

Villagers report a mysterious glowing UFO

Official agency explanations cite booster rockets and meteorites

By HAL BERTON
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Shortly before midnight Tuesday, several dozen villagers from four Northwest Alaska communities reported seeing a glowing, haze-shrouded object flitting through the Arctic sky.

The reports from Elim, Gambell, Savoonga and Tununak were funneled to the Alaska National Guard by Eskimo scouts who live in the region. The reports describe an object bedecked with flickering lights that at times appeared to hover, then move rapidly across the sky.

Guard officials believe the mysterious object or objects were fragments of a satellite or other spacecraft re-entering the earth's atmosphere, said Mike Haller, a spokesman for the Alaska National Guard.

"Based on further evaluation of interviews with folks out there in those communities, we've pretty well concluded . . . that what was seen by the majority of people was some sort of re-entry (rocket) of some sort of space vehicle," Haller said. "Perhaps a booster (rocket)."

A spokesman for the U.S. Space Command, a Colorado-based government agency that tracks space debris, told United Press International Friday that no rockets or satellites fell to earth Tuesday night. But he said the object may well have been a meteorite.

"I'm not going to say with 100 percent surety that it is a meteorite, but that's my best estimate," said Doug Schamp, a Space Command spokesman.

The official explanations, however, are rejected by Marlin Paul, an Elim National Guard sergeant and Iditarod Trail Sled Dog race official. He reported spotting an unidentified flying object while manning a race checkpoint three miles outside his village.

Paul, who reported sighting the object at 11:56 p.m. Tuesday, described a blue-green globe. "It was basically shaped like an egg in a frying pan," he said. "The yolk part was spaceship and the white part of the yolk was a glowing cloud around the ship."

Meteorites, he said, "don't stop in mid-air, then start moving. When a meteorite falls, it falls with a red tail. I know what a meteorite is and it falls fast."

Five other Elim residents, as well as Iditarod mushers Joe Runyan and Ted English, also reported seeing an unidentified object. Their descriptions of the objects varied.

Charlie Saccheus, Elim's postmaster, described a cylinder-shaped object with a bluish-green light flying at an altitude of about 5,000 to 7,000 feet. "It looked sort of like those space rockets," Saccheus said.

Further west, in Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island, a group of villagers spotted something in the sky as they gathered outside a local teen center.

"It was really a weird thing to see. It was just kind of glowing," said Leroy Seppilu, Savoonga's postmaster.

At first the object was partially obscured by a cloud, he said. Its glow turned the cloud green, he said.

"It started moving towards the southeast, speeded up and then rapidly disappeared," Seppilu said.

Other Savoonga residents described a bright round object bigger than a jet, according to National Guard reports. In Tununak, where the object was spotted at midnight, villagers described a bright white light resembling a satellite, part of which glowed, the National Guard said.

Earlier Tuesday evening, St. Lawrence Island villagers also reported seeing an unidentified jet leaving a vapor trail in the twilight sky.

George Seppilu, a Savoonga resident, said he spotted the jet at about 8:30 p.m. coming from the west. "It made three turns, and then headed towards the southwest, Seppilu said. "I saw the vapor trail."

U.S. Air Force jets were not in the area at that time, according to Frank Singleton, an Air Force spokesman.

"We did have flights earlier that day but nothing at that time," Singleton said. "I think if Soviet jets were buzzing that area, we certainly would have responded."

Paul, stationed at the checkpoint with his wife, said he first saw the object over hills northwest of town. It then moved straight above him. It stayed in sight for 15 minutes before disappearing in the southwestern skies, he said.

Paul said the object gave off a glow that bathed several miles of snow-covered tundra in a green light. He estimated the size of the object as bigger than a football field.

"A satellite isn't that big when it comes in," Paul said of the National Guard's explanation. "If it were a satellite, when it comes back to earth, it would disappear in a split-second. This hovered low over the hills, then it moved up, climbed and moved backwards."