

Human Perception:

Studies for more than one hundred years have demonstrated how unreliable human perception actually is. People are not objective recording “instruments.”

Belief:

There is a strong human desire to believe the myth that alien spacecraft along with alien occupants are visiting the Earth. These beliefs are perpetuated by wildly incorrect reports, claims, and statements made by totally unqualified individuals. There is no empirical evidence that such visitations are occurring now or have occurred in the past

Perception, Belief, and Psychological and Sociological Understanding Needed

Psychology/Sociology:

- Σ Memory Bias
- Σ Confabulation
 - o False Memory
- Σ Interference Theory
- Σ Stress
 - o Impact on Accuracy
- Σ Lying
- Σ Hoaxes
- Σ Eyewitness Memory
 - o Forgetting Curve
 - o Contamination
 - o Systemic Error
 - o Due to Data Collection
- Σ Sensory Information Errors
 - o Acquiring
 - o Interpreting
 - o Selecting
 - o Organizing

Lights in the Sky—Causes

- Σ Planets
- Σ Stars
- Σ Moon
- Σ Fireballs — Bolides
- Σ Aircraft
- Σ Missile Launches
- Σ Satellites
- Σ Balloons
- Σ Searchlights
- Σ Test Clouds
- Σ Flares
- Σ Sprites
- Σ Ball Light
- Σ St. Elmo's Fire
- Σ Sun Dogs
- Σ Halos
- Σ Glories
- Σ Mirages
- Σ Scintillation
- Σ Dazzling
- Σ Clouds
 - o Lenticular
 - o Noctilucent

The Stephenville Lights

What Actually Happened

One of the most widely publicized UFO reports of the past few years is the so-called Stephenville Lights of January 8, 2008. Stephenville, Texas, is a small town (population 17,000) one hundred miles southwest of Dallas. Between 6:15 and 7:30 PM local time, forty witnesses reported seeing very bright lights. They made no sound. They were said to be slowly moving, then moved quickly. Many said the lights were pursued by military aircraft. Some said they sped away at 3,000 miles per hour. Some said they saw a single object one mile long. One said it was a life-changing experience.

A local Stephenville newspaper reported the story on January 10, and a public affairs officer for the Naval Air Station, Joint Reserve Base at Carswell Field, sixty nautical miles away, was quoted as saying, “There were no F-16s from

this unit operating.” (That proved to be wrong.) The national media picked up the story about the lights, and it was featured on Larry King Live on January 18.

Astronomer (and retired Air Force pilot) James McGaha (see the accompanying “The Trained Observer” piece) investigated. On January 17, he contacted the Federal Aviation Administration and asked if any aircraft that night had entered the Brownwood Military Operating Areas (MOAs). These MOAs begin ten miles southwest of Stephenville—a 3,200-square-mile area used for military aviation training. The FAA informed McGaha on January 18 that a group of four F-16s from the 457th Fighter Squadron entered the operating area at 6:17 PM local time. A second group of four F-16s entered the same area at 6:26 PM. They departed at 6:54



and 6:58, respectively. The time the aircraft were flying in the MOA accords with the time of the sightings.

On January 18 McGaha contacted the 301st Fighter Wing Public Affairs Office and asked if they made a mistake in saying their aircraft had not been in the MOA that night. They called him back and informed him of their error. On January 23, they issued a press release publicly acknowledging the error, stating that F-16s had indeed been flying in the MOA that evening.

What were the aircraft doing? McGaha says they were flying training maneuvers that involved dropping extraordinarily bright flares. The LUU/2B/B flare is nothing like the standard flares you might think of. These flares have an illumination of about two million candlepower. They are intended to light up a vast area of the ground for nighttime aerial attack. Once released, they are suspended by parachutes (which often hover and even rise due to the heat of the flares) and light up a circle on the ground greater than one kilometer for four minutes. The flare casing and parachute are eventually consumed by the heat. At a distance of 150 miles, a single flare can still be as bright as the planet Venus.

McGaha also describes the testimony of a medical helicopter pilot, a retired U.S. Army pilot, flying that night, who saw the lights. He said: "I saw multiple military aircraft, with some dropping flares, in the area of the Brownwood 1 MOA."

Much mischief was caused by a Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) report on the incident issued on July 4, 2008. MUFON members tend to promote the idea that UFOs are real and in fact are extraterrestrial spacecraft. The seventy-six-page report is mostly an analysis of FAA "raw" radar

returns for the period in question, plus eight eyewitness reports.

These raw data contain 2.5 million points of noise and scatter. MUFON's report selected just 187 of these points to contend that radar had tracked a huge "object" at least 524 feet in size, traveling near the Western White House (the Bush ranch, which is fifty miles southeast of Stephenville). "MUFON's radar analysis is nothing more than cherry picking the 187 targets out of 2.5 million points of noise and scatter to make a track moving forty-nine mph for over one hour," says McGaha. "This analysis is absurd!"

Some MUFON witnesses described "very bright lights similar to the intensity of burning magnesium" and said they saw flares dropped from aircraft. Others said such things as "these were not any known aircraft" and the objects were stationary at times but also "moved at a very high rate of speed." But these witnesses were not trained observers, McGaha says. "How did they know the altitude, velocity, size, and distance of an unknown object?"

There were lights in the sky, McGaha concludes. "There were F-16s flying in the Brownwood MOAs, and they did drop flares. The F-16s did not react to any unknown targets, and radar did not detect any unknown targets."

"The untrained witnesses/observers were seeing nothing more than F-16s and flares. Stephenville is nothing more than connecting 'lights in the sky' to form a very large mysterious object, an object that many that night thought was from another world. But nothing otherworldly happened around Stephenville on January 8, 2008," says McGaha. □

Social Security vs. UFOs

Q. Do more people believe in UFOs than in Social Security?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Answer: No. The Employee Benefit Research Institute, a nonprofit research group, actually investigated this frequently cited statistic and found that 71% of those surveyed had greater confidence in the future of Social Security than in the existence of UFOs.

—Q&A item from a story on twenty-first century retirement, John Waggoner, USA Today, August 8, 2008

