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Jumbo Jet Encounters UAP Soon After Take-off
from LAX on September 27, 1996

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A U. S. registered DC-10 had just taken off from Los Angeles International (KLAX) runway 25L bound for Newark, New Jersey (KEWR) on September 27, 1996. The time was several hours after midnight and the cargo jet was being flown (manually) by the Captain in the left seat. The primary witness was the First Officer in the right seat. There was also a Second Officer sitting behind the First Officer. The flight (probably) followed the Gorman Four standard instrument (over-water), noise abatement departure and was about eight (DME) miles from KLAX VOR on the 210 radial on a SSW heading at the time.⁽¹⁾ The airplane's flaps were at zero, gear was up and stowed and the indicated airspeed (and ground speed) was about 250 kts.; the airplane was climbing at approximately 1,500 ft./min. In short, the airplane was clean and everything was normal. It was a dark and clear visual flight rules (VFR) night and the ocean's horizon could not be clearly seen against the star-filled sky; "visibility was excellent." The Moon was full this night but well beyond the witness' forward field of view being at eighty degrees to the right of the airplane's heading and 58 degrees above the horizon at the time of the incident. Later the witness wrote, "I do not specifically remember the moon that night, just that at the time this occurred it was dark out over the ocean in the direction we were headed." (personal correspondence, 11 June, 2012)

Just before this incident happened the Captain was looking forward out of the windscreen. Significantly, the First Officer had scanned outside his forward (R1) window and the front portion of his side (R2) window for one to two seconds just before he looked down toward the inertial navigation input panel that was located just above the flaps and slats control handle near his left knee. He later wrote, "At that time there was nothing in view (outside the airplane)." (personal correspondence, 11 June, 2012) He continued to look down at the panel for about five seconds while entering waypoint and heading data (from ATC) into the airplane's inertial

navigation system (IRU). This is the relatively short interval in which the unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) must have appeared. The Flight Engineer was working at his control panel which faces 90 degrees relative to the front of the airplane and never saw anything outside the airplane.

At that time the heavy jet was between 6,000 and 7,000 feet altitude, "...and maintaining the below 10,000 foot airspeed restriction of 250 knots (about 290 mph). Suddenly the Captain exclaimed, "Who the hell is that?" Following is the witness' own account of what happened next.⁽²⁾

"I looked up to see two brilliantly white 'landing lights' directed straight at us that appeared to be between five hundred and a maximum of seven hundred feet almost directly (at our 12:30 – 1:00) in front of us." Figure 1 is a graphic artist's depiction of the DC-10's nighttime cockpit environment as viewed from the airplane's centerline just behind the seats. The apparent location and approximate angular size of the UAP, relative to the right-forward window, is depicted very nearly as it was seen by the witness sitting in the right front seat.

Figure 1

Artist's Recreation of the
Early Seconds of the Sighting⁽³⁾



“Five to seven hundred feet may sound like some distance to most people but traveling forward at 290 MPH and expecting that the other ‘aircraft’ is doing the same that becomes an incredibly short distance in which to avoid what we expected to be a very possible collision. I am sure that at this point we both were thinking how can we avoid this collision and is there enough space left in which to do so! Within the first 2 – 3 seconds it became shockingly clear that we were not closing on this traffic and that it was pacing us and staying in the exact same position in the wind screen. Based on the fact that this object was pacing us and that it had its ‘landing lights’ right in our face it would have to have been going backwards. I was able to see some apparently metallic structure in the background between these two lights and still under the rapidly deteriorating assumption that this is some type of aircraft I was looking to see if I could make out the nose of the aircraft, as one would see on an aircraft with fuselage mounted lights on either side of the nose. The other option would be fuselage between the lights as one would see on an aircraft that has under-wing mounted lights. I could not make out either and what I did see appeared to be some type of horizontal edge between the lights with the metallic looking material both top and bottom tapering back away from this edge, but I could only see a small amount of this due to the brilliance of the lights. It appeared that the lights were mounted on or at least horizontally in line with this “edge”. At this point the realization had sunk in that this was not an airplane at all.”

