

JAL pilot has sighting of eerie kind

'Irregular lights' reported to FAA

The Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska - A Japan Air Lines pilot who said his cargo jet was shadowed by a huge unidentified flying object over Alaska in November has reported another encounter of the eerie kind.

Capt. Kenju Terauchi and his co-pilot reported the sighting of lights Sunday morning while on a flight from London to a refueling stop in Anchorage.

"His statement to the controller was 'irregular lights, looks like a spaceship,'" said Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Paul Steucke. But Steucke said there may be an easy explanation for Sunday's sighting: light reflecting off ice crystals in the atmosphere.

Terauchi, a veteran pilot, told the FAA he saw the lights twice Sunday, once for about 20 minutes and again for about 10 minutes as his plane flew at 37,000 feet, Steucke said.

Engineer uncertain

The plane's co-pilot reported seeing the lights, Steucke said, but the flight engineer, who sits farther back in the cockpit, "indicated he was uncertain whether he saw any lights at all."

Terauchi did not immediately return a telephone message left for him at the JAL office in Anchorage.

Both the November sighting and the Sunday sighting were near Fort Yukon, but there were few other similarities, Steucke said. "The second sighting doesn't seem at all like the first one," he said.

Changed altitude

On Nov. 17, Terauchi reported that two bright lights and an object as wide as two aircraft carriers placed end-to-end followed his JAL Boeing 747 cargo plane for more than 300 miles as it flew to Anchorage from Iceland. The lights stayed with the plane even when he changed altitude and took other evasive action, Terauchi had said.

In the sighting this weekend, the pilot said that in both cases, the lights approached from the front of the Boeing 747, went beneath the aircraft and reappeared to the rear.

In November, the object showed up on the plane's weather radar and may have appeared on FAA radar, but there was nothing shown on radar Sunday, Steucke said.

At the time of the November incident, traffic controllers spotted what they believed was a split image of the JAL aircraft caused by a minor problem with the plane's radar

transponder, Steucke said earlier. He said it was coincidence that the split image was located where Terauchi reported seeing the objects.

Radar clutter

The military dismissed the blip as radar clutter.

Steucke said FAA officials and experienced pilots speculated that Sunday's sighting could have been caused by light bouncing off ice crystals in an inversion layer. In a temperature inversion, a layer of warmer air traps a layer of colder air closer to the Earth's surface.

Lights from below could have reflected off ice crystals in the inversion and appeared to be hovering in midair, Steucke said. As the plane approached and passed over villages, the reflected light would appear to go under the aircraft and reappear behind it, as Terauchi described, Steucke said.

No inversion

But the same theory couldn't explain the November sighting, Steucke said, because at that time the weather was clear and there was no temperature inversion.

He stressed that the reflected light theory was speculation and that the FAA has reached no conclusions in either case. Both are under investigation, he said.

Steucke said the crew appeared in good condition Sunday. "They seemed fine, professional," he said.