

Real Mysteries

The True Stories Behind the World's Most Famous Mysteries

by Edward Scimia, ...

Published: 2011



Table of Contents

Foreword



The Mysterious D.B. Cooper
The Oak Island Money Pit
The Lead Masks Case
The Skull of Doom
The Dyatlov Pass Incident

**The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine
The Tunguska Event
Taman Shud**



Foreword

I love mysteries. When I was a child, I couldn't get enough of the short books that seemed to be sold at every grocery store and pharmacy my parents entered, many of which were all about mysterious topics: unsolved mysteries, the paranormal, unexplained events. I grew up watching television shows like *Unsolved Mysteries*, and when I first started using the internet, I spent countless hours reading websites like *The Black Vault*.

As I grew up, it became obvious that many of these stories weren't exactly being told in an honest manner. Sometimes, inconvenient facts were omitted to make the cases seem a little more mysterious; other times, wild bits of speculation were presented as facts. In some cases, entire stories turned out to be fictitious.

While these stories were still fun to read, they lost their appeal as I got older. Once I know that parts of a mystery are invented, or that a key part of the puzzle has been left out, it makes speculating about the truth and debating new theories a lot less enjoyable.

There's no reason why these "true" stories can't be presented in a more honest fashion. There are plenty of mysteries that truly haven't been solved, which leaves plenty of room for speculation to run wild. In cases where investigators are fairly certain about what happened, the solution is often just as fascinating as the mystery itself. Even when a hoax or forgery is involved, the story behind the deception is often worth telling.

In this book, I present a number of famous mysteries, some of which have been solved, and others that perplex investigators to this day. In each case, I've laid out the facts of the case, as well as many of the theories that have been put forward to explain those facts. At the end of each chapter, I've even included a short description of what really happened—or, at least, what my best guess is. Ultimately, it will be up to each reader to decide whether they agree with my assessment, or whether another theory holds more weight with them.

I sincerely hope you'll have as much fun reading about these mysteries as I had researching them. Enjoy!

The Mysterious D.B. Cooper

In a daring hijacking, a man going by the name of Dan Cooper takes control of a passenger jet, receives \$200,000 in unmarked bills, and then surprises everyone by jumping from the plane—and neither he nor the money are ever seen again.

The Facts

The date was November 24, 1971—the day before Thanksgiving. In the afternoon on one of the busier travel days of the year, a man who identified himself as Dan Cooper walked up to the Northwest Orient Airlines counter at Portland International Airport and purchased a one-way ticket on Flight 305 to Seattle, Washington.

What should have been a routine 30-minute flight, however, would instead become one of the most astounding unsolved crimes in American history. Cooper sat near the back of the plane, lit a cigarette, and ordered a bourbon and soda. Witnesses would later recall that the man was between 5'10" and 6'0" tall, and wore a white shirt with a black tie underneath a dark suit and a black raincoat.

The flight left at 2:50 pm local time. Not long after takeoff, Cooper passed a note to flight attendant Florence Schaffner. While she initially ignored it—Schaffner had received plenty of phone numbers from men flying on her planes before—Cooper made sure she took notice of the note by quietly telling her that he had a bomb.

The note asked that Schaffner sit next to Cooper, which she did. Schaffner still wasn't entirely convinced, and asked to see the bomb; Cooper opened the briefcase wide enough for Schaffner to see a few red cylinders and wires.

That was enough to get Schaffner to record Cooper's demands. The man asked for \$200,000 in unmarked bills, four parachutes, and for a fuel truck to be waiting to refuel the plane once they arrived in Seattle. Schaffner brought the demands to the attention of the pilot, William Scott, who then contacted air traffic control.

While this might be unthinkable today, both Northwest Orient and the FBI were quick to acquiesce to the hijacker's demands. The other 36 passengers were merely told that there would be a delay before arriving in Seattle due to a mechanical difficulty, and then the plane circled Seattle for two hours while the FBI and local police gathered the money and parachutes that Cooper had asked for.

The plane finally landed at Seattle-Tacoma Airport at about 5:45 pm. Cooper had very specific instructions for where to taxi the jet, and asked to have the cabin lights turned off in order to make conditions as difficult as possible for police snipers. The local operations manager for the airline approached the aircraft to hand over the cash in a knapsack and put the parachutes on the plane.

Once the money and the parachutes were handed off, Cooper allowed the passengers and two of the flight attendants to leave the plane. However, the pilots were required to stay, and Cooper alerted them to his plan: he wished to take a southeast course towards Mexico City, with a stopover in Reno, Nevada, if necessary.

After refueling, the plane took off again around 7:40 pm with only five people aboard: Cooper, the pilot and copilot, the flight attendant, and a flight engineer.

With the plane in the air, two F-106 fighter jets were scrambled from McChord Air Force Base to follow the 727, out of view from Cooper.

After they took off, Cooper confined the crew to the cockpit. At around 8 pm, the crew saw a warning light flash to alert them to the aft airstair being activated. Soon, the air pressure in the cabin and cockpit had changed, indicating that the aft door had definitely been opened.

At 8:13 pm, the tail of the plane suddenly moved upward, likely indicating that Cooper had made his jump. When the plane landed in Reno two hours later, police and FBI agents surrounded the plane. A search then revealed that the plane was empty, confirming that Cooper had leaped from the plane in midflight.

An investigation quickly determined that this was no average hijacking. There were a few details about the incident that showed the Cooper had a high level of expertise when it came to aircraft, and was far from an ordinary criminal.

Before the plane departed from Seattle, Cooper made a series of demands about how the plane would fly to Mexico City. According to Cooper, the plane must fly as slow as safely possible—in this case, 120 mph. The plane was not to fly at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet. The landing gear would remain down, and the wing flaps were to be lowered by 15 degrees. In addition, he asked that the cabin remain unpressurized, which would serve as a guarantee that the plane would be flown at a low altitude. Cooper also asked that the rear exit be open and the staircase extended on takeoff; however, when the airline suggested this might be unsafe, Cooper—though disagreeing—said he would wait until after takeoff to open the rear door.

But it wasn't just Cooper's detailed knowledge of the plane that made him stand apart. At the time, most hijackers were political dissidents who were looking to escape to a foreign country, or else madmen who were easily angered. Conversely, Cooper was described as polite, even going so far as to pay for his drinks and asking Schaffner to keep the change. He was also intimately familiar with the area, being able to identify Tacoma from the air and mentioning the nearby McChord Air Force Base.

That having been said, one area of inexperience did give investigators something that helped narrow their search slightly. When Cooper requested four parachutes, four military packs were given to him. However, he rejected these parachutes, asking instead for civilian models. He then proceeded to choose the older and technically inferior of the two primary parachutes to jump with. Of the reserve chutes, Cooper cannibalized a functional model (it has been speculated that he used it to tie the money bag shut for the jump), and instead jumped with an unusable "dummy" parachute that was accidentally given to him—a mistake no experienced skydiver would make.

As the investigation began, FBI agents found dozens of fingerprints aboard the plane. Also discovered were the two unused parachutes, as well as Cooper's tie and tie clip. Sketches were made by talking to witnesses, and the first suspects were interrogated. The case name came from the first of these suspects, whose real name was D.B. Cooper; while he was quickly cleared of any involvement, confusion by media members led to the hijacker being referred to as D.B. Cooper, a name that would ultimately stick with the public.

One of the biggest challenges for investigators was figuring out just where the jump took place, and where Cooper may have landed. Although the time of the jump was almost certainly 8:13 pm, it was still difficult to nail down the exact

location of the plane, especially when considering the variable weather conditions and wind speeds during the course of the flight. It was also impossible to know how long Cooper might have waited before pulling his rip cord, which could dramatically impact the landing zone. However, given the jump time, it was almost certain that Cooper had begun his jump during heavy rain in southwestern Washington.