Before the rest of this fascinating story is told let us briefly observe several key points: First. The witness refers to this unidentified aerial phenomenon (UAP) in several different ways in his written narrative. They are presented here in their order of presentation.

- “two brilliantly white landing lights” (an objective, descriptive initial assessment)
- “ aircraft” (a second level assessment that keeps the UAP within a known and acceptably neutral category)
- “traffic” (another parallel, second level assessment, as above)
- “object” (a progression to something that is possibly other than an aircraft)
- “rapidly deteriorating assumption (it was an) aircraft” (an honest admission that, having eliminated the most likely features of another airplane, he was now being forced into a totally different category)
- “this was not an airplane at all” (usually the last stage in admitting publically that one’s previous interpretations of the other object are very likely not valid)
- “vehicle” (a technically accurate yet non-assertive word)
- “they” (the unidentified aerial object is now personified, perhaps as if piloted by people inside)

This progression of words, used to describe a never before experienced phenomena, is well known within the serious investigation of pilot reports of UAP. One can almost follow the thought pattern of pilots who are struggling with an idea that is previously thought to be

impossible. Such a progression of words suggests a realistic and serious attempt by this particular pilot to try to explain what he saw in prosaic terms if at all possible. Only after eliminating other reasonable and socially acceptable explanations does he turn to his last alternative and call a spade a spade, so to speak. Most U. S. pilots today know that they will face ridicule and may even put their career in jeopardy if they report seeing almost anything that is not “naturally explained.” (Roe, 2004) Interestingly, this is not nearly as true in South American countries a fact which has helped encourage pilots there to immediately report what they see to authorities on the ground so that effective identification and support actions can be carried out immediately.

Second. Related indirectly to the first point above is the fact that the first word spoken by the Captain was “Who” not “What.” Because every word is recorded on the cockpit voice recorder (for possible use in later accident investigations) the Captain very wisely did not intimate that the UAP in front of them was not just another airplane. If instead he had said “What” and aviation authorities later had listened to the recording they could have assumed that the UAP was not another airplane at all and perhaps raised the question of his perceptual and even psychological stability. Unfortunately this common and seemingly “official” response shown toward pilot witnesses of UAP today in the U.S.A. is far more common than is realized. The interested reader should consult (Haines and Roe, 2001) for an example of how far this kind of negative bias was displayed toward a line pilot by his company. Let us continue to the next phase of this encounter in the words of the witness.

“After about 10 seconds this “vehicle” departed away and to our left at an angle with the horizon of about 25 degrees but stayed within our view throughout its departure. The speed with which it traveled was beyond anything I had ever witnessed or even contemplated. There was virtually no period of acceleration and it departed like one would imagine a bullet leaving a gun, my immediate thought was “oh my God, they are using antigravity.” They did not turn off the lights when they departed and based on the angle at which the lights were aimed at us it would have been traveling sideways, if sideways even means anything to this type of vehicle. We watched as this vehicle streaked from right in front of us to out of our atmosphere with the lights becoming a pinpoint before being lost to view. Based on my flying experience and knowing how far commercial aircraft light can be seen on a clear night my best guess, and a conservative one at that, is that this object traveled a distance of **AT LEAST 50 Miles in 1-1/2 to 2 seconds**. It was an astonishing thing to witness. I said to the Captain “holy s__ t, did you just see that?” to which he replied “hell yes I saw it”.

Before the rest of this account is given the following observations appear to be in order concerning the witness’ narrative given above. First, it is precise and qualified as is common among the reports of most pilot witnesses. He is careful to describe the events clearly, sequentially, and cautiously. Second, his narrative provides some useful details that can be

related to previous aircrew sighting reports such as the sudden acceleration of the UAP, its apparent sideways upward travel (at about a 25 degree angle with the horizon), and its very high velocity. If it did travel fifty miles in 2 seconds it would have traveled at an astounding 90,000 mph, rapidly breaking the sound barrier and producing a sonic boom [if it was aerodynamic and not a virtual (optical) image]. His observation that the lights did not go out or change in intensity when “they” departed is also interesting not to mention the large amount of luminous energy that was emitted from each of the two sources.

