The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Delusion: Looking Back after Forty Years

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Forty years have passed since my book *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved* was published in 1975. The most important chapter is “Flight 19,” the account of the five Navy Avenger torpedo bombers and a Martin Mariner PBM that disappeared on December 5, 1945. Flight 19 was on an overwater navigation-training flight from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to the Bahamas and back. The Mariner was searching for the Avengers after they got lost.

The disappearance of Flight 19 is the most famous, dramatic, complicated, and relevant incident in the part of the Atlantic Ocean off the southeastern coast of the United States that, twenty years later, would become known as the mysterious Bermuda Triangle. The original mystery story of Flight 19, as it was told for decades by those who did little or no research in authoritative sources, when compared to the true and accurate account—based on my research that included the official Navy report of the disaster, the personal records of flight leader Charles C. Taylor, the ninety-two personal interviews that I conducted, and my flight of the route—is a microcosm of how the mystery/delusion of the entire Bermuda Triangle story came about, and how I came to realize that the Bermuda Triangle is one of the biggest frauds/delusions that has ever been perpetrated.

Flight 19 is such a significant part of the Triangle story that, if the planes had safely returned to base, the concept of the Bermuda Triangle would never have been created. We would never have heard of the Bermuda Triangle, and all the articles, books, documentaries, movies, and websites about it would never have been created.

The loss of the Avengers (Figure 1) and the search plane was a legitimate, confusing, national front-page mystery at the time it occurred. Years later, magazines and newspapers began to publicize it and other supposed mysteries in the area. UFOs were a new, popular, and exciting topic in the 1950s. Best-selling books such as *Flying Saucers on the Attack*, *The Case for the UFO*, *The Flying Saucer Conspiracy*, *Strange Mysteries of Time and Space*, *Stranger Than Science*, and others speculated that Flight 19 had been captured by aliens from outer space.
Early in the popular 1977 Spielberg movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind, the Avengers suddenly appeared in the Mojave Desert. Near the end, the aviators, who had not aged, walked out of a huge UFO.

The part of the Atlantic Ocean where Flight 19 disappeared became popular when it was given a clever, catchy name by Vincent H. Gaddis in his February 1964 article “The Deadly Bermuda Triangle” in Argosy, a popular men’s pulp adventure and modest girlie magazine. A shortened version appeared in the July/August 1964 Flying Saucer Review.

The Argosy article, with several additions, then became Chapter 13, “The Triangle of Death,” in Gaddis’s 1965 book Invisible Horizons: True Mysteries of the Sea. In what is a rarity among those who would later add to “the mystery,” Gaddis listed the sources of information he used in the book:


The 1950s UFO bestsellers previously listed.

The Mystery of the Lost Patrol, Allan W. Eckert, American Legion Magazine, April 1962, which included fictionalized, dramatized messages that would be attributed to Flight 19 by many of the later mysteryans. [Mysteryans is my shortcut word for those who contributed to the creation of the mystery.]

Gaddis wrote:

Draw a line from Florida to Bermuda, another from Bermuda to Puerto Rico, and a third line back to Florida through the Bahamas. Within this roughly triangular area, known as the “Bermuda Triangle,” most of the total vanishments have occurred. Others have happened in adjacent areas to the north and east in the Atlantic, south in the Caribbean, and west in the Gulf of Mexico.

Gaddis did not define how far the “adjacent areas” extended, while adding, “This relatively limited area is the scene of disappearances that total far beyond the laws of chance.” He gave no information as to what were the laws of chance, but it sounded scientific, as if the matter had been thoroughly studied. Map 1 (based on my research) shows the intended routes or known locations of some of the mysteries in the “adjacent areas.” Many of the other alleged “mysteries” did occur in or closer to the Triangle, but the details of their losses were often inaccurate.
Gaddis’s writings started the tsunami of Bermuda Triangle magazine and tabloid articles, books, documentaries, movies, and the popular belief in unknown forces off the coast of the United States. His account of Flight 19 was largely based on the fictional quotations in the American Legion magazine article.

Many of the later mysteryans accepted Gaddis’s version and then embellished it with their own speculations rather than doing original research. Some added another alleged mystery or two.

My source of information about Flight 19 in Chapter 22 of The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved was the official Navy report: “Board of Investigation into five missing TBM airplanes and one PBM airplane, convened by Naval Air Advanced Training Command, NAS Jacksonville, Florida, 7 December 1945, and related correspondence.” No one who had declared the loss of Flight 19 to be paranormal or UFO-related used the official Navy report.

