
LOUISIANA LIGHTS IN 1967

BY JOHN O. WILLIAMS

More than 20 years have passed since the incidents I am about to describe, but in all that time I have been unable to come up with a reasonable explanation for them. I hope that some insights may be forthcoming from readers of *IUR*.

As I recall, the incidents took place on a spring evening in 1967 in Shreveport, Louisiana. I was an instructor in the Mathematics Department of Centenary College at that time. On the evening in question, I had taken my freshman astronomy class, numbering about 25 students, into an open field on campus where they could have an unobstructed view of the night sky. My intention was to point out a number of constellations and, further, to remain there long enough for the students to perceive the nightly motion of the sky due to the Earth's rotation. It was a perfect, clear night for observing. There was no moon.

Curiously, the subject of UFOs had come up in the classroom prior to this observing session and, jokingly, I had offered an extra-credit "A" to the first student who could spot one while we were in the field. It never once occurred to me that I might actually have to pay off!

We had been talking about constellations for about a half-hour when one of my students suddenly blurted out, "Hey, Mr. Williams, I get that extra-credit 'A.' There's a UFO!" I turned to see what he was talking about and saw a bright orange light almost precisely due west of us at an elevation of about 30 degrees.

It was approaching at a modest angular rate of perhaps one degree per second. In astronomical terms, its brightness was somewhere between that of Jupiter and Venus. My first reaction was that it was only an airplane, and I said as much.

"But why don't we hear it?" came another student's query. "It's still too far away," I replied. "Wait until it gets overhead."

Everyone's attention was now focused on the silently approaching light and astronomy, for the moment, was completely forgotten. In a short time, the light neared our zenith heading due east and it became apparent to us that there was a second light, much fainter and blue in color, that was directly behind the orange light and following it in



Figure 1. The orange light and its trailing thread of blue light.

perfect synchronization. I believed I had the explanation for these lights. "Do you see that blue light?" I said. "That must be on the tail of the aircraft, while the orange light is on the nose." No sooner had I said this, than the blue light separated from its aft position, performed a tight turn southward and proceeded down our celestial meridian until it was lost from view. No one said anything for a moment. Finally, I said, "That's probably an air refueling operation." This made sense to me, since we were not many miles from a Strategic Air Command base, Barksdale AFB in Bossier City, Louisiana. (Some months later I had the opportunity to discuss this incident with Dr. J. Allen Hynek, and he informed me that what we had seen couldn't have been an air refueling operation, because such operations at night were so hazardous that they were always extremely well lit. We would have seen far more illumination than two simple lights, one orange and one blue.)

As for the orange light, it continued eastward for a time, then performed a very tight 180-degree turn and came back over us. Accelerating to more than twice its former angular rate, it headed due west and eventually faded from view. No sound was ever heard during this sequence of events, although the turns executed by both lights didn't seem beyond the capability of conventional aircraft.

I tried to bring the class focus back onto astronomy and, briefly, I was successful. But after only 20 minutes had passed, we were interrupted once more. "Mr. Williams, there's that UFO again!" said yet another student.

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"Where?" I asked. Everyone followed the direction he was pointing, just above the horizon and slightly north of due east. There, moving slowly southward at an elevation of about five degrees, was what certainly appeared to be a reincarnation of the orange light we had seen earlier. However, this time it was not followed by a blue light, but by what seemed to be a thread of blue light (Figure 1). And the thread was rippling, much like the appearance of moonlight over water. I thought quickly, and came up with what seemed to me to be a reasonable explanation. "I do know what that is," I said. "That's an advertising plane towing an electric sign, but we can't read the sign at this distance." No sooner had I said this, than the "thread" of blue light broke up into seven or eight individual blue lights, which took their leave in every which direction. Some moved off horizontally, while others went straight up. One or two even followed a zigzag path as they rose and gradually faded into the darkness (Figure 2).

My confidence in my ability to identify objects in the sky was greatly shaken.

