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SEA MYSTERY AT OUR BACK DOOR

In this watery region off the coast of Florida
ships and aircraft vanish without leaving a single clue.

By George X. Sand

THE *Sandra* was a square-cut tramp steamer. Rust spots showed here and there along her 350-foot length. She carried 12 men and radio equipment. She had sailed from Savannah, Georgia, with 300 tons of insecticide destined for delivery at Puerto Cabello, Venezuela.

It would not be delivered. Not ever.

Thumping her way leisurely southward through the heavily traveled steamer lanes off Jacksonville, the *Sandra* was on course. All was in order. From her bridge the friendly, winking beacon of St. Augustine Light must have been easily visible through the peaceful tropic dusk that shrouded the low Florida coastline off the starboard rail.

The crewmen had been at mess, and now those not on duty drifted aft to smoke and talk and reflect upon the dying day and what the morrow would bring. Probably not one of those present suspected he would never live to see it.

When the search vessels and planes were called off, several days later, the case was officially recorded as "unsolved." It became but another baffling incident in a series of strange marine disappearances, each leaving no trace whatever, that have taken place in the past few years right at the back doorstep of the United States.

The region involved, a watery triangle bounded roughly by Florida, Bermuda and Puerto Rico, measures less than a thousand miles on any one side. A small area on any mariner's map, it is hourly being ploughed by vessels of many nations. It is guarded over by radio. It is under constant surveillance from the dozens of commercial airliners that fly over it daily.

Yet its potential for mystery apparently remains just as great today as when Columbus first sailed its milk-green waters . . .

On Wednesday, December 5, 1945, five Navy *Avenger* type torpedo bombers roared away from the Naval Air Station at Fort Lauderdale, Fla. It was to have been a routine flight. It ended in one of the greatest peacetime

searches in history. And, once more, not a single trace was found.

There were 14 men aboard those bombers. As the hours passed anxious buddies back at the base and in other aircraft out on patrol listened in hopefully on the radio channels. But no word came to tell of the whereabouts of the missing flyers.

The last routine message, received at 5:25 that gusty afternoon, had given the position of the flight as 75 miles northeast of the Banana River (Florida) Naval Air Station, or about 200 miles northeast of Miami.

The hands of the clock crawled around to the point where the bombers' fuel supply would be exhausted. Still no word. The Navy swung into action. Search planes and ships were ordered out to cover the entire area from Key West northward to Jacksonville and 250 miles out to sea.

For the benefit of the public the Navy pointed out tersely that the *Avenger* bomber was noted for its buoyancy. In similar emergencies such planes had always remained afloat long enough for the crews to launch the life rafts, often "without even getting their feet wet."

One of the first rescue craft to roar off the water in search of the missing fliers was a Navy PBM, a huge *Martin Mariner* bomber with a crew of 13 that had been

trained for just such work.

This plane, too, was to disappear without a trace.

Interest in the disappearances now reached the stage where it dominated discussion in the streets. How could five bombers, each with its own crew and radio facilities, disappear from the face of the earth without even flashing a single message of explanation? It was hardly logical to assume that the planes had collided in mid-air, killing all the crew members simultaneously.

And, even were such a weird explanation acceptable, how about the PBM?

A merchant ship, the *S.S. Gaines Mills*, sent a radio message to the Navy which described an explosion that had been observed high in the night sky at 7:50 o'clock that ill-fated Wednesday. Next morning, however, when planes and surface craft encircled the spot, no trace of wreckage or oil could be found.

Already a huge search armada, headed up by the Navy escort carrier *Solomons*, had joined in the hunt. Hundreds of Army, Navy and Coast Guard planes buzzed and banked over the sea. Seventeen assorted surface vessels churned the tropic waters. From the nearby territorial islands the British Royal Air Force pressed every available ship into service.

When the pilot of a commercial airline reported observing red

flares and a camp fire in the vicinity of Melbourne, Fla., the search was extended to the land. Swamps were searched with marsh buggies and by jeep and on foot.

All efforts proved in vain.

Comdr. Howard S. Roberts, executive officer of the Fort Lauderdale base from which the doomed flight had begun, said his airmen had apparently been blown off course by strong winds. The Miami Weather Bureau corroborated that freak winds, attended by gusts up to 40 m.p.h., along with showers and occasional thunderstorms, had prevailed over the area of the last reported position.

After this information the mystery enigma was to sink back into the depths of the sea. It would lie there, dormant, for three years. And then . . .

