



Anita Mays, the youngest of four, was born in Nigeria, to Yorkshire parents. She spent a great deal of her upbringing in Africa, while attending boarding school in England where she excelled in sports. At the Universities of Birmingham and Aix-en-Provence she read English and French literature, and attained a combined honours degree. She now lives in Berkshire.

Aeroplanes had always been a seminal part of her childhood. Keen to work in the industry, she applied to become an air hostess, and was subsequently turned down by over 10 airlines. Unable to work in the back, she tried her hand at the front end. She has enjoyed a remarkably colourful career as a pilot, and this book about her experiences, won her a place as a finalist in the national competition ‘The People’s Author’ on TV’s Alan Titchmarsh show.

Anita is also a qualified teacher and enjoys teaching English to Foreign students. She travels extensively (recently she backpacked round Colombia), and enjoys cycling, yoga, ceroc dancing and kayaking. She loves history, and reads avidly: novels, science, health, comedy and occasionally nonsense!

Her maxims for a good life:

Give yourself time to stand and stare.
Don’t take it too seriously.
Most of all....Be Grateful!

FLYGIRL ADVENTURES:

An Autoflyography



I dedicate this book to my mum, for her love, sacrifices, encouragement and generosity. Whose grit, determination and work ethic lifted her out of rations and poverty, and carried her to far flung Africa to face the risks of the unknown, with characteristic courage. For being one of those ladies who'd wear a beautiful white suit with matching hat, gloves and heels when embarking an old BOAC Handley Page Hermes from Lagos, for a two day journey. She'd look a \$million but best of all she knocked it up herself on an old Singer sewing machine. For having a song for everything, for being unfailingly elegant and decent and for being my treasured friend. Her words to me as a child were "Aim for the stars and you'll reach the treetops."

Anita Mays

FLYGIRL ADVENTURES:

An Autoflyography

AUSTIN  MACAULEY

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84963 050 4

www.austinmacauley.com

First Published (2011)
Austin & Macauley Publishers Ltd.
25 Canada Square
Canary Wharf
London
E14 5LB

Printed & Bound in Great Britain

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Gray Joliffe for the excellent cartoons.
- Mike Davis for teaching me to fly and opening up a special world.
- Caroline Davies for computer assistance and printing out my first copy.
- Phil Tomkinson for love, laughs, and loads of help.
- Jack Rose for worldwide adventures, my first break, and teaching me to land the 727: 'keep her coming down'.
- Robbie my friend and partner in mischief, 'shall we shoot an ILS at Heathrow?'
- Mike Woodley for teaching me so much and for fantastic opportunities, warbirds, air shows, and the seaplane.
- My Father Who flew in Bomber Command in WW2.
- FlyPast magazine For a superb publication.
- Virgin Atlantic For being innovative and progressive, and for some great flights.
- Cathy Burnham For teaching me to be a flight instructor.

All my friends who have 'DANCED THE SKIES ON LAUGHTER SILVERED WINGS' with me at one time or another – they know who they are!

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting Started

A Failed Air Hostess – A Good Start

The sky called again that morning and this time I answered.

“The views are great, come on up!”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

“Clear prop!” the instructor shouted through the little window. The key turned, the prop spun noisily into life, as the nose sunk a couple of inches on its strut.

“Golf Mike Charlie Yankee Oscar radio check and taxi for local.”

“Two four left hand, one zero two three,” came the reply through the headset (whatever *that* meant). He turned the altimeter knob, opened the throttle, pushed his foot to the floor, which turned us sharply round and off we went. I was expecting him to move the yoke like a steering wheel as we turned the corner.

“Turning is all done with the rudder pedals,” he had detected my surprise.

We trundled off like a little duck which moves somewhat awkwardly on the ground yet achieves such grace (as we would) once airborne. He turned into wind by some trees, put the brake on and pushed the throttle to full travel, we rattled and shook like a biscuit tin. He chatted away about the magneto checks, as he went from high to low RPM then aligned his direction indicator with the magnetic compass, dropped his hand between the seats and pulled the flap lever up one notch, then he smiled:

“Ready?”

He had no idea **how** ready I was.

“Oh yes I’m **ready!**”

Would this be the “rabbit-out-of-the-hat” moment that I was waiting for?

We lifted off into a gin-clear November morning. It was the very best autumn could offer – crisp cold air, unlimited visibility and a luminosity and clarity, which made you, glad to be alive. This was my first experience of ‘earthshine’ and at that moment I lived to appreciate it totally. My heart was cartwheeling.

But – and that’s a big **but** it had been long journey of disappointment and struggle to arrive at this point.

I had been passionate about getting into aviation because of a lightsome and innocent memory from school days. I would be allowed to leave boarding school at the end of term a night early to catch the BOAC/ British Caledonian flight on a 707 or a DC 10 to Lagos. The excitement was all consuming, joyful anticipation flooded through me. Gatwick was magical in those days, the huge Christmas tree twinkled in the terminal and I’d stand at the gate with my nose pressed against the window, mesmerised by the roaring engines and the

flashing lights disappearing into the night sky. Nothing had ever filled me with so much longing.

The association was cemented – planes quite simply meant happiness. Aircraft and airports offered life changing opportunities for adventure; in a matter of hours you could journey into the stratosphere and end up somewhere – *entirely* different. Vast areas that would take all afternoon to drive around could be journeyed across with one glance. “Wow” I used to mutter under my breath if I picked out my home or a village I had *only* known from the ground. It looks so different from up here!

I was fascinated that these huge oversized seemingly cumbersome machines could defy gravity and so gracefully and with such agility, overcome their bulk and ascend, opening up limitless horizons to us, shifting our lives and giving us a whole new vantage point. I’d watch them land – their weight and speed are so cleverly disguised on the approach. How could something that enormous be approaching so slowly without falling to the ground?

Furthermore, airports were wonderful places in those days. It was an age when people didn’t need to be told by a robot that they were coming to the end of a walkway or that the doors were opening – yes those Halcyon days when we *knew* to stand clear of the doors because of our own natural instincts. A time when a grown man or woman could be trusted to walk unassisted from a door to a waiting aircraft without slipping falling or suing, getting lost or walking into the engine. An age when the flight would be pleasant dare I say even peaceful – free from the ‘pneumatic drill’ PA announcements harping on about mind numbing nonsense like scratch cards, special offers, loyalty points, frequent flyers, overhead lockers, smoking, electronic gadgets, what we *can* do, what we *can’t* do, vegetarian options, duty free, how to read the magazine, new routes, and their chosen charities. (This all delivered in a voice which could bone herring at twenty fathoms). Yes, just as the Permian period came before the Devonian which was followed by the Cambrian, I hark longingly back to *our* Golden age – the ‘Commonsense-ian’, which was post ‘Getonwithit’era and pre ‘Nanny-ian’. Airports and air travel were shining examples of this era.

So, I was determined to become a flight attendant because *that* was the natural way in to the business. It was a job I yearned for. It never occurred to me to become a pilot – yes, I secretly would have loved it but never fancied my chances. It was a distant elitist world full of brainy ‘sciencey’ people. The only mark I got in my physics O’level was for drawing the white light entering a prism and dispersing into a rainbow and I only got *that* because I had Pink Floyd’s ‘Dark side of the Moon’. In chemistry, the periodic table was unfathomable, and as for *calculus* – forget it!

So, after graduating I embarked on my first mission – to become a stewardess. Not very challenging some may say but it’s what I *wanted!* I applied to all the airlines, large and small and the long and short of it is ... that ... I got turned down by *every single one*. That was well over ten companies. I was devastated.

NOT ANOTHER JOB REJECTION!

“Darling, you’ve got a letter from British Airways, shall I bring it up?”

Those were the words from my mum who had tried so doggedly to encourage me during the ‘year of the job rejection’.

I thought by becoming a hostess, I’d get my foot in the door, start travelling, earn some money, see where the path took me and then, you never know, I might get acquainted with some pilots who would kindly take me along when they used the simulators. Anyway ... I would be happy as a ‘hostie’ working in the industry, near my beloved aeroplanes learning all about it! Somehow, I believed I would work it out. Sweet reveries!

I managed to achieve something which not *many* people could lay claim to; I *actually* clocked up a dazzling and unprecedented eleven job rejections. That takes some doing! BA, Britannia, British Caledonian, and many others all said ‘no thanks’. I was sure it would be a breeze, but what I thought would be an *easy* starter turned into a ‘*non* starter’.

So that morning whilst standing in my bathroom, my mum handed me the letter, this was my last chance, *every* known airline in the whole of the UK had given me the ‘Dear John’ treatment. I ripped it open and, as was my custom by then, my eyes shot straight to the bottom. There in print, the by now, familiar words:

“May we take this opportunity to wish you every success in your future career and thank you for your interest in British Airways.”

I slowly lifted my weary gaze into the mirror and said sarcastically at my reflection, “The world has more use for an appendix, so do run along, and don’t bother us any more, *that’s* what they *really* mean.”

I was inconsolable, I just slumped and sobbed, my mum tried so hard to rally my spirits. I sputtered through my tears, “We better start a new file for all my job rejections.”

“Oh don’t be like that darling something will come up, come on cheer up.”

The conversation went back and forth over the net like that until mum gave way to her anger in typical maternal style.

“They must be flaming mad, they don’t know what they’re missing!”

Mums are great aren’t they? The only ones who think you are absolutely brilliant and anyone would be darn lucky to have you in their organisation, when, you know in your heart that nothing is further from the truth, in fact, in the evolutionary traffic you are something of a flat tyre. In the animal world, just out of the molecular soup, not even a finned mudskipper at this point.

