
Special Reports

FAA Data Sheds New Light On JAL Pilot's UFO Report

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THE UFO MOVEMENT, suffering from an extended drought of exciting new UFO incidents to attract media and public interest, got a sorely needed shot in the arm in early January, when it was disclosed that the pilot of a Japan Air Lines 747 cargo airliner had reported an encounter with a giant UFO over Alaska on November 17, while flying to Anchorage from France. The incident had occurred in twilight conditions, starting about 6:15 P.M. local time, with the sun about 11 degrees below the horizon.

According to initial press reports, the incident seemed a classic. The principal witness was an experienced captain, Kenju Terauchi, whose reported visual observations seemingly were confirmed by a USAF/Federal Aviation Administration radar. Additionally, the UFO seemingly paced the JAL 747 for more than 40 minutes, offering an extended period for observation by two other crew members of the cargo aircraft loaded with French wine destined for Japan.

Important new insights into the incident have since emerged as a result of the FAA's wise decision to offer a complete data package to the public at modest cost. The available data includes a verbatim transcript of the JAL pilot's tape-recorded radio communications with

FAA controllers during the incident, tape recordings and transcripts of FAA interviews with the three JAL crew members in early January, about six weeks after the incident occurred, and a copy of the revealing report that Captain Terauchi submitted to the FAA, also in early January.

In releasing all available data on the incident, the FAA's Alaskan Region public affairs officer, Paul Steucke, noted that his agency "does not have the resources or the Congressional mandate to investigate sightings of unidentified flying objects. We have not tried to determine what the crew of Japan Air Lines flight #1628 saw based on scientific analysis of the stars, planets, magnetic fields, angle of view, etc."

During the initial phase of the November 17 UFO incident, a long-range USAF/FAA radar sporadically seemed to show a *single* blip in the vicinity of the 747's radar blip—at a time when the pilot was reporting seeing *several* UFOs. Fortunately, the FAA records radar data (for subsequent analysis in event of a mid-air collision or a near-miss), and it was sent to the FAA's technical center near Atlantic City for analysis by radar specialists, to determine if the long-range USAF/FAA radar had indeed detected

an unidentified object in the vicinity of the JAL 747.

This analysis showed that the sporadic second blip was due to a phenomenon known as "uncorrelated primary and beacon target," which can occur if the radar energy bouncing off an aircraft does not arrive at precisely the same instant as the signal transmitted back by the aircraft's radar transponder. According to FAA specialist Dennis R. Simantel, who analyzed the data, "these uncorrelated primary returns are not uncommon due to the critical timing associated with the delay adjustments in the aircraft transponder . . . and the target correlation circuitry within the radar equipment."

The FAA data package reveals Terauchi to be a "UFO repeater," with two other UFO sightings prior to November 17, and two more this past January, which normally raises a "caution flag" for experienced UFO investigators. The JAL pilot is convinced that UFOs are extraterrestrial and when describing the light(s) Terauchi often used the term *spaceship* or *mothership*.

During his January 2 interview with FAA officials, Terauchi said that he believed the "mothership" intentionally positioned itself in the "darkest [easterly] side" of the sky because "I think they did not want to be seen." This enabled the UFO to see the 747 "in front of the sunset and visible for any movement we make." In his report to the FAA, he expressed the hope that "we humans will meet them in the near future."

Terauchi, who was based in Anchorage at the time but has since been transferred back to Japan, noted in his report that his flights over Alaska "generally [are] in the daytime and it is confusing to identify the kind of lights" in darkness. As an example, he described seeing lights from an Alaskan pipeline pumping station reflecting off snow-covered mountains, which initially puzzled him.

(On January 11, a few days after Terauchi gave FAA officials his recollection of the November 17 incident, he

again reported spotting unusual lights in roughly the same area while on a repeat flight from Paris to Anchorage. The JAL captain, who has a limited verbal facility in English, asked to record his description of the January 11 UFO in Japanese. Its translation, included in the FAA's data package, resembled Terauchi's description of the UFO initially sighted on November 17: "We see irregular pulsating lights just there is a large black chunk [*sic*] just in front of us. Distance is five miles. It seems to be a spaceship, ah UFO." The pilot reported a similar sighting a few minutes later. But when the USAF/FAA radar failed to confirm the presence of any object, he and the FAA later agreed that these January 11 UFOs were merely lights from small villages being diffused by thin clouds of ice crystals.)

Captain Terauchi, who quickly became an international media celebrity, provided colorful accounts of the incident. But he always failed to mention that two other aircraft in the area that were vectored into the vicinity of the JAL 747 to try to spot the UFO he had been reporting were unable to see any such object. This is revealed in the transcript of radio communications between Terauchi and FAA traffic controllers and their communications with the flight crews of United Airlines flight #69 and a USAF C-130 transport.