Searches were immediately carried out in the area south of Mount St. Helens, but nothing of Cooper or his equipment was found. Despite one of the largest searches in United States history, one that lasted through early 1972 and included Army, Air Force and National Guard personnel, nothing was found that could be connected to the hijacking.

However, later interviews with the pilot and subsequent analysis determined that the flight path had veered farther east than the initial investigation had guessed. The changes to the flight path and other variables took the drop zone further south, near the drainage area of the Washougal River.

But despite the extensive searches and the heavy work put into figuring out just where Cooper may have landed, it wasn't until 1978 that the first physical evidence was found: a placard that included instructions on how to lower the aft stairs on a 727. This was found north of the expected drop zone, but still on the flight plan of the plane, and was later confirmed to have come from the hijacked airliner—suggesting that perhaps the placard had fallen before the actual jump.

Two years later, more dramatic evidence was found—three packets of cash that were later proven to be a portion of the ransom money paid to Cooper. The money was heavily damaged, and had washed up on the banks of the Columbia River just south of Vancouver, Washington. Amazingly, it was an eight-year-old boy who found the cash while vacationing with his family. Testing of the bills showed that they had not been buried by human hands, but rather were deposited by the river waters. This gave yet more credence to the theory that Cooper may have landed in the Washougal River area. To date, these are the only bills from the hijacking that have turned up anywhere in the world.

The Theories

There are plenty of questions that surround the D.B. Cooper case, including where Cooper might have landed, or whether or not he even survived the jump. However, the most fascinating question of all is also the simplest: who was D.B. Cooper?

Along with a physical description, investigators were able to put together a reasonable profile of Cooper based on his actions. He was clearly familiar with the Seattle area, and was likely to be an Air Force veteran due to his knowledge of the nearby Air Force base. In addition, his name was likely taken from a Belgian comic book series that featured the hero Dan Cooper, a Royal Canadian Air Force test pilot who often parachuted in the series. If this is true, it would mean that Cooper had spent time outside of the US, as the comics were not printed in English or imported to the United States.

One interesting theory along these lines suggests that Cooper may have been Canadian. As it happens, the Dan Cooper comic was sold in Canada, and Cooper specifically asked for “American currency”—an unlikely phrase for an American to use. However, since Cooper was said not to have an accent, it's unlikely he was from an overseas location, making Canada a likely birthplace.

As mentioned earlier, investigators quickly honed in on areas where Cooper had—or lacked—knowledge to narrow down the possibilities. His intimate knowledge of the Boeing 727 once again suggested he was either an Air Force veteran or involved in the airline industry. In addition, he knew exactly what settings to use to make a jump from such a plane as safe as possible.

However, it was also speculated that Cooper wasn't a particularly experienced skydiver. Besides the mistakes and choices made in picking his parachutes, the jump itself was extremely dangerous due to it being made at night in the rain; an experienced skydiver likely wouldn't have even attempted such a jump, especially without a helmet. In fact, many believe that Cooper probably didn't survive the jump, and may never even have opened his parachute. If he did, it's quite possible he never made it out of the wilderness alive.

But where's the fun in believing that? In the time since the hijacking, thousands of different suspects have been put forward as potentially being D.B. Cooper. While most of these men clearly had no connection to the crime, there are a few intriguing suspects that seem to fit Cooper's profile.

For instance, take John List, one of the first serious suspects considered by the FBI. Two weeks before the hijacking, List murdered his wife, mother, and three of his children before escaping with \$200,000. Given the fact that List might be desperate, and the fact that his description was a match for Cooper's, List seemed a likely culprit. However, upon being captured, List quickly admitted to the murders—but denied any involvement in the hijacking, and no evidence was found to put him anywhere near the plane.

Another possible suspect that was brought up early on was Ted Mayfield, a skydiving instructor who was also an Army Special Forces veteran. Mayfield had previously spent time in prison for negligent homicide charges stemming from the deaths of skydiving students, due to their parachutes failing to open. While he seemed to fit the profile of Cooper reasonably well, he also had a strong alibi; he had called FBI Agent Ralph Himmelsbach just two hours after Flight 305 landed in Nevada to discuss Cooper's possible landing zones. While that would have given Mayfield about four hours to make a phone call—an unlikely scenario, considering that all of the proposed landing zones were deep in the wilderness. Furthermore, the FBI says that Mayfield was ruled out as a suspect early in the investigation.

A more recent suspect came to light only in 2011. Marla Cooper spoke to the FBI, suggesting that her uncle—Lynn Doyle Cooper—may have committed the hijacking. Marla Cooper said that as a child, she had overheard her uncles planning a mischievous plot while at her grandmother's house in Sisters, Oregon. The very next day, the hijacking took place while her uncles were supposedly hunting turkeys; when Lynn Doyle returned, he had a bloody shirt that he claimed was a result of an auto accident. In addition, Marla said that her uncle had been obsessed with the Dan Cooper comic books. While the FBI hasn't been able to find any evidence suggesting that L.D. Cooper did indeed commit the hijacking, it hasn't been able to rule out the possibility, either.

Other prominent suspects over the years have included William Gossett—a Marine, Army and Air Force veteran who was notably obsessed with the case—Richard McCoy, Jr., who later committed a copycat hijacking, and Barbara Dayton, a transgendered woman who claimed she had committed the crime to get back at the industry that had prevented her from becoming a pilot. However, while some independent investigators have pointed the finger at each

of these individuals, the FBI has either rejected most of them as suspects, or found no compelling evidence that they should be strongly considered. Considering the number of people who are purported to have made deathbed confessions as to having been D. B. Cooper, even the testimony of the suspects themselves is far from enough to make any clear connection between them and the hijacking.

What Really Happened?

The D. B. Cooper case may never be truly solved, at least not with any degree of certainty. Every proposed suspect fits at least part of Cooper's profile, but each of these theories also has significant flaws. Barring some fantastic new evidence that comes to light 40 years after the crime was committed, this isn't likely to change.

However, I think that one story seems somewhat more likely than the others. While I wouldn't go so far as to say that this person is definitely the real D.B. Cooper, they certainly can't be ruled out either, and the evidence does at least seem to suggest that they should be considered a serious suspect in the case.

The man I'm referring to is none other than Kenneth Christiansen. An army paratrooper, Christiansen worked for Northwest Orient starting in 1954: first as a mechanic, then as a flight attendant, and finally as a purser in Seattle. Christiansen was known to smoke and drink bourbon, and was left-handed—an unconfirmed but suspected trait of Cooper's.

Christiansen was brought up as a potential suspect by his brother Lyle, who claims his brother, dying of cancer in 1994, told him that he had a secret that he could not share. After Christiansen's death, his family discovered that he had over \$200,000 in the bank, along with valuable coin and stamp collections. Family members also claim that Christiansen bought a house with cash just a few months after the hijacking. While none of this would be suspicious were Christiansen a wealthy man, his family maintains that he had only a modest income from his work with Northwest Orient.

Stranger still, it seems that Christiansen kept a record of his time with the airline in the form of news clippings that dated back through the 1950s. However, these clippings only covered the period up until the time just before the hijacking, when they abruptly stop. Christiansen remained an employee at Northwest Orient for many years after the hijacking, yet he never again added a news story to his collection.

Despite the circumstantial evidence, the FBI still doesn't consider Christiansen a prime suspect. For one, Christiansen was a rather experienced skydiver—more so than what was suggested by Cooper's actions. In addition, there's no direct evidence to link Christiansen to the case.

Most damning of all, Christiansen doesn't fit the physical profile of Cooper all that well. He was both shorter and thinner than the hijacker, and has a lighter complexion. In addition, Christiansen was balding in 1971, while Cooper was said to have a full head of hair.

But don't let that make you rule Christiansen out prematurely. According to his brother and at least one other person who knew him Christiansen was known to have worn a toupee earlier in his life, yet stopped wearing the hairpiece after the time of the hijacking. In addition, Florence Schaffner—the flight attendant who first took the note from Cooper—has said that Christiansen is the closest fit to her memory of what Cooper looked like.

