

# THE DEADLY BERMUDA TRIANGLE

The following article appeared in the February, 1964, issue of the American magazine *Argosy*. It is perhaps the best and most comprehensive summary of one of the great unsolved mysteries of the sky. It will be noted that the late Wilbert B. Smith, head of the Canadian Project Magnet, is referred to though no mention is made of his connection with flying saucers. Project Magnet was, however, primarily concerned with UFOs and it was in the course of such investigations that Wilbert Smith claims to have received extra-terrestrial information concerning areas of turbulence in our atmosphere and means of overcoming them. (See "Binding Forces" by Wilbert B. Smith in *FLYING SAUCER REVIEW*, March-April issue, 1961). It should also be noted that the reference to Project Magnet is to the current American investigative body which seems to have taken over the activities of the discontinued Canadian project. A reference to this new Project Magnet is to be found in the March-April, 1964, issue of the *FLYING SAUCER REVIEW*.

WITH a crew of thirty-nine, the tanker *Marine Sulphur Queen* began its final voyage on February 2, 1963, from Beaumont, Texas, with a cargo of molten sulphur. Its destination was Norfolk, Virginia, but it actually sailed into the unknown. A routine radio message on the night of February third placed the ship near the Dry Tortugas.

The 254-foot vessel was overdue on February 6, and a search was launched for it. Planes took off from Coast Guard stations from Florida to Virginia, while cutters patrolled the Atlantic Coast. When no trace was found, the search was abandoned on February 14.

Five days later, in the Florida Straits, fourteen miles southeast of Key West, a Navy torpedo retriever picked up a life jacket and several bits of debris believed to have come from the tanker. Nothing more has been found.

## Two strato tanker-jets

On August 28, 1963, two KC-135 four-engine strato tanker-jets took off from Homestead AFB, south of Miami, Florida, on a classified refuelling mission over the Atlantic. The crews totalled eleven men. The weather was clear.

At noon, the planes radioed their position as 800 miles north-east of Miami and 300 miles west of Bermuda. The planes were new, in radio contact with each other and they were not flying close together, according to an Air Force spokesman.

Then the planes vanished.

An extensive search was launched. Planes criss-crossed the area in formation, following a carefully planned pattern of observation. Vessels churned the surface of the sea.

On the following day, debris was discovered floating on the water about 260 miles south-west of Bermuda. No survivors or bodies were found.

It was presumed that the two planes had collided in the air, but two days after the disappearance, more debris was located—but it was 160 miles from the first discovery. What happened remains a mystery.

The mysterious menace that haunts the Atlantic off our south-eastern coast had claimed two more victims. Before this article reaches print, it may strike again, swallowing a plane or a ship, or leaving behind a derelict with no life aboard.

Other recent cases:

Two months earlier, on July 1, the 63-foot fishing boat *Sno' Boy*, under U.S. registry, sailed from Kingston, Jamaica, for Northeast Cay, a small island 80 miles south-east of Jamaica. Forty persons were aboard.

When it was overdue, the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard launched a search. Several bits of debris believed to be from the vessel were observed. Finally, after ten days, the search was abandoned.

On January 8, 1962, a KB50 Air Force tanker rolled down a runway at Langley AFB, Virginia, and headed east, bound for the Azores. Major Robert Tawney was in command of the crew of eight men.

A short time later, the tower at Langley received weak radio signals from the plane. Then the signals faded into silence.

Again, there was an extensive search, but there was no trace of wreckage or of bodies. After 1,700 fruitless man-hours, the search was ended.

During the past two decades alone, this sea mystery at our back door has claimed almost 1,000 lives. But even this is only an inference. In this series of disasters, not one body has ever been recovered.

U.S. Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard investigators have admitted they are baffled. The few clues we have only add to the mystery.

Draw a line from Florida to Bermuda, another from Bermuda to Puerto Rico, and a third line back to Florida through the Bahamas. Within this area, known as the "Bermuda Triangle", most of the total vanishments have occurred.

This area is by no means isolated. The coasts of Florida and the Carolinas are well populated, as well as the islands involved. Sea distances are relatively short. Day and night, there is traffic over the sea and air lanes. The waters are well patrolled by the Coast Guard, the Navy and the Air Force. And yet this relatively limited area is the scene of disappearances that total far beyond the laws of chance. Its history of mystery dates back to the never-explained, enigmatic light observed by Columbus when he first approached his landfall in the Bahamas.

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 a trace.

### **The Lost Patrol**

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 lost patrol. Here is the amazing story:

Early on a Wednesday afternoon, five TBM Avenger torpedo bombers lined up on runways at the Fort Lauderdale (Florida) Naval Air Station. The date was December 5, 1945.

