

BERMUDA PROJECT



BERMUDA TRIANGLE **BACKGROUND**

The mystery of the disappearance of ships and aircraft from the area known as the Bermuda Triangle is one of the most well-publicised of modern times. The Triangle is generally considered to stretch from Bermuda in the north, southwest to the tip of Florida, and east to the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, although the boundaries are fairly flexible.

Reported disappearances without trace of air and sea traffic have occurred regularly since 1945, when five US Navy planes vanished off the coast of Florida. Things then took a sinister turn when one of the search planes sent out after the five also failed to return.

What has incited special interest in the disappearances is that frequently no wreckage, flotsam, or bodies have ever been recovered from the sea. Secondly, the disappearances have several times occurred either shortly after the pilot or captain has apparently radioed land to say that electronic apparatus is malfunctioning; that they are in a strange fog or haze; or that they have lost all sense of direction. In the famous case of the Naval planes in 1945, the lead pilot radioed Fort Lauderdale to say that they were completely lost and could not tell which direction they were heading in. This might not be surprising in a novice or inexperienced pilot, but the leader of the five pilots, Lieutenant Charles Taylor, reportedly had over 2,500 flying hours behind him.

While much has been made of strange lights, mists, or apparitions apparently seen by pilots and ship captains shortly before vanishing, conversely, emphasis has also been placed on final radio calls saying all is well, skies are clear, arriving in a few minutes, in a number of the missing without trace incidents.

In all, since the 1945 disappearance, there are up to 20 incidences of missing aircraft, and 10 or so of missing ships, which have been chronicled and are generally considered by supporters of the unnatural mystery camp to be directly attributable to the inexplicable Bermuda Triangle effect. Six ships which vanished prior to 1945 have also been included, retrospectively, in the roll call.

Aside from the five TBM Navy Avenger Bombers and the PBM Martin bomber, sent to search for them, two of most well-known aircraft disappearances are that of the Star Tiger and its sister plane the Star Ariel.

The Star Tiger was a converted Lancaster bomber, carrying six crew and 25 passengers, flying from the Azores to Bermuda on January 29, 1948. Shortly before it was due to land, the pilot radioed Kindley Field's control tower to say that all was well, they were about 380° northwest of

Bermuda and would arrive on schedule. That was the last that was heard of them. A search and rescue party went out the next day, and found not a trace, bar some boxes and empty oil drums northeast of Bermuda. A subsequent court of inquiry in London reported that "no more baffling problem has ever been presented for investigation... What happened in this case will never be known."

Almost exactly one year later, the *Star Ariel* set out on the Bermuda to Jamaica leg of a London to Santiago, Chile, flight. The captain sent a radio message to Bermuda shortly after take-off to the effect that everything was fine. No further messages were ever sent — the *Star Ariel* had vanished. A search party of 72 planes covered the area for four days, but no wreckage or trace of the aircraft was found.

The disappearance of the *Star Ariel* was particularly worrying, since it took place only three weeks after a chartered DC-3 had also gone missing — another well-documented incident. This time, from apparently only 50 miles outside Miami, according to a message sent by the captain to Miami Control Tower, he is reported to have said he could see the lights of the city as he spoke. The crew and 36 passengers all disappeared without trace, and again, no wreckage was found.

Many of the lost ships cited as victims of the forces of the Triangle have become so retrospectively, that is, they disappeared before the Triangle's legend had fully taken root.

The discovery, in 1840, of the sailing ship *Rosalie*, drifting off Nassau in the Bahamas with only a cat and canaries (only a canary in some reports) on board, has invited many comparisons with the *Marie Celeste*. Of the crew and passengers, there was no sign whatsoever.

Regular reports of deserted ships, often with animals still on board, have been made since, culminating a century later in 1944 when the *Rubicon*, a Cuban freighter was found off Key Largo, Florida. Crew and lifeboats were missing, only a dog being found on board.

In 1973, the 20,000 ton cargo ship *Anita* vanished between Newport News and Germany — a rather wide area, but it is thought to have sunk north west of Bermuda. However, the *Anita* had a sister ship, the *Norse Variant*, which followed the ship two hours behind. It also sank, but a survivor reported that a sudden and very severe storm with exceptionally heavy winds and high waves had blown up about 100 miles east of Cape May on the US coast.

