



## The Skeptics SA guide to The Bermuda Triangle

Hoodoo Sea, The Devil's Triangle, The Twilight Zone, The Triangle of Death, Limbo of the Lost are some of the colourful names given to an area of 1 140 000 sq km in the Atlantic Ocean between Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Puerto Rico and the island of Bermuda. This area has been popularised as a graveyard for a number of ships and aircraft that have apparently experienced mysterious happenings, and then subsequently disappeared for unknown reasons.

The first recorded use of this region's most favoured name, The Bermuda Triangle was in an article written by Vincent Gaddis in February 1964 titled 'The Deadly Bermuda Triangle'. The article appeared in *Argosy*, an American fiction magazine, which promoted itself as 'the Magazine of Masterpiece Fiction' and 'A Magazine of Tales, Travels, Essays and Poems.'

Gaddis may have been responsible for this area's most favoured name, but the person to turn the myth into a worldwide sensation was Charles Berlitz. In 1974 Berlitz released *The Bermuda Triangle* and in 1978 followed it with *Without A Trace*. In these books he touched on possibilities that many were eager to believe in, such as UFOs, Alien Intelligences, Space Time Warps, Atlantis. Unfortunately, massive public support through book sales

does not necessarily indicate a scholarly and accurate account of investigative research and reporting. This first edition was even released without an index!

Berlitz claimed that a 103 foot (31 m) brigantine was found abandoned by the crew of the *Dei Gratia* in 1872 in the Bermuda Triangle and that strange forces may have been involved. Seeking the most logical explanation, we know that the ship had taken on water during a winter storm as did the *Dei Gratia* on the voyage across the Atlantic. There was no lifeboat or navigation equipment on the *Mary Celeste* when she was boarded by the *Dei Gratia's* captain. It is quite conceivable that the crew of ten may have prematurely launched the lifeboat fearing the vessel would sink. They were then lost at sea and perished. A small footnote to the *Mary Celeste* mystery was that this event didn't even occur in the Bermuda Triangle but the vessel was found between the Azores and Portugal!

The Bermuda Triangle would never have gained its legendary status without the mystery of Flight 19. On December 5 1945 five TBM Avenger torpedo bombers set off on a routine two-hour training mission over the Atlantic from their base at Fort Lauderdale,

Florida. This flight was known as a milk run because four of the five pilots were trainees, and this mission was simply to increase their hours in the air without an instructor.

Their Flight Leader was Lt Charles Taylor, who was a relatively experienced pilot who had only recently been posted to Fort Lauderdale. He may not have been at peak performance that day as some reports suggested that he was hungover, and had failed in his attempt to swap with somebody in the duty rotation.

Taylor believed that his compass had malfunctioned soon into the flight, so after circling for several minutes he chose to navigate by sighting landmarks. Taylor lived in Florida Keys, and he incorrectly identified an island of the Bahamas as the island he lived on. The weather was deteriorating and radio transmissions between Fort Lauderdale and Flight 19 were becoming scratchy. Taylor then ordered the patrol East in the search to find land as he believed they were over the Gulf of Mexico: in reality they were on course heading North up the Atlantic coastline. Flight 19 continued in their easterly direction farther out into the Atlantic Ocean and tragically ran out of fuel before realising their position. The wreckage may never be found as the planes may have

flown so far out to sea that they were no longer over shallow Caribbean waters, but off the continental shelf.

Many aircraft were sent to search for Flight 19 immediately but one, a Mariner seaplane, exploded 23 minutes after take off. They were notorious for fuel leaks and were nicknamed 'flying gas tanks.' None of the crew of thirteen survived. There have been many accounts stating that the Mariner experienced the same fate of mysterious forces as that of Flight 19. Berlitz wrote of the Mariner, "which inexplicably vanished during rescue operations." This seems completely untenable as the explosion was witnessed by several people and the oil slick and debris found. After this Mariner exploded, the Navy soon grounded all others.

At the end of these tragic turn of events, 27 men had lost their lives to a mixture of human error and the physical elements.

Possibly the most outrageous and fanciful reasons supporting disappearances over the Bermuda Triangle come from the proponents of the lost continent of Atlantis.

These Atlantean authorities claim that the continent of Atlantis is sunken below the ocean of the Bermuda Triangle. "The great Atlantean fire-crystals that once provided so much of the tremendous power and energy are still emitting strong energy beams into the universe — the force field becomes very powerful and any plane or ship coming within the influence of this force field disintegrates and is transformed into pure energy" — so the story goes!

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The Bermuda Triangle's notoriety, in light of all the available evidence, is based on a myth. All the facts indicate that the number of disappearances is not exceedingly high considering the area is one of the most heavily travelled in the world, and that any losses can be explained through rational investigation. If this region was such a hazard to the global community, then all commercial and recreational craft would be forbidden to enter these waters.

The greatest testament to the gullibility of the true believers of the Bermuda Triangle is that if all disappearances in this area were plotted on a map, only a small percentage would actually fall within the Bermuda Triangle's boundaries. It takes a great story-teller such as Charles Berlitz to whip the public into a delirium on a subject matter which should have been saved for the realm of science fiction.

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