Normally, the Avengers carried a crew of three—a pilot, a gunner and a radio operator. One crewman, however, failed to report on this day.

The bombers had been carefully checked and fuelled to capacity. The engines, controls, instruments and compasses were in perfect condition, according to later testimony. Each plane carried a self-inflating life raft and each man was equipped with a life jacket. All fourteen men had flight experience ranging from thirteen months to six years.

At two minutes past 2 p.m., the flight leader closed his canopy, gunned his engine, and the first plane roared down the runway. The others followed in quick succession, climbing up into the clear sky and heading east over the Atlantic at 215 m.p.h.

It was a routine patrol flight. The navigation

plan for the formation was to fly due east for 160 miles, then north for 40 miles, then back south-west to the air station, completing a triangle. The relatively short flight would require about two hours.

The first word from the patrol came to the base control tower at 3.45, but the strange message did not request the expected landing instructions.

"Calling tower, this is an emergency," the patrol leader said in a worried voice. "We seem to be off course. We cannot see land . . . repeat . . . we cannot see land."

"What is your position?" the tower radioed back.

"We are not sure of our position," came the reply. "We can't be sure where we are. We seem to be lost."

Startled, the tower operators looked at one another. With ideal flight conditions, how could five planes manned by experienced crews be lost?

"Assume bearing due west," the tower instructed.

There was unmistakable alarm in the flight leader's voice when he answered. "We don't know which way is west. Everything is wrong . . . strange. We can't be sure of any direction. *Even the ocean doesn't look as it should.*"

Let's suppose that the patrol had run into a magnetic storm that caused deviations in their compasses. The sun was still above the western horizon. The flyers could have ignored their compasses and flown west by observation of the sun.

Apparently not only the sea looked strange, but the sun was invisible.

During the next few minutes, the tower operators listened in as the pilots talked to one another. The conversation progressed from bewilderment to fear, verging on hysteria.

### **The pilot's bewilderment**

Shortly after 4 p.m., the flight leader suddenly turned over flight command to another pilot.

At 4.25 p.m., the new flight leader contacted the tower.

"Tower," he said, "we are not certain where we are . . . we think we must be about two-hundred-and-twenty-five miles north-east of base. It looks like we are . . ." The message ended abruptly.

That was the last word from the doomed patrol.

Tower operators signalled a rescue alarm. Within a few minutes, a huge Martin Mariner flying boat with full rescue and survival equipment and a crew of thirteen men was on its way.

The tower tried to call the Avengers to tell them help was *en route*. There was no reply.

Several routine radio reports were received from the Mariner. About twenty minutes after it left the base, the tower called the flying boat to check its

position. There was no answer.

What was happening out there over the sea 200 miles away?

By this time, it was dusk. Alarmed, operations at Fort Lauderdale notified the Coast Guard at Miami. A Coast Guard rescue plane covered the flying boat's route and reached the last estimated position of the missing patrol. There was not a sign of the six planes.

Navy and Coast Guard vessels joined the search. Through the long night, they watched for possible signal flares from life rafts. But no lights broke through the darkness above the black sea.

### The scale of the Search

At dawn, the escort carrier *Solomons* moved into the area and dispatched its 30 planes in an aerial search. Within a few hours, 21 vessels were combing the sea. Above the ships were 300 planes flying in grid search pattern. The British Royal Air Force pressed every available ship into service from the nearby territorial islands. All during the day, the sky and the sea were methodically criss-crossed over an ever-widening area.

The intensive search continued on the following day, not only between Florida and the Bahamas, but 200 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Twelve large land parties searched 300 miles of shoreline from Miami Beach to St. Augustine. Low-flying planes checked beaches south to Key West and north to Jacksonville. But not a scrap of wreckage or debris was found.

Military experts were baffled. How could six aeroplanes (including the large *Mariner*) and 27 men totally vanish in such a relatively limited area?

Did the planes eventually run out of fuel? While the *Avengers* were not especially buoyant, the Navy said they would remain afloat long enough for life rafts to be launched, and the crewmen "shouldn't even get their feet wet." All the missing men were trained in sea-survival procedures and had Mae West life jackets. After similar ditchings, Navy crewmen had existed for days, even weeks, in open sea.

Each plane had its own radio facilities. Why was no SOS received from at least one of the planes?

Commander H. S. Roberts, executive officer at the base, suggested that his flyers might have been blown off course by high winds. The Miami Weather Bureau reported that there had been gusts up to 40 m.p.h. in the general area where the patrol was last reported. These winds would not seriously influence flying.

A waterspout would affect only a low-flying plane. But if a freak waterspout *had* struck the patrol, there would certainly have been debris.

And what about the *Mariner*? Did it meet the same fate as the patrol?

