

"Lost Patrol"

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By **Michael McDonell**

At 1410 on 5 December 1945, five TBM Avengers comprising Flight 19 rose into the sunny sky above NAS Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Turning east the formation headed out over the Atlantic on the first leg of a routine exercise from which neither the 14 men of Flight 19 nor the 13-man crew of a PBM Mariner sent out to search for them were ever to return.

The disappearance of the five Avengers and the PBM sparked one of the largest air and seas searches in history as hundreds of ships and aircraft combed over 200,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, while, on land, search parties scoured the interior of Florida on the outside chance that the aircraft might have gone down there undetected.

But nothing was ever found. No wreckage, no bodies, nothing. All that remained were the elements of mystery and a mystery it quickly and easily became. Flight 19 "The Lost Patrol" is now the central element of the legend of the infamous "Bermuda Triangle." Much has been written and speculated about the Triangle, a stretch of ocean credited by some as being "the graveyard of the Atlantic," home of the forbidding Saragasso Sea. In actuality, the Triangle is no such geometric entity; it is an area whose northern boundaries stretch roughly from the southern Virginia coast to the Bermuda Islands, southward to the Bahamas and west to the Florida Keys. And within this area, it has been reported since 1840 that men, ships and even aircraft have disappeared with frequent regularity. Why? It depends on whom you talk to. Some claim that this Hoodoo Sea is a maritime Molech, that supernatural forces are at work there. Others assert that strange magnetic and natural forces unique to the area and unknown to modern science are responsible for the disappearances. Still more believe that with the heavy sea and air traffic moving through the area it is inevitable that some unexplained "incidents" are bound to happen. But no matter what the argument or rationale, there is something oddly provoking about these occurrences, particularly the "normal" circumstances which existed prior to each disaster. It is this writer's view that many a good tale would lie a-dying if all the facts were included.

Take the Lost Patrol, for example. The popular version inevitably goes something like this:

Five Avengers are airborne at 1400 on a bright sunny day. The mission is a routine two-hour patrol from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. due east for 150 miles, north for 40 miles and then return to base. All five pilots are highly experienced aviators and all of the aircraft have been carefully checked prior to takeoff. The weather over the route is reported to be excellent, a typical sunny Florida day. The flight proceeds. At 1545 Fort Lauderdale tower receives a call from the flight but, instead of requesting landing instructions, the flight leader sounds confused and worried. "Cannot see land," he blurts. "We seem to be off course."

"What is your position?" the tower asks.

There are a few moments of silence. The tower personnel squint into the sunlight of the clear Florida afternoon. No sign of the flight.

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

Contact is lost with the flight for about 10 minutes and then it is resumed. But it is not the voice of the flight leader. Instead, voices of the crews are heard, sounding confused and disoriented,

"more like a bunch of boy scouts lost in the woods than experienced airmen flying in clear weather." "We can't find west. Everything is wrong. We can't be sure of any direction. Everything looks strange, even the ocean." Another delay and then the tower operator learns to his surprise that the leader has handed over his command to another pilot for no apparent reason.

Twenty minutes later, the new leader calls the tower, his voice trembling and 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 rambles 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 a Mariner flying boat, carrying rescue equipment, is on its way to Flight 19's last estimated position. Ten minutes after takeoff, the PBM checks in with the tower . . . and is never heard from again. Coast Guard and Navy ships and aircraft comb the area for the six aircraft. They find a calm sea, clear skies, middling winds of up to 40 miles per hour and nothing else. For five days almost 250,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf are searched. Yet, not a flare is seen, not an oil slick, life raft or telltale piece of wreckage is ever found.

Finally, after an extensive Navy Board of Inquiry investigation is completed, the riddle remains intact. The Board's report is summed up in one terse statement: "We are not able to even make a good guess as to what happened."

Maybe not, but let's try. Popular versions of the story of the Lost Patrol such as the preceding tale bear striking resemblances to one another, so much so that, because of re-occurring passages in all of them, one is led to believe that a certain amount of borrowing and embellishing from a single source has been performed over the 28 years since the incident occurred. And let us say now that this article is not a debunking piece, but simply a perusal of an incident that has grown to the stature of a myth a legend that begs to be more expertly examined.

The following account is based on the official Board of Inquiry report concerning the disappearance of Flight 19 and PBM-5, Buno 59225. The record consists of testimony of individuals, expert opinions and logs of the numerous radio transmissions.