What did the witness do next? “Immediately after its departure I keyed my mike and asked SOCAL (southern California air traffic control)... “SOCAL (flight number), do you have or did you just have traffic in our vicinity” to which SOCAL replied, “No, you are the only guys up there tonight, why?” I then stated, “disregard”. I simply wanted to know if what had just been right in front of us had painted at all on radar, it had not (been detected) on the cockpit radar to the best of my memory. As an aside, at no time did we experience any malfunction or failure of any of the aircraft systems, sub-systems, flight controls, electronics or navigation. “

Additional Facts from PIREP Form

NARCAP’s pilot reporting form (available at www.narcap.org “*Make a Report*” section) asks many questions that cover spatial, temporal, and energetic aspects of each sighting. In addition, detailed questions are asked about local weather, aircraft registration and configuration, and personal information. The present witness answered every question. Following are several additional details from his report that may be important. The UAP appeared solid but it did not flicker, throb, or pulse. It did not break up into parts, give off smoke or a vapor trail, change color, or produce air turbulence (airplane buffeting). Its edges appeared sharply defined (other than the gradient of light surrounding each of the two round, bright sources). When asked “What do you think the object (phenomenon) was? He wrote, “Controlled manufactured vehicle of unknown type.” He indicated that this was his first UAP sighting and that the remainder of the flight took place without incident.

Page from Witness’ Flight Log Book

Figure 2 is a photocopy of the witness’ flight log book showing his entry with the large initials “UFO!” He (later) wrote, “I need to clarify that the question marks on the log page don’t mean that I questioned what I had witnessed, they reflect that I now realized I had an enormous amount of new questions in front of me that I had never previously had to ponder for real.” (Personal communication, 8 May, 2012) Several pieces of information have been covered to safeguard the witness’s identity.

Figure 3

Initial Sketch of UAP by Pilot

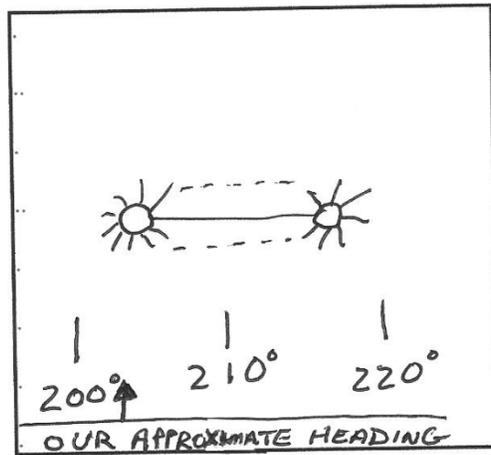
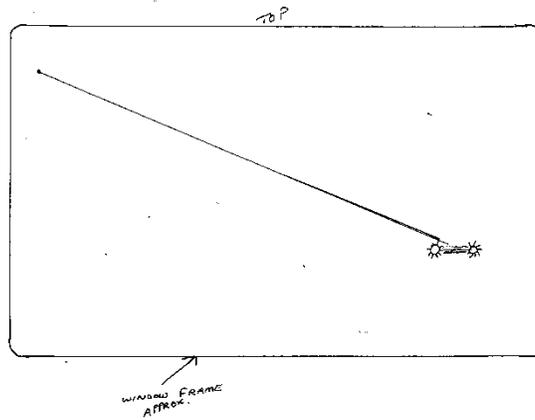


