

The following is a letter Wayne Smith RD3 wrote after the search for Pam Am Clipper #944 was lost at sea.

Nov 15 1957

Today ended the weeklong search for the remains of the Pam Am Clipper 944. Today 19 of the 44 bodies and wreckage of the aircraft were found in an area 11 by 3 miles square. With two destroyers, two Coast Guard Cutters, and an aircraft carrier searching a 100-mile square area, the remains were found.

The search started one week ago, Nov. 7th. While assuming ocean station November our ship, CGC Minnetonka made R/T contact with Clipper 944 at approximately 3:30 PM. At this time Clipper 944's flight information was received and a radar plot, course, speed check and continuous radio beacon were given to 944 on request. Approximately 34 minutes after R/T with our vessel, 944 radioed in his position report to Honolulu. That was their last radio transmission received. Some three hours later at 6:04PM the 4 to 8 watch received an int. qua. Have you heard any news of Clipper 944 from Honolulu? We then radioed in the report that Clipper 944 was over ocean station at 3:30 PM. At 9:00 PM after clippers ETA was well overdue at Honolulu, our vessel started its search following on the same course that 944 was on when they passed over station. All aircraft enroute to the mainland were notified to be on the lookout for 944 and many aircraft dropped to 1500 feet to search the surface along their way. The following morning Navy, Air Force and Pan Am planes were out searching for the downed aircraft. Several aircraft reported in to our ship and were vectored to various search patterns'. The most systematic of these being the creeping line search using several aircraft and our ship as a reference point. With this search method employed for the next two days several thousand square miles were systematically searched. During this time aircraft searching reported seeing oil slicks, wreckage, floating remains of the aircraft and even life rafts floating but after checking each and every report out all turned out with negative results. Most if the aircraft gave up the search Sunday night. By Monday morning there were only a few aircraft still continuing the search. Monday through Wednesday we continued our search, checking various reports of sightings of aircraft with negative results.

Thursday morning we refueled at sea from a Navy tanker then were underway to rendezvous with the Philippine Sea, two destroyers and CGC Bearing Strait to search another area Thursday night our ship rendezvoused with the other ships and continued search throughout the night. Friday morning copters from the Philippine Sea spotted wreckage and bodies floating in the 11 by 3 square mile area with the copters marking the floating wreckage and bodies with smoke flares the five ships in the area picked up the same. The entire day was spent searching the area recovering bodies. Nineteen bodies were found and all were placed aboard the Philippine Sea. During the day our small boats recovered, clothing, shirts, jackets, etc., shoes, seat cushions from aircraft, mail bag full of mail, packages of mail floating, package of color slides, photographs floating in the water, large pieces of wooden wreckage, and various other small articles. At the end of the search these were also turned over to the Philippine Sea the other ships found approximately the same kind of wreckage and also a honeycomb section of the aircraft.

Found on three of the bodies were watches that had stopped at exactly the same time, 4:27PM indicating that Clipper 944 had crashed only 47 minutes from the time he received a radar plot from our station. As several of the bodies were found strapped in their seats, two of which were the Co-pilot and Stewardess. It is fairly evident that the people aboard knew they were going down before it happened. As of yet the cause of 944 going down has not been determined.

Friday afternoon late 5PM the searching came to an end. The Philippine Sea headed back to Long Beach, the two destroyers headed back to Honolulu, the Bering Strait remained on the search area, and our ship headed east to resume Ocean Station November.