To begin with, the Lost Patrol was not a patrol at all. It was an over water navigation training hop composed of an instructor, four Naval Aviators undergoing VTB-type advanced training and nine enlisted aircrewmen who, with the exception of one, were all undergoing advanced combat aircrew training in VTB-type aircraft. The instructor was a combat veteran with 2509.3 hours of flying time, most of it in type, while his students had approximately 300 hours each, about 60 in the TBM/TBF. With the exception of the instructor, hardly a "highly experienced" lot.

The flight was entitled Navigation Problem No. 1 which ran as follows: (1) depart NAS Fort Lauderdale 26 degrees 03 minutes north and 80 degrees 07 minutes west and fly 091 degrees distance 56 miles to Hens and Chickens Shoals to conduct low level bombing and, after bombing, continue on course 091 for 67 miles, (2) fly course 346 degrees for 73 miles and (3) fly course 241 degrees for a distance of 120 miles, returning to NAS Fort Lauderdale. In short, a triangular route with a brief stop for some glide bombing practice on the first leg out.

Prior to the hop, the five Avengers were thoroughly preflighted. All survival gear was intact, fuel tanks were full, instruments were checked--but one mechanic commented that none of the aircraft had a clock. Of the 24-hour variety, clocks normally installed aboard aircraft were highly prized by souvenir hunters. Besides, everyone had his own personal wristwatch--or did he? Inside the training office, the students of Flight 19 waited for their briefing; they were going to be late- takeoff time was set for 1345 and the instructor hadn't shown up. At 1315 he arrived and asked the aviation training duty officer to find another instructor to take his place. Giving no reason, he stated simply that he did not want to take this one out. His request was denied; he was told that no relief was available.

It was the instructor's first time on this particular syllabus hop. He had only recently arrived from NAS Miami (where he had also been a VTB-type instructor). But to the anxiously waiting students, it was the third and final navigational problem. The previous two had been in the same general area and now they were anxious to complete the phase.

At last the briefing began. The weather for the area of the problem was described as "favorable." In the words of the training duty officer who attended the briefing, "The aerologist sends us a report in the morning. If weather conditions are unfavorable, he will inform us . . . and tell us about the condition. In the absence of any further information I considered the weather favorable." This estimate was later confirmed by another TBM training flight performing the same problem an hour earlier than Flight 19: weather favorable, sea state moderate to rough.

At 1410 the flight was in the air, led by one of the students. The instructor, whose call sign was Fox Tare Two Eight (FT-28), flew the rear, in a tracking position. ETA was 1723 and the TBMs had enough fuel to remain aloft for five to five-and-a-half hours. Hens and Chickens Shoals, commonly called Chicken Rocks, the point at which they would conduct low level bombing, was only 56 miles away. If they cruised at 150 mph, they would arrive at the Rocks in about 20 minutes or so. Thirty minutes for bombing and then continue on the final 67 miles of the first leg. At Fort Lauderdale, the tower picked up conversation from Flight 19: "I've got one more bomb." "Go ahead and drop it" was the response. A fishing boat captain working near the target area remembers seeing three or four airplanes flying east at approximately 1500.

Assuming that the flight flew the rest of the first leg and then changed to course 346, they would have been near Great Sale Cay by 1540. But at about that time, FT-74, the senior flight instructor at Fort Lauderdale. was joining up his squadron around the field when he heard what he assumed were either some boats or aircraft in distress. "One man was transmitting on 4805 to 'Powers' [the name of one of the students]." The voice asked Powers what his compass read a number of times and finally Powers said, "I don't know where we are. We must have got lost after that last turn."

Upon hearing this, the senior flight instructor informed Fort Lauderdale that either a boat or some planes were lost. He then called, "This is FT-74, plane or boat calling 'Powers' please identify yourself so someone can help you." No response but, a few moments later, the voice came on again asking the others if there were any "suggestions." FT-74 tried again and the voice was identified as FT-28. "FT-28, this is FT-74, what is your trouble?" "Both my compasses are out and I am trying to find Fort Lauderdale, Fla. I am over land but it's broken. I am sure I'm in the Keys but I don't know how far down and I don't know how to get to Fort Lauderdale."

