

THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE

'Devil's Triangle disaster' screamed the headline in *The Globe* on 1 April 1980. Despite the date, it was not intended as a scam. Charles Berlitz, author of *The Bermuda Triangle* and *Without a Trace*, dragged the issue back into the public eye and sold even more books. 'Fifty planes vanish in two years' we were told, and words like 'eerie' and 'mystery' added to the effect. Larry Kusche's rational retort in *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Solved* didn't sell nearly as well.

Have you got time to check the examples given or are you forced to accept the facts on face value? After many hours of research, Michael R. Dennett published his analysis in the Fall 1981 edition of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Only twelve of the incidents were actually described and, of these, only three occurred in the Bermuda Triangle. One of the three was a simple case of air turbulence and incurred no loss of life, while the other two are too vague to verify. As Dennett says of one:

It has all the hallmarks of such an occurrence; namely, an unidentified vessel, with three unnamed people on board, vanishes on an unspecified date. The local newspapers carried no report of this incident and the Coast Guard was unable to confirm that a vessel matching this description had been lost in October.

(Dennett 1987, p. 48.)

Nebulous claims are typical of the quality of research and reporting which have fed the myth. The Bermuda Triangle

myth tells of an expanse of water in which people go missing in the strangest of ways. Is there some unexplained power lurking there, perhaps devilish aliens, forces from the lost city of Atlantis, anti-gravity fields, vile vortices or distorted magnetic fields? Or is it just some twist of fact which engulfs reason?

Reality check

When did you last hear of a disappearance in the Bermuda Triangle? Given the millions of passengers passing over or through it each year, you would expect to hear of a few at least. Wouldn't you?

The facts

Bermuda is a group of small islands in the Atlantic Ocean, once known as The Devil's Islands. The Bermuda Triangle is usually taken to refer to an area of ocean from Bermuda, south to Puerto Rico and west to Miami. This is a massive region of over a million square kilometres of open ocean.

In February 1964 American journalist Vincent Gaddis wrote 'The deadly Bermuda Triangle' for *Argosy*, a magazine which published mostly fiction. A myth was born.

Ask about the Bermuda Triangle and most people will quote, as examples of the enormous number of doomed craft, one of four cases in particular: the loss of an entire patrol of navy bombers, the wonderfully mysterious *Mary Celeste* or the loss of the *Spray*. Oh, and something about Christopher Columbus's compasses going crazy and spooky lights circling the ship. One at a time.

Flight 19

Flight 19, a patrol of five Avenger torpedo bombers, took off from Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station, Florida, at about 2.10 p.m. on 5 December 1945.

On a clear, sunny day, or so the story goes, an experienced crew took the bombers on a routine two-hour mission. All preflight testing went normally and the planes were well equipped with radio communications. Fully fuelled, they took off. Then came the famous message: 'Control tower. This is an emergency. We seem to be off course. We seem to be lost. We can't make out where we are'.

The tower replied: 'Head due west' but they didn't know which way was west, despite it still being daylight and, even if their compass had failed, the sun was still hours from setting.

'Everything looks wrong, even the ocean looks strange,' the leader said to the tower. At 3.45 p.m. the leader radioed to say they were still not certain where they were. Then there was silence.

A Martin Mariner flight boat with a crew of thirteen went out to search for them. After several routine messages, it too was lost without trace, and all its crew with it. Search parties found nothing, and the navy continues to have a standing order that crews look out for Flight 19.

And it's true. Mostly. The pilots were experienced but, according to the Department of Navy report on the incident, they were on an 'authorised advanced overwater navigational training exercise'. They were *students* of advanced navigation, not *experts*. Due to a compass malfunction, the instructor was uncertain of his location. The patrol follows the instructor's plane. Communications with base were hampered by interference from Cuban broadcasting stations, static and atmospheric conditions.

The 'clear, sunny day', according to official records, consisted of scattered showers and limited visibility. This was considered safe for the training exercise, but the sea, described as moderate to rough, was considered unsafe for ditching in an emergency.

Sighting the sun for navigation would not have been possible and hence the tower would not have expected them to do so. Many of the quotations from the pilots do not appear in any logs and so, it is assumed, have been fabricated for effect.

The flight lost direction and almost certainly ran out of fuel. By 8 p.m. they would have run dry and been forced to ditch into the rough seas.