One which *really* hurt was the rejection from Jersey European, operating from Blackpool to the Isle of Man on a Shorts 360 during which the sum total of the catering service was to hand out a sealed packet of three oatmeal biscuits and pour a cup of tea.

“Why don’t you try the RAF and see what *they* say?” mum offered, trying to lift my flagging spirits. Being pre Internet, I found the number in the phone book and call, I did.

“I see my dear, and what exactly is it you are trying to achieve?” came a voice from the other end of the phone. I put a face to it instantly – a blimpish type with a big moustache, grey hair, and specs on the end of the nose who spoke like those bossy wing commanders of old black and white film fame whose favourite words were ‘frightful’, ‘insolence’ and ‘hup to’. His laugh descended into a patronising spiral until it came to a wheezy stop and he said: “Unless you are of the feathered variety my dear, I’m afraid there’s no flying for you here!”

“Thank you *SO MUCH* for your time,” I said replacing the receiver.

“Any joy darling?” asked my mum.

“Not unless I am a buzzard.”

Enough of the Weight I Need Some Lift

“I’ve got a three day trip to Nice coming up,” was the enviably casual comment from an air hostess I met at a party in town who worked on private executive jets for a company at Heathrow. I was enthralled by this prospect. We swapped numbers. I so wanted her job. I acquired a first aid certificate with St John Ambulance knowing this was a pre requisite and approached them soon after. To no avail, it was the standard ‘closed shop’ scenario. They only hired their special friends and the network was cosy and nepotistic. Liaisons between the hostesses and the captains or company owners were – shall we say ‘close’.

I made it as far as their offices and I recall the very silky, groomed girl who floated around in lots of tumbling baby pink cashmere running her manicured fingers through her long swinging hair. (For someone like me whose hair never moved when I did a handstand, this is an enviable activity!) The phone rang – a guy asking her out I guessed, because she was, much more interested in *that* than this freckly curly haired ‘wannabe’ in front of her. She giggled and played with her pearls, lowering her chin to nibble on them and running her finger along their length, swivelling around in her leather chair and whispering with a scrunch of her nose, “I’ll be with you in a sec.” She never did get ‘with me’ after a sec nor after a month for that matter. As sure as low tide follows high, the letter plopped through my letter box. “We are fully crewed right now, we will keep you on file if anything should come up in the future ...”

Yeah yeah yeah I muttered inwardly. I understand *now* that this is how the world works, but it used to hurt.

So ... my life was beginning to look like the ‘bottom of the parrot’s cage’, with all the blackballing. I even received a couple of rejections in France, where I tried to take advantage of cross border employment.

‘The Careers talk’ is a feature of final year at university. We sat in front of the careers officer who politely asked what we were considering.

“Well,” I said throwing caution to the wind just to see what she’d say. “What I’d *really* like to do is fly, maybe be a bush pilot in Africa, or just *fly* ... you know ... anywhere.”

“I see,” she giggled nervously pushing her glasses up her nose and thumbing through her neat piles of paperwork on accountancy, law, medicine, and banking.

“Oh – I actually don’t seem to have *a-ny-thing* at all on pilots,” she said feigning surprise as though she had just run out.

To earn some money I got a job in a photographic studio (I had a friend there). Photography was a hobby of mine and I fancied being an aerial photographer and combining my two interests. I didn’t know much but I experimented with my Canon SLR. I thought the job might teach me about photographic equipment and one day perhaps I’d be heroically hanging out of the side of an aeroplane filming herds of migrating wildebeest for David Attenborough. I ended up stuffing suitcases with foam, sanding gloss paint off huge panels with a Black and Decker and assembling *really* complicated dolls houses and other toys – they were shooting the Argos catalogue. I know we all have to start at the bottom but this was subterranean – I moved on – had to stick with the flying dream. Fun while it lasted – I did a memorable luggage shoot at Brocket Hall where I held a huge light reflector at different angles for six hours. Also met the dashing cad Lord Brockett who showed me the super duper collection of race cars. Wow he’s got everything I remember musing inwardly. A few years later he was in jail. This taught me very early on that things are not always as they seem. I’ve dipped into that little pot of knowledge many times – it was most useful!

I answered an advert for hostesses in a bar/restaurant. A part-time job and a bit of cash were what I needed before the break into aviation came. Having spent some time in the States I thought it would be similar to the bars over there where girls are employed to welcome people, take coats, show customers to the bar, hand over menus then shout down a mike “Mckenzie, party of four, your table is ready”.

Not knowing London at all I set off – a little bundle of naivety. Characteristically mum told me to wear a nice suit but my dad said through cigar chomps in his strong Yorkshire accent: “It won’t bloody matter what she wears ‘cause it’s a flaming knockin’ shop.”

“Don’t be silly dad, it will be a really nice place in London and I’ll meet new people.” (Duh!) I found the address – St James’s of course meant nothing to me. So I walked down the cobbled street with thoughts of bars like ‘The Rusty Pelican’ or ‘Carlos Murphy’s’ full of fun loving, ‘bon viveurs’ sipping cocktails, feeling sure *this* would be the London equivalent. I hoped my leather suit wouldn’t be too racy or inappropriate.

I rang a bell and was shown in. I couldn’t believe my eyes, I saw about ten topless girls in stockings and suspenders huddled together round a bar. Breezy Californian cocktail bar it was *not*, however, I had to go through with it – besides I’d never see the inside of one of these joints again so I could learn something. The manageress who, to use an equestrian term looked like she’d been ‘ridden hard and put away wet’ gave me the brief:

“You need to be able to eat and drink a lot, handle men, and outside these doors you’re not our responsibility, you get nothing if you don’t get chosen, but it’s £25 if a guy chooses to dine with you, then, you can go downstairs and have whatever he buys you to eat and drink ... probably lots of champagne!”

I followed her clunking heels down the wooden staircase. Men were thin on the ground upstairs so I guess most of *those* girls stood around all night topless in high heels, talked amongst themselves then caught the bus home, empty handed.

She sensed I was a bit taken aback – must have been my eyes like organ stops staring at the incongruity of naked boobs flanking a prawn cocktail. So to encourage me she continued:

“We have great cabaret evenings here, a group of girls who have been invited will sit with the guys at this big table and watch a show – something a bit raunchy ya know!”

I glanced over and saw another girl scantily clad having dinner with a cruelly unattractive man.

“Yea I mean look at Susie over there – she’s on her second this evening and will probably do another one after this.” Susie was quite a girl. He had a few traces of froth in the corners of his mouth and looked like he was on the ‘my wife doesn’t understand me stories’ I caught her looking at her watch discreetly under the table.

I was trying to nod earnestly at her as she described the job.

“Have you done any hostess work before Anita?”

“Well not *exactly* like this,” I replied trying to ooze savvy and cool. “I *am* actually trying to become a hostess ... but ... an ... *air* hostess ... and ... well, fly,” I said making light of it.

“Well we *certainly fly high* in here love,” she laughed and flicked the back of her hand against my arm.

“You should start Monday Anita ... I’m telling you, you’d clean up.”

Oh well, I thought as I walked back to Green Park tube, at least I’ve had *one firm job offer*.

“Well?” said my dad when I got home

“Yep, you were right.”

“So when d’you start?” he teased

We laughed and he came out with one of his many sayings – never knowing the real Latin he used to make it up.

“Non Illegittimus carburundum love”, which was *his* utterly incorrect version of “Don’t let the bastards grind you down”. He had them in German and French too, all totally incorrect but somehow you knew what they meant! Said with a Yorkshire accent it had me chuckling. I say it to this day when ever things go wrong. Bless him ... he’s still making me laugh.

We can smile as we look back, but I keenly remember the gnawing sense of failure and accompanying depression. It is disheartening to find yourself unemployable! My anger was like an icy canal and all I needed was a ship to steer down it. I thought, if I can’t work in the back, hey, maybe I’ll have a shot at working in the front. I took the phone book and called every flying school in the

area and started calmly asking about flying lessons. I had to keep my hopes up. It *was* a gamble! As Churchill said about this life of ours: It is not about the failures, there will *always* be those – what counts is finding the courage to carry on!”

I went first to Blackbush, then on to Fairoaks in Chobham, Surrey. There I met tall lanky Mike who had longish ‘6th form’ hair. He was the slightly geeky, friendly instructor, who was ‘a happy soul’ passionate about aeroplanes, a competent avionics engineer and could solder or fix any electronic gadgetry no matter how miniscule. He was determined that Fairoaks would be my choice so he did a good sales job. We ended up falling in love of course! From the moment we got airborne on that crisp November morning I knew I *had* to do this. Everything was clear and bright, the world had a glassiness and radiance which filled me with a new elation. The south coast was visible from Guildford, but it wasn’t **just** the south coast ... so much more was suddenly visible it was *that* shift in perspective which that little bit of altitude afforded me, – that’s what did it. I’d somehow cut the *earthly* tethers which were keeping me chained

We cruised along, he gave me the controls, explaining the basics of attitude and heading in straight and level flight. Then he had a bit of a play, doing lazy 8’s and chandelles (a gentle wing over manoeuvre). He could see I was loving it so he climbed a bit higher over Basingstoke and played around with the edges of the clouds. Seeing my ‘God this is fantastic’ expression, he went the extra yard. We followed the contours of the cumulus clouds just skimming their nebulous edges, dipping into the canyons and valleys, banking sharply round, shooting down the tunnels treating the whole structure like it were solid, yet, magically, the whole playground is illusory, made of vapour. It is liberating to know that if you do nick the edge of a cloud, there is no damage! Some of the cumulus were building and I could see faces and shapes in them, they looked like plump bearded sages chuckling at our games. They were welcoming me here. We cruised and dived around with the speed and grace of a young dolphin around a submerged wreck. There was so much energy all around me both in the billowing clouds and the spinning propeller. Dazzling flashes of sun bounced off the wings as we came cruising out of the spongy corridors of cloud and burst into the full sunlight again.