When I first heard of the Bermuda Triangle in the early 1970s, I realized it was quickly gaining in popularity. There were several reasons for my interest. First, it was an obviously unique and intriguing topic. Ships, planes, boats, and people were said to be disappearing off the coast of the United States! There were no survivors, no wreckage, no SOS, no clues. I had always wanted to write a book, but because I was entering a new profession and had a young family, there had never been a topic that so captured my interest that I was willing to embark on what would obviously be a huge research project. Second, I was an experienced pilot. By my early twenties I was a commercial pilot, flight instructor, instrument pilot, instrument flight instructor, advanced ground instructor, and flight engineer. I had logged several thousand flying hours, including more than four thousand takeoffs and landings, much of it as an instructor.

Third, my second master’s degree was in library science. Back then I was working in the Reference Department at Arizona State University’s Hayden Library, where we were barraged by student requests for information about the Bermuda Triangle for the term papers they had to write. Librarians know how to do research, which in the 1970s was far more difficult than it is with the technologies that exist today.

We could not find much about the Triangle, so I placed an ad in several library journals and soon received a large collection of magazine and newspaper articles, which I made available to the students. In retrospect, those students and many others across the country were a significant factor in the early growth of the Triangle story. Just as much false information today is spread by the Internet and social media, back then we knew that everything we found was not necessarily accurate. Today I still get letters and emails from students who are writing papers, only now they also have my information to use.

It might not seem likely, but pilots and librarians have an important common attribute. They absolutely hate to make a mistake, to be wrong. A librarian’s primary job is to help people find the information they seek, which can often be complex and difficult. The inability to find accurate information is failure at the job and embarrassing.

If a pilot makes a mistake, he and others can end up dead. I had known a few people who died in flying accidents: A top-notch crop duster pilot for whom I was a loader while in high school. Two friends who learned to fly the same time as I did crashed on a small dirt runway on a sloping hillside that I often used. One of my high-school flying students died when his father crashed his plane. I remain adamant about not making “misteaks” (a small tweak of humor here).

After deciding in the early 1970s to write a book about the Triangle, my research...
Lt. Charles Taylor was the instructor pilot of Flight 19, the five Avenger torpedo bombers from Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Station that disappeared on December 5, 1945. My experience as a pilot was invaluable when analyzing many of the “mysteries.” One case that was reported in a best-selling Triangle mystery book showed the writer’s lack of flying knowledge. His story was that a plane flying in the Bahamas had lost the use of its hydraulic system, so the landing gear could not be lowered, but “the plane seemed to be landing as if buoyed up by a cushion of air.” Every pilot I tell this story to laughs. Any student pilot with just a few flying hours knows what the “mysterious force” is. Ground effect is the increased lift and decreased aerodynamic drag that a wing generates when it is close to the ground or water. It can cause an aircraft to float far along the runway at a slowly decreasing airspeed before it finally settles in.

Another issue that confuses mysteryans is the difference between true north and magnetic north. When I was flying in Arizona in the 1960s, the difference was 12.5 degrees, and we had to adjust for it when navigating cross country. It changes minutely over the years as Earth’s magnetic pole slowly moves. The difference is now 10.6 degrees. Mysteryans claim it is a problem in the Triangle because the difference there is near zero and that can confuse navigators, causing them to get disoriented and disappear. Actually, navigation is simplified because adjusting for zero is quite easy. Duh.

My research showed that the mysteryans rarely mentioned anything that conflicted with their “mystery,” especially hurricanes and other severe weather. A well-known suicide that explained an abandoned boat found closer to the Azores than to Bermuda was ignored. See incident 46 on Map 1. Many “mystery” locations were thousands of miles away from reality. There was no credible evidence to support the oft repeated tales of only a canary being found on board, or of still-warm meals on the table of an abandoned ship.

In The Disappearance of Flight 19, published in 1980, I delved further into that case. After a lengthy search using the most advanced research methods of the time (library reference material, the U.S. mail, and long-distance phone calls), I located the (now deceased) sister and brother-in-law of Charles Carroll Taylor, the instructor pilot of Flight 19. I stayed at their home in Corpus Christi, Texas, several times in the late 1970s as they introduced me to local people who told me what they knew about Taylor. They visited my Arizona home, loved my swimming pool, and became friends with my family, especially my late father. We visited the Grand Canyon. They loaned me a large collection of reports, papers, letters, photos, and other correspondence that Taylor’s late mother and aunt had gathered.

Another part of my research was to visit the Confederate Air Force in Harlingen, Texas, on April 3, 1978. (The name was changed to Commemorative Air Force in 2002.) I examined their huge single-engine Avenger torpedo bomber on the ground, then (as a passenger) headed out over the Gulf of Mexico for a loud, exciting, and informative ride.

