

My Bermuda Triangle Episode by Michael Merrill (20)

My second squadron in the US Navy was Patrol Squadron 44, (VP-44) stationed at NAS Patuxent River, MD. I reported there in late October 1969 after I was retrained in the P3 aircraft in VP-30, the Replacement Air Group (RAG) squadron. I reported to VP-30 in June 1969 after leaving my teaching assignment in the Math department at the US Naval Academy.

I reported to VP-44 on Monday the 27th of October 1969 and was on an P3 aircraft the next day to deploy with the squadron to NAS Sigonella, Sicily for five months. After returning to Pax River, the squadron was scheduled for another deployment to Rota, Spain in July of 1970. Although this deployment would be a split deployment where one half of the squadron would deploy the first half of the deployment because the squadron was going to have a home port reassignment from Pax River to NAS Brunswick, ME. Anyway, that is a whole other story. After the Rota deployment and the home port change, which was completed in the end of November, we re-deployed to NAS Bermuda the end of February 1971. I was the Plane Commander (PPC) of crew 5 and flew many missions with this crew until I left VP-44 on July 30, 1971. But on to the story – of course being deployed to Bermuda we flew many missions from the island. Many of these missions were classified at the time, but now not so much. We spent a lot of time locating and tracking Russian submarines off the eastern coast of the US.

On May 26, 1971, our crew flew a night-time mission west of Bermuda on a submarine location and tracking mission. The sub was not a US submarine. The flight was 9.3 hours from takeoff to landing. And we were on station keeping track of the submarine for about 4 to 5 hours around 11PM to about 3 or 3 AM the next morning – always in the dark at night. The weather was not that great, and we were sort of at the bottom of the cloud layer flying the mission at 500 feet altitude. Anyway, when we were relieved, we climbed out to about 25 thousand feet west of Bermuda and when we turned toward the island, we faced a serious 2 line of weather consisting of thunderstorms and lightning all throughout. We climbed higher up to about 30,000 feet (only because the aircraft was light enough to climb that high), but we could not get enough altitude to get over the thunderstorms. So, we took up a southerly heading for about 90 miles to see if we could find a way through the weather without having to go through the

thunderstorms. But no way, so we turned north and went another 150 mile or so and were not able to find a pathway through the storms so we turned south again and I told the radar operator to find us a decent way through the thunderstorms to get us back to Bermuda.

We descended to about 25,000 feet for better aircraft handling etc. The radar operator found us a way and we turned and headed east toward Bermuda on the way back to base. As we entered the thunderstorms, we experienced a lot of turbulence and lightening – but we kept on the route with the radar operator giving direction info by telling us to either turn right or left depending upon what he saw on the radar scope. Then we hit an unreal situation. Our thoughts (mine and the copilot and flight engineer) was St. Elmo's Fire.

St. Elmo's Fire is a weather phenomenon where luminous plasma is created by discharge from a sharp or pointed object in a strong electric field in the atmosphere which are generated by thunderstorms.

Anyway, our windshields and wings and props began to light up with bright lightening colored arcs and then we experienced an extreme condition. The bright lightening began forming a spike on the nose of our aircraft and build up to a huge spike of maybe 4 to 5 feet in diameter and about 20 to 25 feet in front of the nose. Very disconcerting and at the end of the spike a huge ball formed and was very eerie. All of a sudden, the ball let loose and broke toward the nose of the aircraft and when it hit the nose it broke up and scattered down the aircraft fuselage. We experienced a complete daylight situation formed we guessed from the heavy lightening happening. It went to complete dark because of course it was night. We began to experience the buildup on the windshield and wings and props and then the buildup started to build the huge spike again and again the big ball at the end began again. The same thing happened, the ball broke loose and 3 we experienced a bright like daylight experience again. This happened four times and we finally broke through the thunderstorm and clouds into clear skies and were able to return to NAS Bermuda to land and end the mission.

But it was indeed a very scary situation. I did aircraft condition 5 in the plane which meant everyone had to strap in and be seated with seat belts etc. And the only ones in the aircraft doing any talking were me as the pilot, and the radar operator who was telling me to come left or come right to vector me through the

storms. Also, the compasses in the cockpit were spinning wildly back and forth. Luckily, the gyro was not affected.

Here are a few photos of what St. Elmo's fire might look like when flying the aircraft. Of course, neither of these photos are the pictures of what we experienced.



So, here is a picture of a P3 and my interpretation of what the cylindrical electrical arc and the ball at the end might have looked like when viewed from the side. Of course, we only saw it out in front of us with the electrical cylindrical arc and the ball at the end – and it was eerie at best. My wife drew the arc and ball after hearing my tale of the situation.