We descended. Farnborough control released us,

“Nothing known to conflict squawk 2000 call Fairoaks 123.4 – good day.”

He talked me through the landing and let me think I had done it (a technique I would learn myself not long after!).

We chatted, and he encouraged me to start. It was indeed because of the kind advocacies of people like him that I found the confidence to proceed and to learn. He made it so ‘doable’ and was a great support. Shortly after, he gave me the book ‘Jonathan Livingston Seagull’. It had a deep effect on me, I loved the words and read it over and over.

“Wants to learn to fly ... you what?” came dad’s voice as he dropped his newspaper and looked at mum disbelievingly over the top of his horn rimmed specs.

“There’s no bloody future in that – it’ll be a waste of money, then she’ll want to be a golfer or a windsurfer next month, I mean how can she *ever* make

a career of that, girls don't fly *real* planes like airliners – yer daft the pair of you.”

He flicked his paper back upright and lifted his head to see through the bifocals, then did his trademark sticking out of lower lip – old habit; and then muttered “bloody nonsense.” To be fair he was only trying to be realistic and in time my dad got on board.

“Always have your *own* bit of money darling, this is why.” My mum had been left a small amount of money from a deceased relative and now she invested it in my private licence. I was on my way and when Mike my instructor told me that within two years I could be doing *his* job, my goals were set and my tenacity in that pursuit was utterly unflinching. I was an uneasy blend of fragile optimism and creeping doubt. But I just wanted to do this. So much.

As Jonathan said: “Everything that limits us we have to put aside we're free to go where we wish and to be what we are.”¹

Hour Building in USA, West Coast to East Coast

I acquired my private pilot's license in three months. Though tough at times it had been exhilarating. I learnt how to take off, climb, descend, land, come down in a field after an engine failure, land on short runways, and recover from stalls and spins! I must confess I got a little lost on my first solo cross country and had to be rescued by my instructor who set off at lightning speed to find me over Farnborough. It was the final leg back from Pulborough in Sussex, I held the track – adjusted for the wind, watched the timing and was *supposed* to end up over Guildford but I saw a big round gas container.

“That does **not** look like Guildford to me,” I whispered to myself as I peered out the window, so I called the home frequency at Fairoaks of 123.42.

“Just fly three sixties,” he said, “and don't go **any** further North!” I duly followed orders knowing that to the north lay the Heathrow zone. I know every inch of that landscape *now*, but back then – well it was still unfamiliar. He found me and escorted me back. God, he was my hero after that!

To acquire a commercial pilot's licence in the 1980s you had to have 700 hours. As every student pilot remembers this is tough and you literally take *anything* you can to accumulate those hours. The ‘route’ for most people was to get a Flying Instructor's rating for which you needed 150 hours, then you'd join some flying school and instruct on little single engine planes, then those hours rolled in! Some people pulled gliders or towed banners, some even borrowed money to buy a share in their own little aircraft.

Having achieved my private licence, I was going for the 150 hours so I could enrol in the Instructor's course at Oxford Air Training School. America attracts British students, hourly rates are lower, the weather is better and this is

¹ Richard D. Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1973), pp. 76-7.

why you will find a handful of British trainees in nearly every flying school from Florida to California.

I, like so many aviation aspirants went there, determined to accumulate the requisite hours and was fortunate enough to hit a time of favourable dollar rates – it was nearly two to one. I found the nearest airfield to my sister's bedsit (she was a student in San Diego at the time) and asked for a deal on as many hours as they could offer, for ...

“This much cash,” and plonked it on the table. My pockets were inside out and empty but I was off. I negotiated a Piper Tomahawk (the teeniest trainer) for something crazy like \$35 per hour – less than half the price that I would have paid in England.

Once in the States, I settled in to a routine of flying all day and each afternoon eating all I could at these marvellous venues called Happy Hour buffets where if you buy one beer for a dollar you can help yourself to a smorgasbord of junk food.

“What you mean you don't pay for the food?” I asked my sister incredulously.

“No it's thrown in when you buy a drink.”

I couldn't believe my luck because I had no money to eat of course, just to fly.

I happily chomped my way through cubes of cheese dotted with jalapeno peppers, spicy Buffalo wings and plates of nachos with melted cheese and stodgy grey beans on top, fantastic. It is amazing how deft you become at budgeting when you're hour building, the price of everything is always translated into how many minutes flying time. Free junk food was a Godsend!

It got a bit lonely flying solo each day. My sister gets airsick and she wasn't keen, so occasionally I invited people I met in bars or shops or at the beach to come with me. It is easy to strike up a conversation over there since they love the English accent.

“Oh neat” or “Awesuuuum” would be the response, when I told them of my mission to become an instructor, so, if they were keen I'd invite them for a flight up the coast to Laguna Beach. I met all sorts of nice people this way.

I met one rather strange lad who invited me for a drink after we landed. He was a student pilot himself, always hanging around at the airfield.

“C'mon, jump in,” he said from the driving seat of his gigantic truck. It was just ridiculously high up. I wondered if he went in for that strange sport of squashing smaller vehicles with his 'monster truck' I've always struggled a bit with that one!

“Let me show you my baby first,” and with that he jumped out and opened the back to show me a huge fat snake in a cage. It wasn't a wriggler – it was definitely one of those which kills by squeezing every last gasp of breath out of a grown man. I'd seen enough, I made my excuses and thanked him for his company and jumped smartly into my clapped out Datsun Sunny, which had pieces falling off it each time I closed the door.

Oh well it takes all kinds, I'd clocked up another hour of flight time and who knows, I might have met one of those strange snake handling people who think the Lord protects them from venom. I saw a documentary about them.

Very strange! They talk in tongues that have rather ‘alternative’ beliefs. But he, and other happy clapping loonies I kept meeting did reinforce my desire for something a bit more varied. I was desperate for a long trip somewhere, well lo and behold, God answered my prayers because ‘Ta Daa’ my chance came.

A wonderful opportunity cropped up to ferry a Cessna Skyhawk (a light single prop) from San Diego to Long Island New York.

My flying instructor – Mike (now a BA captain) came over to join me, we would do the journey together, *he* also needed the hours for his Commercial Licence. An English friend of ours had bought this plane N758FX and wanted it in the UK. He would change the registration to G-DIVA because his wife was a famous opera singer. If we could get it to the east coast he would crate it up and ship it to England. Fantastic – everyone was happy, we would get about 25 free hours and *he* would get a cheap delivery. We jumped at this with all the enthusiasm of a young Labrador braving a river to retrieve his stick.

Our intended route would be San Diego, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Wichita and then due east across Missouri, Ohio and Pennsylvania to New York. Mike came out a week early and joined me for some ‘jollies’ from Montgomery field in San Diego. I was so glad of his company, it was great to have a friend *and a* fully qualified instructor with me. I had less than 100 hours, he had a few more but what we lacked in experience we made up for in guts and bravado (actually nearly got ourselves killed but more of that later).

We were two now – we felt brave and chanced our hand at a trip to the Grand Canyon, we were taking on the whole country in a couple of days so this would be a good warm up. Off we went in a piper Cherokee N47508 (that’s the beauty of log books!) towards Lake Mead and Boulder City. We naturally ignored all the warnings NOT to go into the canyon because of downdraughts and other dangers like having absolutely nowhere to land in the event of an engine failure. We approached the edge and like mad dogs and Englishmen flew straight over the cliff and into the glorious canyon! It was terrifying and wonderful all at once. The mind boggling size of this awesome red, vertiginous abyss made me feel like one of those tiny spacecraft in a ‘sci-fi’ movie, dwarfed by the huge wall of a planet as it cruises alongside.

With all the responsible caution of kids playing on a railway track, we descended right into the bottom. After about ten minutes we heard a rather unwelcome bang from the engine. I looked at Mike gripped with panic. Well we were still going along – that was good!



“Think it’s the alternator,” Mike said as he frowned at the instrument panel. The alternator light was on and the gauge read zero. So there we were miles from home and no electrics – except the small amount in the battery.

“Better drop into Las Vegas,” I suggested, looking at the map, “it’s only down the road.”

We climbed the steep walls of the canyon, up to the valley edges and off we headed for Vegas where we were treated to a priority landing because of our ‘injury’. We came down onto the vastness of Vegas Airport, which, with all the cross runways and miles of taxi ways, was a big deal when you only know small provincial airfields! We slowed her up to seventy knots, trimmed, put the flap down and prepared for the landing. The runway was so long we had come to a stop before the first set of runway marker lines! We followed instructions to a parking bay, climbed out and Mike popped open the engine cowling and put his hand in. Out came a ‘cat-o’-nine-tails’ the alternator belt – it was in tatters.

Typical of American hospitality, the guys from the ramp or FBO (fixed base operation) came to assist and greet us.

“You guys need anything? Fuel ... oil ... chocks ... a tie down?” Because we were just passing we didn’t need much, but *not* being able to do anything for you sits uncomfortably with an American so they gave us two complimentary baseball hats and a cooler bag with their logo on it, *and* a huge torch which the guy held on his shoulder like a rocket launcher and said, “Its heavy dooty, good for a two hundred yards!”

Only having a limited amount of time on the battery, we didn’t want to use up the precious power by starting the engine so we decided to hand swing the prop. A couple of kids hand swinging a prop at Las Vegas International is not a common sight. The airline pilots who were peering down at us from the cockpits of their DC10s and 767s found it most amusing.

