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'Bright Light' spotted near Navy Helicopter Crash

From: **Kenny Young** <task@fuse.net>

Date: Fri, 20 Feb 1998 20:34:23 -0800

Fwd Date: Fri, 20 Feb 1998 21:12:09 -0500

Subject: 'Bright Light' spotted near Navy Helicopter Crash

"Bright Light" spotted near KERN RIVER CANYON Helicopter Crash Area
Feb. 20, 1998

This report was enacted due to a brief, vague reference of a 'flare' being spotted near the scene of a tragic helicopter accident happening near the Kern River Canyon on Wednesday, February 18, 1998. The crash claimed the lives of five crewmen from the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station.

The article, (dated February 19, 1998) authored by Hanh Kim Quach of The Fresno Bee, and circulated by The Associated Press, gives the brief and vague mention of a 'flare' that was spotted by several residents in the area. The article states that: "attempts to locate the origin of the flare were futile."

Of concern, at the time, was the possibility that the fifth member of the crew, whose remains had not yet been located, may have sent up a distress flare. He was later located in the wreckage of the helicopter.

Tulare County, sheriff's office (209-733-6211) was contacted, and the dispatcher was advised about the nature of my inquiry, to determine if the Sheriff's Department had any information regarding reports of a flare near or around the crash area.

The dispatcher didn't know about any 'flares', and any further inquiries were to be made with Lietenant Gutsch, who would not be available until Monday.

The Fresno Bee (1-800-877-7300) was contacted and a reporter said that the 'flare story' was considered incidental to the story in light of the accident and its casualties. He said the 'flare' story originated from a reporter who is with the South Valley Bureau of the Fresno Bee.

The journalist with the Fresno Bee also said that a separate helicopter accident happened in the exact same location in 1995. This accident involved a helicopter also clipping the same power cable. There were two casualties in the 1995 accident.

The South Valley Bureau of the Fresno Bee (209-625-5711) in Visalia, California was contacted. Lou Griswald, the reporter who covered the crash, conveyed that there were 'many' people who reported a 'bright object' in the Kern Canyon vicinity at 11:00 p.m. that evening.

Griswald said that Deputy Ernest Cowan acknowledged that the bright light caused some concern. Cowan said the object wasn't a flare, but was most likely a shooting star or possibly 'space trash' from a satellite launch at Vandenburg Air Force Base. The object exhibited a strange, 'arcing' motion that, Griswald said, ruled out a shooting star.

Cowan was not a witness to the event, but had knowledge of many inquiries regarding the light. Griswald heard about the bright light from the Deputy and one other person.

"There was some interest and speculation by people who thought that this bright light was perhaps a flare from the fifth person in the accident", Griswald said. The fifth member of the crew, whose remains were not initially located with the other four, was assumed to be unaccounted for at the time of the sighting.

There were many phone calls which came in over a wide area of Tulare County regarding the bright light. When told that the Tulare County Sheriff's Department didn't acknowledge reports of an alleged flare, Griswald speculated that the term 'flare' may not have been used, and that "half of the precinct probably wouldn't have known about it."

Comment :

I think this could possibly be a rocket launch or space debris. The reported 'arcing' motion seems compelling, and the reporter did not have additional details with which to elaborate on this alleged characteristic.

Inquiries should be made with Vandenburg Air Force Base to determine if there were any rocket launches near/around the 11:00 p.m. time frame on February 18, 1998. A separate inquiry with NORAD should also be made concerning satellite or space debris entry during this time frame, visible over this Tulare County, California.

Additional contact with witnesses could also reveal better clarifications regarding physical descriptions, ballistic conduct, duration of event, etc.

I hope to hear and coordinate with any persons willing to undertake these inquiries so I can install any comments/findings to the final report.

Filed
February 20, 1998
Kenny Young

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