THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE: WHATEVER BECAME OF THE MYTH

News / Events / Festivals



Seventy years after the **disappearance of five planes in the Atlantic**, Giles Milton investigates one of the world's most enduring **aviation mysteries**

The message picked up by the control tower was as bizarre as it was alarming. "Everything looks strange," said the pilot. "It looks like we're entering white water. We're completely lost."

There were a few more crackles and then silence. It was December 5, 1945, and the five airplanes of Flight 19 – a routine military training mission departing from Fort Lauderdale, Florida – had vanished without trace.

For the last 70 years, the disappearance of Flight 19 has been one of the world's most enduring aviation mysteries. No wreckage was ever found, despite an extensive search, and nor were any

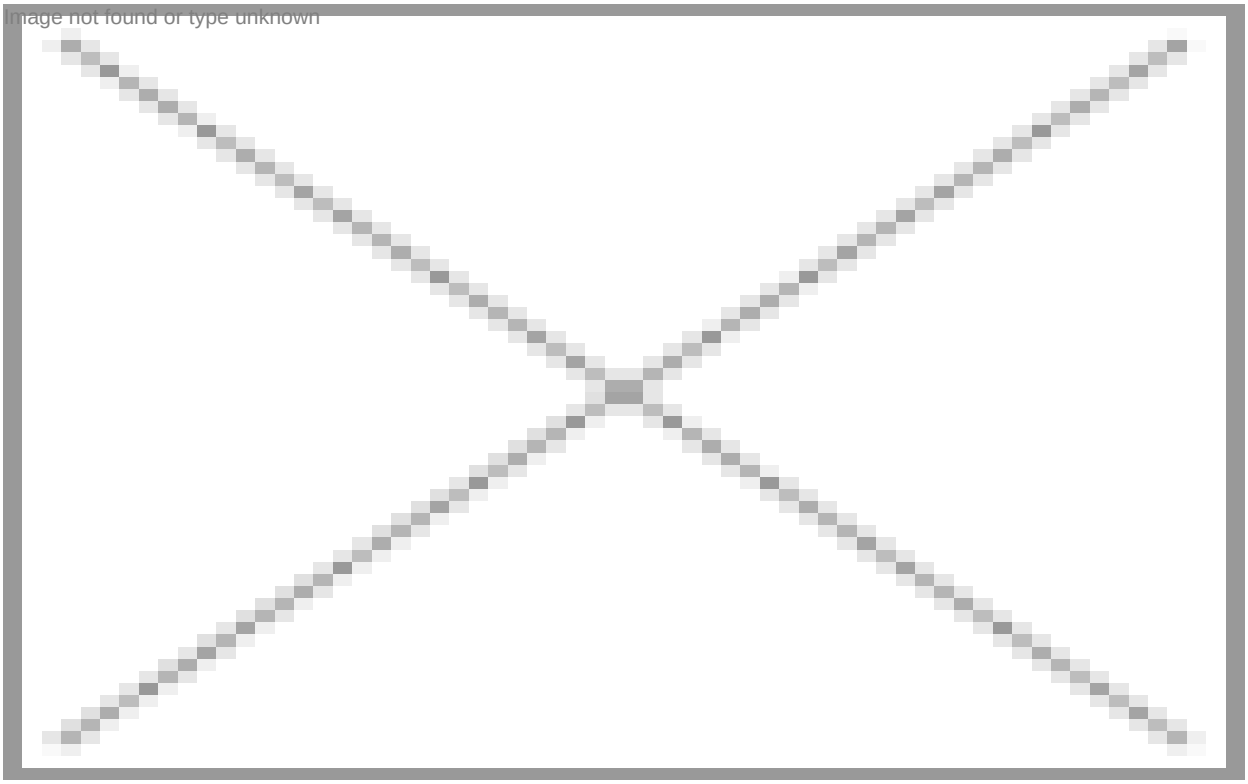
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bodies recovered. It was as if the planes and their 14 crewmen had simply disappeared into thin air.

In the absence of any hard facts, there was frenzied speculation as to what might have happened. There was also – before long – the birth of an extraordinary myth. The fate of the planes was linked to an area of ocean that became known as the Bermuda Triangle, in which unexplained and seemingly paranormal incidents occurred with alarming frequency.

Now, seven decades after the disappearance of Flight 19, the truth about both the planes and the Bermuda Triangle can finally be revealed.