Poor Mike, he was puffing and panting trying to start this thing, it’s not like a tiger Moth, the direction of rotation means the body is going into the propeller and the compression stroke is at the bottom of the swing so it was awkward. It finally fired up and I was ready on the throttle and mixture levers in the cockpit.

“You guys take care now and have a safe flight,” came the voice as we said goodbye to Vegas control and headed West.

We had to save our electrics for the landing back at San Diego, we’d need the radio and some lights so we held off using the battery until we were ten minutes from the field. ‘Big Bear’ mountain rises to above nine thousand feet and we had to fly over it just as it was getting dark. We were on the home stretch. We contacted Montgomery approach frequency and they vectored us round, downwind. This airfield is smack next door to Miramar of Top Gun fame. The movie had just come out and I was straining to catch a glimpse of ‘iceman’, ‘wingman’, or ‘anyman’ for that matter, but nothing seen.

The twinkling lights of mountain homes and of San Diego in the distance looked enchanting. We slowed up, lowered the nose and came down. The little tyres squeaked onto the tarmac. We were back. I walked in with the shredded alternator belt and started bartering (years living in Africa) for a reduced price on the Cherokee due to the fact that we could have been killed – and they kindly gave me a free hour in a Tomahawk, I was as pleased as punch. Definitely worth putting your life in grave danger if you come out of it with a free hour!

So two days later we set off on our Homeric voyage to the east coast. We had two small bags, (we wanted to be light) a bunch of VFR maps and these hilariously funny ‘peeing’ devices, which are part of the ‘ferry kit’. It helped that we were going out with one another because there’s not much turf left untrodden after twenty-five hours shoulder to shoulder in a space smaller than most people’s downstairs loo. We would cease ourselves laughing when perched on the back seat trying to pee into the ‘relief kit’ and the other gave the controls a damn good rocking. Funnier still was when we cruised over vast open cowboy country, dropped down to low level and hopped over telegraph poles giving it a bit of ‘yee ha’.

Everything was going swimmingly, we admired the breathtaking ‘album cover’ views of Arizona and New Mexico. There was such a variety of landscape – mountains, desert, and golden forests of red and ambers (it was November). Unfortunately once we got to Wichita we hit appalling weather and couldn’t go any further east, we gave it a full day to see if it would clear but there was no sign of a break so we decided to head south into more clement weather. We set off for Little Rock, Arkansas. Only cruising at about 105 knots we had time enough to admire the new countryside. We’d regularly apply some carburettor heat to prevent icing and we’d keep realigning the direction indicator which, being a gyroscope, suffers from precession and can deviate from the compass. But what occupied us the most was just good old map reading.

After a two and a half hour flight we were ready for a cold beer. Well our luck was out because ... guess what? It was Sunday and we couldn’t get a drink on a Sunday! This was a rude introduction to the weirdness that is ‘the American bible belt’. The weather followed us south and soon we were ensnared in the same stormy frontal system we’d escaped from in Wichita. The storms cost us two days in which time I learnt *all sorts* of things about country and western culture.

Fortunately there was a happening joint called the Amarillo Grill, and we soon got the knack of the voucher system. It was quite bizarre, no wonder Bill and Hilary headed off to DC. You had to pay for your drinks with a voucher, something to do with God or temperance. It was the first time I saw women who *actually* looked like Dolly Parton and also a beef steak the size of a handbag. I looked over as the waitress was approaching the table and thought I saw a rugby ball slit down the middle and stuffed with cream, ‘how nice, I thought, someone who plays rugby is having a birthday and some enterprising mate has organised a cake in the shape of a rugby ball’. Then she put one in front of me and I suddenly became acquainted with the ‘Idaho potato’. It was the biggest single expression of a carbohydrate I’d ever seen. It belonged in the world of giant mutant marrows seen at those country fairs where people compete for decades with their neighbours to grow a vegetable that can only be held with two arms outstretched like a forklift. To boot, there must have been a whole tub of sour cream on it, but just in case that wasn’t enough for me she left five or six pats of butter. As for the steak I didn’t know whether to eat it or climb it. I spent the first five minutes just walking around it like you do an unfamiliar building when you’re trying to get in. I kept turning it around on my plate with the massive carving knife and fork they’d given me, battling to find the ‘first point of cut’. Bob Cratchit would have fed his whole family if this single piece of meat had been gifted by Ebenezer Scrooge.

The next day the storm raged on, we looked at the weather briefing, it was not good, so we were marooned another night. That evening my cunning plan was to have what looked like the smallest portion on the menu – crab, – a good idea, it would be like those small dressed crabs in the shell you find at the deli in Waitrose, there’s never much bulk in a serving of crab, **Wrong!** Next thing I know there are two buxom blondes in miniskirts and tights standing each side of me tying a plastic bib round my neck, placing hammers, mallets, spiked

instruments, and a great wooden board in front of me and dropping a bucket by my feet.

“Blimey,” I said, “I’m not going to redecorate, I just want to eat a small crab salad.”

Well I sat there like Neptune’s bride, banging, smashing, gouging, sucking, cracking and scraping whilst busy smiling girls kept rushing past with pens stuck in their hair balancing trays twice the size of the Wimbledon women’s trophy high above their heads with one hand, and saying, “You guys doin’ ok? – need some more claws?”

She managed, even with her heavy load to pick up our giant jug of beer which we’d just struggled to empty. Five seconds later ... ‘splosh’, down came another full one.

“Excuse me!” I said, “we didn’t order another jug of beer.”

“Oh aah know honey, but on the pitchers of local beers it’s two fer waaan tonight.”

I couldn’t believe it; suddenly the size of the backsides in Disneyland started to make sense.

We were just discussing our onward flight route to the east coast, when a singer came on the stage; she was slim and pretty and wore jeans, waistcoat and western boots. Guys in cowboy hats were perched on stools, boot heel on the rest bar, lifting the brim with an index finger with that ‘I’m cool – and ready for action’ type of gesture. She started singing, it was nice music, a few people danced ... About halfway through her repertoire she holds the mike with both hands, guitar round her shoulder on a strap and starts talking in that charming southern drawl.

“How’s everybardy doin’ dernite? Ya’ll havin’ fuuurn ...? Ok, I’m gonna dedicate this next sarg to an ex-boyfriend of maaan, we had great taarms together, alotta fuuurn, he met someone else and ... well, hey that’s life ya know. I was real cutup at the taarm but we’re still freends, no hard feelins, I was gonna call it ‘Movin on’ but I changed ma maand, it’s called ... ‘Fuck you, pencil dick’.”

The waitresses all cracked up and cheered, there was much ‘whoopin’ and hollerin’ from the bargirls, some men shifted uncomfortably on their barstools. It was a damn good night.

Some great fat American man patted me on the back as he was leaving, “God I’m sure glad I got rid of mine when I see the size of them!” and exploded with laughter as he pointed to my crab.

The next day we finally got the weather to continue, Lexington was our next stop. I will always remember the little statues of jockeys in all their bright, eye catching colours lining the taxi ways. It was a hell of a long flight – 3 hours 30 minutes to be precise from Arkansas, over Tennessee and up to Kentucky. Colossal meandering rivers and thousands of acres of woodland and farms moved slowly beneath us. At least we were back heading north-east. Lil’ Rock had taken us way south of track, but it had been worth the experience.

We fuelled up, checked the oils and all the flying surfaces, controls, flaps and lights. We strained the fuel several times until the little bubbles of water in it disappeared, then took to the skies again heading for Charlottesville,

Virginia. We were doing well; from there we could sniff the east coast. We flew over gorgeous mountains, noticing the change in landscape. The ‘fall’ was firmly established. Compared to the vast open plains near Wichita and the desert areas of New Mexico back west, this was wonderful. We were greeted (the next morning) by a full and brilliant array of toasty, warm colours.

It was getting dark when we landed, we were the last movement on the small airfield that night. There was no time to go downtown and find a hotel, it was late, we wanted an early departure tomorrow so it made sense to stay by the airport. Tony the owner of the plane had told us to be comfortable, but we tried to keep the price down by staying in little inns or motels by the airport which were adequate for our needs.

There was one guy on duty at Charlottesville that evening and he said there was one hotel very near, brand new, just down the road, and he would give us a lift – perfect. He dropped us at the door of what looked like a very ‘spraucy’ establishment. If memory serves me, I think it was a Hilton. We walked in to reception, looking pretty bedraggled. Sumptuous oak panelled walls surrounded us. They were adorned with long oil paintings of glamorous, debutantes and heiresses in jodhpurs with riding crops. They wore pearls and diamonds and had immaculate blonde locks tumbling over crisp pink candy striped shirts; they looked like Queen Noor of Jordan. I glanced around and saw more paintings of wealthy smoulderingly handsome men holding polo sticks wearing ten thousand dollar watches with names like Brett Samuel Macintyre Johnson. Then, the tell-tale sign of ‘high end’ – a symphony of tall exotic flowers in a huge vase on the central table – strelitzias, lilies, curly bamboo, glorious wine red roses gesturing up towards the stucco ceiling. They all whispered glamour and luxury. Oh dear, I sighed internally, we are in the wrong sort of place but we were so tired and so hungry. I looked down at my oily trainers and at Mike’s Snoopy sweatshirt which he never took off ... ‘Damn’.

We did take a room which was beautiful with more wood panelling, humungous towels and logoed robes. We had nothing but jeans and sweaters of which we pulled out the least grubby and went downstairs for a drink. In the bar, sitting on solid mahogany armchair barstools we ordered a beer. The barman in waistcoat and bowtie felt sorry for us and pushed extra peanuts our way.