To this day I feel that these incidents may have a prosaic explanation. After all, there was a SAC base in the

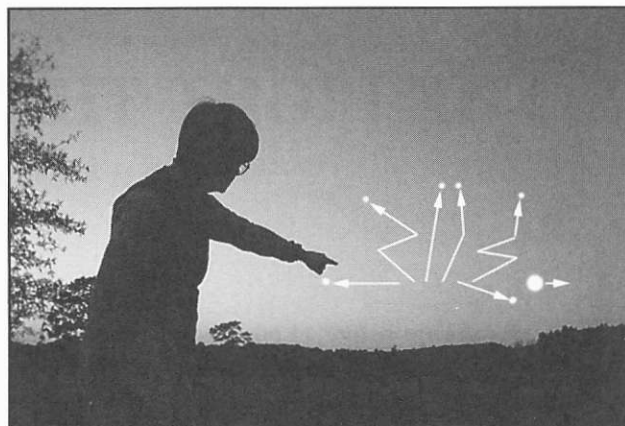


Figure 2. The subsequent dispersion of the thread.

area and the movements were not obviously unconventional (no right-angle turns, stops, sudden reversals of direction, etc.).

The lack of sound, however, remains disconcerting. If any readers know of a conventional explanation for nocturnal lights that behave such as these did, I would welcome their response. ♦

SCIENTIFIC PANEL: UFO EVIDENCE BEARS INVESTIGATION

There may be more to UFO evidence than just verbal reports of what people see in the sky. Some UFO evidence may be worthy of scientific investigation. This is the tentative conclusion of a panel of scientists convened by the Society for Scientific Exploration to examine this matter.

The panel of nine scientists met at a conference center near New York from September 29 to October 3, 1997.

The panel reviewed evidence presented by eight UFO investigators, and will issue a report within a few months that summarizes the workshop activities and makes recommendations for further research. Panelists were drawn from France, Germany, and the United States. Investigators came from France, Germany, Norway, and the United States.

The strong representation from France is due to the fact that France is the only country that has an unclassified ongoing official investigation into UFO reports. This program, headquartered at the French Space Agency (CNES) in Toulouse, is headed by Jean-Jacques Velasco, a participant in the workshop.

Velasco described damage to soil and vegetation associated with a strange object that was seen to land at a farm in Trans-en-Provence in France, departing within about one minute. This evidence has been analyzed by scientists in France on behalf of CNES.

Other evidence presented and critically reviewed at the workshop included photographs, video records, spectroscopic data, radar records, reports of malfunctions of automobile and aircraft equipment, material specimens, and radiation-type injuries to witnesses.

"We made no effort to solve the UFO problem," said Von Eshleman of Stanford University and Thomas Holzer of the High Altitude Observatory, cochairs of the review panel. "We had a far more modest goal. We were here only to inform ourselves about claimed evidence, and to try to decide if further scientific study of such evidence is likely to significantly advance the resolution of the UFO problem."

The "UFO problem" was defined by Peter Sturrock of Stanford University, director of the workshop, as the problem of understanding the cause or causes of UFO reports.

"Honest people report strange observations. Not all reports have obvious explanations. So what are the not-so-obvious explanations? I would like to see scientists play a more active role in helping to unravel this 50-year-old mystery. I see the workshop as a small step in this direction."

Other members of the panel were Randy Jokipii of the University of Arizona, François Louange from France, Jay Melosh of the University of Arizona, James Papike of the University of New Mexico, Guenther Reitz from Germany, Charles Tolbert from the University of Virginia, and Bernard Veyret from France.

In addition to Velasco, the panel received presentations from Richard Haines of Los Altos, California; Illobrand von Ludwiger of Germany; Mark Rodeghier of Chicago; John Schuessler of Houston; Erling Strand of Norway; Michael Swords of Kalamazoo, Michigan; and Jacques Vallee of San Francisco. ♦