So, was Christiansen the real D.B. Cooper? I have absolutely no idea. But the evidence in his favor seems to be at least as compelling as the case for anyone else—making him, at the very least, an exciting avenue for investigators to look into until a better suspect comes along.

In the end, the identity of D. B. Cooper is likely to always be the subject of speculation, as pinning down a firm suspect will only become more difficult as time moves on. But that just makes this case all the more mysterious, and should make D.B. Cooper—whoever he was—one of most infamous figures in the history of unsolved crimes.

The Oak Island Money Pit

On a small island off the coast of Nova Scotia, there lies a pit. For over 200 years, human artifacts have been found deep below the Earth's surface, but nobody has been able to reach the bottom or solve the Money Pit's greatest riddle: who put it there, and what were they hiding?

The Facts

Oak Island is a small island (about 140 acres in area) located just off the south shore of Nova Scotia, Canada. In 1795, an 18-year-old man named Daniel McGinnis saw lights on the island, and went out to investigate. Almost immediately, McGinnis discovered a small, circular depression in a clearing. Next to the depression was a tree; on one of the tree's branches, he found a tackle block.

Gathering a few friends, McGinnis went to work digging into the depression. A few feet down, a layer of flagstones were found, and the diggers noted that there were visible pick marks on the walls of the pit. As they continued to excavate the pit, they began finding layers of logs every 10 feet or so. Finally, the dig was abandoned with no further dramatic findings around 30 feet down.

As you might imagine, this particular dig didn't exactly draw a wave of treasure hunters. However, the odd nature of the pit did catch the attention of a few people. Less than a decade later, the Onslow Company arrived at Oak Island planning to dig deeper in the hopes of finding a secret treasure.

The Onslow excavation went much deeper, eventually reaching a depth of about 90 feet. Once again, those involved with the dig reported finding layers of logs or markings every ten feet. Also curious were distinct layers of charcoal, putty and coconut fiber found at various depths.

According to at least some accounts, the Onslow Company also found a stone that was inscribed with some strange symbols bearing over 80 feet deep in the pit. Apparently, the stone was translated by at least some researchers to read "Forty Feet Below Two Million Pounds Are Buried".

Not long after discovering the stone tablet, the pit flooded with seawater up to about the 30 foot mark. Although several attempts were made to pump or bail the water out of the shaft, these efforts were unsuccessful.

It would be nearly a half century before the Truro Company would re-excavate the shaft in 1849. They drilled 86 feet into the ground before running into the same flooding issues as the Onslow Company. However, the Truro

Company was able to drill further down, passing through a platform of spruce at the 98 foot mark before hitting layers of metal, wood, and clay. Having dug over 110 feet deep at this point, and not having uncovered any significant finds, the excavation was abandoned.

The next serious attempt to excavate the pit came in 1861, by a company known as the Oak Island Association. Unfortunately, this attempt would end in failure and tragedy; the bottom of the shaft collapsed into what appeared to be a cavern underneath the excavation, and one worker was killed after a boiler burst. After three years, the Oak Island Association gave up on the project, having run out of money.

Over the next seventy years, several more attempts were made to find out what could be hidden in the Money Pit, including one in 1909 that included future president Franklin Delano Roosevelt. However, none of these efforts were successful in digging deeper or finding anything of note.

Finally, a 1931 excavation—performed by William Chappell—did turn up a few artifacts. Chappell managed to fit a 163-foot shaft into the ground a few feet to the southwest of the original pit. Around 127 feet down, Chappell found a pick and an axe among other tools. However, given the number of prior excavations, it was likely that these items were from previous attempts to discover the pit's secrets.

As the years went on, the excavation attempts grew larger in scale, though these new efforts arguably produced even worse results. Excavations by Robert Restall around 1960 caused the deaths of four men due to toxic fumes in a shaft. In 1965, Robert Dunfield used a crane to dig out a hole measuring 100 feet wide and 134 feet deep, but failed to find anything in the soil.

One of the more sensational accounts came from a 1971 dig by Triton Alliance, a partnership that purchased the majority of Oak Island in preparation for yet another attempt to find something deep under the island. A 235-foot deep shaft was excavated, and sending a camera into the shaft allegedly yielded some interesting results. Though even the members of Triton admit that the images were unclear, they claim that chests, human remains and other items could be seen in a cave below the bedrock. However, before any of these findings could be independently confirmed, the shaft collapsed. While another attempt was made to dig the shaft, they never again reached a depth of over 200 feet, and the partnership collapsed before further work could be completed.

Legal battles between the Triton partners prevented further excavations for decades. Finally, Oak Island Tours—a group led by several partners from Michigan—purchased the island in 2006. By 2011, the government of Nova Scotia had passed legislation allowing treasure hunting to continue on Oak Island. Although early studies have begun, as of late 2011, no new excavations have been undertaken.

The Theories

After reading all of the above accounts, you might be wondering exactly what kind of treasure—if any—might be found on Oak Island. While the pit certainly is mysterious, it's likely that explorers would have given up on the project long ago were it not for the stone tablet with the mysterious inscription. Given that

one piece of critical evidence, most of the speculation in this case has been driven by the question of who could have put that message—and any associated treasure—in the pit to begin with.

The many theories about the treasure and its origins are fanciful, to say the least—and unfortunately, there's little evidence to support any of them. For instance, many have speculated that the pirate Blackbeard (or perhaps a lesser known pirate captain) could have used the island as a safe hiding place for their treasure. Similarly, some have speculated that a group of sailors from one navy or another could have placed the treasure there.

Believe it or not, those are the relatively mundane versions of the story. Other possibilities have been advanced, suggesting that some of history's greatest treasures might be somewhere beneath Oak Island. Perhaps the Knights Templar placed the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant there. Others say that Marie Antoinette's missing jewels may someday be found on the island.

My personal favorite theory was advanced by Penn Leary in his book *The Oak Island Enigma*. His idea was that Francis Bacon used the pit to hide evidence that he was the true author of William Shakespeare's plays. This theory has actually gained some steam, with a handful of other books and researchers expanding on it—all without any hard evidence, of course. However, Bacon's fondness for ciphers and his interest in secret locations has made this one of the more discussed possibilities for Oak Island, even if it does sound far fetched.

What Really Happened?

So, pirates, philosophers or ancient orders of knights—who's responsible for the mysterious Money Pit? As boring as this answer might be, I'm afraid that the answer is probably none of the above. Instead, there's a much more natural explanation: the "Money Pit" is nothing more than a sinkhole.

That wouldn't explain the stone tablet, of course. But then, how sure are we that the stone ever even existed? While there are several accounts of the stone, nobody has been able to produce the tablet for the last 100 years. There are no original photographs of the stone or the cipher on it, which means that there's plenty of dispute over how the code should be interpreted, or even whether the ciphers that are commonly depicted as being the ones on the stone today are accurate.

On the other hand, there are plenty of sinkholes present on Oak Island, along with numerous underground caves that would account for many of the shaft collapses that occurred during the excavation attempts. Meanwhile, a natural sinkhole would look similar to a pit dug by humans, while the platforms or layers of wood could easily be attributed to logs or branches from fallen trees.

Of course, none of this means that there isn't treasure hidden somewhere in the pit, or in the caves hidden below the island. Someone could even have masterfully crafted the Money Pit to look as much like a natural sinkhole as possible, just to throw future explorers off the scent. Personally, I think it's unlikely—but if you travel up to Nova Scotia and find the Holy Grail, you have my personal permission to say "I told you so."

The Lead Masks Case

Two men are found dead in Brazil. Neither has any apparent injuries, but both are wearing suits and lead masks, and there's a cryptic note found near them. The question: how and why did they die?

