

11-19-1987

In 1945 Flight 19 Flew To Its Doom Through a Large Cloud of Mystery

Donald E. Wilkes Jr.

University of Georgia School of Law, wilkes@uga.edu

Repository Citation

Wilkes, Donald E. Jr., "In 1945 Flight 19 Flew To Its Doom Through a Large Cloud of Mystery" (1987). *Popular Media*. Paper 19. http://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/fac_pm/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Popular Media by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Georgia Law. For more information, please contact tstriepe@uga.edu.

IN 1945 FLIGHT 19 FLEW TO ITS DOOM THROUGH A LARGE CLOUD OF MYSTERY

Published in *The Athens Observer*, p. 1A (November 19, 1987).

Author: Donald E. Wilkes, Jr., Professor of Law, University of Georgia School of Law.

If John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated in 1963 while driving through the streets of Dallas, and were still living, he would be 70 years old this year. This fact is fairly well known. What is less known is that another man who died a tragic early death, many years earlier, also would have turned 70 this year--last Sunday, Oct. 25, in fact. But unlike JFK, who was 46 when gunned down, this man was only 28 at death. And unlike JFK, this man took 13--some would say 26--others with him to death. This man was Charles Carroll Taylor, born in Corpus Christi, Texas in 1917. Charles Taylor was the veteran pilot in charge of Flight 19, which in one of the strangest incidents in naval aviation flew to its doom over the Atlantic Ocean in 1945.

For a long time the true story of Flight 19 was shrouded in mystery or beclouded by sensationalistic writing. There has been talk of the Bermuda Triangle, of space ships, of aliens from outer space. But in recent years new, bright light has been thrown on the matter, and the facts now seem clear and far less mysterious. Flight 19 was the subject of part of a "Nova" episode several years ago, and Larry Kusche has written two books on the disaster--most notably, *The Disappearance of Flight 19*, published in 1980. What we now know is that Charles Taylor is the principal reason why Flight 19 never returned.

Summary of Events of Flight 19

Flight 19 consisted of five naval planes and 14 naval and marine corps aviators (five pilots, the rest radiomen or gunners) manning them. The planes were Avengers--large, single-engined torpedo bombers used in World War II. Four of the planes were piloted by student pilots; the fifth was piloted by Navy Lt. Charles Taylor, who was the experienced officer in charge of the training flight.

The five planes took off from Ft. Lauderdale Naval Air Station shortly after 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 5, 1945, with enough fuel to stay aloft for around six hours. The students, under the supervision of Taylor, were to fly a triangular course which would take them away from the Florida peninsula and out over the Atlantic Ocean to the Bahamas and then back to Ft. Lauderdale. The course was around 300 miles long.

Before 4 p.m. distress calls were coming from Flight 19. The flight was somewhere near the Bahamas over the Atlantic Ocean, but instead of flying west, as would have been sensible and proper, the six planes followed a course which led them north and east and hence further and further away from land into the deepest ocean. The last radio transmissions from the doomed planes came shortly after 7 p.m.

Nothing more was heard from the planes, which then had about an hour's fuel left. At that time the flight was probably over the Atlanta Ocean, several hundred miles off Daytona Beach, and apparently still heading either north or east. Neither the planes, their crews, nor any wreckage was ever located, despite vast search and rescue operations. The five planes undoubtedly were

forced to ditch in the ocean far from the Florida peninsula. Where the planes went down there was no moon; it was the proverbial dark and stormy night; the winds were high and seas were turbulent; and all was blackness. It is not surprising that, as Kusche relates, the death certificates of the 14 men listed them as dying on Dec. 5, 1945--probably, it may be supposed, when the planes impacted with the ocean, due to injury; or shortly afterward, probably due to drowning.

Thirteen more men died that evening of Dec. 5, 1945--the crew of a military rescue plane that exploded over the ocean shortly after taking off to try and locate Flight 19.

Official as well as unofficial investigations (including Kusche's) concluded that, while there were other contributing factors, the principal cause for the loss of Flight 19 was error by Charles Taylor. In the late 1940's Taylor's persistent relatives obtained a decision from the highest levels of the Navy Department exculpating Taylor and blaming the tragic loss of Flight 19 on unknown causes, complicated by bad weather.

Who was Charles Taylor?

Born in Corpus Christi on Oct. 25, 1917, Charles Taylor excelled at nothing but mediocrity, in the public schools, at college, or in the military. According to author Kusche, Taylor's father ran away and left him as a small child to be raised by his protective mother and a female relative. Although he has defenders, Taylor on the whole appears to have been a lackluster pilot with a somewhat irresponsible attitude. Kusche presents believable evidence, in fact, that Taylor left on Flight 19 without taking a watch and without taking a basic navigational instrument (the plotting board.)

But the most interesting fact about Taylor's undistinguished career is that twice in WWII he was forced to ditch his airplane in the ocean because he had gotten lost, but luckily he was in each case able to ditch safely, enter a raft, and survive until rescued. Taylor ditched safely in the water a third time in WWII, but this time it was not his fault. This, then, was the man, with a proven record of getting lost and being forced to crash-land in the water, in command of Flight 19.

Charles Taylor's Blunders

Mistakes in judgment by Charles Taylor led to its tragic fate. The mistakes are amazing, but they do explain what happened, unlikely as it was. The mistakes include: (1) getting lost in the first place, after taking over from a student pilot; (2) mistakenly thinking he knew where he was when he didn't, and broadcasting that he didn't need help; (3) mistakenly thinking he was in the Florida Keys when he couldn't possibly be, and even after ground radio told him of his error; (4) causing the flight to proceed on a generally northerly and easterly direction, and causing the flight to sometimes change directions 180 degrees back and forth; and (5) refusing, despite repeated requests, to change Flight 19's radio frequency to the more audible emergency channel.

Incredibly, published transcripts show that as late as 6 p.m. Taylor was instructing his men to fly east! Those transcripts also indicate that at least two of the student pilots wanted to fly west, but followed orders to the contrary issued by Taylor. There is, then, no longer a need to

envelop the loss of Flight 19 in mystery or the occult. Fatal errors by Charles Taylor, compounded by errors committed by the rescuers (which will not be recounted here), were what caused the disappearance of Flight 19.

Flight 19 and Close Encounters

There is a charming scene in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, occurring toward the end of the photoplay. We are given indisputable evidence of the goodness of the aliens when they hand over the 14 men of Flight 19--who presumably never died but instead were captured and held by the aliens. It is as though the men are back from the dead. Presumably, one of them is Lt. Charles Taylor, alive as you or me.

Unfortunately, however, the hapless members of Flight 19 will never come back. These 14 young men, including Lt. Charles Taylor, died in the Atlantic Ocean, almost certainly on that Wednesday, Dec. 5, 1945, probably around 8 p.m.--at the time of or shortly after ditching in the cold, dark, violent sea--as a direct result of monumental but nonetheless human errors committed by Charles Taylor, who lived only 28 years.