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Recent UFO Sightings Lack Credibility To Scientists

From: **Kenny Young** <ufo@fuse.net>
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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Tuesday, January 25, 2000 | 6:22 a.m.

Recent UFO sightings in area lack credibility to scientists
By Heather Ratcliffe Of The Post-Dispatch

Stacy McKenna rubbed her eyes. Once. Twice.

Was she really watching three UFOs hovering over south St. Louis during rush hour traffic?

"I just kept rubbing my eyes because I thought if I rubbed them hard enough, they would go away," said McKenna, 28, a college student and waitress.

The objects she saw about 5:45 p.m. Jan. 10 were shaped like triangles with white lights at each point, she said.

"At first they were just two bouncing, glowing lights. Then another one dropped out of the sky," she said. "It was so huge, I screamed because I thought I was going to hit it."

McKenna and dozens of St. Louis-area residents have seen what they thought was an alien spacecraft since the first UFO report Jan. 5 by a Highland man and four police officers in the Metro East area.

McKenna spent two days rationalizing the sighting, which occurred on Utah Street as she headed toward Interstate 55. She talked to friends, surfed the Internet for pictures and visited the same spot at the same time she first saw the UFOs.

Finally, she called the newspaper to report her encounter.

"I didn't believe in UFOs before," she said. "But I'm certainly intrigued now."

Experts say movies and television shows such as "X-Files" have created a culture in which people are quicker to suppose some unusual object in the sky is an alien craft.

In that atmosphere, witnesses may feel more comfortable reporting what they saw -- or think they saw. And when they do, officials may not be as quick to dismiss them as crazy.

McKenna may have seen an extraterrestrial aircraft. But scientists say it was more likely an episode of a "social-psychological phenomenon," in which people believe they see a UFO because they are looking for one.

"I've often said that if anyone will spend one hour looking in

the sky on a clear night, he or she will see a UFO," said Phillip Klass, founder of the Committee of the Scientific Investigations of Claims of the Paranormal, in Washington.

"Most UFO reports, especially lights in the night sky, turn out to be honest misidentifications," he said.

Reporting a UFO

Stephen Winnacott, an English teacher at East St. Louis High School, said he saw a strange aircraft at about 6:45 a.m. that same morning of the police officers' reports on Jan. 5.

"It was triangular shaped with lights all on one side," he said.

Winnacott told his wife and children, but didn't think much about it until he read an article in the Post-Dispatch.

"All its takes is one sighting report, and within days you will have thousands more," said Robert Baker, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Kentucky. "Everybody starts looking up in the sky and seeing things, too."

This pattern is called a "social-psychological phenomenon," said Baker, who has interviewed thousands of witnesses who claimed to have seen UFOs.

When people spot something strange in the sky, they first try to make sense of it, scientists said.

"It's a giant leap of faith that people take when they see lights in the sky to say it's a craft from another planet," said James McGaha, an astronomer and former Air Force pilot in Tucson, Ariz., who investigates UFO reports.

Witnesses apply what they heard about UFOs in the past and soon their perceptions become reality. Then their stories usually sharpen with time and the truth gets lost, Baker said.

Winnacott, along with a handful of other witnesses who reported UFOs this month, said he didn't really believe aliens have visited Earth.

"Before this experience, I was skeptical," Winnacott said. "But now that I have seen something unexplainable, I will put more credibility in other UFO reports."

"People believe me"

Barry Beyerstein, a professor of psychological biology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, said, "In the past, people who saw things were less likely to report it because of fear of the repercussions. That stigma has largely dissipated."

Winnacott said he never felt apprehensive about telling his story.

"People believe me," he said.

Commercial airline pilots have taken their planes off course to avoid hitting things that later turned out to be the planet Venus or stars, experts said.

"Smart, honest, good people can still be seriously wrong about seeing a UFO," said Beyerstein, who has researched sightings for decades.

The power of suggestion may play a role: If somebody says a bright light is a UFO, others will measure it against that expectation and the perception may become their reality.

UFO researchers said they don't count on witnesses to describe sightings accurately.

"People are notoriously bad at recollecting what they saw," McGaha said. "You can't put any credibility into their reports -- even police -- because they are not trained to observe anything in the sky or an astronomic anomaly," he said.

"I've been with Air Force pilots who thought they were seeing a

UFO. But it was actually the moon," McGaha said. "I've seen people look at Venus and say they could see portholes on a spaceship."

Observers struggle, unknowingly, with distance, time and size, he said.