The Facts

On August 20, 1966, an 18-year-old boy named Jorge de Costa Alves was flying a kite near Vintém Hill in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. What should have been a relatively quiet and uneventful day for Jorge took a turn for the bizarre when he found two dead men in a field. Jorge immediately ran back home and called the police, who responded quickly to the scene.

Two dead men in the middle of a field might be strange in and of itself, but it was the state they were found in that really raised eyebrows. The two men were lying next to each other. Each was wearing a suit, a lead mask—the type normally used to protect power plant workers or other from strong doses of radiation—and a waterproof coat. Nothing around the bodies suggested that the deaths were due to violence. Next to the bodies, the police found an empty water bottle and a packet with two towels.

Perhaps most distressing of all was a small notebook found with the bodies. The notebook contained a message which, translated to English, said roughly the following:

16:30 be at the agreed place. 18:30 swallow capsules, after effect protect metals wait for mask signal.

It was soon discovered that the two men were named Manoel Pereira da Cruz and Miguel José Viana. Both worked as electrical technicians, and made their living primarily from television repair.

Once the men had been identified, police were able to put together a reconstruction of their final day. The two men were friends who lived near each other in Campos dos Goytacazes. On August 17, they had told friends and family that they would be gone for the afternoon while they purchased materials they needed for work.

Instead, the men took a bus to Niterói, the municipality in which Vintém Hill is located. The bus arrived at 14:30, after which they purchased their raincoats at a small shop. The two then headed to a bar. There, they purchased the bottle of water; a waitress would later recall that one of the men seemed very nervous while he was in the bar, and was seen to be checking his watch repeatedly. As far as police could determine, the men then traveled directly to the location at which they were found dead three days later.

When the police found the bodies, there were no apparent injuries to either man. Given the mention of capsules in the notebook, police planned to perform testing for toxic substances; however, the bodies were already in relatively poor condition due to the time it took for them to be found and the rainy weather in the area, and further failures by the police to properly preserve the bodies or their internal organs made such tests impossible.

The Theories

Given the limited amount of information there is to work with, there was very little chance of the police coming to any firm conclusions in this case. On the other hand, the cryptic note and strange clothing left plenty of room for speculation—and there have been more than a few wild theories advanced over the past 45 years!

Let's start with some of the more mundane ideas. Given the fact that the note referred to capsules, one obvious possibility is that the capsules themselves were toxic, and led to the deaths of the men. This theory, of course, could likely have been tested had a toxicology report been possible, but the lack of one only makes this case all the more mysterious.

Even if we accept that it was the capsules that did them in, that leaves us with at least three possibilities. The first is that the men committed suicide. However, a careful look at what was written in the note makes this seem unlikely: after all, it suggests that there are steps to take after swallowing the capsules. While there is no time entry after the time for "swallow capsules," and many of the other instructions are cryptic, "wait for the mask sign" certainly suggests that they expected to be alive after taking the pills.

Perhaps, then, the capsules toxicity wasn't known to the two men. It's possible that the deaths were accidental; they may have ingested the capsules only to quickly find that they were deadly. This also opens up a third, more disturbing possibility: another person may have fooled them into taking the capsules, knowing fully well that they would kill the men. This would be murder, but who would want to murder two television repairmen? The bodies were found with no money on them, however, which has lent some credence to the idea that robbery could have been a possible motive if murder is the answer to this puzzle.

Unfortunately, none of these theories can account for the lead masks, which remain the most mysterious part of the case. But that hasn't stopped some imaginative people from coming up with interesting ways to tie everything we know about this case together.

Some people have attempted to connect the two bodies to UFOs. According to some reports, there had been several sightings of mysterious lights in the area near where the bodies were found. Okay, so it's still a stretch to imagine aliens instructing two Brazilian men to swallow some capsules and put on weird masks, then just leaving them to die (unless you think aliens have stupid fraternity pranks on their planet, too). A slightly less bizarre version of this idea is that the men might have been part of a cult that believed committing suicide could allow them to reach a spaceship, much like the 1997 Heaven's Gate suicide cult. But there was nothing on the scene to suggest cult activity, and nobody who knew the two men felt the need to point out any strange groups they belonged to.

Plenty of other theories abound, though some of the wilder ideas rely on "evidence" that is difficult or impossible to verify was ever actually present in the case. The men could have been trying to somehow contact spirits, capture signals, send a message to Mars, or have been time travelers, depending on who you ask. Each of these theories relies not only on evidence that may or may not have actually existed, but also quite a few additional leaps of faith beyond that.

What Really Happened?

Trying to determine the actual truth behind the Lead Masks Case is virtually impossible. Given the poor investigation that was done at the time of the case, and the near total lack of leads available to modern investigators, there's very little to go on for anyone who would like to dig further into the facts of the matter.

Furthermore, almost every theory that has been forwarded has several flaws. Given the fact that there were no injuries on either body, poison does seem like a likely cause of death, and the note about the capsules would suggest an obvious method of delivery. But the problems with the suicide theory have already been pointed out above, and it seems unlikely that the two men would be gullible enough to swallow something that they weren't sure was safe.

Given all of the nearly impossible theories that have been advanced, perhaps a bizarre—but in my mind, slightly less improbable—theory should be considered. If this case was indeed a murder and a robbery, could all of the strange clues have been designed to point investigators in the wrong direction? Perhaps the men were lured out to Vintém Hill for a proposed business meeting, or a lucrative opportunity that was slightly outside of normal legal channels. Unfortunately, they had been conned, and they paid for it with their lives. Afraid they would be caught, the murderer(s) first forced one of the men to dictate a note, and then put the masks on the men after they were already dead. Sure, it's something straight out of Columbo or Monk, but it's no wilder than any other theory I've heard.

At the same time, it also has exactly as much solid evidence as any other theory in this case (none, to be precise). The Lead Masks Case seems like one that we'll never have a real answer to: just a lot of speculation, and plenty of fun theories that can't be disproven.

The Skull of Doom

The daughter of a famous adventurer finds a crystal skull while on an excavation in Belize. The skull is said to have magic powers, and may even have been used by Mayan priests to kill their enemies.

The Facts

Anna Mitchell-Hedges was the adopted daughter of F.A. Mitchell-Hedges, a popular British author and adventurer. According to Anna, she accompanied her father on an expedition to British Honduras—known today as Belize—and participated in an expedition to a temple in Lubaantun. During an excavation at the temple, Anna found a crystal skull buried underneath an altar.

One fact that can be agreed on universally is that the skull is an incredible piece of craftsmanship. It measures about five inches high, five inches wide, and is seven inches long, making it only slightly smaller than a life-size human skull. It is comprised of two pieces, as the lower jaw is detached from the remainder of the skull. It has been noted for the incredible level of detail in the

eyes and teeth, which have distinguished this particular piece from other crystal skulls.

According to Anna, she was told by Mayans that high priests used such skulls to “will death”, giving the object the moniker *The Skull of Doom*. Indeed, Anna herself claimed that the skull exhibited a number of supernatural powers. She reportedly claimed to see visions with the help of the skull, including one that showed her the assassination of President John F. Kennedy before it occurred. Even more fantastically, Anna said that the skull could cure cancer, and that she was able to tap into the ancient power of the skull in the same way as the Mayan priests had, using it to kill a man.

For decades, Anna Mitchell-Hedges toured with the skull, charging people to view her find. She continued to speak about the skull and occasionally show it to captivated audiences until 2007, when she passed away. The skull then passed on to her husband, Bill Homann, who has continued to share his wife’s belief in the mystical powers of *The Skull of Doom*.

The Theories

There has been significant debate over the nature and origin of crystal skulls in general, as well as the Mitchell-Hedges skull in particular. According to F.A. Mitchell-Hedges’ *Danger My Ally*, the skull was over 3,600 years old, though later editions of his autobiography omitted any reference to the object.

One of the first attempts to date the skull was made by Frank Dorland, an art restorer. Dorland had a chance to spend time with the object in the 1970s, and came to the conclusion that it had been carved without the use of modern metal tools. However, Dorland did find some scratch marks from grinding on the teeth.