The Keys? Both compasses out? FT-74 paused and then told FT-28 to ". . . put the sun on your port wing if you are in the Keys and fly up the coast until you get to Miami. Fort Lauderdale is 20 miles further, your first port after Miami. The air station is directly on your left from the port." But FT-28 should have known if he was actually over the Keys; he had flown in that area for six months while stationed at Miami. He sounded rattled, confused.

"What is your present altitude? I will fly south and meet you." FT-28 replied, "I know where I am now. I'm at 2300 feet. Don't come after me." But FT-74 was not convinced. "Roger, you're at 2300. I'm coming to meet you anyhow." Minutes later, FT-28 called again: "We have just passed over a small island. We have no other land in sight." How could he have run out of islands? How could he have missed the Florida peninsula if he was in the Keys? FT-74 was beginning to have serious doubts.

FT-28 came back on the air. "Can you have Miami or someone turn on their radar gear and pick us up? We don't seem to be getting far. We were out on a navigation hop and on the second leg I thought they were going wrong, so I took over and was flying them back to the right position. But I'm sure, now, that neither one of my compasses is working." FT-74 replied: "You can't expect to get here in ten minutes. You have a 30- to 35-knot head or crosswind. Turn on your emergency IFF gear, or do you have it on?" FT-28 replied that he did not.

At 1626 Air-Sea Rescue Task Unit Four at Fort Everglades heard FT-28: "I am at angels 3.5. Have on emergency IFF. Does anyone in the area have a radar screen that could pick us up?" ASRTU-4 Rogered and, not having direction-finding gear, contacted Fort Lauderdale, who replied that they would notify NAS Miami and ask the other stations to attempt to pick up the lost flight on radar or with direction finders. In all, more than 20 land facilities were contacted to assist in the location of Flight 19. Merchant ships in the area were asked to be on the alert and several Coast Guard vessels were told to prepare to put to sea. But there were delays. Teletype communication with several locations was out and radio fixes were hampered by static and interference from Cuban broadcast stations.

At 1628, ASRTU-4 called FT-28 and suggested that another plane in the flight with a good compass take over the lead. FT-28 Rogered but, from fragmentary messages between the flight leader and the students concerning their estimated position and headings, it appears that no other plane took the lead at this time.

Meanwhile, FT-74 was having his own problems maintaining contact with the lost flight. "Your transmissions are fading. Something is wrong. What is your altitude?" From far away, FT-28 called, "I'm at 4500 feet." At this point FT-74's transmitter went out and he had no power to continue on the common frequency with the lost Avengers.

According to the senior instructor's later testimony, ". . . as his transmissions were fading, he must have been going away north as I headed south. I believe at the time of his first transmission, he was either over the Biminis or Bahamas. I was about 40 miles south of Fort Lauderdale and couldn't hear him any longer."

Did he remember any more? Yes, he recalled that at 1600, FT-28 had reported that he had a visibility of 10 to 12 miles. FT-74 further stated that while flying offshore at the time, he had observed a very rough sea covered with white caps and streamers. (The surface winds were westerly, about 22 knots, and visibility was very good in all directions except directly west.)

Upon returning to Fort Lauderdale, FT-74 went to operations and related as much as he could remember of the conversations with FT-28 to the duty officer and requested permission to take

the duty aircraft out to search for the flight. Receiving no answer, the pilot then made the same request to the flight officer who replied, "Very definitely, no."

The flight officer had been notified of Flight 19's difficulty at 1630 by the duty officer. "I immediately went into operations and learned that the flight leader thought he was along the Florida Keys. I then learned that his first transmission revealing that he was lost had occurred around 1600. I knew by this that the leader could not possibly have gone on more than one leg of his navigation problem and still gotten back to the Keys by 1600. . . . I notified ASRTU-4 to instruct FT-28 to fly 270 degrees and also to fly towards the sun." (This was standard procedure for lost planes in the area and was drummed into all students.)

At 1631, ASRTU-4 picked up FT-28. "One of the planes in the flight thinks if we went 270 degrees we could hit land."

At 1639, the Fort Lauderdale operations officer contacted ASRTU-4 by telephone. He concurred with FT-74 and felt that the flight must be lost over the Bahama Bank. His plan was to dispatch the Lauderdale ready plane, guarding 4805 kc, on a course 075 degrees to try to contact FT-28. If communications improved during the flight, the theory would be proved and relay could be established.

