

= Flying Tiger Line Flight 739 =

Flying Tiger Line Flight 739 was a Lockheed L @-@ 1049 Super Constellation propliner chartered by the United States military that disappeared on March 16 , 1962 , over the Western Pacific Ocean . The aircraft was transporting 93 US soldiers and 3 South Vietnamese from Travis Air Force Base , California to Saigon , Vietnam . After refueling at Andersen Air Force Base , Guam , the Super Constellation was en route to Clark Air Base in the Philippines when it disappeared . All 107 aboard were declared missing and presumed dead .

The airliner 's disappearance prompted one of the largest air and sea searches in the history of the Pacific . Aircraft and surface ships from four branches of the US military searched more than 200 @,@ 000 square miles (520 @,@ 000 km²) during the course of eight days . A civilian tanker observed what appeared to be an in @-@ flight explosion believed to be the missing Super Constellation , though no trace of wreckage or debris was ever recovered . The Civil Aeronautics Board determined that , based on the tanker 's observations , Flight 739 probably exploded in @-@ flight , though an exact cause could not be determined without examining the remnants of the aircraft .

To date , this remains the worst aviation accident involving the Lockheed Constellation series .

= = Flight = =

The aircraft was a 5 @-@ year @-@ old Lockheed L @-@ 1049H Super Constellation with a total of 17 @,@ 224 airframe hours . It carried 11 American civilian crew members and 96 military passengers . The flight was operated by the Flying Tiger Line as Military Air Transport Service (MATS) Charter flight 739 .

The Super Constellation carried 93 jungle @-@ trained Army Rangers en route to South Vietnam . Their orders were to relieve soldiers in Saigon who had been training Vietnamese troops to fight Viet Cong guerrillas . Also on board were three members of the Vietnamese military . The flight crew consisted of eleven civilians based out of California , including four women . The pilot was Captain Gregory P. Thomas .

The flight originated from Travis Air Force Base , California , and was destined for Saigon . There were four planned refueling stops : Honolulu , Hawaii ; Wake Island ; Guam ; and Clark Air Base , Philippines . The flight arrived at Guam at 11 : 14 GMT after being delayed for minor maintenance on engines numbers 1 and 3 at Honolulu , and later at Wake Island . The aircraft departed from Guam at 12 : 57 GMT with an estimated time of arrival at the Philippines at 19 : 16 GMT . The Super Constellation carried nine hours of fuel for the 1 @,@ 600 miles (2 @,@ 600 km) , 8 @-@ hour flight .

Eighty minutes after departure , at 14 : 22 GMT , the pilot radioed a routine message and gave his position as being 280 miles west of Guam at coordinates (13 ° 40 ? N 140 ° 0 ? E) . The aircraft was expected to reach 14 ° 00 ? N 135 ° 0 ? E at 15 : 30 . At that time , the Guam IFSS experienced temporary communication difficulties with heavy radio static . At 15 : 39 the Guam radio operator attempted to contact the flight for a position report but was unable to establish contact . The aircraft was not seen or heard from again .

= = Investigation = =

The Clark Field Rescue Coordinating Center declared the aircraft missing the morning of 16 March 1962 . Navy officials reported that they believed that the aircraft had crashed closer to Guam than the Philippines . At the time of the disappearance , the weather was clear and the sea calm . The Navy , Air Force , Coast Guard , and Marines ordered aircraft and ships to the area .

The first day of searching continued overnight . During the first two days of the search , vessels crisscrossed 75 @,@ 000 square miles (190 @,@ 000 km²) of ocean . Secretary of the Army Elvis Stahr told newspapers that " [w] e have not given up hope that it will be found and that those aboard are safe , " and that a " maximum effort " was being made . After four days of searching ,

Major General Theodore R. Milton of the 13th Air Force told newspapers that although the chance of finding survivors was doubtful , every effort would be made " as long as there is any hope at all . "

Search efforts included aircraft from Guam , Clark Field , the US 7th Fleet , and the Air Force at Okinawa . Additionally surface ships and aircraft from numerous U.S. bases in the western Pacific contributed to the search efforts .

After eight days , the search was called off . The search , which was at the time one of the largest to ever take place in the Pacific , had covered more than 200 @,@ 000 square miles (520 @,@ 000 km²) of ocean .

= = = Conspiracy theories = = =

Flight 739 was one of two Flying Tiger Line flights with military connections that were destroyed under similar circumstances on the same day . This led to suggestions of sabotage and conspiracy by both airline officials and the media .

Both Flight 739 and the other aircraft , a L @-@ 1049 Super Constellation , departed from Travis Air Force Base at around 09 : 45 PST on Wednesday 14 March 1962 and both encountered difficulties several hours later . The other aircraft was carrying " secret military cargo " when it crashed in the Aleutian Islands and caught fire .

Flying Tiger Lines released a statement outlining some possible reasons for the two occurrences , including sabotage of either or both aircraft , and kidnapping of Flight 739 and its passengers . The airline also said that these were merely " wild guesses " and that there was no evidence to support either theory .

= = = Possibility of sabotage = = =

A Liberian tanker , the SS T L Linzen , reported seeing a bright light in the sky near the aircraft 's expected position about 90 minutes after the last radio contact . US military officials described it as being a " bright light strong enough to light a ship 's decks " . The Spokane Daily Chronicle reported that the tanker observed a flash of light approximately 500 miles (800 km) west of Guam , followed immediately by two falling red lights falling to the ocean at different speeds .

A Civil Aeronautics Board investigation determined that witnesses aboard the tanker also observed what appeared to be vapor trails , and numerous crew members observed the two fireballs fall into the ocean . The tanker proceeded to the location where the fireballs had been observed to impact the ocean but was unable to find any trace of the falling objects during their six @-@ hour search . A spokesman at the rescue effort headquarters in Guam said that as time passed with no sign of the aircraft , " more credence is given to the possibility that the tanker may have seen the missing aircraft explode in flight . ?

Officials with the Flying Tiger Line said that if the investigation revealed that an explosion had occurred on board the aircraft , it would support their earlier theories of sabotage . The executive vice president of operation told the Associated Press that experts considered it impossible for explosions to occur on the Super @-@ Constellation in the course of normal operation . Additionally he claimed that there was nothing powerful enough aboard the aircraft to completely blow it apart , and that " something violent must have happened . "

The Civil Aeronautics Board determined that , given the observations of the tanker crew , the flight most likely exploded in midair . As no part of the wreckage was ever found , the CAB was unable to establish a determination of cause . The accident report concluded :

A summation of all relevant factors tends to indicate that the aircraft was destroyed in flight . However , due to the lack of any substantiating evidence the Board is unable to state with any degree of certainty the exact fate of N 6921C .