Putting his observations together, Dorland reached the conclusion that the skull was quite old: he believed the skull could have been made as early as 12,000 years ago. It was likely chiseled using some sort of diamond tool, while the fine details were made using sand. This process may have taken centuries to accomplish, meaning the skull would have been passed down through generations of craftsmen to arrive at the finished product.

But Dorland didn’t rely simply on his own observations. He also passed the skull along to Richard Garvin, who was able to take the skull to a Hewlett-Packard crystal lab in Santa Clara. Technicians there made further discoveries, finding that the entire skull—including the lower jaw—had been created using a single quartz crystal.

That would be the last time Anna Mitchell-Hedges would allow any testing to be done on the skull. However, her specimen is far from the only example of a mysterious crystal skull, with other famous examples including one that has been displayed by the British Museum for over a century.

Like *The Skull of Doom*, many individuals have claimed that other crystal skulls also share its supernatural powers. Most of these skulls are said to be Mayan in origin, with one theory stating that there are in fact 13 skulls in total. Others have suggested that the skulls could instead be one of the last remaining artifacts of a lost civilization that lived in Atlantis. An even more extreme possibility that has been advanced is that the skulls have an otherworldly origin, perhaps coming from an ancient alien civilization on Mars. While these wilder theories have no direct evidence to corroborate the supposed

origins of the skulls, their mysterious and somewhat morbid nature certainly lends itself to speculation.

What Really Happened?

One thing that I failed to mention earlier is that there have been questions about Anna Mitchell-Hedges' account of discovering the skull since she first started showing the object. For instance, F.A. Mitchell-Hedges never wrote about the skull during his expedition to Lubaantun. Furthermore, nobody who took part in the excavation there bothered to mention Anna even having been at the site, let alone finding such an incredible artifact.

That alone isn't enough to cast too much doubt on her story; after all, countless people have actually seen and touched *The Skull of Doom*, so its existence isn't in doubt. And as I said, at least some of the examinations done on the skull itself seem to suggest that it could be quite old, even if the Mayan stories may have been invented.

But if you'd like to believe that these skulls are thousands of years old, I have some more bad news. One early cause of suspicion came from two holes that seemed designed to fit around pegs, so that the skull could be displayed. While that would have been a reasonable thing to do even in the ancient past, even early examinations of the skull suggested that these holes showed signs of being drilled with a metal bit.

Still, a believer in the power of the skulls could reasonably argue that the holes were made more recently than the skull itself—perhaps Anna herself wanted to be able to better display the object when she went on tour. And since Anna refused to have any further testing done, there was no evidence that the skull had a modern origin.

The death knell to the idea that the skull was thousands of years old came when Bill Homann brought *The Skull of Doom* to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History shortly after Anna's death, in order to have a more rigorous scientific analysis done. Using a scanning electron microscope, scientists could not find markings that would be consistent with carvings done by a pre-Columbian society. However, micrographs and silicone molds of the skull were able to reveal the markings of high-speed carving tools—the kind that didn't exist before the past century or so. The Smithsonian's best guess is that the skull was created around 1930, and was a basic copy of the British Museum skull, though the two are not identical.

Other crystal skulls have also been shown rather conclusively to be fakes or forgeries, and not actual Mayan artifacts. The British Museum skull (as well as one on display at the Smithsonian) is catalogued as a 19th century artifact that was made with modern tools.

So where did all these skulls come from, then? They seem to have been made by a number of different individuals, though several can be traced to Eugene Boban, the owner of a Paris antiquities shop in 1870. Even though a few of the skulls would not be found to be fakes until much later, most crystal skulls of the late 19th century were realized to be a part of a growing trade in fake artifacts that were said to have Mayan or Aztec origins.

There you have it: the crystal skulls may be beautiful to look at, but they're fairly modern creations, not the work of mystical Mayan priests from millennia past. Nonetheless, nearly all of the crystal skulls should still be cherished as

incredible works of art (with the possible exception of Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, which is far less pleasing to most observers).

The Dyatlov Pass Incident

Nine hikers are found dead in the Ural Mountains. They appear to have torn open their tents from within, wandering out barefoot into the frigid weather. Soviet investigators are baffled, causing them to label the official cause of death as “a compelling unknown force.”

The Facts

On January 25, 1959, a group of ten skiers met up in the city of Ivdel. The group was led by Igor Dyatlov, who would ultimately give his name to the pass in which this mystery unfolded. From Ivdel, the group took a truck to Vizhai, one of the northernmost settlements in Sverdlovsk Oblast. They planned to take a ski trip from Vizhai through the northern Urals, ultimately reaching a mountain known as Otorben. The route was certainly hazardous, especially during the middle of the winter, but all of the group members had previous experience on mountain expeditions and ski tours, so the trip was not expected to be particularly dangerous.

The actual expedition began on January 27, when the group departed from Vizhai. One member of the group—a Yuri Yudin—fell ill just one day later and returned to Vizhai. The remainder of the group continued on, never to be seen alive again.

However, considering the planned length of the expedition, it was some time before anyone became concerned about the whereabouts of Dyatlov and his party. The group was expected to send a telegraph when they returned to Vizhai, which was expected to occur on approximately February 12. When this date passed without word from Dyatlov, there still wasn't any immediate reason to worry; given the conditions and the length of the trip, it seemed reasonable that the group might be a few days late in returning.

But within a week, friends and family began to believe that something was wrong. On February 20, a volunteer group of students and teachers from the Ural Polytechnic Institute (most of Dyatlov's group were students or alumni of the school) began searching for the missing skiers. In the days that followed, the police joined the investigation, and even Soviet army personnel were called in to help.

Finally, on February 26, the first signs of the party were found. An abandoned camp was found on Kholat Syakhl, including a badly damaged tent. There were footprints leading away from the camp towards the woods, but these footprints quickly disappeared into the snow.

At the edge of those woods, the first two bodies were found near the remnants of a fire. Strangely, both of the skiers found here were found barefoot and wearing only their underwear. Considering the winter temperatures in the region were between -25° and -30° Celsius (about -13° to -22° Fahrenheit), this was an unexpected development, to say the least.

Three more bodies were quickly discovered between the woods and the camp; the placement of the bodies seemed to suggest that they had attempted to turn around and return to their camp before succumbing to the cold.

There was plenty of information about the hikers and their journey to be found at the campsite. According to diaries found there, the group had traveled without incident through the end of January, when they began to prepare for a climb through the pass. In preparation for the return journey, they stored some food and equipment in a wooded valley. The trip through the pass began on February 1, but snowstorms caused them to lose their direction and climb upwards towards to the top of Kholat Syakhl. The group then decided to make camp on the slope of the mountain, which is where the campsite was found.

While four of the hikers were still missing at this point, the investigation into the deaths of the five who had been found began almost immediately. It was quickly discovered that none of the five had severe injuries—the closest was a slight crack on one man's skull that was by no means fatal—and that all showed the classic signs of having died of hypothermia.

But the discovery of the final four bodies would turn this incident from a simple case of hypothermia into a mystery that is still debated to this day. On May 4, the remaining party members were found deeper in the same woods where the first two bodies had been found, buried under about four meters of snow. Unlike the original group of bodies, three members of this group exhibited potentially fatal injuries, including skull damage and chest fractures. One woman even had a missing tongue.

Despite these injuries, the bodies apparently showed no severe external injuries that would explain how the skiers died. According to one doctor who examined the bodies, it would have taken an extensive amount of force in order to create the damage seen in the corpses—particularly when considering the lack of wounds on the bodies.

The investigation would ultimately conclude in May. The findings suggested that six group members did indeed die of hypothermia, while three others suffered fatal injuries. The victims had ripped their tents open from within, and left the camp willingly. Journalists have also said that the inquest files state that the injuries that killed three of the skiers could not have been caused by humans (though none were believed to be in the area other than the skiers, in any case), and that a few of the victims had clothing that showed high levels of radioactive contamination upon testing.

