

Unsolved Mysteries of...

Airplanes Gone AWOL

Stories of Airplanes that Disappeared without a Trace

The news this past month was dominated by the story of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, which disappeared on March 8. It was believed lost somewhere over the South China Sea while en route from Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, to Beijing, China.

It is hard enough to lose a truck, let alone an airplane, so when a Boeing 727 disappeared without a trace, the world was shocked. In fact, it was the first time in history that such a large aircraft disappeared and could not be found.

The airplane carried huge stores of fuel, triggering a massive search involving the CIA, FBI and other US agencies. The question was on everyone's mind: Was the airplane taken over by international terrorists and transformed into a massive flying suicide bomb?

But this case is not completely unique. Read the stories of other airplanes that mysteriously vanished.

Yakov M. Wagschal

Over the past month the world was riveted by the story of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 that disappeared into thin air. Governments, intelligence agencies, civil experts and news agencies around the globe were preoccupied with the story, touted as one of the most perplexing mysteries in recent times.

Imagine. A Boeing 777-200ER, a huge aircraft measuring 209 feet in length and boasting a wingspan of 200 feet simply vanished with its human complement of 239 souls. We are in the 21st century, when intelligence agencies observe everything happening anywhere in the world through radar and sophisticated spy satellites. How can a jumbo jet be “misplaced”?

But, like it or not, we are forced to admit that this is apparently what happened. Flight 370 took off on March 8 for a routine flight from Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaysia, bound for the Chinese capital of Beijing. The airplane, itself just a few years old, made final contact with air-traffic controllers less than one hour into the flight. It was not heard from again.

Over the coming days investigators pieced together bits of information from radar and satellites. They learned that the airplane continued flying for another six hours after “losing contact” with the ground. Evidence suggests that someone may have intentionally switched off the transponder and ACARS, devices intended to help authorities track the plane’s flight. After that, the plane was flown in a direction completely different from its authorized flight path.

The most extensive search mission in history was launched to locate the missing airplane and, more importantly, its missing occupants. An incredible tally of 26 countries became involved in the search operation over an area of 6 million square miles at sea. In the words of one CUNY professor, it was the equivalent of looking for a needle in 10,000 haystacks. According to England’s daily *The Guardian*, “Should the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 never be found, its disappearance would be by



An artist expresses his feelings regarding the lost airplane.



A Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777-200ER, similar to the aircraft that went missing.

far the biggest such unexplained disaster in aviation history.”

The biggest maybe, but not the only one.

Since December 22, 1910, when a private airplane en route from Dover, England, to Calais, France, disappeared while crossing the English Channel, 160 airplanes have disappeared from the face of the Earth without a trace. You read that right: 160 airplane disappearance mysteries have never been solved.

To be fair, the vast majority were far smaller than Flight 370. Some were carrying no more than the pilot, or just several passengers. As a result, they attracted limited attention and relatively little effort was invested in tracing them. In this article we examine some of the most astounding unsolved cases of airplane disappearance.

MYSTERY 1: Pan Am Flight 7



It began on November 9, 1957, when a US airplane belonging to Pan American Airlines took off from San Francisco, California. The airplane never reached its destination. The Boeing 377 known to Pan Am as PAA-944 carried 44 people, including the crew. It was on the first leg of a routine trip around the world with its first stop scheduled for Honolulu. It disappeared along the way...

The Boeing 377, aka Stratocruiser, was developed by Boeing after World War II and could carry 55 to 100 passengers. It was the largest, fastest and most luxurious airliner built by Boeing to date. The Stratocruiser was powered by four massive propeller engines that allowed for a cruising speed of 350 MPH—exceptional speed for an airliner at the time.

Known as “the ocean liner of the air,” it was outfitted with sleeping berths and even had a cocktail lounge on the lower deck. The seats of the Stratocruiser could be opened like recliners so passengers could rest on them. It boasted 60 inches of legroom between one row of seats and the next. Pan Am served a seven-course dinner complete with champagne on expensive china. Meals served in the first-class section were prepared by an exclusive restaurant in Paris.

Pan Am Flight 7 left San Francisco International Airport shortly before lunchtime on its 9 1/2 hour flight. It was carrying 38 passengers that day. Those on board were from the wealthier set who could afford the \$300 ticket to Hawaii or the \$1,600 (worth around \$11,000 today) ticket that allowed passengers to fly all the way around the globe. It included prominent businessmen, executives, doctors and government officials.

At 4:04 PM local time, Captain Gordon Brown contacted the *Pontchartrain*, a Coast Guard weather ship stationed in the Pacific

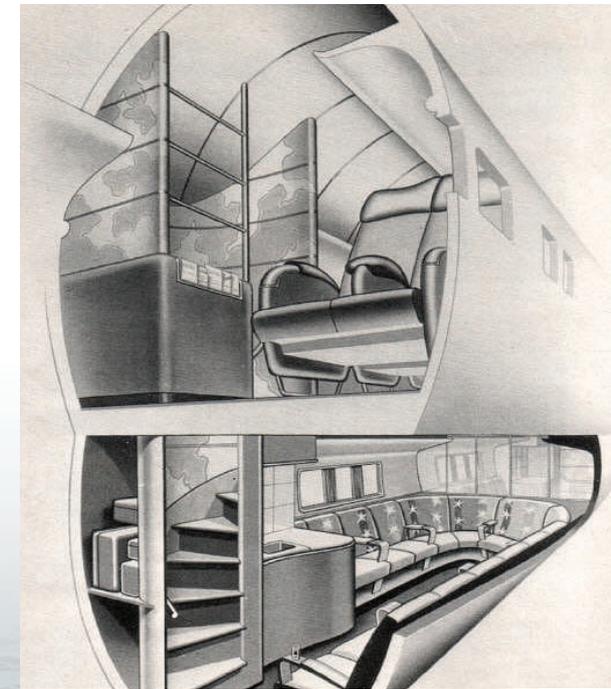
to assist aircraft flying nearby. It was a routine radio call to report his position: altitude 10,000 feet, 1,160 miles from Honolulu and about 10 miles east of the *Pontchartrain*. The skies were clear and the seas were calm. The flight attendants had just begun serving the meal when something occurred.

Where Is the Airplane?

The rescue agencies spent days painstakingly searching for signs of the missing aircraft. They finally solved the mystery—partially—days later when 19 bodies were found floating amid the wreckage, about 1,000 miles north of Honolulu. The



A Pan Am Boeing 737.



At the time, the Stratocruiser was the largest and most luxurious plane Boeing had ever built.