Figure 4

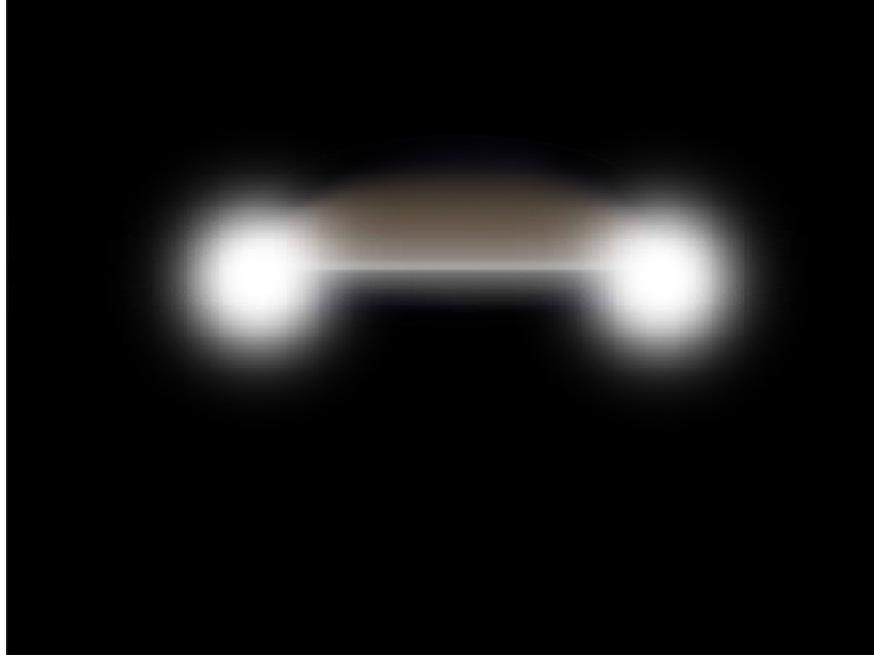
Second Sketch of UAP by Witness Showing its Path of Movement Relative to His Forward Window



The final artistic rendering only of the UAP is shown in Figure 5. It was achieved after a number of corrections were made to it by the witness.

Figure 5

Final Witness-Approved Rendering of the UAP



Later Questions and Answers

The author asked the witness a number of additional questions about this incident over a four week-long period. Several of them are included here with his answers since they shed additional light on the event.

Q. *Who was in the cockpit at the time?*

A. “There were 3 crew on board, the 2nd Officer (Flight Engineer) was heads down at his panel giving our OUT, OFF, ETA report to the company and dealing with checklists when this (event) occurred so he did not witness the event. We tried to convince him of what we had just witnessed but he felt that surely we must be mistaken. The usual reaction I am sure.”

Q. *Did you move your body and head position during this encounter?*

A. “I was in a heads down position when the call "who the hell is that" was made by the Captain and I went heads-up for my first sighting and then I leaned well forward towards my windscreen to get a better view.”

Q. *When you first looked up and outside would you say that your head and eyes were at the reference eye position for that airplane?*

A. “Yes I would say that initially my position was close to the eye position for my seat in that airplane.”

Q. *As you continued to look at the UAP did your head move forward (or in any other direction) at all? (question repeated later in slightly different terms).*

A. “Yes I quickly moved my head straight forward so as to position myself for the best view of what was almost straight in front of us. It is only a guess but I probably moved forward between 12 - 16 inches. (If you push forward on the top rear of the seat belt buckle it releases the harness straps without releasing the belt strap and we most often do that shortly after takeoff for comfort).”

Q. *What was the cockpit lighting like at the time.*

A. “The cockpit was dark as depicted in the picture on the right. Standard procedures for us when below 18,000.” (His reference is to Figure 1 provided him by the digital artist).

Q. *Can you comment on the artist's first rendering? (Note: The following answer is quoted only because of other subtle details that are mentioned.)*

A. “There should be an edge to the vehicle that is vertically aligned with its axis passing directly through both lights but still giving way to the brightness of the lights as you have depicted. It was my impression that there was more of this object above this edge than there was below this edge. Below this edge the color was a very dark gray that diffused quickly into a black that basically matched the night sky. The area above this edge was the color of brushed Nickel with just the slightest hint of an oxidized or rust color, very subtle and light coloring only adding to the brushed Nickel look. The upper portion above the edge was taller than the portion below, it would only diffuse into the lights and into the dark sky at a point which is slightly higher than the brightest portion of the lights as is currently depicted and was a surface that appeared to be going up and away from me until the scatter back of the lights could no longer illuminate it. It was my impression that I was by no means seeing all of the craft but only what could be illuminated by the backscatter of the lights. In other words I don't believe that the two lights represented the horizontal size limit of the vehicle but were simply mounted in some position along this edge. The edge I keep referring to is simply the transition point between the very dark gray bottom coloring versus the brushed Nickel appearance above which appears as a line for lack of a better term.”