Beyond the official investigation, there has been plenty of independent research that has uncovered other potential evidence which some believe may shed new light on the case. For instance, a 12-year-old boy named Yury Kuntsevich attended the funerals of five of the nine skiers. According to him, their skin showed a “deep brown tan.” Interestingly, Kuntsevich would eventually found the Dyatlov Foundation, a group dedicated to convincing the Russian government to reopen an investigation into the case.

According to some reports, there was another group of hikers on a trek about 50 kilometers south of the Dyatlov group at the time of the incident. This group, it is said, saw orange spheres in the sky to the north on at least one night during the period when the skiers may have died. Other sightings of these spheres and other strange lights were reported in the area throughout early 1959.

The Theories

While hypothermia initially appeared to be the simplest explanation for the deaths of the hikers, the unusual facts of the case have caused many investigators to speculate on other possible causes of death.

One of the first theories advanced was the possibility that the group came under attack from the Mansi, an indigenous population that lived in the area. However, the evidence found at the camp and near the bodies suggested that this couldn't have been the case. There were no other footprints found near the skiers' bodies, several of the bodies had no sign of injuries, and the injuries that were present seemed impossible for a human to inflict.

With human causes ruled out, and the hypothermia explanation seeming unsatisfactory to some journalists and investigators, more unusual theories began to circulate. These theories tend to focus on the reports of mysterious lights and the levels of radiation in some of the hikers' clothing. Could this point to UFOs or alien activity as a possible explanation? This possibility certainly has plenty of proponents, including at least one member of the original investigatory team. Those who believe in alien involvement also point to the fact that many of the victims were found wearing little or no clothing—something, they say, makes no sense given the extremely cold weather.

Another theory takes the same bizarre evidence and comes to less otherworldly conclusion. Some have speculated that the nine skiers may have unwittingly been the victims of a secret weapons experiment by the Soviet Union. Proponents of this theory point to reports that a large amount of scrap metal was found in the area during the initial investigation, suggesting that there may have been military activity in the area.

What Really Happened?

The Dyatlov Pass Incident is a fascinating case, and it's an open playground for fun speculation. However, in this case, I'm on the side of those who think the evidence points to a pretty solid conclusion: Dyatlov's group simply died of hypothermia, and most of the seemingly incredible evidence actually makes perfect sense given the undisputed facts of the case.

One of the weirder things about the bodies was their state of undress in sub-zero temperatures. However, this is not an uncommon occurrence among hypothermia victims. As many as half of all hypothermia victims show a symptom known as paradoxical undressing, a condition that usually occurs in severe cases of hypothermia. As a person becomes disoriented and confused, they may be convinced that they actually feel very hot, and undress. While the exact reasons for this behavior aren't known, several plausible theories have been suggested, and the phenomenon is common enough that mountain rescue personnel are trained to expect to see this when coming across individuals who have died of hypothermia.

Much of the other unusual evidence can be explained by the time it took to recover the bodies. The original five bodies were found weeks after the deaths likely took place; it has been suggested that this could easily account for their tanned appearance. As for the victims that weren't found until May, it's certainly possible that the severe damage could have been caused by an avalanche, either after the victims died or as a cause of death. The most likely explanation for the missing tongue is that an animal may have eaten it in the months before the body was recovered.

But what about the radioactivity and the mysterious lights in the area? Well, it's unclear as to whether or not the reports about radioactivity actually appeared in the original investigation, or if this detail was simply invented later on. And while investigators certainly found people claiming that they saw orange spheres in the sky after the fact, none of these reports were made at the time of the initial investigation.

All told, this appears to be an open and shut case of a ski trip that ended tragically in severe weather conditions. Still, even some of the confirmable evidence was weird, and nobody can say precisely what the events were that led to the deaths of those nine hikers. That alone should be enough to keep people curious about what exactly happened in that mountain pass for a long time to come.

The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine

There's a lost mine somewhere in the Superstition Mountains, one that is reportedly home to a tremendous quantity of gold. There's only one problem: nobody knows where to find it—or if it even really exists.

The Facts

Finding reliable factual accounts of the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine is about as difficult as finding the mine itself. There are several different Lost Dutchman stories, and each of these stories in turn has several variants. However, the following account captures most of the important parts of the Lost Dutchman tale.

According to most accounts, there were once two German men: Jacob Waltz and Jacob Weiser. At some point in the middle of the 19th century (varying accounts of the story put the date anywhere between 1850 and 1870), the two men found a gold mine in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona—one that was extremely rich. However, after discovering the mine, Weiser was attacked and mortally wounded. Some suggest that it was Waltz himself that attacked Weiser out of greed, while others say that it was a band of Apaches.

In either case, the story goes that Weiser lived long enough to make a deathbed confession to a Dr. Walker, allowing the legend of the mine to continue on. Later, Waltz similarly passed on knowledge of the mine to a woman named Julia Thomas, which included a rough guide to finding the mine itself.

This seems like a good place to answer an obvious question: if the two men who found the mine were both German, how did the "Dutchman" name get attached to the story? The answer comes from a now archaic practice in which many Americans used Dutchman as a slang word for German. Americans never actually confused Germans with the Dutch, but the word Deutsch (meaning German in the German language) was close enough to cause some translational errors.

While the above story is the one most commonly associated with the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine, there are many variations on the tale. In some versions, an Apache tribe held the gold mine, killing at least one man who found it

independently. Later, they take a doctor to the mine as a reward for healing one of their chieftains, but do so in a way that makes him unable to share the location with anyone else.

Yet another story says that the mine was found (either as the original discoverers, or subsequently after others had done so) by several U.S. Army soldiers. While the soldiers were able to take some of the gold out as proof, they went missing soon after, never to be seen again.

Regardless of which version of the story is believed, the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine soon captured the imagination of the public, and would be prospectors flocked to Arizona in hopes of finding the mine and staking claim to its riches.

One of the most famous explorers who attempted to find the mine was Adolph Ruth, who went in search of the Dutchman's gold in 1931. Although Ruth was warned not to travel into the mountains due to his advanced age (he was 66) and his lack of experience, Ruth refused to be denied, and planned to take two weeks to search for the gold mine.

After setting out in June, Ruth was never again seen alive. While an initial search failed to find his body, a skull was found in December that later proved to be Ruth's. Unexpectedly, however, there were two bullet holes in Ruth's skull, likely from a shotgun or rifle. When the rest of Ruth's remains were found about a month later, his pistol and other belongings were found with them. The only item that couldn't be found was the map that Ruth was said to have taken with him on his journey.

Ruth was just the first of many explorers to die in search of the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine. While some of the earlier accounts of missing explorers or close brushes with death can't be independently verified, there have been recent examples of just how treacherous the terrain near the lost mine can be. For instance, in 2010, three hikers in Utah went missing while searching for the mine. After more than a week of searching, local authorities gave up. In early 2011, three sets of remains (presumably belonging to the hikers) were found in the Superstition Mountains.

The Theories

With so many stories and little accurate information to go on, it would be wonder why anyone cares about such a tall tale. But, incredibly, there is actually some solid information out there that supports at least one account of the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine.

As it happens, there is plenty of evidence to establish that Jacob Waltz really did exist. A man by that very name immigrated to the United States from Germany in the middle part of the 19th century, and later moved to Arizona around 1860. This man is known to have tried gold mining, but found little success—at least according to public records.

Here's where the story gets really interesting. Waltz operated a farm near Phoenix which was destroyed in the major flood of 1891. He likely developed a case of pneumonia during the flood, and died in October of that year. While he was dying, he had a nurse: one Julia Thomas.

