

THE WRECK OF THE SAPONA



The wreck of Sapona as seen from the air

Naval Planes Mysteriously Vanish

December 15, 1945. It was a typical afternoon at the Naval Air Station in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Flight instructor Lt. Charles Taylor climbed into his Avenger Torpedo bomber and readied himself for a routine over-water flight training mission. After coughing and sputtering a few times the 1,700 horsepower Wright radial engine growled to life. Weather conditions were described as “favorable” for the flight over the eastern Bahamas. There was no reason to suspect this flight would be anything other than normal, just one more routine training mission for the squadron of five planes.

The mission was straightforward; a triangular route over the eastern Bahamas with a practice bombing run on a well-known wreck in the Bimini island chain, the concrete ship Sapona. In an ironic twist, the exercise was officially known as Navigation Problem #1. About 50 minutes into the flight, radio transmissions overheard back at the base indicated the bombing run had been completed without incident. At roughly the same time a local fisherman

in Bimini spotted the planes flying overhead. But from that point on things started to go terribly wrong. Radio communications became troublesome. Flight 19 had lost its compasses and instructor Taylor could not determine his location. Over a period of hours the Naval air station communicated with Flight 19, trying in vain to help them re-establish their true position.

At one point Taylor radioed back that he thought they were over the Florida Keys and headed towards the Gulf of Mexico, hundreds of miles off the planned course. It was obvious the squadron was becoming more confused with each passing message. Ominously, fuel and nightfall would soon become a problem. One of the last transmissions heard was “...all planes up close tight...we’ll have to ditch unless landfall...” Around 6:20 pm, radio contact finally ceased. The fourteen crewman of flight 19 were now missing somewhere out in the Atlantic.

In response, the Navy launched a mammoth search and rescue mission but no signs of the missing flight were ever found. No wreckage, no bodies, no oil slick - absolutely nothing. Flight 19 had vanished into history. In a sinister endnote, a PBM rescue plane with 13 crewmen suddenly disappeared during the search mission and, like the missing torpedo bombers, no physical wreckage was ever found. Twenty-seven young men and six planes were now part of legend, the so-called Lost Avenger Flight 19. The Bermuda Triangle had struck again.

The doomed mission included a practice-bombing run on the Sapona, a famous wreck near Bimini.



Older photo, note stern section still in view on left

Fast Forward 50 Years

Anyone who has been to Bimini by boat is familiar with the wreck of the Sapona, a huge cargo ship often referred to simply as the “concrete ship.” Lying roughly 3 nautical miles south of Bimini on the edge of the Great Bahama Bank, she is an easily recognizable landmark and one of the first things you will see as you approach the island chain. Sitting in about 15 to 20 feet of water and rising 30 feet above the surface, she is both an aid to navigation and a hazard to avoid.

The Sapona, like Bimini itself, has a unique and storied past. She started out as a World War I cargo ship designed by Henry Ford and heavily built of concrete and reinforcing steel. During her early years she passed through a number of owners, each with a different vision for her future. At one point she was owned by Carl Fisher, the Miami Beach developer and founder of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. His plans were to permanently moor her in the Keys as a private club. When this fell through, he sold her to Bruce Bethell, a one armed rum-runner from Bimini. While being towed to Bimini in 1924 she ran aground and came to her current resting place. Some reports were that she hit a submerged Spanish wreck from earlier times. For a short period she served as a rum barge for bootleggers. Bethell then decided to turn the Sapona into a nightclub on the spot where she had run aground. Sadly, none of these visions ever came to fruition. Over the years her wooden deck and fittings were salvaged or stripped, no doubt some ending up as construction material on Bimini.

Today the wreck of the Sapona serves out her life as a great snorkeling site for visitors and locals alike. While no longer a prime fishing spot, schools of colorful reef fish make for excellent underwater viewing and the bar-

nacle encrusted propeller and engine shaft remain visible. Because of the ease of finding the Sapona she is as much a social pit stop as snorkeling site. A wonderful place to meet, relax and enjoy a frosty Kalik with friends.

Artifacts Still Being Found

During Bimini’s rum-running days in the 1920’s the area around the Sapona was a staging point for massive liquor barges. Permanently moored, they offloaded their cargo to smaller rum-runners for clandestine trips to Florida. The fearsome hurricane of 1926 wiped out the fleet, but liquor bottles are still found occasionally on the sandy bottom. In addition, divers continue to report finding .50 caliber machine gun bullets around the Sapona, no doubt from her days as a Navy practice target. If you’re lucky, maybe you’ll find something while snorkeling around the wreck. Who knows, possibly even a bullet from that doomed flight of fifty years ago.

Twenty-seven young men and six planes were now part of legend, the infamous Lost Avenger Flight 19

Hurricane Update

The historical 2004 hurricane season in Florida also impacted Bimini, though to a much lesser degree. Damage was very minor on the island but interestingly the storms did slightly shift the Sapona and the stern section is no longer clearly visible as it once was. You can see this change in the aerial photograph that was taken after the storms.



The Sapona many moons ago