Q. *Can you describe the color of the two bright lights?*

A. “The lights were just a very pure white with no other colors apparent.”

Q. *Regarding the appearance of the two white lights, with what kind of known light source could you compare them? E.g., tungsten, arc light, halogen, xenon, etc.? What is of importance to me is their color temperature.*

A. “I am not as up to speed as you about lighting. To the best of my recollection I believe that opinions on what constitutes “pure” white light fall somewhere between 4100 and 5000 (deg.) K so I would put it in that range. I don’t remember ever seeing a generated light that was any more pure than this was as there were no tints of yellow, orange or blue at all.... Correct me if I am wrong but I think of the types of incandescent lights you mentioned that Xenon is known for its light brightness and purity, so then I would say Xenon.”

Q. *Once you looked away from one or both of these lights did you notice any visual afterimage(s) from them? If so, about how long did these afterimages last in seconds?*

A. “That is a very interesting question and something I had never thought about. One would expect to have afterimages following something like this but I honestly don’t remember any afterimages. My memory of its departure stands out as perfectly clear and of good contrast. To me it raises the question is it my memory not retaining the afterimages or is it something about their lights? Interesting. “

In a subsequent letter he wrote, “When I said that I did not remember any afterimage I was speaking only about the position the vehicle was maintaining as it and the two bright lights that were aimed at us were, **relatively** wise, stationary. I remember no after image of that stationary picture as it departed that position. The lights did however leave the image of a white “streak”, to my vision, from the point it had departed from to the point at which it was so far away that it was only a speck. It was short lived but the image of a streak none the less.” (personal correspondence, 7 May 2012) Later he also wrote, “...my memory is that I just visually locked onto it and kept it in sight until it left our atmosphere and just winked out as a tiny point of light..” (personal correspondence, 30 May, 2012) These comments are important because they suggest that the witness’s eyes actually could not rotate fast enough to directly fixate on the UAP *during its initial departure* (and actually did leave an after image on the retina) but soon caught up with the UAP once its direction of travel was correctly determined.

Q. *Were your own landing lights still on?⁽⁴⁾*

A. “Yes. At that altitude we would still have the landing lights on... but they are basically aimed straight ahead for illumination of the runway environment and nothing else. Also, this craft was not straight in front of (us) but off to the side. Our landing lights could have some amount of illumination of an object not in front of us but it would be VERY minimal.”

Q. *Could this UAP have been a reflection of your own lights off fog, air/water vapor, etc. If you disregard its impressive departure? I know that you can’t disregard it but, if you could would the spacing, light source diameter, color, intensity, etc. of the UAP be in any way similar*

to your own lights?

A. “Would anyone really believe that after 42 years of my continuous flying around, above, below and through thousands and thousands of clouds that we (the Capt. and I) would both be fooled by our own landing lights reflected off some clouds, fog or whatever? At that time, place, and altitude there were no clouds, fog or anything else for our lights to illuminate. ... Most of my time aloft is at night and I am quite familiar with anything that can normally be viewed in a night sky. No, it is not possible that it was our own lights reflected back at us unless it was a flying mirror at six to seven thousand feet that also could depart at thousands of miles per hour.... Keep in mind that since it was off to the side our fuselage would have obscured most if not all of our left landing light and both of its lights were equally bright and equal in shape. That (idea) is barking up the wrong tree.”

