Scott Troyanos / The associated press 1997

Former Gov. Fife Symington says now that those strange lights that appeared over Phoenix a decade ago were from another world and that he had a close encounter with an alien craft on March 13, 1997.

"I'm a pilot and I know just about every machine that flies. It was bigger than anything that I've ever seen. It remains a great mystery. Other people saw it, responsible people," Symington said Thursday. "I don't know why people would ridicule it."

Symington, who was in his second term as governor of Arizona during the Phoenix Lights incident, recently told a UFO investigator making a documentary that he had kept quiet about his personal close encounter because he didn't want to panic the populace.

He repeated his story Thursday on CNN, saying the craft he saw was "enormous. It just felt other-worldly. In your gut, you could just tell it was other-worldly."

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The governor didn't let on at the time, instead poking fun at the whole thing.

He hosted a press conference a few months after the mass sightings to announce that his Department of Public Safety had arrested the culprit responsible — a very tall bug-eyed creature brought before the media in handcuffs.

He then unmasked the creature to reveal his chief of staff, Jay Heiler, who at 6-foot-4 made an imposing, somewhat comical space alien.

Symington said the producer of the film "Out of the Blue," James Fox, originally sought him out to talk about why he had spoofed the sightings but then asked if he had seen the lights.

"I said, 'Yeah, I got a good look.'"

Heiler said Thursday he isn't surprised Symington believes in UFOs.

He said his boss was a "Trekkie" who enjoyed discussing space travel. Heiler said Symington was convinced that earthlings would be traveling to distant solar systems at speeds exceeding the speed of light "in our lifetimes."

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Heiler said he remained "the earthbound skeptic" in those talks.

Symington never mentioned his personal observation of the Phoenix Lights but was always interested in getting to the bottom of it, Heiler said. "The DPS was at kind of a loss as to how to investigate an alien visit."

Symington's June 1997 press conference coincided with his appearance in federal court on a variety of fraud charges.

"It was a troublesome period to say the least," Symington said. He said he didn't need the additional problems that would have come with the admission he had seen a UFO. He told only his wife, he said.

Symington was convicted of bank and wire fraud and had to vacate his office that September. His conviction was later overturned and he was pardoned by President Bill Clinton before federal prosecutors made a decision on refiling.

Tucson astronomer and retired Air Force pilot James McGaha said he investigated two separate sightings over Phoenix that March night and traced them both to A-10 aircraft flying in formation at high altitude.

McGaha said he talked to an amateur astronomer who observed the A-10s and to the National Guard unit that flew them.

"It was clearly aircraft in formation, flying at two different times and then dropping flares and it's clear to any rational person that's what it was," McGaha said Thursday.

McGaha said Symington "is not a trained observer and what he feels in his gut doesn't make any difference."

Symington said he's always believed that life existed elsewhere. "The universe is a big place and we're conceited to think we're alone."

"The universe is a big place, and we're conceited to think we're alone."

Fife Symington, former Ariz. governor

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