It is a tale of fantasy, duplicity and wishful thinking – one that was to bring enormous wealth to a handful of individuals. And it all began on that December evening.



Aerial view of Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station, the origin of Flight 19

Within hours of the five Avenger planes disappearing from the radar, a PBM-Mariner seaplane was sent on a search-and-rescue mission. The Mariner's pilot made a routine radio call at 7.30pm indicating his position. It was the last call he ever made. Soon afterwards, the Mariner also vanished from the radar, just as the five Avengers had done. Neither the plane, nor her 13-strong crew, was ever seen again.

The disappearance of six planes in one day was mysterious enough, but the losses were by no means at an end. A further three planes went missing in the same area in 1948 and 1949 and a pleasure yacht, the Connemara IV, was found adrift and without its crew in 1955. Just a few years later, two USA Air Force Stratotankers also disappeared.

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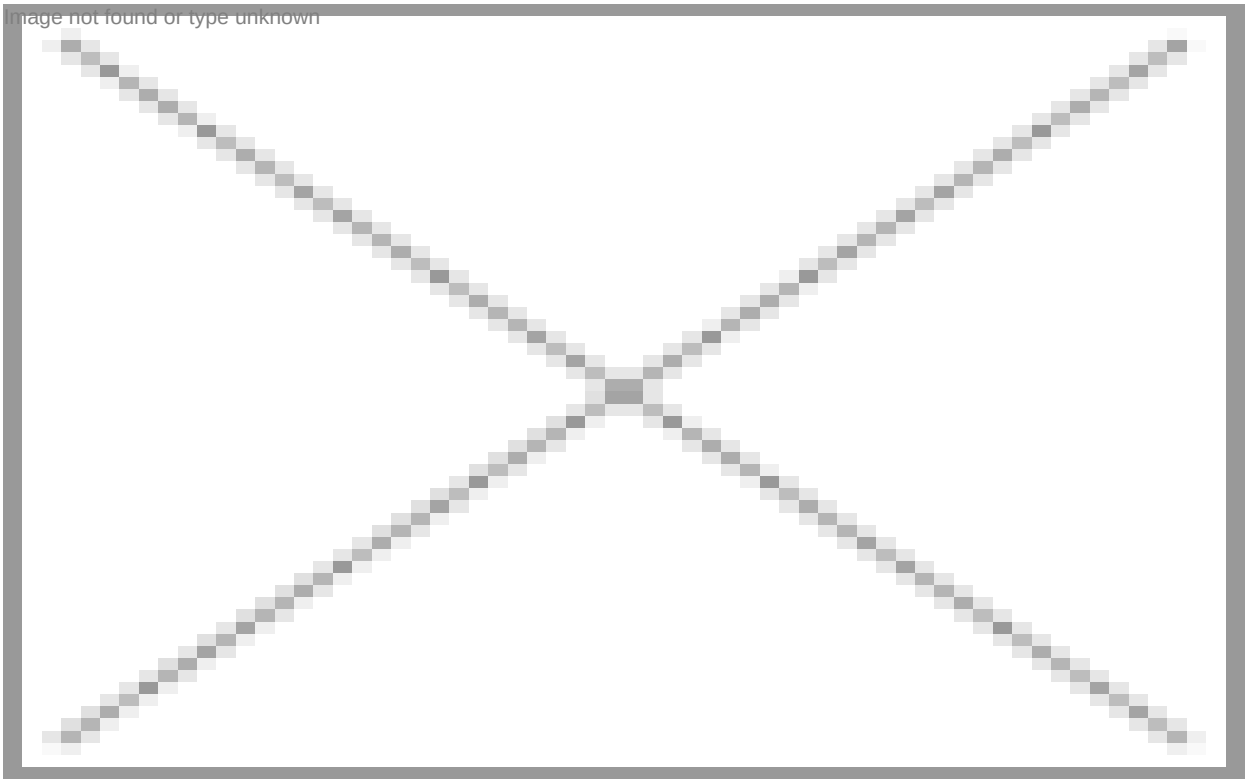
In the absence of any obvious explanation, the popular press began to speculate on what might

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have happened, citing compass variation, tropical storms and the Gulf Stream's unpredictable currents.

But one theory in particular caught the public imagination, and it was centred on geography: all the losses had occurred in a triangular area of ocean of about one million square miles that lay between Miami, Puerto Rico and Bermuda.