Q. Can you discuss in more detail how the UAP accelerated away?

A. “I don't know that "infinite" acceleration would be the right word as that would seem to imply that it never stopped increasing its speed and that is not something I could attest to. A better word might be "instant" acceleration. I can remember that I recognized the instant it first began to move but that period was in my opinion so short a time that it was probably about as short a time as my eyes and brain are capable of processing. The speed ramped up instantly and as I said earlier it really was like a bullet leaving a gun. Even though a bullet is thrust by what is an explosion and obviously must still have some period of acceleration, that acceleration happens in an extremely short period of time. It was like that, an unbelievable short period of time. If they are not somehow bending space/time by use of some technology that at this point is way beyond our understanding of physics the G's experienced by this type of vehicle, whether manned or not, would be in the thousands! As I said it was an astonishing thing to witness.”

Q. Did the Captain ever discuss with you how the UAP first came into his sight?

A. “Well I had looked out the windscreen about 5 seconds earlier and had seen nothing so whether or not it just popped up I knew from his tone of voice stating "who the hell is that" that he was surprised by it. The possibility exists that they were already there and simply turned on those white lights at that point because I never saw any other lights on the vehicle. Had those lights been off the whole time I don't think we would have seen it or identified it simply by its blocking of the star field behind it because it was nowhere near that big a piece of the sky. At night you are always looking for lights as that is all you are going to normally see.”

Q. On the NARCAP PIREP form you sent in you estimated the angular size of the UAP to be about equivalent to a grapefruit held at arm's length. Do you mean that this angle went from the far left side of the left-most light to the far right of the right-most light?

A. “That is correct, I could see nothing outside of the outer limits of each light.”

This angular estimate is about eleven degrees arc which would indicate a UAP about 97 feet wide at 500 feet distance or 136 foot-wide at 700 feet distance.

Q. *Upon looking back on this incident almost sixteen years ago would you say now that this encounter qualified as an air-safety event?*

A. “Within the aviation rules it does qualify as an air safety event but even more than now you did not want to be noted as having seen and reported a UFO (UAP). This atmosphere of being afraid of the damage to your reputation for making a report has to change but it is going to require a truly open effort and public stance by the powers to be in either the government, or military, or both. When I say public I mean an unambiguous public announcement that reports are now wanted, desired and will be handled in a professional manner, if this never happens then the stigma will never be removed. I am not holding my breath. As far as my particular sighting I still feel that their technology and demonstrated capabilities are so matured that I feel they were in complete control of the situation and I have never felt that they put us at risk. But that’s just my opinion on my experience and I cannot comment on any other occurrences.

The subject of what specific actions should be taken by aviation officials to improve the ongoing climate of denial within the aviation world regarding UAP is discussed elsewhere (Haines, 2010).

Q. *As a result of there being no radar paint on this UAP what were your honest intellectual feeling(s) about the adequacy/usefulness/reliability of FAA radar after that?*

A. “Well it has a lot to say about how ground radar, airborne radar and TCAS are all useless in detecting or avoiding these vehicles if they don’t want to be painted. There have been many instances where sightings of UAP have been matched with radar returns but if we have stealth then they most definitely have stealth. It must all be a matter of whether they want to be seen or not or they care if they are seen or not. This all brings up a question I have always had, why did they bother to make their presence known to us? Had they not turned on those lights we most assuredly would never have known about them. What purpose did it serve for us to know they were there or were they just playing with us?”

Q. *During your sighting could you see the earth-ocean surface or horizon?*

A. “It was a very dark night so I don’t remember seeing much of the ocean as horizon but since the visibility was excellent we could see all of the lights along the coastline and inland north of Los Angeles prior to the sighting and south of Los Angeles after the sighting. During the sighting my view was out over the ocean which I remember as being very dark.”