Two days later I rented a Cessna in Fort Lauderdale (I was still an active pilot back then) and flew the intended route of Flight 19 to the Bahamas, landing for fuel at Walker’s Cay, the chain’s northernmost island. I then flew back across the Gulf Stream and the Everglades to Key West, Florida, refueled a second time, then flew along the Florida Keys on the way back to Fort Lauderdale.

The reason for my seven-hour flight was to see what Charles Taylor had seen on his flight and what he should have seen. Although the training group he was in charge of took off from Fort Lauderdale at 2:10 in the afternoon and headed east toward the Bahamas, an hour and a half later he radioed that he was sure he was
Map 2. Flight 19's 5:50 pm position fix was a circle of 100-mile radius, several hundred miles north of where Flight 19 should have turned west toward Fort Lauderdale.

“I don’t know where we are,” Taylor was heard to say on the radio. “We must have got lost after that last turn. I’m sure I’m in the [Florida] Keys and I don’t know how to get to Fort Lauderdale.”

He said “both my compasses are out.” Taylor did not know where he was, which direction he was flying, or which way to go. He mistakenly identified himself as MT-28, which meant “Miami torpedo bomber.” That revealed that, mentally, he was flying out of Miami; those flights were performed in the Florida Keys, not the Bahamas. His correct ID, FT-28, Fort Lauderdale torpedo bomber, was eventually learned.

Dead reckoning navigation, which Flight 19’s students were practicing, does not use landmarks. It was used when flying over the ocean, out of sight of land. They fly in specific directions, according to their compass heading, for a specific length of time, based on the estimated wind direction and speed. Progress is marked on an erasable plotting board (see Figure 2). Taylor had extensive dead reckoning experience during his time in the Pacific war.

Prior to flying combat in the Pacific, Taylor had been based in Miami for a year, flying patrol over the Florida Keys and the Gulf of Mexico, watching for German U-boats. After his combat time in the Pacific, he was again based in Miami as an instructor. According to the information sent to me by the National Personnel Records Center, Taylor was “detached” to Fort Lauderdale on November 20, 1945, where the training flights went east to the Bahamas. Taylor reported for duty at Fort Lauderdale the next day, along with hundreds of other officers, student pilots, and enlisted airmen. He was flying again by December 1, but it is not known if he flew the Bahamas route before December 5. My conclusion, based on all my sources of information, is that this was his first time.

On December 5, when Taylor called, he was confused because there are parts of the smaller islands of the northern Bahamas (where he actually was) that do look like some of the islands in the Florida Keys. I saw both areas on my flight to the Bahamas and the Keys three decades after Taylor’s fatal flight. The official Navy report states that Taylor “allowed himself to be led to believe he was in a position in which he could not possibly have been.” Captain William O. Burch, commanding officer of the Naval Air Station, told Taylor’s mother and aunt he thought Taylor had confused the string of cays north of the Bahamas with the keys south of Florida.

Some of the writers and websites report that Taylor was confused because his compasses failed, and that is what caused Flight 19 to get lost and eventually disappear. That story, which has largely been accepted, has only added to the mystery. What kind of mysterious force, the mysteryans ask, would cause compasses to fail? What other disappearances has this strange force caused? After all, compasses, whether mechanical or fluid–filled, are known to be extremely trustworthy. Distrusting a compass could be a response for a pilot when the landmarks he sees do not tally with his compasses, especially after he has made some turns. A former Avenger instructor pilot told me how easy it was for him to deliberately disorient a pilot just by doing a few turns to see how quickly he could reorient himself. When I was a flight instructor, I discussed with my students the issue of absolutely trusting the compass before I signed for them to take their solo cross-country flights. Shortly after takeoff from Fort Lauderdale, the planes of Flight 19 were to perform low-level bombing practice runs at Hen and Chickens Shoals, fifty-six miles east of the Naval Station. That would involve turns and altitude changes, which can also be disconcerting, especially at diving speeds and higher g forces.

Believing he was in the Florida Keys where he had previously spent many months flying, Taylor refused to head west, as pilots had been instructed to do if they were lost or confused in the Bahamas. If he had actually been in the Keys, as he mistakenly thought, flying west would have taken them into the huge Gulf of Mexico. He insisted on...
heading north because he was certain he was south of Florida. One of the stark truths of flying (and hiking) is that the longer a person stays lost, the more confused and the more lost he becomes, which is even worse if night is approaching. (At least a hiker can stop moving to try to get reoriented.) Flight 19 continued to fly north from the Bahamas, despite at least one of the pilots saying they should fly west. But Taylor’s order had to be obeyed; he was the commanding officer.

