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Russian missile lights the skies during re-entry

Associated Press

Air Force officials say a fireball that erupted into a giant Roman candle over night skies in the Southwest was a Soviet rocket booster burning up as it re-entered the atmosphere.

"It looked like 100 stars all falling together — it was moving very fast and appeared to be like a comet with bright debris falling off it," said Adrienne Berry at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, Nev.

Berry said she and other controllers spotted the fireball about 8:10 p.m. "I've never seen anything like it," she said, adding that it lasted about 45 seconds. "It was a string of lights with a Milky Way effect."

The fiery end of the rocket booster was seen in Texas, Arizona, Nevada and Utah.

Del Kindschi, information officer for the North American Aerospace Defense Command at Colorado Springs, Colo., said the rocket booster re-entry ended at 9:16 p.m. MST Wednesday.

"It came in over northern California, down across California to the Phoenix and Tucson (Arizona) areas and then along the west coast of Mexico," Kindschi said.

Although he had no information as to the size of the rocket booster, Kindschi said it was used to launch a Soviet Molnya communications satellite on Sept. 5.

The satellite had a north-to-south trajectory, said astronomer Sam Barden at Kitt Peak Observatory in Tucson, Ariz., which received a number of calls.

"Some people said it looked like a rocket," said technician George Will. "It had a large tail and appeared to break up into nine pieces. Some people said it was a blazing orange-red and others said it was silver."

"The main fireball was about a tenth the size of a full moon," said police Officer Russ Rekward in Barstow, Calif.

"It was moving slow like a jet coming in for a landing, but not real slow," said Greg Vergis of Las Vegas. "It was awfully pretty. It just held me there until I lost the view behind a building."

It "almost looked like a sparkler going down," San Bernardino County Sheriff's Deputy Fred Wegner in Needles, Calif., said of the bright object.

Deputies from the sheriff's office searched the Mojave Desert on Thursday but failed to find any evidence that pieces of the rocket hit the ground, said Lt. Norm Hurst of the Morongo substation in Joshua Tree.

NORAD's Lt. Col. Chuck Wood said the craft was among more than 6,000 the command monitors in orbit.