United #69 was headed north from Anchorage to Fairbanks at the time that JAL #1628 was headed in the opposite direction along a parallel airway to Anchorage. The FAA asked the United pilot if it could vector him slightly to the left of his intended path, to bring him within several miles of JAL #1628, to see if he could spot and possibly identify the "UFO." As United #69 approached, Terauchi reported the bright light to be at his "nine o'clock" position—roughly broadside and to the left at an estimated distance of about ten miles.

The United captain agreed, and Terauchi was asked to turn his landing lights on briefly to help the United crew

engineer Yoshio Tsukuba (through an interpreter) during his January 15 interview with FAA officials, the initial UFO was observed for about five to ten minutes at roughly an 11 o'clock position before it disappeared. This is confirmed by the FAA radio communications transcript, which shows the pilot reported the UFO disappearance at 0223:13 GMT, roughly four minutes after it was first reported. Crew members had been observing it for several minutes prior to the initial report.

The second UFO, which Tsukuba characterized as "absolutely different" was visible much further to the left ("nine o'clock") for about 30 or 40 minutes. Tsukuba described the initial UFO as a "cluster of lights . . . undulating," which were "different from town lights." Unlike the pilot, Tsukuba said he was unable to describe any particular shape for either UFO. The flight engineer said that, when he was first interviewed by the FAA immediately following the incident, he "was not sure whether the object was a UFO or not. My mind has not changed since then."

During FAA interviews in January, copilot Takanori Tamefuji, who was flying the 747 at the time of the initial sighting, confirmed the flight engineer's recollections that the UFO first sighted was "completely different" from the one later seen further to the left. Tamefuji described what at first appeared to be "two small aircraft" slightly below his own altitude. When the copilot was asked if he could distinguish these lights "as being different" from a star, he replied: "No." (The planet Mars would have been visible to the crew about 19 degrees to the right of Jupiter, but it would not have been nearly as bright.)

When a sketch made by Captain Terauchi, showing a giant walnut-shaped UFO, was shown to the copilot and he was asked if this was what he had seen, he replied: "I don't see anything like this but . . . if we can connect these lights it

[would] be a big object, but ah . . ."

There are a number of ambiguities in the report that Captain Terauchi submitted to the FAA on January 2, and in his subsequent interview with an FAA representative, despite the presence of an interpreter. Terauchi generally characterized the initial amber-white lights as resembling the exhaust of jet or rocket engines. In his report, written in Japanese and later translated, Terauchi said that a few minutes after first observing the lights ahead and to the left, "most unexpectedly two spaceships stopped in front of our face, shooting off lights. The inside cockpit shined [*sic*] brightly and I felt warm in the face." Neither of the other crew members reported such effects.

All three crew members agreed that the 747's weather radar displayed an echo at a bearing that roughly corresponded to that of the initial lights at a range of about eight miles. The radar display uses color to show the strength of the echo to alert the crew to the potential intensity of thunderstorm turbulence ahead. A red-colored echo indicates an especially strong radar echo and a green color shows the weakest. All three crew members agree that the "UFO blip" was *green*.

This is especially curious if the visual UFO was a giant craft only a few miles ahead, which should have produced an extremely strong (red) return. Flight engineer Tsukuba characterized it as "not a dot, but streamlike." This is confirmed by a sketch drawn by the pilot after landing on November 17. It suggests that the green "blip/stream" was an echo from thin clouds of ice crystals—like those that prompted Terauchi to mistake village lights for UFOs on January 11.

On the night of November 17, there was a nearly full moon that would have been approximately 12 degrees above the horizon at the time of the initial UFO sighting and almost directly behind the JAL 747's direction of flight. This raises the possibility that bright moonlight reflecting off turbulent clouds of ice crystals

could have generated the undulating flame-colored lights that Terauchi described.

It would also explain why the undulating lights would periodically and suddenly disappear and then reappear as cloud conditions ahead changed. When the aircraft finally outflew the ice clouds and the initial "UFO" disappeared for good, Terauchi would search the sky for it, spot Jupiter further to the left, and conclude it was the original UFO.

This case is likely to become a classic in the UFO inventory because many people assume that a senior airline captain could never mistake a bright planet or other prosaic object for a UFO. Yet when the late Dr. J. Allen Hynek re-analyzed UFO reports in the USAF files, he found that pilots were as readily misled by prosaic objects as persons in other professions. Numerous air-accident-investi-

gation reports by the National Transportation Safety Board confirm that even *experienced* pilots are not infallible.

I am indebted to astronomers Nick Sanduleak and C. B. Stephenson, of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, for their valuable assistance in computing positions and bearings of bright celestial bodies relative to the JAL 747 airliner at the time of the November 17 incident. •

Philip J. Klass, who was a senior editor with Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine for nearly 35 years until his partial retirement in June 1986, has been investigating famous UFO cases as a hobby for more than 20 years. His most recent book is UFOs: The Public Deceived, published by Prometheus Books.

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