Even more promising to prospectors, it appears that Waltz shared a tale of a gold mine with Thomas, just as the legend describes. Within a year of his death, there were newspaper accounts about Thomas and other individuals attempting to locate the mine. Furthermore, these newspaper accounts recount the story

that Waltz shared the location of the mine with Thomas. Though Thomas and her partners could not find the mine themselves, they sold maps to the mine to other treasure hunters for years after Waltz's death.

One of the big holes in this theory is the fact that there is no real evidence for the existence of the second man in the story, Jacob Weiser. However, most of those who believe that the gold mine is real are willing to concede that Weiser never existed, and that the parts of the story that involved him were embellishments added well after Waltz passed the location of the mine down to Thomas. Similarly, versions of the story that include murderous Apaches and other poetic flourishes are dismissed as attempts to make the legend all the more dramatic, but aren't seen as proof that the core story isn't true.

What Really Happened?

There is virtually nothing that can be said with any degree of certainty when it comes to this story. Some have said that there's unlikely to be gold anywhere in the Superstition Mountains, let alone a particularly rich mine, while others have proposed that the mine may have actually been in a different location. Still other theories have surfaced that the "mine" may actually have been a secret storage area for a large cache of gold, meaning it could be virtually anywhere in or near the mountain range.

I can't pretend to know who has this one right or wrong, but a few things do seem certain. Jacob Waltz definitely spent some time looking for gold in the area, and I'm inclined to believe he passed some sort of knowledge along before he died. Sure, Waltz may have made it all up, but it's also possible that he had some real knowledge of gold in the area. Given that he was quite sick when he passed this information on to Julia Thomas, it's even possible that he was confused or disoriented as he spoke, sending future treasure hunters on a wild goose chase.

In any case, there's at least a kernel of truth to this story, and that's been enough to keep thousands of people motivated enough to search for the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine each year. If you decide to join their ranks, though, I have two pieces of advice for you: be mindful of your health, and don't get your hopes up.

The Tunguska Event

In 1908, a massive explosion rocked the area near the Tunguska River in Russia. The blast had the force of a nuclear weapon, knocking over millions of trees and sending shock waves around the world. The question: what could have caused such a devastatingly powerful event?

The Facts

The Tunguska Event occurred on the morning of June 30, 1908. At about 7:15 am local time, people in the area northwest of Lake Baikal in Siberia saw a very bright column of blue light streaking across the morning sky. Ten minutes

later, a flash was seen; this was accompanied by a loud sound that was said to be similar to artillery fire.

The blast produced a lot more than just light and sound. A powerful shockwave resulted in dramatic effects hundreds of miles away, breaking windows and throwing people to the ground. In fact, the shock wave was so powerful that many people only reported hearing the sound and then feeling the force and heat of the wave, not actually seeing the explosion.

Soon, the whole world knew about the event. Seismic stations across Europe and Asia recorded the shock, and atmospheric effects were seen around the globe (likely due to ice and dust particles). In some areas, the shock wave was strong enough to register as a 5.0 earthquake on the Richter scale.

It wasn't long before the event was traced to the remote area of Tunguska. However, there were no immediate attempts to locate the exact location or nature of the event. This may seem strange today, but given the remote location and the turmoil in Russia over the next decade (including the Russian Civil War and World War I), travelling to a sparsely populated region wasn't high on anyone's list of priorities.

But eventually, the time came to find out exactly what had happened. In 1921, a Russian mineralogist named Leonid Kulik traveled to the area and determined that the event was likely an explosion caused by the impact of a large meteor. Soviet authorities were intrigued by the possibility of finding meteoric iron at the impact site, and authorized an expedition by Kulik in 1927.

When Kulik's group reached the expected impact site, they were shocked to find that there was no crater. Instead, they discovered a five-mile wide area of scorched and barren trees. Later expeditions would confirm the lack of any crater or other evidence of a meteor crash, and found that a much larger area was affected by the event. Over 800 square miles of forest was entirely leveled, with all of the trees in the region falling in a direction away from the center of the affected area.

Further expeditions in the 1950s and 1960s would turn up more clues about the nature of the Tunguska Event. Microscopic spheres were found in the soil of the area, and chemical analysis showed that they had a similar makeup to meteorites. In fact, many metals were found in amounts that were out of proportion for the region, suggesting that the event was caused by an object of extraterrestrial origin.

Taking all of the evidence into consideration, it became clear that the Tunguska Event was caused by the explosion of an extraterrestrial object above the region, explaining the lack of an impact crater. However, that still left an open question as to the nature of the object that exploded.

The Theories

In the time since the event, there has been rampant speculation as to what exactly exploded over the Tunguska River. Many of these theories have attempted to reconcile the fact that the pattern of damage from the explosion was similar to the damage observed after atmospheric explosions of nuclear weapons.

Some of these theories are fairly easily dismissed. Some have proposed that the event could have been caused by antimatter, while others have said that a small black hole could have caused the blast. While both of these possibilities could have caused damage similar to that seen in Tunguska, neither would be

expected to leave the physical evidence (in particular, the mineral deposits) that were found after the event.

Others have pushed unnatural explanations for the Tunguska Event. Like every other strange event in Russia during his lifetime, some have suspected that a Nikola Tesla experiment could be responsible for the explosion. Despite the fact that there's absolutely no evidence to confirm such a theory, that hasn't stopped many from pinning the event on a malfunctioning Tesla Tower. How this could have resulted in a massive explosion in a remote area of Siberia hasn't been adequately explained by proponents, either.

One rather popular theory is that the Tunguska Event was caused by the explosion of an alien spacecraft. The most popular version of this theory dictates that a damaged UFO operating on a nuclear propulsion system attempted to make an emergency landing on Earth. However, the ship exploded in midair, causing a nuclear explosion that devastated the forest below. Some even say that the wreckage of an alien spacecraft was later found at the blast site, though these reports are—to put it as kindly as possible—unconfirmed. Other versions of this theory are slightly more romantic, making the blast the mark of an alien weapon that stopped an object just moments before it would have crashed into the Earth.

What Really Happened?

The most commonly accepted theory for the Tunguska Event—and the one I'm most inclined to believe—is that a meteoroid or comet exploded about five miles above the planet's surface, causing the massive explosion.

Meteoroids enter our atmosphere many times each day, and most either burn up or explode before making impact. Relatively large explosions might happen as often as once or more each year, and according to some estimates, a meteoroid large enough to cause the Tunguska event likely explodes in the atmosphere once every 300 years. Other researchers have suggested that a comet is the more likely culprit; eyewitness accounts seem to support this view, while the preponderance of physical evidence seems to tilt in favor of the meteoroid theory. In all likelihood, the meteoroid was over 100 feet in length, and weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of 220 million pounds.

Either way, while the exact nature of the Tunguska Event remains unclear, it does seem as though all of the evidence points towards a natural cause. Then again, it's always possible that Nikola Tesla managed to destroy an incoming alien spacecraft, and simply made it look like an exploding comet. Okay, that's pretty unlikely, but that won't stop someone from running with this theory—and when they do, you can say you read it here first.

Taman Shud

A man is found dead on an Australian beach. He has no identification, and nobody can determine who he might be or even where he came from. Rare books and a secret code leave investigators baffled. It sounds like the plot of a thrilling mystery novel—only it's all real, and remains unsolved to this day.

The Facts

At about 6:30 am local time on December 1, 1948, a man was found dead on Somerton beach in Adelaide, Australia. The man was 5'11" tall with light hair, and appeared to be around 40 years old. He wore what was described as "quality clothing," including a shirt and tie, brown trousers, and a double-breasted coat—strange, considering that it had been a warm night.

Immediately, investigators realized that there was something a little off about this man. Every label on his clothing had been removed, and he wasn't carrying any identification. The police attempted to run his dental records, but couldn't find a match.

Examining his pockets, local police found a used bus ticket and an unused rail ticket for a trip from Adelaide to Henley Beach. Also found were an American comb, a pack of cigarettes from Britain, and a handful of matches.