Unless you know how large an object is supposed to be, you cannot figure its distance; unless you know its distance, you cannot determine its size, McGaha said. People reporting UFOs have neither point of reference.

"Time compression also occurs during extreme experiences," he said. "People can see things for 20 seconds, but think 10 minutes have passed."

In a study of about 1,000 UFO sightings in the 1970s, the Center for UFO Studies concluded that about 90 percent of the reports were actually stars, planets, planes, meteors or the moon.

What did they see?

"Like a two-story house..."

At about 4:11 a.m. Jan. 5, a St. Clair County police dispatcher sent a call out to the Lebanon officer on duty.

"Lebanon, this a call from Highland PD in reference to a truck driver who just stopped in. He said there was a flying object in the area of Lebanon. It was like a two-story house. It had white lights and red blinking lights, and it was last seen southwest over Lebanon. Could you check the area?"

About two minutes later, Officer Ed Barton sent a message back:

"... Be advised there is a very bright white light east of town. It looks like it's just east of Summerfield, and it keeps changing colors. I'll go over there and see if it looks like an aircraft. It doesn't look like an aircraft, though. .o.o. It's not the moon, and it's not a star."

Over about a seven-minute time span, three other police officers -- from Dupo, Millstadt and Shiloh -- saw the object. None can explain what he saw.

Klass, often called the dean of UFO research, said the object, described as flying slowly and silently, was probably a hoax or some kind of a balloon with intense lights or flares.

"I would suspect this report is bogus," Klass said.

A National Weather Service spokesman said it has no weather balloons that would reach the Metro East area.

Officials at Scott Air Force Base, which is near the sightings, said nothing like what was sighted is based at the airfield. The military also does not fly any low-level training or testing routes in the area, the spokesman said.

The sky that morning was partly cloudy and there was an unusual condition in which a layer of warm air sits on top of cold air at the surface. Meteorologists said that can reflect light in odd-looking ways.

Venus is also very bright in the eastern sky this time of year, said McGaha.

Klass said, "For 50 years, we've gotten reports such as this, but not a single piece of credible evidence to support these claims."

"There is a very bright white light east of town..."

Excerpts from a seven-minute recording of the St. Clair County police dispatcher talking to officers, beginning about 4:11 a.m. Jan. 5.

Dispatcher: Lebanon, this a call from Highland PD in reference to a truck driver who just stopped in.

He said there was a flying object in the area of Lebanon. It was like a two-story house. It had white lights and red blinking lights, and it was last seen southwest over Lebanon. Could you check the area?

Lebanon officer: Did they say the truck driver was DUI or anything? 10-4, I'm out... Just a quick question. If I happened to find it, what am I supposed to do with it? If I see it, I'm not saying a word...

Also be advised the last thing that went over Lebanon -- this was approximately five minutes ago -- was a military cargo plane. It looked like a C-5.

... Be advised there is a very bright white light east of Summerfield. It looks like it's just east of Summerfield, and it keeps changing colors. I'll go over there and see if it looks like an aircraft. It doesn't look like an aircraft, though... It's not the moon, and it's not a star.

If you would, will you contact Scott Air Force Base and see if they have anything flying in this area please?

Whether it's a plane or not, it's heading westbound now. It should be really close to Scott now. . . . As a matter of fact, if the Shiloh officer looks up, they can probably see it by now.

Shiloh officer: I see something, but I don't know what the heck it is.... It's probably heading to Lambert (Field).

(Radio chatter)

Millstadt officer: I've got that object in sight also.

Dispatcher: Are you serious?

Millstadt officer: It's huge.

Dispatcher: ... Does it look like a -- What does it look like to you?

Millstadt officer: It's kind of V-shaped. It looks like it's possibly headed toward Lambert.

Dispatcher: 10-4. That's what Shiloh said when it was heading towards Fairview Heights.

(One of the officers hums theme song to "Twilight Zone" over his radio.)

Millstadt officer: Really.

Millstadt officer: Does Dupo have a Polaroid?

Dispatcher: That, I don't know.

Dupo officer: 6004, this is 3923 on County (radio channel) 2.

Millstadt officer: 6004, go ahead.

Dupo officer: I'm not sure what you're seeing. It appears to be pretty high in the area. When I could first see it with binoculars, you could see it was different colors. Now it appears to be white.

Millstadt officer: Is it very large?

Dupo officer: It's hard to tell. It's pretty far off in the distance.

Millstadt officer: This object was above me about 500 feet. And it was huge.

Dupo officer: This thing appears.... it's probably 20 or

30,000. It about where planes usually are.
It's not low at all.

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