After a few minutes, a man in a suit approached, leant over and quietly told me they were deeply sorry but we were not dressed appropriately, there was a dress code. I think he was politely informing us not to even *contemplate* the dining room. Totally unoffended, I said, “You know we’re sorry not to be able to do justice to these elegant surroundings, but we’re two student pilots from England building hours towards a Commercial Licence, we’ve had this great opportunity to ferry a small Cessna from west to east, so we have to travel light and this was the only hotel around. We’ve been staying in airport motels and didn’t know this was going to be so posh. If it’s ok we’ll just drink this beer and maybe order a sandwich and take it up.”

That was it, he just thought this was the most terrific thing he’d ever heard and he was a dog with five tails.

“John, give these guys anything they want from the bar menu ... please allow us to buy you a drink.”

He must have been a keen aviator himself because a minute later two Bloody Mary’s arrived in chunky cut glass tumblers with a stick of celery like a Scotsman’s caber and a generous flotsam of celery salt and fresh limes. It was delicious. The impecunious state of a trainee pilot normally precludes the garnish of such drinks, so it was well appreciated. All the ice-cool, statuesque hotel staff seemed to drop the formality and came over for a chat. What a lovely place.

The next stop was Washington, (not Dulles) but the smaller airport. We spent an exhilarating day at the Smithsonian aviation museum. It was fantastic seeing everything from early bi-planes to rockets and we both had a ball looking at what was by far the best exhibition we’d ever seen.

All the airport staff were helpful and friendly, showing us where to get weather, file flight plans and furnish us with the right maps. They were also keen to hear of our progress

We were feeling pretty brave by now and decided to have a go at a night landing in New York. (*Bad, oh very bad mistake*) N758FX – our little Cessna 172 was serving us well, and our ‘Yes, we *can* do this’ sort of attitude spurred us on. We planned a departure for 6p.m. that night, it was only a couple of hours away.

So ... back to the flight centre and into the VRF flight plans. Mike had what we call an IMC (instrument meteorological conditions) – a basic Instrument rating, so we considered ourselves up to the job of landing in Newark at night. (It’s truly cringe worthy isn’t it?) God when I think back, our innocence and naiveté makes me look sky ward with a shake of the head. We were the airborne equivalent of those British soldiers going into the battle of Isandhlwana against the Zulus.

Our flight would be VFR (visual flight rules) rather than IFR (instrument) but all the *other* traffic would be IFR so they follow set routes, approach patterns, and waypoints all delineated on their charts. As we approached the busy terminal manoeuvring area around New York – (bear in mind there are three huge international airports and a handful of regional ones) the RT – radio transmissions got faster! The numbers are not necessarily correct but I remember it went something like:

“Continental three cleared down one two zero, change approach one two six point four, Delta four niner descend six zero call tower one one eight point one, so long, Learjet four nine papa bravo expedite climb through flight level niner zero, break United two one eight maintain one six zero on reaching call center on one three four point five.”

And so it went on, there was no stopping for breath, it was one long continuous hurried urgent frantic transmission punctuated with the shortest clipped read backs by pilots.

So into this melee we flew, expecting an uncomplicated set of steers to a visual final. My doubts began to swell. There were just lights absolutely **everywhere**, I had been used to the odd “Traffic in your ten o’clock range five

miles left to right”, but this ... this was something entirely different, the night sky was one of those huge rotating disco balls.

A bit of added misfortune was the recent air traffic control strike which meant all the *good* controllers were at home. What *we* had that dreadful night were the less experienced ones, the sort of ... ‘Dads army’ part timers. So it was the one eyed leading the blind. When we checked in with those words “November 758 fox kilo, Cessna 172 with you at five thousand feet VFR” we could feel this woman’s despair – like her evening wasn’t tough enough. ‘*You have gotta be joking!*’ She must have thought – her gyros toppled! We were ordered to go to point ‘zulu’ and hold. Oh God, we couldn’t find it on the map, there were millions of lights from other aircraft it was looking dangerous, and to make matters worse we had to *ask* her where point zulu was.

“On the two four zero radial, twelve D!” she yelled! This was giving us a radial and distance fix off a VOR. We were physically ducking and rotating our heads around in the cockpit frantically assessing the proximity of the surrounding lights. It was more a case of *which* of the nine lights was a ‘head on’ – *that* was the one we would attend to first! Things were certainly warming up!

She was diverting planes away from us, screaming instructions like “Do an immediate 360”. She suddenly asked us if we were able to accept an IFR clearance. To release us from this pandemonium, Mike blurted “affirmative” which was a bit of a fib, but we were in trouble and it was the right decision. We then followed vectors to the ILS. We had DC10s right behind us, 737 and 727s all around us as we went tearing down the approach, to hell with flaps we *dared not* slow down (always been good at flapless landings since then!). We came in excessively fast but didn’t care, it just felt great that reassuring smack (and it was a smack) of the wheels hitting the ground. We were just told in no uncertain terms to call ground on 121.9. They were **so** busy we couldn’t squeeze even our call sign out for many minutes.

“Cessna 58 fox kilo go to holding area x-ray,” came an exasperated voice. This was a sort of pen for the disobedient. I think we hit a couple of taxi lights on the way, *plus* due unfamiliarity, we had to keep asking instructions. We heard a lot of “Fox X-ray *STANDBY*” which roughly translated means: “Oh do shut up you irritating little English cretin I have big important American airliners here with pilots who know what they’re doing – let me deal with *them* first!” But we finally pulled into this area and waited. This was the airport equivalent of medieval stocks for petty offenders, who must be removed from the active areas. That’s what it felt like. They sent someone over to us in a truck and we had to sheepishly follow them like admonished children to a park area where we could cause no more trouble!

The best was yet to come, due to the expense of last night’s hotel, we decided to just get the cheapest motel advertised on the big lit screen. We called, and they said they’d pick us up. We waited and we waited. An hour later a battered old van with hub caps missing and covered with stickers coughed its way up. A very rotund black guy with his hat on backwards and a huge track suit greeted us and drove us off at breakneck speed picking up

various ‘brothers and sisters’ en route. Mike and I had a serious de brief of *that* flight and decided to celebrate living through another day.

The motel was – well without beating around the bush, a filthy, sleazy, roach ridden, dump, an eyesore of dirt and crime. It was the three layers of bulletproof glass through which you passed your money (cash only) which first aroused our suspicions. They would have been wearing crash helmets I’m sure if it had not been for their turbans. The microphone down which you had to communicate had seen better days, so you only got the odd end or beginning of a word. It was the front for some scurrilous criminal racket I felt sure, it was shouting out ‘Tax dodge’.

A rather appealing hand written sign was sellotaped to the wall “\$5 extra for adult movie in room”. They were running this place as a motel but basically it was a hall of residence for a technical college down the road so ... up to four students per room, and no doubt more on a Friday and Saturday night. Fortunately Mike had the aircraft’s crash axe in his overnight bag and we slept with it under the mattress. Noise, shouting and venomous rowing filled the air all night. Doors slammed and arguments raged, most in Ebonics so we couldn’t understand the finer details of exactly who had stabbed who. But there were jealous boyfriends, powerful motor bikes and some savage temper loss. “Bitch” was banded around a lot by the guys and “asshole” was a definite favourite amongst the girls but the out and out winner was, without doubt “motherfker” which seemed to have no end of applications.

Needless to say the night was not a restful one.

Next stop Danbury Connecticut. I notice from my log book it was the earliest take off of the trip. Not having undressed or used the rancid bathroom, we left at first light. It was great to see our little plane again, partly because of our attachment to it by now but mostly because it was getting us out of *there*. We had a coffee with the friendly guys from the general aviation terminal and we all laughed about the motel.

“Goddaaam you went *there*? hell that’s crazy round there!” said the guy behind the desk and shaking his head.

We fuelled up, fired up, ran our checklist then sat with our little red beacon flashing for many minutes, finger on the transmit button waiting for one free second to get our call in to the ground frequency. The next bit took us quite by surprise and it was probably the highlight of the trip.

“Foxtrot X-ray, do you know where the statue of Liberty is at?”

“Er yes, we can find that.”

“Okay you’re cleared straight ahead to the statue of liberty.”

So, one of the more unusual departure clearances, but that was the unedited truth of it. We took off into a bright chilly morning and flew away from Newark towards the statue of liberty. In those days there was a VFR corridor which took you right beside the world trade towers. We climbed to 2000 feet and Mike asked for onward instructions.

“Confirm I can fly VFR up the Hudson River?” Mike asked incredulously.

“A-firm sir,” came the yank voice, “cleared own navigation you can take the river, you all have a good one, so long.”

We climbed sunward once again, enjoying the most breathtaking views of New York, it was a real thrill being below the level of the sky scrapers just absorbing all that ... 'Big Apple'!

New England was a tapestry of rich colour. We cruised over magnificent stretches of auburn and russet woods. I'd never seen so many shades of red and yellow, it was somehow very elegant and groomed. We made a blissfully uneventful landing in Danbury, where we were received with warmth. The plan was to crate the aircraft up here and ship it to England. It would soon change its name to G-DIVA and be parked on the grass at Fair Oaks. I knew Mike would have loved the chance to ferry it across the Atlantic in spite of all the dangers of bad weather and icing.

"C'mon Mike wait 'til you can cross the Atlantic in something decent that goes a bit faster and higher, " was my offering as he nursed his coffee dreaming of a Charles Lindbergh type of welcome on the Scottish shores.

Tony the owner, contacted us – he'd found a better deal on the shipping and asked us to do one more leg to Long Island. So after two sublime days in the 'church steeple', 'apple pie' haven of New England's suburbia, we flew the final leg to Mac Arthur airfield on Long Island. There followed another scary flight into airspace swarming with aeroplanes. (The New York terminal manoeuvring area is tricky for a beginner!)

