

Sea find may be 'Flight 19' plane

KEY WEST, Fla. (AP) — Treasure seekers have discovered the wreckage of a plane they say might be one of five Navy aircraft that disappeared more than 40 years ago on a routine training flight.

The crew of Mel Fisher's Swordfish pulled a Grumman Avenger airplane from the 1940s out of mud in water 33 feet deep 20 miles west of Key West on Tuesday, said Don Kincaid, vice president of Treasure Salvors Inc.

The disappearance of Navy Flight 19, consisting of the five TBM-3 Avengers, torpedo-bombers normally based on carriers, and the loss of a twin-engine Navy Martin Mariner subsequently sent to search for them is frequently mentioned in the lore of the "Bermuda Triangle."

The Bermuda Triangle, off the southeastern coast of the United States, was popularized by Charles Berlitz in a best-selling 1974 book of that title that told of ships and planes vanishing into a mysterious void.

Navy and Coast Guard officials have scoffed at the theory, noting that some of the world's busiest shipping and flight lanes cross the area and that over the years, accidents are bound to occur.

Key West also is far beyond the westernmost boundary of the legendary Miami-Bermuda-San Juan triangle.

But Fisher, who has made millions salvaging treasure off the Florida coast, said he believes the plane could be one of the five.

Salvors "stumbled across" the wreckage in 1971 during a search for a galleon and were in the vicinity again last week, Kincaid said.

"Mel just wanted to pull it up out of curiosity," he said. "We ran across it again on a whim. We're not in the business of looking for Bermuda Triangle wreckage."

The five Avengers left a World War II training field at Fort Lauderdale on a training mission Dec. 5, 1945, each carrying a pilot and radio operator.

The flight leader was soon lost in hazy skies, despite the prevalent clear and sunny weather. Radio contact was maintained until the planes ran out of fuel still searching for the way home.

A Martin Mariner, a twin-engine patrol plane with 13 aboard, left the Banana River Naval Air Station near Cocoa Beach the next morning to search for the squadron.

The plane failed to return and no trace was found.

No human remains were found in the Avenger salvaged this week, said Mel Fisher's son, Kim.

When the fuselage was hoisted from the water, an open parachute spilled out, said Scott Nierling, a Treasure Salvors photographer.

The plane, estimated at 40 feet from tip to tail and with a wingspan around 60 feet, was brought to Key West for identification. It still bears Navy markings.