Police found several witnesses who recalled seeing someone who resembled the dead man in the same area the night before. A couple who saw the man between 7:30 pm and 8:00 pm the night before said that he had not been moving, though they didn't suspect he was dead, and thought that his position had changed during the time that they noticed him. In fact, the description of his position given by the witnesses was the same as the position the body was found in the next morning.

An autopsy did suggest that the couple who had seen the man the previous night was right that he was not yet dead; the time of death was pinned at about 2:00 am. While most of the man's body was congested, no foreign substances were found in the body. Despite this, the pathologist assigned to the case thought poisoning was the likely cause of death, though how the poison was ingested was unclear.

Despite sharing photos and fingerprints of the dead man, no matches were found anywhere in the world. In the following months, there would be several close calls in which it seemed that the body would be identified. One possibility seemed to be Robert Walsh, a missing 63-year-old wood cutter. However, after three people initially identified the body as Walsh's, a closer inspection of the body revealed that the dead man did not share a scar Walsh was known to have. Dozens of other people were supposedly identified as being the dead man, but all were quickly dismissed as possibilities. Over the next three years, hundreds of identities were proposed, and all were eventually rejected.

In early 1949, investigators seemed to have caught a break. On January 14, a brown suitcase was discovered at Adelaide Railway Station. Like the dead man's clothing, all labels had been removed from the suitcase. Furthermore, the suitcase had been checked in on November 30, making it safe to assume that the suitcase belonged to the dead man.

Inside the suitcase was a variety of clothing and personal grooming items. In addition, there was a table knife, a sharpened pair of scissors, an electrician's screwdriver, and a stenciling brush that was commonly used for stenciling cargo on merchant ships. All of the clothing labels had been removed, though the name Keane or T. Keane was found in a few places (such as on a laundry bag). However, police believed that Keane was not the dead man's name. While there was a local sailor named Tom Keane that couldn't be located, his shipmates were certain that the body was not his, and no other person by the name of T. Keane was found to be missing anywhere in the world.

The suitcase also featured a thread card that wasn't available for purchase in Australia. Similarly, the stitching on a coat in the suitcase could only be done (at the time) in the United States. This evidence made it appear likely that the man had spent time in the United States and may have been a frequent traveler.

By June 1949, there had been no progress made on the case, and the story had already been recognized as "one of Australia's most profound mysteries" by one editorialist in *The Advertiser*. Had that been the end of the case, the story would likely still have become famous, at least locally.

But a new discovery turned the case into a truly legendary mystery. Deep within one of the dead man's trouser pockets, police found a secondary pocket that had been sewn. In that pocket, there was a small piece of paper that had been neatly trimmed around two printed words: "Tamam Shud". Interestingly, the name this case is universally known by—Taman Shud—is a misspelling of that phrase. The phrase means "finished" or "ended" in Persian, and came from a book of poems by Omar Khayyam known as *The Rubaiyat*.

After a search by investigators, it was realized that the scrap of paper came from the first edition of Edward FitzGerald's English translation of *The Rubaiyat*. After searching throughout Australia for the book, it was found that a man in Glenelg found a copy of that book in the backseat of his car on November 30, 1948. That copy of the book was examined and the scrap of paper compared, and it was confirmed that the paper came from that copy.

The copy of the book was examined for further evidence, and that's when police found the piece of evidence that is probably best known from this case. In the back pages of the book, five lines of capital letters were found, though the second, shortest line was struck. The letters do not form words in any language, and combined with the second line that was struck out—which is similar to the beginning of the fourth line—this has led many investigators to believe they represent a code.

There is some disagreement on some of the letters represented in the "code," but the most commonly accepted reading is as follows:

WRGOABABD
MLIAOI (struck out by a line)
WTBIMPANETP
MLIABOAIQC
ITTMTSAMSTGAB

If these letters do represent a code, it has not been solved to this day.

Also in the book was a telephone number. Police found that the number belonged to a nurse who lived about a half-mile from where the body was found. Interestingly, the woman who the number belonged to had previously owned a copy of *The Rubaiyat*, but had given her copy to an army lieutenant named Alfred Boxall.

This opened up the possibility that the case might be solved, but nothing is ever that easy in this case. Boxall was later found alive, and still had his copy of *The Rubaiyat*, complete with the phrase "Tamam Shud" on the final page. The woman—whose name was never revealed, but was identified by the name Jestyn—said she had no idea who the dead man was, or what he would be doing near her home on the night of his death. She did say, however, that she

was told a mysterious man had asked her next door neighbor about her in late 1948, just months before the dead man was found.

Since the initial investigation, there have been several potential leads in which people claimed to have new evidence or know the identity of the dead man. However, none of these have proven fruitful, and his identity remains a mystery to this day.

The Theories

It should come as no surprise that there are numerous theories about the dead man, and the circumstances leading to his death. Given the code, the fact that the man seemed to have traveled throughout the world, and the timing (the Cold War was in its early years in 1948), one of the first possibilities that gained widespread popularity was that the dead man could be a spy.

Other than the death being strange and the man being unidentified, very little about the case directly pointed to the dead man having been an operative for any government. However, the theory gained some traction after Alfred Boxall's association with Jestyn was revealed. Rumors surfaced that Boxall had served in a military intelligence capacity during World War II—a rumor that Boxall never categorically confirmed or denied.

Other possible avenues for investigation came in the form of links to other cases. The most promising of these leads came from a death that took place three years before the Taman Shud case. In June 1945, a Singaporean man named Joseph Saul Haim Marshall was found dead in Sydney with an open copy of *The Rubaiyat* on his chest. If that wasn't enough to connect the two cases, Marshall was also believed to have been killed by poison, though police were more confident in this case that the death was likely a suicide. But the Marshall case wasn't exactly open and shut either; when an inquest was held to look into his death, a woman who testified about the case was found dead in a bathtub two weeks later, her wrists slit.

Other investigators have been working on trying to crack the “code” found in the back of the dead man's book. Simple decryption methods have clearly not yielded results, and some have suggested that a one-time pad may have been used. Of course, some believe the code is just nonsense; however, analysis showed that the letters are sufficiently non-random to suggest that there's at least some meaning behind the lines. One leading theory (based on recent efforts) is that the four lines of the code line up with a quatrain from *The Rubaiyat*, and an original copy of the FitzGerald translation may be necessary to finally crack this mystery.

Another recent bit of analysis has opened up the suggestion that there may have been more to the story of the dead man and Jestyn than she revealed during the investigation. Going by photos of the dead man and a purported picture of a son of Jestyn, both shared uncommon ear shapes and a rare dental disorder—something that, if true, is extremely unlikely to be coincidental.

What Really Happened?

Unless genetic testing is done on the dead man's remains—which seems highly unlikely, as exhuming a body is normally only done if there's an important public interest served by doing so—it's unlikely that a conclusive

result will be reached in this case. I certainly don't feel I'm in any position to make a guess as to who this man is, where he came from, or why he died, other than to say that something very strange was going on, and that it's likely that someone involved with the case (likely Jesty) knew more about the dead man than they were willing to say publically.

Amazingly, more than 60 years later, people are still suggesting new possible identities for the man who was found on that Somerton beach. In October 2011, a woman from Adelaide submitted an ID card dating back to World War I, which included a picture of a man who is similar in appearance to the dead man. In fact, some experts believe that the two men are one in the same. The card identified the man as H.C. Reynolds, and was a standard identification document that was issued by the US government to foreign seamen during the First World War.

But if you've read this far, it should come as no surprise that nobody has been able to find any records that confirm the existence of an H.C. Reynolds in the United States, UK, or Australia. If Mr. Reynolds was the man who ultimately started one of the most bizarre mystery cases in history, we seem no closer to knowing exactly what happened to him than police were the day he was discovered. As has been the pattern in this case, the more we learn, the further we seem to travel away from discovering the truth.