So the journey over, we spoke to the shipping guys there who would crate it up, and we busied ourselves with hiring a car to get to the international airport. I was headed back to San Diego from Newark and Mike was BA to London from Kennedy. New York in rush hour was the most terrifying leg of all. The traffic, the bridges, the freeways, the confusion! We were like ants in a concrete labyrinth. I was a complete nervous wreck by the time we found Newark. We hugged like buddies who had been to war together.

"Mike, promise me you won't fly that bloody thing over the Atlantic, I know what you're like, don't sneak back there and fit ferry tanks, I don't want to read about you in the paper being discovered by an Eskimo seal trapper, OK?"

He tightened his lips and looked top left, grinning as though I had really read his mind. Dear Mike there he was in his anorak, jeans, snoopy sweatshirt and tennis shoes, I don't think I've seen him in anything else. He had such unbridled enthusiasm, but he promised me, he'd go straight to Kennedy. The irony of it – he is probably sick to death of crossing the Atlantic now in his 747.

On board the Continental 727 for San Diego, I found myself next to a lookalike rock star all in black leather with dark shades. We were both wannabes of a sort, so we connected there, for a fleeting moment, albeit tangentially.

"Alriiiiiight" and "coooooo!" were his favoured responses and he seemed perfectly able to sustain an entire conversation with just those two words! I totted up my hours in my little log book, you can't imagine how important this ritual is.

"ONE HUNDRED," I sang triumphantly, that last leg just notched up my one hundredth hour, my God I was on my way. Young Alice Cooper next to

me called the hostess over, ordered a mini bottle of champagne and suggested that I be allowed to visit the cockpit with my log book.

The captain congratulated me and unpinned his wings and gave them to me as a memento. I was beyond chuffed, when they said: “We’ll be seeing you up here then pretty soon.” I returned to my seat, wanting to jog down the aisle with my hands in the air like Rocky.

Alice Cooper clasped the glasses and raised his tray so I could take my window seat. He ordered another round and I joyfully sipped and giggled my way back to San Diego. He told me he was going to write a song about me called ‘Seat of her Pants’. I’m sure he never did but he *was* fun.

Just fifty more hours and I could join the Instructor’s rating course. I booked it for the coming spring.

Flying Instructor

*‘For each of them, the most important thing in living was to reach out and touch perfection in that which they most loved to do and that was to fly’.*²

Richard Bach

Within two years of acquiring my own Private Licence, I was a flying Instructor myself.

One hundred and fifty hours was the prerequisite to sit the course. So after the intense innings of hour building in the States I returned to Oxford to do the Rating. Learning *how* to teach people the skills of flying was a fantastic challenge. Getting to grips with the patter of explanation along with accurate demonstrations was tough but *really* character building.

Seven hundred hours was the magical amount one needed to take the Commercial Licence and become a professional pilot. There were several ways to get there, the quickest being to pay the fifty grand (eighty now!) and do a the full ‘ab initio’ course at Oxford or Perth in Scotland (now Jerez – Spain), but for most of us who couldn’t afford that, the most popular way, was to become a flying instructor.

Isn’t it funny – in life, you so often don’t realise which are the happiest days until they are gone. We were all so young, driven, fresh faced and keen, and so envious of the BA or Air Europe Captains who frequented our Club. We envied their 757s at Heathrow and stories of high-tech cockpits and faraway places. Derek, a British Airways captain who owned one of the Club’s Piper Warriors used to say to us:

“It gets very boring you know, enjoy this while you can because instructing is *fun*”.

We would protest and disagree, just like kids do when the holidays are over and they remain unconvinced when their parents say: “I wish I were going back to school; *they* are the best days”.

² Bach, p. 53.

The beauty of those days is that you are all sharing a dream. You are on a journey filled with hope and expectation and with *that* level of enthusiasm, it didn't matter that we earned only £50 per week. We considered ourselves wealthy and fortunate. It was so good not to be paying for the precious hours any more. That was one of the great joys – every hour you flew, someone else was paying and you log it as command time.

When I recall instructing days and the small regional airfields, a scrap book of images float through my mind; the sound of propellers, freshly mown grass, summer evenings, wasps in the beer glass, wicker chairs in the sun, Tiger Moths landing or a small aerobatic planes (my favourite was registered G.FREE) diving and tumbling over the Hogs Back. Piper Archers returning from Jersey, Beech Barons coming back from Deauville, and balloons floating way in the hazy distance over Frensham. People would be studying topographical maps planning a trip to France and enthusiasts in overalls would have their heads in cowlings, devotedly repairing their tail-draggers. At Fair Oaks where I taught, Wednesday and Friday were bar nights, this was a great time for everyone to get together – the instructors, students, owners, and engineers, we all indulged in a bit of fun and banter. On fine evenings we'd sit outside in the warm sunshine and enjoy the variety of aircraft coming and going. There was a certain helicopter pilot in his Augusta 109 who, once he saw us gathered there, would put on a little show – go into the hover, move sideways, do a scenic 360, then bow.

I became friendly with the helicopter school who shared the airfield with us. My great friend Jenny was the charter manager there and we had many wonderful days at Silverstone for the British Grand Prix and at Epsom for Derby Day. She'd recruit me as helper and handler. I'd have the passenger manifest and escort people to and from their helicopters, show them to the hospitality tent, get them a drink, etc. Everything went so well at the Derby until I said to Robert Sangster, (had no idea who he was) "Lost money on that last race – that horse should be pulling a milk float!" Jenny's head shot out of the gazebo like Godzilla, her eyes like organ stops.

"Get in here and shut up – don't talk to the passengers – that was *his* horse!"

"Well he asked me if I'd had a good day – any winners, that type of thing ... sorry."

Every single helicopter on the fleet would be engaged on these big days and we fixed wing instructors would get involved. I have an undying memory of Jenny and I following Nigel Mansell with the rest of the celebrating crowds round the track when he'd just won the Grand Prix. But the most beautiful memory – when all the passengers had finally left, we the crew, six of us, all came back in the Augusta 109. I was up front, headset on, with the pilot. We flew in formation with four other helicopters in the early evening sunlight, south from Northamptonshire. We could see the start of the Welsh hills on the right – the visibility was fantastic. All around helicopters were lowering *into* then lifting *from* the gardens of prestigious wisteria covered Jacobean mansions – all five star hotels and restaurants! People were sipping Pimms under umbrellas on rose covered patios, while the Bell Jet Ranger came down

to drop more guests off on the stripy ‘Wimbledon’ type lawn. It was the first time I’d ever seen anything like that – a terrific experience.

Summers were glorious, blue skies sugared with fair weather cumulus and green fields drenched in hours of warm sunshine. All the planes would be booked and often we’d fly until eight o’clock. If all three of us (the instructors) were flying the last outing of the evening we would agree to meet over Guildford cathedral, lark about with a few steep turns around one another and return in formation which was a treat both for us and for the students – a little reprieve after the lesson (what the Americans refer to as ‘Miller Time’!).

“If anyone’s free and fancies it, I’m off top Compton Abbas,” would be a typical shout at the flight center by an aircraft owner seeking a bit of company or another set of hands. Whatever was on offer, we’d all jump at it. ‘Fly Aways’ were a happy feature of summer when we would take four or five planes over to France, a worthy exercise in navigation and map reading and wine purchasing!

One of the exciting perks for us was the odd trip to Le Touquet in Northern France, famed for great seafood. Business men (and their accountants) needed us to fly them to, but more importantly *back* from Le Touquet after a day of ‘fruits de mer’ and inordinate amounts of Chablis. I remember one chap – a regular on the Le Touquet run. He turned up in his suit one day holding a child’s yellow rubber ring which had a duck’s head attached to it.

“Well I was told to bring my own life jacket if possible because there weren’t enough spares – at least it’s yellow,” he grinned. He was quite a card, always laughing, he loved telling me of his past peccadilloes after a boozy lunch.

“I never forget,” he said while pacing across the sunny ramp, reaching for his shades to cover his bloodshot eyes, “being in bed with this gorgeous girl in my younger years, and her bloody father came home unexpectedly, being very cognizant of the utter contempt in which he held me, I thought it best to jump out of the window. Unfortunately I couldn’t see a bloody thing so in a panic I just grabbed *anything* and scarpered. A few moments later whilst in the headlights of a police car on the main road I realised I had on *her* cotton baby doll nightie ... It was a bit difficult explaining that one to the police – looked like a damn pervert!” he said grinning at the memory.

“Never got my brogues back, the old man saw them outside her room and threw them on the bonfire!”

I really enjoyed flying those reprobates back across the channel after their large lunches! Never a dull moment.

Some clients weren’t aiming for a licence per se, they just fancied getting airborne. So we’d go on genteel little outings to, say White Waltham, Goodwood, or the Isle of Wight – have a cup of tea and then return, usually via a circuitous route, flying 360s as we looked for their houses and took pictures. At these other airfields, people were also indulging in summertime fun. Aerobatic pilots were practicing their routines, Chipmunks were looping overhead, Students flying round the circuit, the occasional wobbly landing

which would bring the odd “whoopsie daisy” from a spectator sat outside enjoying a pot of tea in the sunshine.

There is an extra charm about those airfields such as White Waltham which were unmodernised. The old wartime hangars are still standing. In the 1940s style NAAFI (the cafeteria), old paintings of Mosquitoes and Spitfires hang on the walls. A faded photo of a great hero: the words Wing Commander so and so DFC, BAR, under a handsome, strong face, his uniform immaculate. Everywhere – mugs of tea, bowls of white sugar, and the smell of bacon. The old-fashioned iron-rimmed windows and doors open up onto the lawn. Just the sort of place where you could expect Dougie Bader to stroll in, oxygen mask flopping round his neck saying: “How about a brew?”

