

## Places & Landmarks

# Reconstructing the Bermuda Triangle



*The mysterious origin of this famed locus of oceanic tragedy suggests that the curse of the Bermuda Triangle may be more maritime concoction than reality.*

### The Triangle's First Victims

It is 2:10 in the afternoon on December 5, 1945. Five Avenger torpedo bombers take flight from the U.S. Naval Air Station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The mission is a standard training flight: 13 students and their commander, Lieutenant Charles Taylor, are scheduled to fly a short, triangular path over the sea and then return to base.

But things did not go according to plan on that fateful afternoon. About an hour and a half into the flight, a transmission was received from Lieutenant Taylor. His compasses were not working properly, and he was lost. In those days, pilots didn't have snazzy technology like GPS to keep a constant update of their precise location, so in the absence of a working compass, a pilot had to fly by the seat of his pants. Taylor was an experienced pilot, but he was disoriented. He was accustomed to flying westward from Florida instead of east toward the Bahamas—the direction he was headed when he got lost. From the snatches of radio transmission that were received, it seems Taylor continued to lead his men farther out to sea, thinking that he was headed for land.

Taylor and his men were never heard from again, and their aircraft were never recovered. The most likely scenario is that they ran out of fuel and had to crash-land in the ocean. This tragedy would likely have disappeared into the annals of naval disaster had something very strange not happened next. A patrol plane, meant to search for the missing Avengers, never returned from its search and rescue mission. A merchant ship off of Fort Lauderdale reported

seeing a “burst of flames” in the sky soon after the rescue plane took off. The plane was a PBM Mariner; the aircraft were nicknamed “flying gas tanks” for their propensity to explode from a single spark.

### Putting the Triangle Together

The tragedy of 1945 received a good deal of media coverage at the time, and some speculated that mysterious, possibly supernatural, forces were responsible for the disappearance of the planes. Rumors of strange magnetic fields, time warps, and even alien abduction began to circulate. It didn't help that Navy reports on the incident, which were requested by Taylor's mother, concluded the incident was due to “causes or reasons unknown.”

Stories developed claiming that the Avengers disappeared over a particularly dangerous portion of the ocean. Not surprisingly, other accidents were found to have occurred in nearby stretches of sea. The exact dimensions of the Bermuda Triangle differ greatly depending on the source, but the three points are usually designated as Bermuda, Puerto Rico, and Miami, Florida. The Triangle's size is also in question; reports and studies list it as anywhere from 500,000 to 1.5 million square miles.

The area wasn't christened “the Bermuda Triangle” until the publication of a 1964 fiction story called “The Deadly Bermuda Triangle,” written by Vincent Gaddis and published in *Argosy* magazine. A decade later, the Triangle leapt into popular culture with 1974's best-selling book *The Bermuda Triangle*, a sensationalized account of mysterious accidents that had occurred in the area.

More mundane explanations for the Triangle's deadly powers point to the statistical probability of more accidents occurring in an area that sees high traffic. The waters between Florida and the Bahamas are frequented by pleasure boats, which are often crewed by inexperienced tourists. In addition, aircraft and boats are also sometimes victim to short, unexpected storms that dissipate before reaching shore and thus seem mysterious or fantastic. Still, whether or not the Bermuda Triangle is really more dangerous than other patches of sea, the persistent legends of tragedy have certainly prevented many a weary traveler from entering its dreaded perimeter.