Storms, of course, are a natural phenomenon. It is the apparent breakdown of controls, especially compasses, and the lack in a number of cases of any wreckage being found, which has given rise to inventive folklore. Some who survive strange happenings in the Triangle have added considerably to its reputation with tales of time warps — a National Airlines 727 flying to Miami apparently disappeared from radar screens for around ten minutes; when it landed, the crew checked their watches and discovered they were each running ten minutes slow.

Other reported experiences include compasses spinning wildly, tow boats disappearing, enveloped in fog while everywhere else is clear, shining lights on the sea, "white-out" — where sea and sky merge into one — and blue-green hazes or a glow on water or in the air. Add accounts like this to the lack of wreckage and sudden disappearances and it is hardly surprising that many explanations rely on supernatural or science fictional scenarios.

Theories have been propounded, and published worldwide, that people on these ships and planes have been kidnapped by the crews of UFOs; alternately that they have been kidnapped by the citizens of an advanced underwater civilisation living in the depths of the Caribbean. Other explanations include the "hole in the sky" (in the sea, for the ships) which craft can enter but not leave; that under the sea there is a vast but hitherto undiscovered electronic installation, a remnant of an extinct civilisation, which sucks the vessels in; even that concentrated magnetic fields in the area have rendered the craft invisible.

The appeal of the legend of the Bermuda Triangle, or Graveyard of the Sea, or HooDoo Sea, as it is sometimes called, has much to do with the fact that it is a modern-day mystery. Technologically advanced electronic equipment and scientific knowledge appear powerless against unknown forces. In days gone by, those forces would be attributed to witchcraft; today, people prefer to believe in visitors from other planets. It is no coincidence that reported sightings of UFOs are higher proportionally in the Triangle area than anywhere else in the world.

There is no doubt that the area covered by the Bermuda Triangle lends itself to science fiction. The Caribbean, Florida and Bermuda is popularly thought of as a holiday paradise with weather to match, but in fact the weather can be extremely changeable with storms, high waves, mists and thick cloud blowing up out of nowhere.

The sea, as well as the powerful warm Gulf Stream current, which flows at about 4 knots per hour and which can therefore carry wreckage right out into mid-Atlantic, also contains many counter currents and sub-currents. The area around the Bahamas is known for its whirlpools, created by strong currents around the "blue holes", a series of cave and tunnel labyrinths in the limestone rock of the sea floor created millions of years ago when the area was still dry land. Tornadoes over the sea and sudden tidal waves are well-known at certain seasons, caused not only by currents and wind, but also seismic disturbances.

Clear Air Turbulence (CAT) is often found at the edge of the jet stream, an air current flowing from south west to north east off the east coast of the USA. This can throw small planes all over the sky, and possibly, at its worst, break them up.

The Bermuda Triangle is also one of only two places on earth where the compass points to true north rather than magnetic north, which has certainly confused navigators and pilots in both the past and present. The other place is the "Devil's Sea", off the eastern coast of Japan, which is just

as notorious as the Bermuda Triangle for mystery losses of ships and planes – so much so that the Japanese Government ordered an inquiry in 1955, and has subsequently declared it a danger zone.

Add to this closeness of the Sargasso Sea, on the eastern borders of the Triangle, which has a folklore all its own, and you can see how easily the area fits its air of mystery. The Sargasso is a large area in mid-Atlantic, notable for its lack of currents, between the Gulf Stream which flows past to the north, and the North Equatorial Current. The Sargasso gets its name from the abundance of Sargassum seaweed which smothers the area. With no current to take it anywhere, the sea appears stagnant, and in the days before motorised engines, mariners used to dread being becalmed on the Sargasso, with its attendant legends of monsters, especially sea serpents (it's a main spawning ground for European and American eels), and rotting hulks of ancient ships.

The Bermuda Triangle theory grew in notoriety from that one incident in 1945, but there was an explosion of publicity in 1974, when Charles Berlitz's book *The Bermuda Triangle*, was published. It became a best seller, selling around 10 million copies worldwide, receiving extensive coverage in the UK press and serialised in the *Sunday Express* in February 1975.