Interesting characters frequented our airfield. There was Doctor Joy, (sounds like Mel Brooks character!) he was an eminent heart specialist who owned a Beech Baron, in which he’d occasionally take us for a practise ILS approach into Stansted. Gary Numan the pop singer, had a Harvard painted like a Japanese Zero, he enjoyed a bit of cloud bashing and aerobating on a summer evening and took us up with him occasionally. I was treated to wonderful ‘jollies’ in a Boeing Stearman and a Beech Staggerwing. One of the most successful charter companies in UK now called Gama Aviation had its humble beginnings at Fair Oaks in the eighties – just one small room, one Beech Baron and three people. A good guy friend to all of us – Marwan started it with his mate Steve and now it has big offices, numerous employees and an impressive fleet of jet aircraft.

There were funny, scary and nostalgic moments in the life of a Flying Instructor, as well as many edifying challenges. Here are some snapshots of different students and of fellow instructing colleagues.

First Day Nerves

I was a nervous wreck on my first ever day as a new instructor. It was pouring with rain so we had to do ground school. My student was a six foot six black guy from Gabon in a beige suit and fat shiny tie – he looked like one of the Drifters or The Four Tops.

“Right, we’ll go over some met shall we?” I said desperately trying to appear like I knew what I was doing.

“We hav don all dis in di odder place,” he said in a strong West African accent. He was on a government grant so apparently he’d done some ground school preparation in Bristol or Staverton prior to coming.

“Okaaay ... shall we go over frontal systems?”

“I have don dis one.”

“Right let’s talk about icing.”

“Yes we did dis icing too.”

“Okay what about some weather chart decoding?”

“Yes I know dis symbols we learnt it also!”

Feeling pretty exasperated I changed track, gave *him* the coloured pen, pointed to the white board, swapped places and said, “I tell you what Osi, why don’t *you* get up there and tell me all you know about ... oooo ... let’s say ... advection fog?”

What followed was truly a funny moment, this tall gangly man walked up to the front, holding the green felt pen, looked at the board, looked at me, then at his shoes, drew his hand down the length of his face

“Actchooally, meteorology was not my best subject.”

The Young Arab Boy

This poor lad – whose name had an ‘al’ and a handful of ‘bins’ – really didn’t like flying.

He had obviously been sent down to us by a father or an uncle to improve his education. This was just another of the chores that were the dismal adjuncts of wealth and title.

He must have weighed in at sixteen-stone despite being only a boy. He would arrive every Thursday morning in a big limousine with his driver.

“Ello darlin’, alright?” his driver would chirp as he walked through the door in his dark suit with his *Sun* wedged into his armpit, clutching his packet of cigarettes. He was a real cockney, spirited and friendly and had a face utterly robbed of any trace of moisture, dehydrated by years of coffee and cigarettes. I think he used to look forward to coming down to the airfield where he would have mugs of tea and a fry up.

The reluctant cargo would follow him in sheepishly looking forward to it about as much as root-canal work. The lad was so fat he always wore a track suit and on this particular occasion decided on a fry up too because at least it would delay the moment of having to climb into a small plane with me. The chauffeur would love chatting up the big bosomed lady running the café. He’d flirt with her and she gave him extra rashers of bacon.

“Did it ‘urt love when you hit the ground?”

“How d’ya mean?”

“Well, when you fell from ‘eaven.”

“Oh go on with ya, you little devil.”

I watched with mild panic as the young Arab boy doggedly polished off all the food on his plate, fried eggs, fatty bacon, beans, the lot. I also noticed the windsock looking rather lively that morning and I didn’t like the combination. The chauffeur told him he’d better go for his lesson and he nodded over to me as if to say – “Ok, he’s all yours now”.

I sat him down for the pre-flight brief – we were doing circuits that day. I explained what our intention was, went over speeds and actions for each of the four legs of the circuit and tried to reassure him, emphasising the fun aspect. It was an uphill struggle.

We took a headset from the drawer for him, I signed us out on the Club’s register, and off we went over the apron to the little Piper Cherokee parked on the grass.

I normally sent students on ahead to do the ‘walk around’ but last time he had taken that literally and just walked round the plane in a big circle – so we went through the checks together, straining the fuel drains, checking the oil and testing the lights and flaps, etc. He heaved himself up onto the wing first and opened the door, the aircraft keeled over as he stepped up.

I enjoyed and looked forward to, at least, *some* banter and chit chat, but this boy never ever spoke, which made things a little uneasy. He *had* to say “I have control” or “You have control” because that was mandatory but I never heard him say anything else. The plane sank on her oleo struts as he flopped into the left seat. The seat belts were expanded to the limits of their travel to get around him.

Even though it was a cold day, he was sweating already. I told him gently to go through the check list, which he did, slowly turning things on, starting with the battery. The mixtures went to rich and he turned the key in the magneto and we sprung into life. I sensed his discomfort so I always reminded him to bring the throttle back immediately after start, because the reduction in noise was calming. He just simply couldn’t bring himself to talk on the radio so I offered to do that if, at least, he would do the ‘downwind’ call, that way he’d get used to pressing the transmit button and saying something even if it was only “Golf Yankee Oscar downwind”.

“Yankee Oscar – readability five, runway two four, left hand circuit, QFE one zero zero five,” came the voice through the headset.

He set his altimeter, released the brake and we lurched forward. He slammed on the brakes! At least he remembered the check but I was looking for a gentler touch, one which wouldn’t put my forehead on the cowling. He always giggled a bit nervously when he got it wrong. So he tried it again and jabbed them on even more fiercely. “That’ll do, I think the brakes work,” I said and prompted him on his taxi-checks. I noticed the sweat beads gathering in the few dark hairs of his young moustache.

When we check the instruments, compasses, turn slip indicator, etc., we do a small turn to the left then to the right. First, he’d turn the control column as in a car (common reaction during early days), then, when I’d light heartedly say “remember it’s the **feet** for turning” he’d suddenly remember and push his foot right to the floor and we’d be in a Ford Cortina sketch out of ‘*The Sweeney*’ – going up on one wheel because for some unfathomable reason, he would always increase the power during this manoeuvre as well.

“Nice and *GENTLY*,” I’d say as we careered onto the grass on both sides of the taxiway. His eyes were wide and staring straight ahead.

“Remember what we are checking here?” I asked, and he unconvincingly waved his chubby little hand over all the instruments.

“Needle to the left, ball to the right, numbers decreasing,” I suggested slowly and methodically, in a voice which said now *YOU* say it. But his terror choked him. The magneto check at full power was interesting because not having the nimblest of hands, he moved the key all the way round to the OFF position instead of just to the right and left positions. Magnetos don’t really like being switched-off while the engines are running at two and a half

thousand RPM. He fumbled through the remaining checks, the fuel pump went on and I called for take-off.

“Yankee Oscar – take off at your discretion, wind two six zero, twelve knots.”

His nerves were well and truly messed up by now, so I softly reminded him how well he did last time and encouraged him to push the power up keep straight with the rudder and then *ease* it off the runway at seventy knots. Off we went down the runway, he forgot the rudders and when I said, “Just ease in a little bit of right rudder,” it was the sledgehammer touch again.

“*JUST* a tad!” I squeaked, trying to keep things smooth. Blimey this was exhausting.

Once airborne we flew the first circuit together so I could release the pressure from him. We went through the downwind checks, which he knew and then I pointed out the big country house where we turned onto base leg, and reminded him of the first stage of flap – “Ok, good; now remember to just look at the picture of the runway and keep that image in the windscreen, fly at seventy knots ...”

He came down final approach with the expression of someone on a horse for the first time after it has bolted. But he never actually spoke so it was awkward. He managed to put the aircraft on the ground with only a little ballooning at the last minute. I helped him with the flare, then said much to his despair: “Ok good, now full power and let’s do that again.”

This went on for about twenty minutes, round and round the circuit we flew. Then I noticed his expression was becoming very blank; he was quite pale and drops of perspiration were gathering on the thin fluff of his upper lip.

“Are you alright?” I asked him with serious concern.

He should have put the ‘losing face’ issue on the backburner and told me the truth, which was that he felt as sick as a parrot. I noticed that all the windows on his side had steamed up. My left side, that is, the one nearest him, was much warmer than my right. Oh my God – I was sitting next to a human volcano. He wiped his forehead with his hand and that was my cue.

“Ok – I have control,” I said, “relax and close your eyes. I am taking you back.”

I asked him again if he felt sick and a barely audible, “No, I’m okay,” came from his lips that hardly moved.

By now I couldn’t actually see out of his window, it was totally misted up. I turned onto base leg very early and told the tower I was coming in on very short finals! I tried my best to avoid sharp turns or changes in pitch, but, alas, my endeavours were too late. His hand came over his mouth and he burped. I put the air blowers on him.

“Just breath slowly and deeply.”

But at about three hundred feet, the mightiest and most unpleasant projectile of vomit ever known to man came forth in that little aeroplane. I thought of ‘Mr Creosote’ from Monty Python, as all my efforts went into getting the aircraft safely down and delivering this poor, retching reluctant back to safe ground.

The three *Macbeth* witches would have had a field day with this one: “Oh, most vile and loathsome stench ... most bilious and yellow livered emunction!”

Poor chap. I taxied in with an open door – he was so embarrassed I really felt for him. I had to escape the smells as soon as possible so I alighted immediately. He followed, looking like he’d been shot; sick all down his tracksuit. Then he disappeared off never to be seen again. Finding someone to help clear that lot up was, as you can imagine, not easy.