Port Everglades Air Sea Rescue Unit 7 heard several messages between Taylor and the other pilots concerning their estimated position, their compasses, and which direction they should go. As best they could tell, no other plane ever assumed the lead.

Navy personnel had no idea where Flight 19 was until 5:50 pm, a half hour after sunset, nearly four hours after takeoff. An approximate position fix based on some of their radio calls was calculated. Flight 19 was somewhere in a huge area, 200 to 400 miles north of the Bahamas and sixty to 260 miles northeast of Cape Canaveral! (See Map 2.)

By that time, it had turned dark and stormier over the Atlantic. Fuel was running down and a strong wind was blowing out to sea. Turbulence, storm clouds, and the setting sun made it even more desperate. The only chance they had to survive was to immediately turn west.

But none of the Navy stations could contact the flight to let them know where they were and what to do. Radio contact had faded as the planes moved farther away and the sun had set. The atmosphere changes at night, drastically affecting radio reception: static and background noise increases, as does interference from commercial radio stations, especially the powerful music coming from Cuba. No one sent “blind” broadcasts, hoping that someone in the flight would hear it. The storm worsened after darkness fell; they surely were flying on instruments in turbulent air.

An old cliché is that flying is 99 percent boredom and 1 percent stark raving terror. I never did feel the boredom part during my flying career, but on a flight in northern Arizona in 1964 I had a scary hour-long experience in a Piper Comanche, concerned about if I would manage to survive. I was over a mountainous area at 17,500 feet (the plane carried no oxygen), trying at full throttle and full cabin heat to outclimb or outrace the dark thunderhead clouds that were rapidly developing below me as far as I could see. I was in serious trouble, but my anxiety and fear surely were nothing compared to what the men of Flight 19 must have felt, knowing they were doomed to go down in the cold, raging ocean in the darkness, with no chance of survival. I survived by spotting a small break between the huge clouds, diving between them, hoping the break would not close, hoping I would not crash into a peak, and then, miraculously, seeing an abandoned strip on a hillside and making a safe landing. I spent the night at a nearby ranch. I played a lot of pool.

On December 6, 1945, the day after Flight 19’s disastrous flight, more than 200 planes and seventeen ships from Florida and the Bahamas went out by dawn, braving high winds and heavy seas. Some small boats and their crews were rescued, but no trace, no one from Flight 19 could be found.

The Martin Mariner search plane that became a part of the mystery was seen (from a search ship) to explode in the air on the night of December 5 at 7:50. Mariners were called “flying gas tanks” because they carried almost 2,000 gallons of fuel. The next morning the ocean was so rough that not a trace of the plane or its crew could be found, even though they knew where it had come down. One officer I interviewed said that fumes were occasionally present inside the plane, and that he, while on duty in Greece, had seen a Mariner explode in the air.

Taylor’s flying skills and combat experience surely were extensive and heroic during the war, but I did interview two men who were with Taylor other times when he ditched. The first was his gunner, who told me “Taylor lost his bearings” on June 14, 1944, near Trinidad. They ran out of gas, could not get the raft out before the plane sank, and their depth charges blew up beneath them, but they were quickly rescued. The other ditch was January 30, 1945. After losing radio contact, Taylor couldn’t find Guam. He climbed so they could find him on radar. Almost out of gas, he ditched in a rough sea. He and his passenger spent a wet, cold, turbulent night in a raft and were saved late the next day. Photo 19 in the Flight 19 book shows Taylor in the raft, being rescued by the USS Bailey. December 5, 1945, was the third time he got lost. All these years after the publication of both books, I still get the question: “How did you solve the Bermuda Triangle mysteries?” The question I rarely get, which shows a more analytical mind, is: “Did the alleged disappearances actually occur the way the mystery writers said they did?” The answer is no, they did not.

Map 1 shows the Triangle, a thousand miles on a side. While the mysteryans claim it is small and limited, roughly half of the so-called unsolved mysteries occurred far from the Triangle; thousands of miles away in some cases. The numbers on Map 1 are the chapters in The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved. “Research” by the mysteryans was so poor that one ship that had been dismantled and lying on its side (obviously a storm victim) in the Pacific Ocean was included as a Triangle mystery.
Some occurred closer to Newfoundland and the route of the Titanic than to Bermuda. Many of the “mysterious losses” occurred because of storms, even hurricanes that the mysteryans did not mention. Today, the Bermuda Triangle is not the hot topic it was forty years ago, but it still gets plenty of interest. The numbers vary considerably, but as I write this, a Google search returns 3,650,000 entries for it; Flight 19 shows 285,000,000; my name shows 11,000. Some of the websites I perused show much of the same old stuff: accepting the mystery stories, then listing various “theories” such as death rays from Atlantis, a drawing of a UFO over Columbus’s ship, and so on. Some of the sites do present good information; many refer to my two books.

