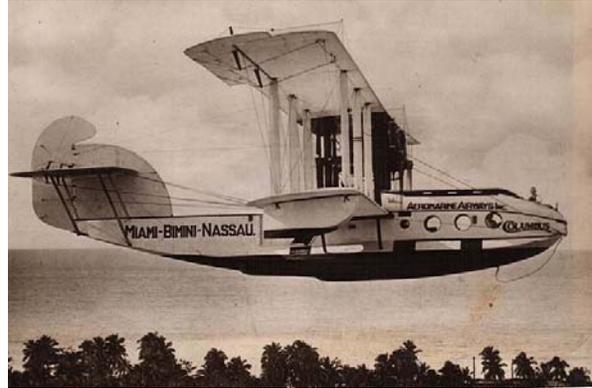


ACTIVITY: Drowning / scavenging following air disaster

CASE: [GSAF 1923.01.13](#)

DATE: Saturday January 13, 1923

LOCATION: The plane went down in the Caribbean sea, twenty miles from Havana, Cuba.



The seaplane Columbus

NAME: Edwin Farnsworth Atkins, Jr.

DESCRIPTION: He was the 31-years-old son of an American sugar magnate, and a passenger on board the seaplane *Columbus*. The Atkins family lived in Massachusetts, but owned many of the top sugar producing mills in Cuba.

BACKGROUND

WEATHER: The day was calm.

MOON PHASE: New Moon, January 16, 1923

SEA CONDITIONS: The sea was choppy.

TIME: Morning

NARRATIVE: “Edwin F. Atkins, Jr., and his family, accompanied by a nurse and a governess, boarded the twin-motored seaplane *Columbus*, operated by Aeromarine Airways, Inc., to fly to Havana, forty miles away. Atkins had frequently made use of the airplane, which maintained a regular daily schedule between Key West and Havana, with a record of no mishaps.

“The two children, after the take-off, went to sleep in the aft cabin. All went well for a while. The Atkins entourage had been joined by Otto Abrahams, a New York banker and broker, as a fellow passenger. The plane’s crew consisted of a pilot and mechanic.

“Twenty miles from Havana, the starboard motor began to miss, and C.W. Miller, the pilot, became anxious. He sought to remedy the defect, but at length determined he could not go farther. The plane had been proceeding at 65 mph, at a 200-foot altitude. Miller looked about for a spot to alight in the Gulf Stream. He found the water very rough, but when he espied a ferry boat below he determined to come down at once.

“The *Columbus* came down at 45 miles an hour. One of the surging waves – 15 to 20 feet in height – struck the pontoons and the plane was catapulted into the air. Before Miller could right the ship it came down nose first into a swell, and another wave spun the airship completely around.

“The aft cabin was submerged almost immediately, and the terrific impact tossed the occupants to all corners of the larger forward cabin. The two children were never seen again and it is probable that they were killed by the first shock.

“When Atkins, dazed, realized the condition of the aft cabin, he was restrained with difficulty by Abrahams and the mechanic, Harold Thompson, from plunging into it. Despite

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restraint, Atkins and the governess, Grace McDonald, climbed out of the cabin and out on the wings. There they clung.

“Meanwhile, the ferry boat *H.M. Flagler*, which plied daily between Key West and Havana, was bending all efforts to reach the stricken air liner. The *Flagler*, under Capt. John Albury, launched a lifeboat with great difficulty, but time and again it was swept away from the plane wreckage by the surging seas.

“A wave crashed over the wings of the plane and swept Miss McDonald from her perch. Then another wave, a huge one, struck the wreck and Atkins was swept into the sea.

“Passengers lined the ferry boat’s rails to watch the proceedings with agonized eyes. At length the two women were taken aboard the lifeboat and the other clambered aboard too.

“Meanwhile, the sister air liner of the *Columbus*, the *Ponce de Leon*, hovered overhead. But it was powerless to aid. It was more than an hour before all in the lifeboat were safely aboard the ferry.

“Mrs. Atkins, the nurse, Julia Haverty; Abrahams, the pilot, Miller, and the mechanic were saved. Atkins, his two boys, Edwin and David, and the governess, Grace McDonald, perished.

“Next day Atkin’s brother, Robert, chartered a ferry steamer at Havana to search for the bodies of the four who were lost. He offered a reward of \$4,000 for their recovery.

“On the day following, at Big Pine Key, Fla., forty miles north of Key West, Capt. W.E. Young, Walter C. Johnston and their men were engaged in their regular business – netting sharks for their leather and teeth. They pulled in a Brown shark measuring nearly twelve feet in length. Captain Young told of the discovery:

“I proceeded to rip him open, and was amazed to find a human arm and hand in the Brown shark. I was particularly surprised because the Brown shark is not usually regarded as a vicious killer. I immediately got my camera and made several pictures.

“I also found six pieces of human flesh in this same shark and a piece of blue serge cloth about 12 inches by 18, that appeared to have been part of a coat.

“The arm to the elbow was not mangled, but from there up to where it ended – at the shoulder joint – all the flesh had been torn away. The six pieces of flesh in the Brown shark were not enough to account for the whole part torn away, so I concluded that two or maybe three sharks had come upon the man’s body, floating arms downward – a woman floats all doubled up, you know – and had joined in tugging at it.

“I began to make inquiries about anyone being lost lately, and then I heard about the Atkins disaster. I notified the coroner at Key West and he came on up to Big Pine Key.

“In the meantime, Johnston had cut off the hand from the arm and preserved it in a glass jar full of alcohol.