Operations requested that ASRTU-4 ask FT-28 if he had a standard YG (homing transmitter card) to home in on the tower's direction finder. The message was sent but was not Rogered by FT-28. Instead, at 1645, FT-28 announced: "We are heading 030 degrees for 45 minutes, then we will fly north to make sure we are not over the Gulf of Mexico."

Meanwhile no bearings had been made on the flight. IFF could not be picked up. The lost flight was asked to broadcast continuously on 4805 kc. The message was not Rogered. Later, when asked to switch to 3000 kc, the search and rescue frequency, FT-28 called: "I cannot switch frequencies. I must keep my planes intact."

At 1656, FT-28 did not acknowledge a request to turn on his ZBX (the receiver for the YG) but, seven minutes later, he called to his flight, "Change course to 090 degrees for 10 minutes." At approximately the same time, two different students were heard; "Dammit, if we could just fly west we would get home; head west, dammit."

By 1700, the operations officer was about to send the duty plane out to the east when he was informed that a radio fix was forthcoming the aircraft was held on the ground pending the fix. At 1716, FT-28 called out that they would fly 270 degrees "until we hit the beach or run out of gas."

In the meantime, Palm Beach was reporting foul weather and, at Fort Lauderdale, they waited for it to move in. At 1724, FT-28 called for the weather at Fort Lauderdale: clear at Lauderdale; over the Bahamas cloudy, rather low ceiling and poor visibility.

By 1736, it was decided that the ready plane at Fort Lauderdale would not go out. According to the operations officer, the prospect of bad weather and the encouraging information that FT-28 was going to "fly west until they hit the beach" prompted his decision. It was for this reason that the senior instructor's request was turned down.

The decision was logically correct; but with hindsight, it was ironic and lamentable. To this day, FT-74 is convinced he *knew* where the lost flight *had to be*. He was denied the opportunity to prove his point. For reasons of safety and, perhaps, hopeful confidence, it was determined that

the single-engine, single-piloted ready plane would not be risked on an arbitrary flight into the gathering darkness over winter seas.

At 1804, FT-28 called to his flight, "Holding course 270 degrees we didn't go far enough east . . . we may as well just turn around and go east again." The flight leader was apparently still vacillating between his idea that they were over the Gulf and his students' belief that they were over the Atlantic.

The Gulf and Eastern Sea Frontier HF/DF nets had now completed triangulation of bearings on FT-28 from six different radio stations, which produced a reliable fix: he was within an electronic 100-mile radius of 29 degrees north, 79 degrees west; Flight 19 was north of the Bahamas and east of the Florida coast. All stations were alerted and instructed to turn on field lights, beacons and searchlights. Unfortunately, *no one* thought to advise the activities assisting in the attempted recovery of Flight 19 to make open, or "blind" transmissions of the 1750 evaluated fix to any aircraft of the distressed flight!

At 1820 a PBY was airborne out of CGAS Dinner Key to try to contact the flight. No luck. Transmitter antenna trouble. But garbled messages were still coming in from FT-28. "All planes close up tight . . . we'll have to ditch unless landfall . . . when the first plane drops below 10 gallons, we all go down together."

At about the same time, the master of the British tanker *Viscount Empire*, passing through the area northeast of the Bahamas en route to Fort Lauderdale, reported to ASRTU-4 that she encountered tremendous seas and winds of high velocity in that area.

More multi-engine search aircraft were dispatched by air stations up and down the Florida coast.

At NAS Banana River, two PBM-5s were being prepared to join the search, after being diverted from a regularly scheduled night navigation training flight. A flight mech checked out one of the planes, PBM-5 BuNo 59225, filled it with enough fuel for a 12-hour flight and, as he later testified before the Board, "I found it to be A-1. I spent about an hour in the aircraft . . . and there was no indication of any gas fumes. There was no discrepancy in any of the equipment and, when we started up the engines, they operated normally."

According to the pilot of the other PBM, "About 1830, operations called and the operations duty officer in regard to the five TBMs whose last position was reported as approximately 130 miles east of New Smyrna with about 20 minutes of fuel remaining. We received this position and were told to conduct a square search. We were instructed to conduct radar and visual search and to stand by on 4805 kc, the reported frequency on which the TBMs were operating. At the time we were briefed, Ltjg Jeffrey, in Training 49, was to make the second plane in the search. No other planes were included."