At 1 a.m. on Friday, January 30, 1948, disaster struck again. Once more it proved to be an aircraft, this time a heavy four-engined plane of the British South American Airways that bore the proud name *Star Tiger*. The ship was bound for Bermuda from the Azores. It had been overdue at Kindley Field, Bermuda, since 10:30 the night before.

While still several hundred miles away from Kindley, the big *Tudor IV* airliner had sent its last routine message. There had been no indication of trouble, either with the aircraft or the 23 passengers and six crewmen aboard.

At dawn the search was begun. The U. S. Navy ordered 10 surface vessels out. The weather was gloomy and fitful and got progressively worse. By late the following day strong seas were coursing through the desolate area, with gray-bearded waves 40 feet in height. It was no weather for flying. The 30-odd Air Force, Navy and civilian planes which had been fruitlessly searching the leaden waters were recalled.

Once again mystery shrouded the victims, mystery that was deep, complete.

On March 5 of the same year another disappearance took place, this one within a few miles of metropolitan Miami itself, in the shallow and relatively protected waters of Florida Bay. Here, for a change, some evidence of the grim ending would remain to mock the weary searchers.

Internationally famous horse racing jockey Al Snyder and two friends set out on a fishing expedition into the Florida Keys. Anchoring their cabin cruiser, the *Evelyn K.*, near Sandy Key, which lies about 10 miles offshore from Cape Sable, the southernmost point of the United States mainland, the three men set off in a small skiff to fish the surrounding shoals.

When they failed to return to the cruiser the Coast Guard was notified. The usual search was begun. It started with several

boats from nearby Everglades City descending upon the site. These fishing skippers, sun-darkened men who had grown up in the Keys and who knew what it meant to be adrift beneath a burning sun, or worse, lost in the mosquito-ridden swamps without fresh water or anything better to eat then perhaps a few coon oysters, joined willingly with the Guardsmen in searching every likely spot.

By the end of the second day it became obvious that the search was accomplishing little.

And then searchers found an oar identified as belonging to the missing skiff. Then a hat was found. By this time the army of searchers was increasing at an astonishing rate. There were at least 800 persons fine-combing the area now, including Coast Guardsmen, sportsmen and fishing guides, Army jungle combat teams in amphibious craft. One hundred boats of all descriptions churned the turquoise shoals of the bay. No less than 50 private and Armed Forces planes wheeled and dipped overhead, exploring every foot of the water and jungle patchwork below.

Then the skiff was found. Empty, it lay lodged in the mangrove roots of an unnamed island near Rabbit Key some 60 miles to the north of where the three men had set out.

The search was renewed with

frantic vigor now. For the hours were growing short when missing men could remain alive without nourishment. Bloodhounds and Indian guides led the way through the swamps and along the shorelines of silent lagoons where long-legged wading birds watched their intrusion with beady eyes.

The missing jockey's wife refused to accept the inevitable. Racing friends of Snyder were inclined to agree with her; it just didn't make sense that with all these searchers and equipment at least *one* of the men, or his corpse, couldn't be recovered.

These same friends offered rewards totaling some \$15,000 to anyone who could produce such conclusive evidence. A blimp was chartered — and inside it the worried turfmen flew over the atolls and headlands where Army helicopters still hovered and where foot soldiers thrashed through the underbrush, maintaining contact with walkie-talkie radios. Various supplies, food and bedding and what not, could still be seen scattered about where it had been parachuted to earth to aid the searchers.

But Al Snyder and his two companions were never seen again.

Trouble came again before the year was over.

Capt. Robert Linnquist, of Fort Myers, Fla., sat at the controls of his DC-3 transport plane in the pre-dawn sky on December 28,

1948. The ship, operated by Airborne Transport, Inc., of New York City, had been chartered for a flight from San Juan, Puerto Rico, to Miami.

Beside Captain Linnquist was his co-pilot, Ernie Hill, Jr., of Miami. Neither Floridian was a stranger to this particular run, especially now that they were over the soil of their native state. The plane had safely covered all but 50 miles of the 1,000-mile trip. The skipper had just sent a radio message at 4:13 a.m. giving their position to explain why they would be slightly late (they had been due to land at Miami by 4:03 a.m.).

Stewardess Mary Burks of Jersey City may have stepped into the control cabin about that time to serve the two pilots coffee and to comment upon her 30 passengers, including two babies. The passengers, mostly Puerto Ricans, were returning to the States after spending the gay Christmas holiday on their native island.

