

"Aphrodite's Encounter"

On 16 July 1996 the 44' motor sailor "Aphrodite" skippered by the owner, Dr. Quincy Gilliam, encountered rough seas on a voyage from Virginia to Maine in the Atlantic, and took refuge in Long Island Sound. Dr. Gilliam had a crew of two aboard.

During the night of 16 July 1996 "Aphrodite" received several "PAN, PAN, PAN" general alert radio transmissions from the Coast Guard warning civilian vessels to use caution because of military operations overnight in the Long Island sound.

Curious about those transmissions, Dr. Quincy illuminated his onboard short-range navigation radar. At one point he observed a high-speed radar contact (estimated at 30 knots) pass close by on radar but was unable to see the ship. It was running without lights.

The next day, 17 July 1996, Dr. Gilliam decided to abandon the trip to Maine and return to homeport in Virginia. At 20:31 EDT, when TWA Flight 800 went down, all three aboard were in the engine room working on a problem they encountered with the fresh water converter.

The "Aphrodite" was on auto pilot tracking at 4 knots using diesel power on a west southwest heading about 24 nautical miles south of the Long Island shore line. Despite the noise of the nearby diesel, the crew either heard or felt concussion from the TWA incident. Dr. Gilliam coming up from below turned on the radio and quickly discerned there had been an air disaster close by. Because of the intensive Coast Guard response, his distance from the crash, his type of boat and the lack of rescue equipment on board, Dr. Gilliam continued on course for Hampton Roads.

By 2100 EDT the moonless night was very dark. At that point, Dr. Gilliam noticed three boats close aboard off his starboard stern quarter. Each boat (estimated at 25' in length) had non-standard dim red bow and stern lights. Dr. Gilliam, an experienced sailor, was able to estimate the individual boat's length by watching the pitch and heave of the lights. The boats stayed in close proximity to each other almost as if tethered together and remained in position less than 200 ft. from "Aphrodite" for the next six hours.

Dr. Gilliam, assuming these were the military craft, thought the boats were following because they couldn't identify him. For that reason, he twice illuminated his entire vessel with masthead spreader floodlights. This having no effect, nothing changed until 0300, 18 July 1996 when Dr. Gilliam picked up a loud-and-clear plain language radio transmission from nearby stating, "I'm going to need a tow." When Dr. Gilliam responded on the same frequency, "Vessel needing assistance, this is the Aphrodite, can we be of help?" The three boat's light's disappeared.

Once in homeport, Dr. Gilliam called the FBI to report his observations relative to TWA Flight 800. Later, he was very disappointed to find out the FBI responded by only making contact with a crewman but not bothering to talk to him. Dr. Gilliam called the FBI the second time with this complaint. A second agent responded and met the Doctor for an interview, but Dr. Gilliam immediately ascertained the agent didn't understand the difference between longitude and latitude or anything else about sailing, so he once again complained to the FBI.

This time, they sent a female agent who was a pilot. During his interview, Dr. Gilliam was asked not to tell anyone else about his nocturnal encounter with the mystery boats.

Dr. Gilliam subsequently sold "Aphrodite" but in a visit at the marina prior to the sale he came aboard to find all three of the boats batteries discharged. He found that odd because "Aphrodite" has a built-in automatic battery charging system. It did not occur to the doctor to check the boat's computer memory navigation system to see if Long Island voyage data had dumped until after the boat was sold. It was at that point he discovered the boat's deck log was missing from the box of navigation gear he had taken off the boat prior to its sale.

Comments from Cmdr. Donaldson

During our extensive interview with Dr. Gilliam he rationalized the behavior of the boats shadowing "Aphrodite". After listening to the intense radio traffic between the Coast Guard and civilian boats, the doctor believed he was being followed as a potential terrorist suspect.

In my opinion, this is highly unlikely. The actions described more closely fit tactical deployment of Navy Special Warfare boats on a point defense picket line. Already low profile with minimum radar reflectivity, these inflatable assault boats, by attaching themselves to a legitimate slow moving radar target, would be in its radar shadow masking their presence and invisible to an enemy's radar.

Once the Special Operations boats passed a real world target, with information from satellite reconnaissance, a surface combatant or surveillance aircraft, they would race to an intercept and Navy Seals would board and seize the target ship or boat.