Were any plans made for a joint conduct of the search mission? "Yes, I was to proceed to the last reported position of the TBMs and conduct a square search. Lt. Jeffrey was to proceed to New Smyrna and track eastward to intercept the presumed track of the TBMs and then was to conduct an expanding square search at the last reported position of the TBMs."

What were the weather and sea conditions when you arrived in the vicinity of 29 degrees north, 79 degrees west? ". . . the ceiling was approximately 800 to 1200 feet overcast, occasional showers, estimated wind, west southwest about 25 30 knots. The air was very turbulent. The sea was very rough."

At 1927, PBM-5, Buno 59225, was airborne from Banana River with 3 aviators aboard and a crew of 10. At 1930, the aircraft radioed an "out" report to its home base and was not heard from again.

Cruising off the coast of Florida, the tanker *S.S. Gaines Mills* was sailing through the dark night when it sent the following message, "At 1950, observed a burst of flames, apparently an explosion, leaping flames 100 feet high and burning for ten minutes. Position 28 degrees 59 minutes north, 80 degrees 25 minutes west. At present, passing through a big pool of oil. Stopped, circled area using searchlights, looking for survivors. None found." Her captain later confirmed that he saw a plane catch fire and immediately crash, exploding upon the sea.

A message from USS *Solomons* (CVE 67), which was participating in the search, later confirmed both the merchantman's report and the fears of many at Banana River. "Our air search radar showed a plane after takeoff from Banana River last night joining with another plane, (the second PBM) then separating and proceeding on course 045 degrees at exact time *S.S. Gaines Mills* sighted flames and in exact spot the above plane disappeared from the radar screen and never reappeared." No wreckage was sighted and according to witnesses there was little likelihood that any could have been recovered due to a very rough sea. The next day, water samples, taken in the area, developed an oily film. The area was not buoyed due to the heavy seas nor were diving or salvage operations ever conducted. The depth of the water was 78 feet and the site was close to the Gulf Stream.

During the Board's examination of the disappearance of the PBM, several witnesses were questioned concerning gas fumes and smoking regulations, which were reportedly well posted and rigidly enforced aboard all PBMs. Although the Board's report is not a verbatim record and no accusations were made, there seems to be enough inference present to cause one to suspect that the Board was aware of the PBM's nickname, "the flying gas tank."

What followed is essentially what has been reported by so many others: five days of fruitless searching which revealed numerous older wrecks but not so much as a scrap of wreckage from either the TBMs or the PBM. The fate of the latter seems confirmed an in-flight fire of unknown origin and subsequent crash/explosion. The former's disappearance still has the aura of mystery, however.

Why did FT-28 not want to go on the flight; what was his state of mind? How could *both* his compasses have gone out? Did he have a watch? One suspects he did not, as he repeatedly asked the other flight members *how long* certain headings had been flown. These are only some of the questions which can never be fully answered.

But some have been.

We now know that FT-28 took the lead sometime after the turn north on the second leg, thinking that his students were on a wrong heading. We know that FT-28 would not switch to the emergency radio frequency for fear of losing contact with his flight. We also know that there were strong differences of opinion between the instructor and the students about where they were. The instructor, familiar with the Florida Keys, with both compasses out and with evidently no concept of time, could very well have mistaken the cays of the northern Bahamas for the Keys and the water beyond for the Gulf of Mexico.

But the students, having flown the area before, appeared to know exactly where they were and it was *not* the Keys or the Gulf. The lead passed back and forth between FT-28 and a student, and land was never reached as the flight zigzagged through the area north of the Bahamas.

Toward the end, the low ceiling and daytime ten-mile visibility were replaced by rain squalls, turbulence and the darkness of winter night. Terrific winds were encountered and the once tranquil sea ran rough. They would "fly towards shore," the better to be rescued.

Valiantly trying to keep his flight together in the face of most difficult flying conditions, the leader made his plan: When any aircraft got down to ten gallons of fuel, they would all ditch together. When that fateful point was reached, we can only imagine the feelings of the 14 men of Flight 19 as they descended through the dark toward a foaming, raging sea and oblivion.

Former TBM pilots that we questioned express the opinion that an Avenger attempting to ditch at night in a heavy sea would almost certainly not survive the crash. And this, we feel, was the case with Flight 19, the Lost Patrol. The aircraft most probably broke up on impact and those crewmen who might have survived the crash would not have lasted long in cool water where the comfort index was lowered by the strong winds. This last element, while only an educated guess, seems to satisfy this strange and famous "disappearance."