

A decade-old UFO sighting continues to spark controversy and concern in Russia

UFO update , Omni, Dec, 1994 by James Oberg
[original speculation centered on a Plesetsk launch]

Once a UFO case becomes "a classic," no amount of logic can convince some people that a prosaic explanation holds sway. Take the sighting made in the pre-dawn darkness of Friday, September 7, 1984, when a Soviet Aeroflot airliner was flying north from Belorussia toward Estonia. At 4:10 a.m., passing Minsk, the co-pilot noticed a bright light ahead and to the right. For the next several minutes, the light, or whatever it was, supposedly escorted the airliner along its path.

Captain Igor Cherkashin called the local traffic control, who saw nothing in the sky. But after several minutes of searching on radar, ground controllers reported a funny "double image," presumed by some to be the airliner and its escort from beyond. As the radar was tracking, co-pilot Gennadi Lazurin grabbed his logbook and began making sketches of the apparition as it changed shape, color, and size. Its scintillating sequences of color were so bright the crew could see its reflection in the ground below.

Years after the original report, pundits started discussing another civil airliner, one supposedly heading in the opposite direction, that had observed the strange lights as well. According to rumor swirling around the UFO community, this second craft had been a military interceptor sent up to chase the UFO. Its pilot reportedly died a year later of cancer, and its co-pilot suffered heart problems. A stewardess was said to have contracted a mysterious skin disease.

To some investigators on the case, the medical puzzle had an obvious explanation: the poisonous rays of the UFO. Russian UFO-watcher Antonio Huneus later called it "one of the most serious UFO injury cases ever reported."

But despite all the theories, a prosaic explanation exists. It turns out that just when the pilots in the first craft glimpsed the mysterious lights, a Soviet military missile was being launched. In fact, the sketches by co-pilot Lazurin show a distinct sequence of lights - first rays, concentric circles, and expanding rings, then a cloud, and finally, a fading amorphous mass; it's no coincidence that the same sequence of shapes graces sketches made by other witnesses depicting known rocket launchings.

What's more, at precisely the same time the Soviet pilots were freaking out, amateur observers throughout Finland were observing the Soviet missile launch themselves.

As for the radar sightings and health problems, skeptics dismiss them as coincidence and exaggeration. Most people "exposed" to the UFO, after all, were not affected, and those who were seem to have been injured in strikingly different ways. And Phillip Klass, an electronics expert for Aviation Week magazine, noted that given an insistent enough visual sighting, a radar operator will almost always find something "funny" on his display.

Speaking for the record, Moscow, of course, did not agree. Soviet officials denied the existence of the rocket flight itself. And the official army newspaper, Red Star, later asserted

that the Minsk sighting might have been caused by refracted lights beams striking floating space garbage.

As for UFO proponents, they admit that the rocket launching occurred, but suggest that this was what attracted the real UFO to Russia in the first place. "The UFO must have continued its flight toward Plesetsk, probably to see what was going on," one expert speculated in the magazine, "Science in the U.S.S.R".

A starship from beyond or a secret Soviet missile? Decide for yourself. As far as I can reckon, the telling evidence is there.

COPYRIGHT 1994 Omni Publications International Ltd.