In February 1963, a freelance writer named Vincent Gaddis wrote a sensational article for Argosy Magazine claiming that supernatural forces were at work in this area of ocean. He called it the Bermuda Triangle and said that Flight 19's disappearance was one of a series of strange happenings that dated back many centuries.



A reward poster at a marina for the yacht Saba Bank, which went missing in the Bermuda Triangle on March 10, 1974

Gaddis's article contained much speculation, little evidence and precious few facts. But his timing was perfect: "The Deadly Bermuda Triangle" was published shortly after the two US Air Force Stratotankers were lost.

"The mysterious menace that haunts the Atlantic off our south-eastern coastline has claimed two more victims," wrote Gaddis. "Before this article reaches print, it may strike again, swallowing a plane or ship, or leaving behind a derelict [vessel], with no life aboard."

Here in the Bermuda Triangle was a phenomenon that tantalisingly seemed to defy explanation.

The article was a masterpiece of conspiratorial fantasy, suggesting that dark forces were at work. This was the era of the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, when people were more than willing to believe in conspiracy theories. It was also a time when Nasa – and science – was increasingly providing answers to unsolved questions. Yet here in the Bermuda Triangle was a phenomenon that tantalisingly seemed to defy explanation.

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“The Bermuda Triangle underlines the fact that despite swift wings and the voice of radio, we still have a world large enough so that men and their machines and ships can disappear without trace.”

Others were quick to cash in on Bermuda Triangle fever. Scores of books were published – many became international bestsellers – with the most popular of all being Charles Berlitz’s The Bermuda Triangle, published in 1974. It sold 20 million copies in more than 30 languages – an extraordinary feat for a work that blamed the losses on aliens and survivors from Atlantis.

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American Navy Avenger planes, the same kind of planes which disappeared in the Bermuda triangle Photo: Getty

Berlitz’s theories were so popular that when Steven Spielberg made Close Encounters of the Third Kind, he depicted the Flight 19 aircrews as having been abducted by aliens.

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Seventy years after the disappearance of Flight 19, the truth about what happened can finally be unravelled. At the time of the loss, much attention was focussed on the skill of the squadron's leader, Lieutenant Charles Taylor. An accomplished pilot with 2,500 hours of flying experience, he had an unblemished track record as an instructor. His student pilots were also highly capable, having clocked up some 300 hours of flying time.

Nor were there any reported problems with the aircraft. They were fully fuelled and had passed all their pre-flight checks. They took off without incident at 2.10pm and were soon heading due east, towards Abaco Island in the northern Bahamas.

Snatches of the radio conversations between the aircrews allow for a partial reconstruction of that afternoon's flight. At around 3.40pm, one of the crew was heard asking for a compass reading.

"I don't know where we are," was the response. "We must have got lost after that last turn." Minutes later, Lt Taylor was heard to say: "Both my compasses are out and I am trying to find Fort Lauderdale, Florida."

Why planes crash: air accident statistics and unsafe airlines

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He attempted to locate his position by studying the islands below. "I am over land but it is broken," he said. "I am sure I'm in the [Florida] Keys, but I don't know how far down."

The final moments of Flight 19 must remain as speculation: despite extensive seabed searches, the planes were never found.

A dissenting voice was heard on the radio. "Dammit, if we could just fly west, we would get home.