"The coroner examined all the stuff we found and took it along with him. I understood from some of Atkin's friends, both at Key West and in Havana, that he was wearing a blue serge coat, and when I described the hand to them they agreed it was undoubtedly his.

"But none of them cared to look at the hand."

"The day following the discovery of the hand, Johnston and I went with the cloth fragment to the aviation field at Key West. There we interviewed a friend of Atkins, who sadly identified the piece as being from Atkin's coat, which he had worn when good-bye was said. Upon such identification the reward for the recovery of his body was withdrawn. Shark had infested that portion of the sea, our catch coming up North with the Gulf Stream after his feed."

SPECIES INVOLVED: The brown shark referred to in the above account was identified as a dusky shark, *C. obscurus*, by Capt. W. F. Young, shark fisherman

SOURCE: Shark! Shark! By Captain W.F. Young, pages 152 – 156.

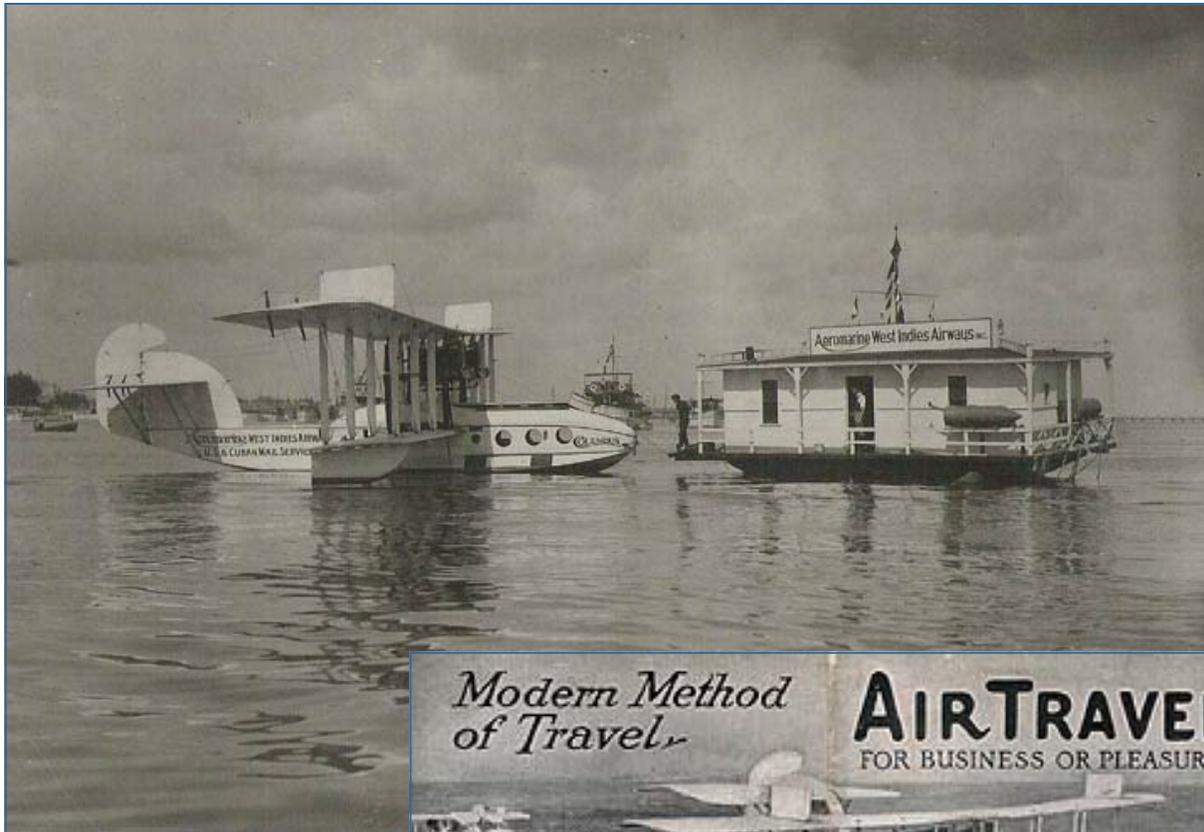
Loss of the Flying Boat Columbus

AVIATION deeply regrets to have to record the first serious accident of American civil air transport. On Jan. 13 the passenger flying boat Columbus, of the Aeromarine Airways, Pilot C. W. Miller, Mechanic H. Thompson, with seven passengers and 400 lb. of mails and sundry baggage enroute from Key West to Havana, foundered in the Straits of Florida with a loss of four passengers. Those lost include Edwin F. Atkins, sugar planter, his sons Edwin F. and David, aged 5 and 3 years, respectively, and Miss Grace Mac Donald, governess of the Atkins children.

The Columbus, which had regularly been flying on this route, was about 20 miles from Havana, when engine trouble developed and the pilot decided to make a landing. Ten to fifteen feet waves were running at the time, and one of them hit the boat amidships and badly damaged her hull, which began filling with water. The passengers climbed on top of the cabin, but Mr. Atkins and Miss Mac Donald were soon swept over board by a big wave and drowned, while the two children who were sleeping in the cabin were either killed through the impact or drowned in the wrecked cabin.

Rescue came through the daring of Capt. John Albury and his men of the ferry ship H. M. Flager, who launched a lifeboat and fought their way to the side of the Columbus, and took off the five survivors just before the flying boat heeled over and went down. All the baggage and mails were also lost.

From "Aviation" magazine, January 22, 1923



For additional information
about Aeromarine Airways,
visit their website at:
[http://
www.timetableimages.com/
ttimages/aerom.htm](http://www.timetableimages.com/ttimages/aerom.htm)

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