Berlitz's book promotes the unnatural and mysterious forces viewpoint. The first half chronicles the disappearances, both before and after the 1945 incident. In the second half of the book, he details a number of the theories which have been put forward, devoting one chapter to the prosaic, 'no mystery' advocates, and four chapters to the supernatural argument. Luminaries such as J Manson Valentine, an oceanographer, and the late Ivan Sanderson, a writer, are quoted at length, particularly Valentine, who is credited as a collaborator in the book's authorship.

Sanderson was a supporter of the advanced underwater civilisation theory. He also devised a world map showing twelve areas where most "magnetic space time anomalies" have occurred, including the Bermuda Triangle. All are stored at around 36° north or south of the equator (except two which cover the north and south poles). Sanderson reckoned that the Bermuda Triangle was the most well-known because it is the most heavily used by air and sea traffic.

Sanderson also noted in the case of the Rubicon that, if the crew had abandoned ship, it would be unusual not to have rescued the ship's mascot, the dog. He suggests that the crew was forcibly removed by "entities who wanted only specimens capable of oral communication". Sanderson claims that while dogs, cats and canaries have been found on abandoned ships, parrots, which mimic oral communication, have frequently been missing as well.

Valentine suggests the "visitors from space" idea, but does not discount visitors from the depths of the ocean either. He hopes that they are either distantly related to the human race or at least advanced enough to be friendly and altruistic rather than aggressive. He is quoted in Berlitz's book as saying that the magnetic peculiarities of the Triangle area may provide an answer to the disappearance and that the presence of UFOs could activate electro-magnetic aberrations.

Berlitz also quotes John Spencer, a student of UFO phenomena and US Air Force veteran, as saying "since the disappearance of ... vessels ... or commercial airliners going in for a landing *cannot* happen according to earthly standards and yet *are* happening, I am forced to conclude that they are being taken away from our planet". Spencer's theory is that the disappearance can be attributed to space kidnappers, possibly interested in monitoring the development of our civilisation, or wishing to preserve human specimens before a world nuclear war.

Berlitz's own preferred theory is that a vast solar crystal exists at the bottom of the sea, and once was the main power supply for the lost city of Atlantis. The crystal is activated when planes and ships pass over, sending their instruments haywire and pulling them in to their doom.

The book, despite its newspaper serialisation and the fact that it popularised the Triangle legend, was heavily criticised in press reviews, largely for stressing supernatural explanations at the expense of some of the more rational arguments which are given only lip service in its pages.

Berlitz also wrote a second Bermuda Triangle book. *Without a Trace*, which goes into greater details but in fact covers much the same ground as the first.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the US Coast Guard in Miami is not too impressed with talk of space kidnapping and undersea civilisations, preferring to point to the extraordinary weather conditions which can blow up without warning. The Coast Guard attributes the losses to environmental factors and human error, including inexperience and disorientation caused by the true north reading on magnetic compasses.

The science fiction explanations put forward in Berlitz's book were "debunked" at length by Lawrence Kusche in his book *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery – Solved*, which appeared a year later. Kusche's work was received much more favourably, although it is a indication of the relative popularity of other worldly versus prosaic explanations that Kusche is now out of print whereas Berlitz's original *Bermuda Triangle* is still available.

In general, Kusche says, like the Coast Guard, that the disappearances are due to abnormal weather conditions blowing up unexpectedly, and inexperienced pilots not being able to cope. The lack of any wreckage he attributes to the prevailing currents, particularly the Gulf Stream which will carry remains far out to sea.

Kusche gives detailed counter-explanations for many of the incidents described by Berlitz, dealing at length with the case of the five US Navy pilots, the disappearance of which largely began the tradition of the Bermuda Triangle.

Kusche refers to the US Navy's 500-page report on the disappearance, and says that the many of the final radio messages quoted by Berlitz (particularly a last one from the flight leader apparently saying "Don't come after me – they look like they're from outer space") were an invention.

Kusche's explanation is that the patrol got lost because the leader's compass failed and he couldn't tell if he were east or west of the Florida peninsula. Kusche goes on to point out that the other four pilots were students, and that the leader himself was new to the area. The patrol repeatedly searched east and west for land, but since they were actually over the Bahamas rather than Florida, they didn't find it. When they ran out of fuel, it was dark and the sea choppy; there was little chance they could survive for long or be rescued.