The concept of mysterious disappearances has become part of the language. In baseball, a batted ball that cannot be caught is said to have gone into the Bermuda Triangle. It is where money that disappeared in the stock market went, and where anyone is who is lost is said to be. The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in March 2014 in the Indian Ocean has been mentioned as a Bermuda Triangle–type situation, as expected.

The word solved in my title elicited comments from some who apparently believe that a solution had to involve UFO captures, death rays, or some other mystery solution. My solution is that the Bermuda Triangle is a fraud, a delusion, and that reality is far more interesting than the phony stories.

Someone wrote that I was a debunker, that my purpose was to snitch on those who I claim got it wrong. That comment is also devoid of reality. When I began my research, I had no idea how true or untrue the mystery stories were. Early on, I hoped to find that the mysteries were true, because I knew the first hardcover book on the market would be a huge bestseller. I wanted mine to be the first! Then reality reared its head. Good, honest research, which takes much more time than cobbling together “mysteries” that previous writers have created, revealed that virtually every incident had been distorted to make it look mysterious. Thus, I did not get the pleasure of having the first hardcover book to be published.

At the end of The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved, I stated that the Triangle was a “manufactured” mystery. That was a polite way to say it was a fraud. The “mystery” of the Bermuda Triangle is one of the most widespread frauds that has ever been perpetrated. It was based on poor research and distorted, untrue, inaccurate information that was uncritically copied, embellished, and sensationalized. Does it matter if people believe that forces “beyond the laws of science as we now know them” are capturing ships, boats, planes, and people, and that scientists, the Coast Guard, Navy, Lloyd’s of London, and other experts are said to be baffled by it all? If those alleged unknown forces in the Triangle are only light entertainment for the masses, does it matter that some people believe in them? So what if they believe in UFO captures, psychic powers, astrology, ancient astronauts, and ads to lose thirty pounds by the end of the month? What is the harm in it? Few of us will ever be affected by whether there are unknown forces in the Triangle or anywhere else.

Actually, there is an issue of greater importance than whether “paranormal forces” are at work anywhere. In this age of information explosion and social media, it is worrisome that so many people believe so many things without requiring any supporting evidence, that they employ little skepticism, have such a lack of curiosity, and such a bias toward what they want to be true, that they ignore what is true. Once false information becomes “common knowledge,” no matter how thoroughly it might be shown to be false, the false version will continue to be believed by some, either because they remain uninformed about the correct information or because they refuse to accept any information that is contrary to the beliefs they hold.

The need for skepticism, for paying close attention to detail, is of critical importance in everyday life. A healthy dose of skepticism might have saved billions of dollars from disappearing during the dot com debacle in the early 2000s and the financial meltdown in 2008. It would have kept millions of dollars from vanishing during the more recent Ponzi schemes.

Skepticism and critical thinking are important in politics when voters let their emotions rule rather than becoming informed on the positions of the candidates. It is important in issues of health, such as the vaccination/autism controversy, which is resulting in diseases that were virtually wiped out to start coming back. It is important in the discussion of the use of genetically modified food and the global warming situation.

Larry Kusche

Larry Kusche is the author *The Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved* (1975) and *The Disappearance of Flight 19* (1980). The books set high standards for investigative research and reporting on popular subjects. They demonstrate the need for critical thinking and being a skeptic. He has been a commercial pilot/flight instructor and a technical writer, and he was a founding CSICOP fellow. His first novel, *Return to Marble Canyon*, will soon be published. He has lived in the Phoenix area since the second grade (1947).

Gaddis' statements on the Bermuda Triangle and spontaneous human combustion have been criticized by skeptics for being inaccurate and misleading. Gaddis has also drawn strong criticism for ignoring possible natural explanations and inventing mysteries where none exist.[5][6][7][8]. Historian William K. Powers from Livingston College, Rutgers University has described Gaddis' *American Indian Myths and Mysteries* as an "outrageous and intolerable book" filled with crackpot claims and "Danikenesque delusions".[9]. Published works[edit]. Winona Lake: A Memory and A Vision. (2015). "The Bermuda Triangle Mystery Delusion: Looking Back after Forty Years". Skeptical Inquirer. Retrieved 12 November 2016.
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