

Meetup in the Bermuda Triangle

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The thing about flying at night, at sea, with no moon or stars, is there is no horizon. No way to distinguish where the air ends and the water begins. You have to trust your instruments. The artificial horizon, or attitude gyro, and the vertical speed indicators are your guideposts.

That night, a cold day in December, was very dark. Flashes from the towering thunderstorm ahead provided the only lights. And of course, the white and cobalt blue flames coming out of the exhaust stacks on either side of the A-1E's massive Wright 2700 horsepower engine, and the red and green wingtip lights. This old bird had been designed before I was born and had the looks of a classic World War II fighter.

The rule about thunderstorms is to fly as low as possible underneath the bad weather. I decided five hundred feet was about right. Enough altitude to live through a sudden downdraft. High enough to be well over the small Caribbean atolls and keys that dot the Bahama Islands. The steady drone of the engine lulled me into a fixation on the artificial horizon and neglecting to watch whether I was holding my altitude or on a slow descent.

The warning button on the radar altimeter turned red, and an audible alarm sounded in my helmet's earphones. I shook my head, blinked, and pulled back on the stick while I added about ten inches of engine manifold pressure to permit me to gain altitude and level off again at five hundred feet. I throttled back to cruise settings and double-checked my heading against the magnetic wet compass. I was three hundred fifty miles off the coast. No chance I would miss hitting the United States but not at all certain I would be anywhere near the exit of the St. John's River. This area of the Caribbean had been labeled the Bermuda Triangle for numerous strange

occurrences, including difficulties in navigation. Then too there was that story about the missing Flight Nineteen – five Fort Lauderdale-based Navy TBM Avenger torpedo planes disappearing over these same waters in December 1945.

As I passed under the thunderstorms, the windscreen lit up with electrical sparks that crawled from the center outward. I glanced out to the wings and saw the St. Elmo's Fire advance from the fuselage outboard to each wingtip. I watched the meteorological phenomenon. Didn't seem to affect the navigation lights or my instruments.

Not much to do as I motored along and passed through the bad weather. I flipped the toggle switch to see if I could pick up the automatic direction-finding radio beacon on New Providence Island. The number one needle swung from side to side, pointing back to the thunderstorms. *No sense trying to use the onboard navigation aids. Just keep flying west, report back to the ship "feet dry" when I was over land. Then figure out if I was north or south of the St. John's River. From that point, it'd be a cakewalk to follow the eastern shore to the welcoming white and green rotating beacon at the Mayport Naval Air Station.*

The audible alarm from the radar altimeter woke me up and I instinctively pulled back on the stick and added throttle. The aircraft responded, and the altitude warning alert ceased. I again shook my head and thought how lucky I was to have technology work in my favor. I reduced power and stretched my torso and legs – time to dig out the maps.

The windscreen filled with an opaque gray, and I realized I had entered a fog bank. *Focus on the attitude gyro, keep the wings level, and maintain altitude.*

I reached down to the documents pouch on the right side of the cockpit and extracted the aviation charts for the southeast U.S. As I turned my head back up to the left, I had difficulty

getting my eyeballs to steady on the artificial horizon. My stomach churned with foul-smelling burps escaping my gut. My head hurt – classic symptoms of vertigo or spatial disorientation.

Focus on the attitude gyro. Ignore what my body is telling me. I am not in a turn to the left and a climb. The artificial horizon shows wings level. Do not touch the stick. Disregard the pain in my head. Keep my head steady and don't move it to upset the semi-circular canals in my ears further. The sloshing of fluids will settle down if I can sit still.

My nausea intensified, and I opened my helmet bag just in case I needed to barf.

I knew I was in a turn, and the instruments were wrong. I turned to the right and took off power to compensate. *There, that feels better. I'll have this bird thoroughly checked before I take it back to the aircraft carrier.*

The feel of the plane seemed normal. I smiled without a care in the world as the A-1E struck the water, cartwheeled, and came to a stop amid the screeches and sounds of tearing metal.

When my eyes opened, it was daylight, and I stood outside the cockpit on a sandy treeless island. My A-1E sat upright on a windswept beach. Somehow it was resting on its landing gear, and there was no damage to the airframe. I patted my body to see if I could feel my touch. Everything felt the way it should. I removed my helmet and my orange Mae West and dropped them on the sand.

“Hi there.” A voice came from behind me.

I turned to face the source. I saw five young naval aviators in World War II-era tan flight suits and cloth headgear. Five TBM Avengers sat on their landing gear undamaged. On the side of

each aircraft was stenciled, NAS Ft. Lauderdale. Looked just like the flyers that appeared at the ending of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

The Bermuda Triangle is real?

One of the other flyers shouted and asked, “What year are you from?”