

The Loss of Flight 19

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Two TBM Avenger aircraft, similar to those lost in Flight 19.

Shortly after 2:00 p.m. on 5 December 1945, five TBM Avenger torpedo bombers departed U.S. Naval Air Station Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for a routine navigational training flight with Lt. Charles C. Taylor acting as the flight's leader. Taylor was a seasoned naval aviator with some 2,500 flying hours and multiple World War II combat tours in the Pacific. The group of aircraft, dubbed Flight 19, were to execute Navigation Problem No. 1, which was to fly to the east from the Florida coast, conduct bombing runs at a place called Hens and Chickens Shoals, turn north, then proceed over Grand Bahama Island. The flight's last leg was to fly back to NAS Fort Lauderdale. The weather was projected to be relatively normal except for a few scattered showers.

On the first leg of the flight, everything went as planned as they dropped practice bombs without incident. As the group began to turn north for the second leg of the journey, trouble began for Flight 19. At approximately 3:45 p.m., Fort Lauderdale's flight tower received a message from Taylor, who reportedly sounded confused and worried.

"Cannot see land," Taylor said. "We seem to be off course."

"What is your position," the tower responded.

Then there were a few moments of silence. Tower personnel peered out into the clear day in the direction where the planes were supposed to be operating, but there was no sign of them.

"We cannot be sure where we are," the flight leader announced. "Repeat: Cannot see land."

Contact was lost for about 10 minutes, but when it resumed, it was not the voice of the flight leader. "We can't find west. Everything is wrong. We can't be sure of any direction. Everything looks strange, even the ocean," the voice reported. There was another delay, and then tower personnel learned from intercepted transmissions that the flight leader had turned over his command to another pilot for unknown reasons.

After 20 minutes of radio silence, the new leader's voice transmitted to the tower, but it was trembling, bordering on hysteria. "We can't tell where we are... everything is... can't make out anything. We think we may be about 225 miles northeast of base..." For a few moments, the pilot rambled incoherently before uttering the last words ever heard from Flight 19. "It looks like we are entering white water... We're completely lost."

Within minutes, tower personnel scrambled two PBM Mariner flying boats carrying rescue equipment. They were headed for Flight 19's last known estimated position and after 10 minutes into the rescue flight, they checked in with the tower, but that was the last time one of the rescue planes transmitted back to Fort Lauderdale's flight operations. Now, six aircraft with personnel had vanished. For five days, Coast Guard, Navy, and naval aviation personnel searched extensively in more than 250,000 square miles of Atlantic and Gulf waters, but nothing was found—no aviators, wreckage, life raft, or even an oil slick. Nothing. The Navy

launched an investigation into the incident, but nothing conclusive was found.

Fourteen men were lost as a result of the Flight 19 tragedy. Thirteen more were lost from the PBM Mariner attempted rescue.

Added Information: Over the next five days after the tragedy, a massive search was conducted at sea and overland Florida. A number of old wrecks were found, along with various floating objects, but no confirmed trace of either the five Avengers or the PBM. Although the exact cause of the loss of the PBM is not known, it is pretty certain that some combination of fire and explosion caused the plane to go down with all aboard. The fate of the Avengers remains a mystery. However, the most likely explanation is that the aircraft ditched as a group off the east coast of Florida north of the Bahamas in the face of a rapidly moving severe weather front. The prospects of survival in an Avenger ditched at sea are marginal at best, especially for the air crewmen in the back. Ditching an Avenger at night in heavy seas would almost certainly prove fatal, causing the plane to break up, and if anyone got out, they would not last long in the cool December water and winds.

Exactly why LT Taylor became so disoriented will never be known. He took control of the flight sometime after the first turn, apparently believing the trainee flight leader had gotten lost. Having just come from NAS Miami he was familiar with the Florida Keys area but not with the Bahamas. His late arrival for briefing and request not to fly suggested that he might not have been fit for duty. He apparently had difficulty with one or both of his compasses. He may not have had a watch (and the plane had no clock) as he appeared to have no conception of time during the flight, frequently asking the others how long they had been on certain courses. Taylor was generally a good pilot, although he had gotten lost on three previous occasions, ditching his plane at sea twice. There were also rumors, never proven, that he had too much to drink the night before and that he was experiencing some unknown difficulty with this dating life (sounds like a lot of accident reports).

The board of inquiry concluded, "The leader of the flight became so hopelessly confused as to have suffered something akin to mental aberration." LT Taylor's mother took extreme offense at the Navy's conclusion, accusing the Navy of blaming her son when there were no bodies, no planes, and no evidence. With an attorney, she conducted her own investigation and petitioned the board for the Correction of Naval Records, which concluded "that an injustice is found in subject officer's record under applicable standards of Naval Law." LT Taylor was officially declared cleared of blame, with the conclusion, "The cause of the accident remains unknown." It most certainly wasn't due to aliens or the Bermuda Triangle.

In April 2017, the NAS Fort Lauderdale Historical Association and Museum Members installed a commemorative plaque at the former NAS Banana River seaplane ramp, "Dedicated to all U.S. Naval personnel who served at Naval Air Station Banana River (Patrick Air Force Base). October 1940 – August 1947. In particular, to the officers and crew of "Training 49," a Martin PBM-5 Mariner seaplane from NAS Banana River, lost searching for Flight 19 on 5 December 1945.