One of the many search aircraft, a Mariner, blew up in an explosion witnessed and reported by a merchant ship in the area. The ship also passed through an oil slick at the place of the explosion. The Mariners were known to have a problem with fuel leaks and be at risk of such explosions.

Was the loss of Flight 19 a mystery? No. A tragedy? Most certainly.

The *Mary Celeste* and a problem with geography

The case of the *Mary Celeste* faces a slight geographical dilemma. She famously lost her crew and kept sailing for ten days until found near the Azores, with a breakfast serve of boiled egg just cut open and a full bottle of medicine still uncapped. A fascinating story which I would love to relate in detail, if only it was relevant. Unfortunately the Azores are way outside the Bermuda Triangle and the *Mary Celeste* cannot be considered a victim of this strange place.

In fact, it is estimated about 75 per cent of Bermuda Triangle incidents aren't. They fail the simple test of geography. For example, The *Bella* was nearly 5000 kilometres south when it sank, while *The Atlanta* left Bermuda travelling away from the Triangle. The *Freya* wasn't even in the same ocean; it was lost in the Pacific. The *Cyclone*, the *Raiku Maru*, the *USS Scorpion* nuclear submarine and the *V.A. Fogg* were not near the Triangle, although often quoted as evidence of its horrors. Some famous aircraft losses should also be disqualified. The *Globemaster* went down off the coast of Ireland while the British York Transport never entered the Triangle on its fatal flight from The Azores to Newfoundland.

Christopher Columbus and the Bermuda Triangle

There is a story oft told about Columbus's compass and the strange light which circled his mast and spooked his crew.

Magnetic north and true north are different. In Columbus's time, north was measured by the North Star. Columbus became aware, as was proven later, that compasses varied from true north as you travelled west or east. This was what he recorded in his log. There is no mention of the much quoted crazy movements of the compass.

The bright light was recorded and identified as a meteor which landed in the sea. It was much larger than usual, hence the record in the log. Again a light circling the ship's mast seems to be a fabrication.

The 'spooking' of the sailors appear to be more linked to the fear of not reaching land before rations ran out. The sighting of birds, usually associated with land, added to this despair and stories circulated among the traditionally superstitious sailors. But nothing in Columbus's log, which is readily available to the public, supports circling lights or crazy compasses.

The loss of the *Spray*

In 1909 the small boat *Spray* was sailed out to sea by Joshua Slocum, who had previously circumnavigated the world. She was only 11 metres long and had a beam of 4.3 metres. And Slocum took her out to sea and right around the world. There is no doubt he was an extremely experienced and skilful sailor, although his stories of one of Columbus's crew acting as helmsman when Slocum himself was ill and delirious does leave a little doubt as to his definition of reality.

At 65, this intrepid sailor set forth again to sail around the world. He went out into the open ocean and he wasn't heard

of again. Now does that strike you as requiring a strange force, or as a likely outcome of an elderly man tackling the open sea in a very small boat?

So the anecdotes go on. And on. And on.

Rational explanations for the losses

To lose ships in an expanse of over a million square kilometres of open ocean is no great surprise. Statistically the Triangle is no worse than any other large expanse of ocean. You want proof? Based on data and statistics, Lloyd's, the major shipping insurer, charges no more to insure ships which go through the Bermuda Triangle. They claim it is statistically no more dangerous. We are talking money here. What further proof do you need?

There are reasons why ships and planes disappear and no trace is found.

The Bermuda Triangle includes a small portion of the Sargasso Sea, but tales of ships lost anywhere in this sea seem to get into the Bermuda folklore. In the Sargasso Sea there is little wind or current, a higher salt level, warm water and seaweed—lots of seaweed. Seaweed is rarely found in the open seas and this phenomenon has caused many sailors to think they have found land. This particular seaweed, known as Sargassum weed, can be a real trap. The sea also rotates slowly, clockwise, in the middle of the Atlantic. Before powered craft, the ships could be caught without wind and a circling current. They never got out again. They were doomed.

The Gulf Stream is an extremely swift and turbulent flow which will quickly remove any evidence of a disaster in parts of the Triangle.

The Caribbean–Atlantic weather is notoriously unpredictable, subject to sudden storms and water spouts. The ocean floor includes some of the deepest marine trenches on the globe and hence makes tracing sunken vessels or aircraft close to impossible.

Reefs, shoals around the islands, strong currents and unpredictable weather all add to the risks. Then please don't forget human error. Sadly, it is a common cause of accidents.

The only real mystery about the Bermuda Triangle is how it ever became a mystery.

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