All these theories disregard the puzzling circumstances reported by the flight leader: the curious observations and the strange inability to determine location.

On the night of the disappearance, the S.S. *Gaines Mills*, a merchant ship, notified the Navy that it had observed an explosion high in the sky at 7.30 p.m. No wreckage or oil slicks were found at the location given. But the explosion occurred more than three hours after the last radio message from the patrol, and it is unlikely that there is a connection. It may have been an exploding meteor.

"They vanished as completely," an officer of the Naval Board of Inquiry said, "as if they had flown to Mars."

A study reveals some possible clues.

### "A hole in the sky?"

If the patrol had flown west, they would have reached Florida or the Florida Keys. If they had flown east, they would have seen the Bahamas; Grand Bahama is almost twenty-five miles long. South-east were the Great Abaco and Andros islands. Open areas were north and south, but on such a clear day, islands and the mainland should have been visible part of the time.

We can only conclude that the patrol planes were flying in a circle between Florida and the Bahamas. This would mean that all five compasses were thrown off erratically to the same degree. If the errors had been constant, they would have flown straight and seen land somewhere.

Something affected the compasses; and it may also, later, have silenced the patrol's radios. The twin-engine *Mariner* not only had the usual radio facilities, but a hand-cranked generator for emergencies.

Combine these facts with the strange appearance of the sea, plus inability to see the sun, and a possible theory is an unknown type of atmospheric aberration. This aberration might be called "a hole in the sky." Its exact nature and why it is localized to semi-tropical waters within and near the Bermuda Triangle are not known.

Officially, the Navy does not go along with this theory. Captain E. W. Humphrey, co-ordinator of aviation safety, puts it this way: "It is not felt that an atmospheric aberration exists in this area, nor that one has existed in the past. Fleet aircraft-carrier and patrol-plane flight operations are conducted regularly in this same area without incident."

The fact that patrol operations are made without incident is no evidence against the phenomenon. It is obvious that it occurs only occasionally in the well-travelled triangle area, without warning, but frequently enough to be alarming.



Many commercial pilots who fly the triangle consider the aberration theory seriously. How else, they ask, can you explain what has been happening?

### **Project Magnet**

As for magnetic disturbances that can affect compasses, the U.S. Navy's Project Magnet is currently studying this phenomenon. Super Constellations, equipped with highly sensitive magnetometers, are covering much of the globe searching for magnetic anomalies or unusual variations.

Although the project is classified, it has been reported that peculiar magnetic forces coming from above have been detected in the Key West-Caribbean area.

A similar project, combining studies of magnetism with gravity, was authorized by the Canadian government in 1950. The late Wilbert B. Smith, an electronics expert at Ottawa, who was in charge of the project, claimed to have discovered regions of what he called "reduced binding" in the atmosphere with an instrument he devised.

Smith alleged that such regions had been found at locations where there had been unexplained plane crashes. They were described as roughly circular, up to 1,000 feet in diameter, and probably extending upward quite a distance. They appeared to be more common in the southern latitudes.

"We do not know if the regions of reduced binding move about or just fade away," Smith wrote. "However, we do know that when we looked for several of them after three or four months we could find no trace of them."

Smith believed that while many planes would not be affected by these regions, others might experience turbulence that would disintegrate them.

Project Magnet may well be investigating the theories of Smith as part of the research it is doing.

Let's take a look at what else has happened in the area.

There was the DC-3 passenger plane, operated by Airborne Transport Incorporated, and chartered for a predawn flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Miami.

It was December 28, 1948, when Captain Robert Linquist, of Fort Myers, Florida, manoeuvred the big airliner above the San Juan airport and headed for Florida, 1,000 miles distant. The 32 passengers, including two babies, had been spending the Christmas holidays on the island. Ernest Hill, Jr., of Miami, was co-pilot. Mary Burks, of Jersey City, the stewardess, served coffee and cookies to the passengers.

Everyone was in a gay mood. "What do you know?" Captain Linquist reported early on the flight. "We're all singing Christmas carols."

Several hours passed. By this time, most of the weary passengers had fallen asleep in the now-darkened cabin. Below the smoothly humming plane, dim in the starlight, the Florida Keys began to slip by. They were almost home.

### **The last contact**

At 4.13 a.m. Captain Linquist made his last contact with the Miami control tower: "We're approaching field," he said. "Only 50 miles out, to the south. All's well. Will stand by for landing instructions."

And then suddenly—seconds later—it happened!

It happened so swiftly that Captain Linquist and his co-pilot had no time to send an SOS. It happened so close to the mainland that the lights of Miami could be seen as a glow in the night sky ahead.

What is this doom that can strike a huge airliner so quickly, so close to home? What dread fate actually came to the men, women and infants aboard the DC-3?

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