Q. *Were any clouds visible?*

A. “No, the sky was clear.”

Q. *Can you describe (or draw) how the UAP appeared to move relative to your forward cockpit window, e.g., where it intersected the center post. Could you make a simple sketch showing the UAP’s initial position and its departure streak? (This request resulted in Figure 4).*

A. “Because of the fact that I had moved forward the streak never intersected the center post for

me, I was able to witness the entire departure path through my windshield. See the attached drawing (Fig. 4). I have tried to show in my drawing that the two lights became a single streak almost immediately. “

Q. *Did you ever speak with the Captain about this incident afterwards?*

A. “I only saw that Captain two or maybe three times after this experience and it was always in a public setting so the opportunity never arose for us to discuss it again. We only discussed it at length the night after it happened.”

Witness Qualifications

The witness had flown for forty two years and amassed over 17,000 flight hours before retiring recently. He began flying at age 18 and has flown a wide variety of airplanes including the Cessna 310 twin, DC-3, DC-6, DC-7B, DC-8, DC-10, B-747, A-300, A-310 as well as smaller propeller-driven airplanes. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Aeronautical Technologies and also earned an FAA license as an Airframe and Power Plant mechanic and has taught flying as well. He requested to not be identified with this report.

Footnotes:

- (1) It is standard practice at KLAX in the early hours to both land and takeoff over the water , wind permitting, because of noise concerns.
- (2) Written report received on 2 May 2012 through the NARCAP website. The witness requested complete anonymity and waited until he had retired before submitting his report.
- (3) Figure 1 and 2 are renderings provided by Garret Moore, Owner and Principal of UFOEARTH.NET: Visual & 3D Reporting for which the author and NARCAP are indebted. Each illustration is the final result of three iterations with the witness.
- (4) The two sealed beam, halogen-Quartz landing light lamps on the DC-10 are extremely bright and pre-focused to a narrow beam that is aimed straight ahead and slightly downward toward the runway. Each 600 watt lamp, operated at 28 volts (21.5 amps) could produce up to 750,000 candlepower. Use of such sources is a part of the FAA's *Lights on for Safety* program.

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Appendix 1

Air Traffic Controller at KLAX Comments on UAP Activity

An air traffic controller who has worked at Los Angeles International Airport for six years said that he has personally witnessed four unexplained UAP incidents. (www.sightings.com/ufo/laxrep.html) Making it clear that because he and the other controllers are kept informed of all kinds of air traffic including secret military testing, this controller said that when he sees something (on radar) that is “truly unidentified, he’s pretty sure it’s not a super-secret military project. He was present when another colleague told his supervisor about a reported unusual aerial encounter and they both could find nothing on their radar “...they kind of shook their heads and rubbed their chins, and that was that.... This I believe is what typically happens,” he said. “Nobody knows what to do, really.”

He personally monitored a United Parcel Service jet in his sector that was descending to land at Ontario, California airport at about 2100 hours after sundown in 1995. No other traffic was within thirty miles of him. Suddenly the flight crew radioed to report that a large aircraft of some type, “I’m not sure what it is, just went over and in front of us, crossing right to left... it has some strange lights.” Nothing showed either on primary or secondary radar.

Appendix 2

Additional Sighting Report

An attempt was also made to find out if other aircrew or ground witness reports had been made for the same time and locale as the present KLAX sighting. The closest event took place in mid- September, 1996 near Victorville, California at 11:00 am. This is about forty three miles SE of Edwards AFB, California and about seventy five miles NE of KLAX. A geological engineer with good vision reported seeing a dark gray (sometimes shiny), spinning, circular disk with a black ring in its bottom surface for about two hours that remained stationary above a given spot on the ground but gained and lost altitude. When viewed through 15x binoculars the UAP looked like a Saturn shaped metal object “...making gyroscopic maneuvers in place.” It

seemed to be above a distant thunderhead cloud estimated at about 45,000 feet. When it rolled on its side its shape was round; three or four little “wispy blobs” flew around it and seemed to merge with it as well as fading in and out of sight. A Southwest Airlines (?) airliner flew on its designated course at about 35,000 feet AGL below the object which was at about 40,000 feet. “I could not believe the airliner pilots did not see this thing or that this flying saucer and companions did not fly away.” The witness thought that the UAP was at least six times longer than the jet airplane.

No other sighting reports could be found for southern California around the date of the in-flight incident reported here.