Kusche also produces an eye witness who saw the rescue plane which failed to return explode in mid-air.

A postscript to the Five Avenger bombers case is a newspaper article from 1987 which reports the discovery of wreckage thought to be one of the US Navy planes. It was discovered 20 miles west of Key West, Florida (note, *not* the Bahamas), sunk into mud at the bottom of 33 feet of water.

As for the DC-3 which vanished within 50 miles of Miami, Kusche says that although the captain did radio Miami Control Tower to say that he was only 50 miles away, he did not say that he could see the city lights. Kusche goes on to say that pilots tend to underestimate distance when at the end of a long flight, that he could have been double the distance away and off-course. He further points out that the plane only had one and a half hour's worth of fuel left in the tanks – not necessarily enough to reach Miami and land, if he were off-course. It was three hours before search planes went out and the fast Gulf Stream could have moved the wreckage some considerable distance by then.

The Bermuda Triangle Mystery – Solved also pours cold water on many of the "retrospective" ship losses which have become part of the legend. The Rosalie, he says, was in fact called the Rossini, and ran aground two weeks before being discovered off Nassau. The crew were all rescued – apparently the cat and canaries were not deemed worth saving.

As for the Rubicon, found drifting off Florida in October 1944, the New York Times reported at the time that the ship had been in port at Havana when a hurricane blew up and broke her mooring. The crew was on shore when the ship drifted out.

Whether you prefer to believe in science fiction style explanations or more prosaic reasons for the Triangle's mysterious, it is certainly not true to say that the area is "dangerous". Air and sea traffic off the coast of Florida and the Caribbean islands is heavy – one of the busiest air and shipping routes in the world – and made more busy by the large number of pleasure boats and private planes flying in the area. It is worth noting that the Chalk Airline, which operates a taxi service between Miami and a number of islands and has done so daily since 1919, has suffered no disappearances at all.

Further reading:

The Bermuda Triangle, by Charles Berlitz (Grafton Books), £2.50

Without a Trace, by Charles Berlitz (Grafton Books), £2.50

The Bermuda Triangle Mystery – Solved by Lawrence Kusche (New English Library) (currently out of print)

From the New York Police Department's Missing Person's Files

MISSING

NAME: Daniel Schultz

AGE: About 36

OCCUPATION: Officially unemployed; part time petty crook and hustler

DETAILS: Wanted for assault and first degree murder in downtown New York. First time Schultz has lost his head; he's been done for burglary and petty assaults before, but this time he blew it, and used the gun.

Was on the wanted list for two weeks before being sighted by police at Newark airport, but eluded capture. All scheduled flight departure gates were put under surveillance and the department is positive that Schultz did not board a scheduled flight. One eye witness reports seeing a man similar to Schultz's description hanging around near Patterson's plane. Did he manage to get on board? If he did, it would explain none of our boys can trace him now.

From the Federal Aviation Administration's file on the disappearance of private charter flight 376 from Newark to Barbados.

MISSING

NAME: Nicole Lascelles

AGE: 25

OCCUPATION: Secretary

DETAILS: Very middle class. Lives in New York and had arranged a last minute holiday in Barbados. Had been booked a seat on Flight 376, as it was the only one available at such short notice, by the Press Association. Apparently, she has friends in the business.

MISSING

NAME: Don Quayle

AGE: 44

OCCUPATION: Airline pilot with Acme Chartered Enterprises

DETAILS: Highly experienced civil aviation pilot. Qualified 18 years ago, joined Asis. 'Retired' from Asis two years ago; apparently he wanted to spend more time with family, but there was also question of his being "stale" or burnt-out over his ability to cope in a crisis, bad weather etc. Joined private charter company last year. They say he was a good steady pilot, no problems, no complaints from crew – maybe it was just rumour.

MISSING

NAME: Gina Rodriguez

AGE: 24

OCCUPATION: Air Stewardess

DETAILS: Stewardess with Asis; had flown with Quayle while he was still with company. Going to Barbados on holiday to join fiancée. Quayle apparently took her on as stewardess to pay her fare.

