesman for the U.S. Space Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., said Friday that what Stein and others saw was probably a portion of a Soviet satellite returning to earth's atmosphere after more than two years in space.

According to the report, Stein saw a cluster of yellow and white lights that appeared to vary in size and intensity. The cluster appeared to be traveling east to west at a speed of 200 mph.

After a few seconds, a fiery, cone-shaped tail extended from the rear of the cluster. The tail began to grow, until it appeared to split into three separate parts.

Then the whole thing disappeared in an instant, less than 90 seconds after Stein and his partner, John Hartley, first saw it.

"At first, we felt a little funny reporting it," Stein said. "We felt better after we heard we weren't the only ones seeing things."

A Proctor police officer and a state trooper in Moose Lake reported similar

sightings, as did the operator of the Duluth Aerial Bridge.

Police Lt. Beverly Ecklund said Stein's report was relayed to the National Unidentified Flying Object Reporting Center in Seattle. The privately operated center, devoted to UFO research since 1973, receives an average of six calls a night, said staff member Robert Gribble.

Please see **UFO/4A**

Continued from Page 1A

Of those calls, about 95 percent can be explained by natural causes such as aircraft lights, Gribble said. The rest are investigated by the center, which keeps track of all unsolved sightings in North America, he said.

Early attempts to identify what Stein and the others saw focused on the meteor shower anticipated this weekend. David Teske, an assistant at the University of Minnesota-Duluth's Alworth Planetarium, said Stein's description of how the tail split and then disappeared is consistent with a meteor burning up

when it hits the earth's atmosphere.

"Very often the meteor explodes and the pieces blaze for a few seconds before they disintegrate," Teske said.

He added that the Geminids meteor shower occurs each year at this time. Characterized by 40 or more "shooting stars" an hour, the shower can be seen this week and next, he said.

Stein wasn't satisfied. "I've seen meteors before, and what I saw was no meteor," he said.

When his children asked him if he had seen a flying saucer, Stein

said it was possible. "Then it hit me that it was only two weeks until Christmas, so I told them that it was probably Santa Claus making a trial run over Duluth."

That was as good an explanation as any — until the U.S. government spoiled the fun.

U.S. Space Command spokesman Del Kindschi confirmed that a piece of a Russian Soyuz T-11 satellite entered the atmosphere above northeastern Minnesota at the same time Stein was watching Rudolph and Santa fly by.

"The debris entered the atmos-

phere over Lake Superior about 1:30 Friday morning and eventually disintegrated over Eastern Pennsylvania," Kindschi said. The main satellite, launched in 1984, re-entered the atmosphere later that year, Kindschi said.

Stein said he doesn't doubt that what he saw was the satellite debris. The timing and location were too close for coincidence, he said.

"I figured they would come up with a scientific reason eventually," he said. "But I wish the suspense and romance of it all could have lasted a little longer."

ERIC HELWIG VIA COUD-2