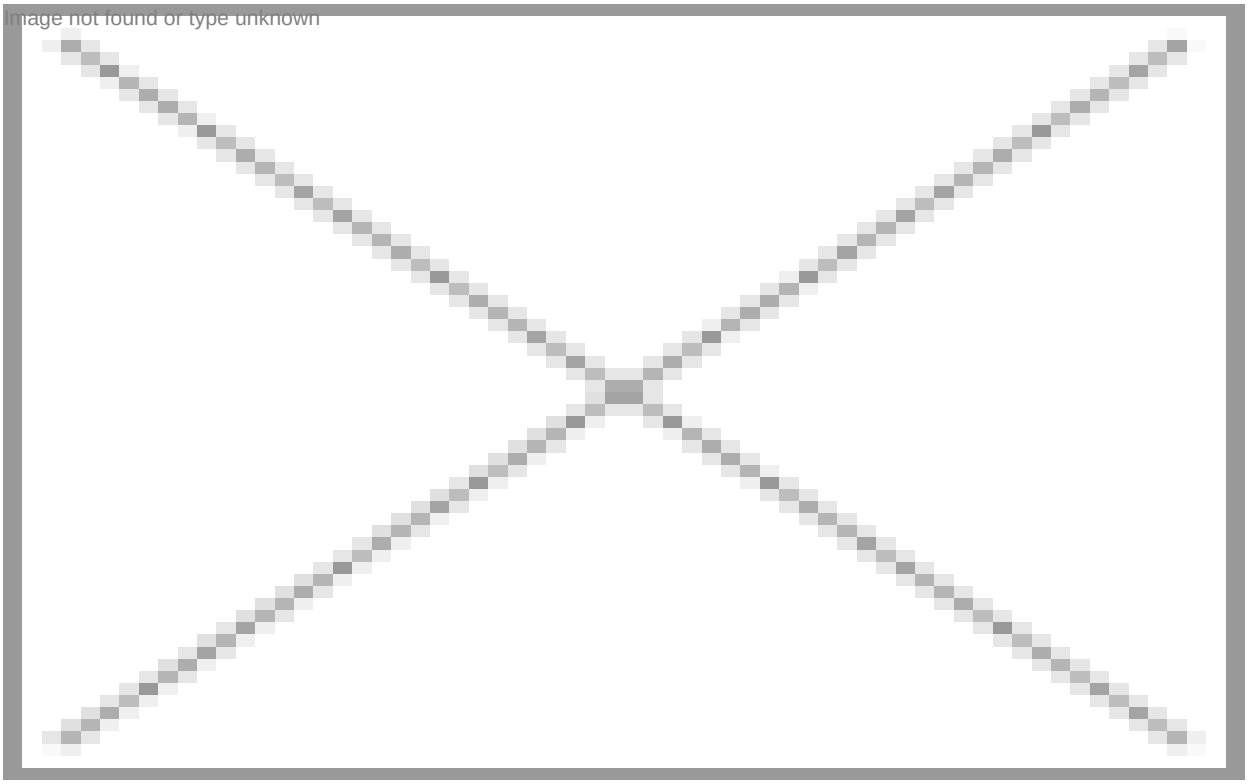
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Head west, dammit.” Someone on board, it seems, knew that they were on course for disaster.

The Fort Lauderdale ground staff made frantic efforts to contact Lt Taylor, but their messages were not picked up. They eventually managed to triangulate Flight 19’s position and it was most alarming. The planes were north of the Bahamas, miles from land.

“All planes, close up tight,” radioed Taylor at 6.20pm. “We’ll have to ditch unless landfall. When the first plane drops below 10 gallons, we all go down together.”

The final moments of Flight 19 must remain as speculation: despite extensive seabed searches, the planes were never found. They presumably ditched into the sea, where conditions had deteriorated since they left Fort Lauderdale. The choppy waves would have soon swallowed the heavy Avengers.



Two life preservers and a foghorn with the name "S.S. Marine Sulphur Queen" painted on them are examined by Coast Guardsmen

The US Navy immediately opened an investigation into the missing Avengers, as well as the PBM-Mariner sent to search for them. This latter plane was widely held to have exploded in mid-air – a hypothesis reinforced by the testimony of Captain Shonna Stanley of the SS Gaines Mills: he saw a ball of fire in the sky at exactly the time when the search plane went missing.

As for the Avengers, it was concluded that human error and compass malfunction caused the tragedy. Lieutenant Taylor had wrongly believed himself to be over the Florida Keys; each change of course took his formation further out to sea. And although he had clocked up many flying hours, he had previously been based in Miami and was unfamiliar with the Fort Lauderdale topography.

One by one, the Bermuda Triangle’s supposed mysteries have been solved. The Connemara IV’s crew was not abducted by aliens. The ship was washed out to sea (without its crew) during a

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hurricane. And the two missing Stratotankers collided and crashed in the Atlantic.

When Lloyds of London was asked to investigate losses in the Bermuda Triangle, they found no evidence to suggest that they were higher than in any other area of ocean. The United States Coast Guard concurred: it said that losses over the years have been negligible when compared to the number of vessels and airplanes that regularly traverse the area.

Such prosaic explanations were never going to satisfy the conspiracy theorists. Vincent Gaddis refused to accept the investigation's findings into Flight 19 and set to work on his supposition that supernatural forces were responsible. "Whatever this menace that lurks within a triangle of tragedy so close to home, it was responsible for the most incredible mystery in the history of aviation."

The fact that Flight 19's compasses were faulty, that Lieutenant Taylor was lost and that the planes had run out of fuel, was of little matter. The planes had disappeared. And the Bermuda Triangle was born.

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