

Note of Interest: "UFO" sightings in western Alaska night of March 17-18, 1987, were caused by Soviet satellite launch. by James Oberg

The launching of the Kosmos-1833 satellite from Baykonur-Tyuratam at 1987 March 18 at 1830 UT led to a large number of UFO reports from western Alaska. The spacecraft's upper stage was venting leftover rocket propellant when it passed off the Seward Peninsula at about 1857 UT (11:57 PM March 17, Yukon Standard Time).

Two reports came from observers on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea: Savoonga (63.40N, 170.31W), "It was round and it seemed bigger than a jetliner". Gambell (63.46N, 171.45W): "There seemed to be a big bright cloud of smoke thrusting downward with one red and one white light.... The object seemed to be bigger than a 747 jet at that altitude. No body was visible, just the bright cloud of smoke and the lights."

Other reports came from mainland observers out late to watch the mushers in the Iditarod dogsled race. Tanunak (60.34N, 165.15W): It "looked like a satellite-bright, white light within a glowing area...", like "aircraft landing lights as seen through the fog." Elim (64.35N, 162.20W), saw a "bright aqua-blue-green colored, oval-shaped object approximately the size of two football fields with three lights on the side and an egg-shaped cloud around and leaving a smoke trail behind." Newsmen talked to more than forty witnesses in these areas.

The mayor of Pilot Station (61.58N, 162.59W) in the Yukon River delta is a subscriber to The Skeptical Inquirer, and he received the Winter 1987 issue (with my article on the Great East Coast UFO of August 1986) a few days after his sighting. The startling similarities prompted him to write a letter to me. The apparition "brightened and began jetting out a plume of milky nebulous material. This plume was slowly rotating and formed a cloud around the star-like object with a diameter of between 4 and 5 times that of the full moon. This wondrous show continued for around 3 minutes, then rapidly faded and disappeared." David E. Cartier, 3/30/87 postmark. He originally reported it as moving from northeast to southwest, but on plotting it against star charts reconsidered and concluded that it had been moving largely west to east. "The story of this sighting got around and local eskimo parents are now using it in stern admonitions to their children as a prime example of why 'You shouldn't stay out late at night!!!'", Cartier, letter of 4/16/87.

Army National Guard observers reported to Anchorage that they watched lights moving southeast at about 30,000 feet altitude.

The event was caused by the launching from Tyuratam of an SL-16 vehicle (the USSR's new intermediate Saturn-I-class military booster), carrying a "1603-class" satellite (possibly military ELINT) into an unusually high inclination (71 degrees, highest ever from TT), high altitude (850 km) orbit. Computer plots generated by Nicholas Johnson (Teledyne-Brown Corporation, Colorado Springs, CO) showed the object's groundtrack crossing the Aleutians about 900 km from the Yukon River delta, at an altitude of about 310-320 km. Such launchings, while rare, will occur again, and under the proper twilight

and weather conditions will probably again be widely visible throughout western Alaska.

Army National Guard:

2nd Lt Mike Haller, Frontier Bldg, suite 620,
3601 C St., Anchorage, AL 99503-5989
(907) 249-1253

Interviews:

David Shoup, Anchorage Times

Bob Ortega, KIMO-TV, 2700 E. Tudor, Anchorage 99507