MISSING

NAME: Jack Patterson

AGE: 44

OCCUPATION: Businessman

DETAILS: Visiting Barbados with view to negotiating takeover of sugar manufacturer. Chartered flight from Asis, in which he is a minority shareholder. Founder and chairman of Patterson Industries, Inc. Recently very active in takeover market. Patterson is a known tough guy in business dealings, but also had a fear of flying in Bermuda Triangle area. He knew the legend and theories well about magnetic aberrations and "holes in the sky" well. One of his companies once sponsored a SORAC (Society for Research into Ancient Civilisations) expedition into Triangle.

MISSING

NAME: Matt Hickey

AGE: 25

OCCUPATION: Marine biologist

DETAILS: Newly qualified, very keen. Research lab where he works is sponsored by Patterson Industries. Went out on a working holiday, with brief to bring back some coral specimens for his lab. Single, but his parents have been on the phone to us day and night.

MISSING

NAME: Lisa Ricelli

AGE: 29 (has been for years)

OCCUPATION: Model/actress

DETAILS: Would-be jetsetter with few visible means of support. Name has been linked for some time with pop star a good ten years younger than her, but there is also some talk of a liaison with Patterson. Visits Barbados two to three times a year for undisclosed reasons (believe the Narcotics Squad may have a file on her somewhere). Long divorced (twice).

From the Federal Aviation Administration's file on Triangulair plane, hired by the New York Star and Herald, flying from private airfield outside New York to Virgin Islands.

MISSING

NAME: Bill Benson

AGE: 26

OCCUPATION: Journalist

DETAILS: Senior reporter on the New York Star and Herald. Given three months sabbatical leave to investigate recent spate of disappearances in Bermuda Triangle. A resourceful man, he was forced to book every seat on the one and only plane belonging to Triangulair Airlines (on the newspaper's expenses) and set off into the Triangle. Newspaper had planned a serialisation using eye witness accounts from people who'd experienced strange happenings within the Triangle. Benson was rumoured to have his own reasons for going but officially, had a view to writing a book on his own impressions afterward. Apparently was heading towards Virgin Islands on initial flight out. Also had an appointment with Seventh Coast Guard in Miami scheduled for two weeks time.

Letter accompanying report from the chief investigator to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Dear John,

I'm afraid it's bad news. We've combed the area by air and sea and come up with nothing, not so much as a piece of wing-tip, never mind black boxes. It's as though both planes had vanished into thin air. Mind you, the coastguards and the aerial reconnaissance boys have had all sorts of weather thrown at them. Sure, the Triangle's known for its cyclones, but we've had some of the most changeable climatic conditions for 50 years. One minute it's clear for 30-40 miles, the next it's swirling mist and hurricane force winds.

Two more disappearances in so short a time aren't doing much for our PR. The whole of the main island and most of Florida is full of tales about UFO's, lost civilisations of Atlantis, interplanetary kidnappers, you know, all that nonsense they were spouting back in the seventies. I don't mind telling you, John, I don't hold with spooks and all that stuff, but there is something creepy about that whole Triangle area. The compasses don't read right, the radio static's dreadful, and the wind and sea come right up at you from nowhere.

I met with one guy in Nassau who gave me a horror story about his last flight. Seems he wanted to go up to Bermuda on business. He says his controls went bust halfway over, the compass flipped, gas meter all over the shop, says he just kept going till he spotted land and took the slow boat home. He was still shaking when he told me about it. I haven't put this in the report, but I reckon it could be time for a proper inquiry into this whole business.

Air traffic control in all the relevant areas positively state there were no distress signals of any kind from either plane. The pilot knew the area well enough and I'm surprised Quayle didn't radio in at all. He's been flying for a good 15 years and should have been able to spot any trouble coming up. Anyway, we've seen the records and no-one in the whole of the Caribbean heard sight nor sound of them.

Frankly, John, they could have gone down anywhere in an area of 720,000 square miles. It's full of islands and reefs, half of which don't seem to be on our maps – a real needle in a haystack job. With that sort of distance it could be optimistic looking for wreckage, since the Gulf Stream will shift it right out into the Atlantic anyway. Still, it's all in the report, though I'm afraid it won't make very happy reading.

Best wishes