It had been an easy trip, marked by good feeling all around. There had been some singing of Christmas carols and now all was quiet back in the darkened cabin. Outside, starlight lay in silver radiance against the low metal wings of the DC-3. Although scattered clouds rode the night heavens with them, it was smooth flying up here, with the slumbering little islands of the long Keys

chain beginning to slip past far below (the U. S. Weather Bureau stated later there was no likelihood the plane had been forced down by bad weather).

And then . . . disappearance. Abrupt. Complete. Not even a piece of torn, silver wreckage visible against the land when daylight came. Or an empty life jacket floating on the surface. Or even an unusually heavy concentration of sharks and barracuda in the clear water . . .

Again the search was launched from the air, from the water, on the land. As many as 48 Coast Guard, Navy and Air Force planes joined together in pinpointing the Florida Bay and Keys area; a region still fresh in their memories from the Al Snyder incident. It was still the same shallow expanse of gin-clear water, only a fathom or two in depth. A ship the size of the transport should be clearly visible even on the bottom.

The DC-3 had carried three 10-man life rafts and there had been life preservers for all the passengers. It even boasted a "Gibson Girl" portable radio transmitter for automatically sending SOS signals. No such signals were ever intercepted.

A report that bodies had been sighted on a Cuban beach proved to be unfounded. But the search area was extended, nevertheless, to include the entire Caribbean

and Gulf areas, as well as the southern tip of Florida in the Everglades region.

By the third day squally weather sprang up to hamper the search. But it didn't matter, really . . . nothing was ever found.

Three weeks later, a large task force of the U. S. Navy was on maneuvers south of Bermuda. The weather was good, the skies clear, the sea calm. No one suspected that up there in those bright skies 20 persons aboard a British South American Airways plane were hurrying to their deaths at 300 miles per hour.

The Avro *Tudor IV* airliner, this one known as the *Aerial*, was a sister ship to that other four-engined craft that had been lost to the same company in this vicinity less than a year before. With his 13 passengers and crew of six Capt. J. C. McPhee took off from Bermuda at 7:42 a.m., Monday, January 17, 1949. He was enroute to Kingston, Jamaica, five hours and 15 minutes away to the south. The 1,000-mile hop was to have taken them further along on their regularly scheduled trip which had begun in London and would end when they reached Santiago, Chile. For the five-hour hop the *Tudor* carried fuel for 10 hours of flying time.

When he reached a position 180 miles south of Bermuda (about an

hour after his departure) Captain McPhee, a veteran ocean flier, sent a radio message advising that he was changing frequency to pick up Kingston.

That was the last ever heard of the *Aerial*. No SOS. No earlier hint of trouble. Nothing.

Soon the radio wavelengths were crackling with terse messages between Bermuda, Kingston, Miami. The Coast Guard air-sea rescue headquarters at Miami ordered out rescue planes from as far away as Massachusetts. The Fifth Rescue Squadron of the Air Force, stationed at MacDill Field, Tampa, likewise became airborne. Word was flashed to the Navy task force already in the vicinity.

Two 27,000-ton carriers immediately joined in the search. Other units were likewise diverted. The U.S.S. *Kearsarge* and *Leyte* headed up one group of ships to the north side of the island of Cuba. Included in this group were the light cruisers *Fargo*, *Portsmouth* and *Huntington*,

aided by six destroyers.

Searching to the south of the island, between Cuba and Kingston, the 45,000 ton *Missouri* led a pack consisting of the light cruiser *Juneau* and four destroyer minesweepers.

The disappearance jinx would be broken now or never. Probably never again would there be an opportunity like this.

Six of the Coast Guard's two-engined PBM patrol planes now augmented the dozens of craft put aloft by the *Kearsarge* and the *Leyte*. Two merchant ships likewise turned from their courses to aid in the hunt. Thousands of pairs of sharp eyes, trained for just such work, scanned the surface of the smiling sea.

All in vain.

There have been other disappearances in this backyard sea of ours; Government and private aircraft, fishing boats, yachts. And always the record, when the account is finally closed, has the ominous notation: "No trace found."

IS THE GULF STREAM CHANGING?

LAST summer Norway had the coldest summer in more than 100 years. New snow fell in the mountains in the middle of July. Norway's leading oceanographer, Prof. Jonas Fjeldstad, announced that the Gulf Stream had vanished. He found evidence of counter currents from the north. If this change should be permanent, Norway and Sweden would become arctic deserts.