I watched him flop disheartened into the black limo, probably back up to Park Lane where he would have to break the news to father that being a fighter pilot in the Royal Saudi Airforce was ... out! I’m sure his minder took him shopping later for a reassuring pair of new bejewelled ‘slip ons’ from Bond Street.

The Baroness

Her exits and her entrances were unforgettable!

I had the pleasure of meeting an elderly Baroness in her eighties who had a truly balletic presence. She even had her cataracts removed so she wouldn’t fail her medical, that is how determined she was to achieve her licence. She was miniscule and fragile, like a Lladro figurine. Her husband, elderly and skinny wore an immaculate cravat and blazer. He had a perfectly round beaming face, huge eye sockets and a ‘piano board’ set of false teeth. He was like the character ‘eyes right’ from the old card game. They owned a dazzling Chateau in thousands of acres in France. He always stood with hands clasped behind his back smiling and was most concerned about doing everything correctly and having a debrief with me after her lesson.

Every time I gave her a headset in the flight centre, just before we went out to the plane, she would immediately put it on, in spite of my telling her to wait until we got into the aircraft. This made her go completely – as opposed to partially – deaf. She would beam up at me proudly with her crooked mouth and squint, then hold my hand tightly. We’d walk out together over the apron to our Piper Cherokee. She looked so beautiful and funny in her long skirt, her little hunched shoulders and this great big headset on her tiny head – the flex always trailing behind her with the jack jumping and clacking over the tarmac.

Then we would go through the ‘getting her on board’ phase for which I would enlist the help of a couple of the ground crew guys. They would bring a stepladder and three cushions for her seat so that she could see over the cowling. They would always watch for me coming back-in so they could help her disembark. We were three instructors and the CFI (chief flying Instructor – the wonderful John Barker) and collectively we knew she would never get the Private License, but we were determined to make it as thrilling and enjoyable as possible. We all admired her guts.

I was often halfway through the pre start checks awaiting her response, which never came because she would be waving to someone out of the

window. She reminded me of Margaret Rutherford playing the batty eccentric Madam Arcati from the Noel Coward play. It didn't matter how many times we went over things, by the next lesson it was always like starting from scratch. I would encourage her to taxi-out but remind her to avoid the lights.

"Oh, God yes, those nasty little blue things again," she'd mutter, as we careered along like Herbie the cartoon Volkswagen.

I would let her do the take-off which usually went swimmingly apart from her not actually pulling the plane up aggressively enough to get airborne. I would assist her on the stick and as soon as we got airborne she would look out of the window like an awestruck child.

"Right, let's do some straight and level," I said, "remember how we do that?"

"Oh yes, yes," she'd say, smiling and squinting. "That's that bit out there, looking like that," she said with a shooing gesture towards the landscape. "Then those levelly bits out there", flicking her wrist towards each wing tip. "Then making sure all these agree," she concluded triumphantly as she made a large sweep over the whole instrument panel.

"Good – you have control; let's fly straight and level."

Always the same – we managed about fifteen seconds of level flight then the left wing would drop and into the spiral dive we'd go! I would talk her through the recovery only to repeat the same thing again.

Nonetheless, we had great fun and I let her handle the aircraft as much as possible. She would often make "weheeee" sounds as we came in to land and each time we touched down it was as though we had performed a miracle and her teeth made clacking sounds as she got excited. Even though her seat was fully forward, her little feet with smart Victorian style lace ups could barely reach the rudders.

As we trundled happily back to our parking bay the engineers, bless them, would amble over to assist the Baroness in alighting from her carriage. They would almost lift her out of the seat. Once, John (who always greeted everyone with "Alright?" – and so became known as 'Or-wight John') actually lifted her in his arms, off the wing and placed her on the ground. This amused her no end.

On our little stroll back to the Club house with her headset still on, she would hold my hand and say to me earnestly: "You are a vair, vair clever girl"

"Don't be silly" I'd joke. "I'm just an instructor – it's no big deal"

"No, no, you *are*, you *are*, I wish I were as clever as you," she'd say in the most beautifully polished voice.

"Yes, well I wish I had a Chateau in France with its own airstrip, so I'll swap you," I winked down at her.

"Yes that's the bally problem, too darn old to enjoy it all now," she chuckled as we went inside to 'take tea' with her adoring husband.

I did do a lot of flying with her and taught her as much as I could. She was a treasure.

When Harry went Solo

There are simply some people who just do not resonate with the environment of flying and others who brim over with confidence from the word go.

One such character was a contemporary of mine, the house building tycoon Charles Church who, on his first solo – which is strictly, just once round the circuit – took off into the local area to look at some houses he was having built in Surrey. I had never heard of such fearlessness on a first solo. Sadly he died in a Spitfire not long after.

Conversely, I had one chap in the seat next to me during a lesson who physically shrunk in front of my very eyes. He just completely withdrew – his arms came up into his jacket sleeves, his neck sunk down into his collar and he was getting smaller. If it hadn't been for his big long shoes, I swear his feet would have disappeared up his trouser legs!

But I taught a real treasure of a chap – Harry – who was a gentle giant; in fact he reminded me of *Jaws* of metal-teeth fame from the James Bond movies. Except Harry was utterly benign. All he wanted to do was to fly solo once. It took me weeks to get him up to standard, because every time I would go to open the door and say those dreaded words:

“Right, off you go, once round the circuit, you're ready.” He would almost blub and say he didn't want to do it today but he promised he would do it next time. He would grab my arm and look at me with a penetrating glare of an abandoned child that said ‘Please, please don't leave me’.

“Harry, you can *DO* this. Don't be scared; you know what to do.” But it was no good – he became a six-foot-six jelly.

The weeks rolled by and one day I hatched a cunning plot for our Harry. He was flying well and feeling comfortable in the knowledge that I wouldn't send him solo until he requested it – that was our agreement. Normally the instructor will taxi back to the club house then get out, therefore the student knows that *this* is the moment when they will solo. I didn't do that, I pretended that we had landed long so he should make it a full-stop and I requested a backtrack of the runway. When we were lined up back on the runway centerline, as quick as lightning I opened my door and jumped out. So now he would be left in an aircraft on the runway and he would HAVE to go otherwise he would cause an obstruction.

“Harry, JUST GO FOR IT ok – no more messing around, you can do this so pull your finger out and *get on with it*.”

I slammed the door and banged twice on the roof and I was gone. I stayed at the hold of runway 24 and crouched in the bushes, muttering, “Go on Harry, push the bloody throttles up and get in the air.” Nothing happened for about thirty seconds. I hung my head, “Oh God, please make him go.”

Then I heard the sweet sound of the throttle going up – Harry was moving off down the runway confronting his fear.

“GREAT!” I said out loud and watched him all the way round like a nervous parent chewing the top off my biro.

He came down final approach making a few too many power excursions with the throttle but he flew right over my head. “That's it Harry – bring it

down, fly it level, keep it level, *now* start to pull the nose up.” He did a little balloon with an early flare but then put her down handsomely on the centre line.

“Oh thank God!” I exhaled heavily, and clutching my clipboard and pad, I began to walk round the perimeter of the airfield back to the Club. I was watching him carefully, willing him to clear the runway at the end and taxi safely back.

He obviously caught sight of me at the other end, because the next thing I know he had stopped the plane in the middle of the taxiway, got out, and waved triumphantly.

“Christ – what IS he doing?” I asked myself. Then I shouted, “Harry, get back in the plane, go back and taxi in, TAXI THE PLANE BACK TO THE RAMP!”

Back at the flight school; I stood there watched him park then saw this giant form lolloping towards me like some huge inmate just escaped from an institution. He was grinning from ear to ear and waving his arms around.

“Harry, well done!” I yelled.

I walked rapidly towards him: “Go back and make sure you’ve done all the shutdown checks.”

I might as well have been telling a baby grizzly to heel and sit. He came up to me panting heavily from his run, then got both his arms round me and literally threw me high into the air. I couldn’t quite believe what was happening. I guess the man was elated.

That was a rather different thank you!

Robbie and the Lance

Although the title might conjure up pictures of a jousting knight from a heroic medieval tale, in fact it is about a great friend called Robert – a fellow flying instructor and his passion for a particular aircraft G-LUNA, which was a Piper Lance. A cut above your average club aeroplane in that it had a super charger *and* a variable pitch propeller. This was *big* stuff for doe-eyed instructors who would gape longingly at anything different or faster to handle. We were so keen that the promise of a free hour in *anything* would launch us into those bounding circles performed by dogs when they see the lead come down off the peg.

The unsuspecting owner had said to Robbie that he could use the Lance only *once* in a while, just to keep it oiled and lubricated. We of course exercised a slightly more elastic interpretation of these terms and conditions. ‘Jollies’ at least once a week became commonplace.

To break the tedium of teaching straight and level, or climbing and descending, when Robbie flew on his ‘jollies’ he would always ask for an ILS approach into Gatwick. He became known by the controllers there; heaven knows what they thought but I think his cheek and enthusiasm amused them and they accommodated him whenever possible. You must imagine the eye

rolling of the busy air traffic controllers dealing with an endless stream of airliners, getting a call from captain Robbie.

“Golf Lima Uniform November Alpha; PA 32 from Fair Oaks at two thousand four hundred feet, requesting vectors to an ILS approach to overshoot, *if you’re not too busy, please?*”

He actually shot an approach into Heathrow once and I was amazed, it sent us into fits of juvenile hand clapping. He was *very* serious of course and did all the checks and read-backs with the authority of a BA skipper.

“November Alpha; fully established two seven left,” and then turned, wide-eyed to me and chortled with laughter as we peeled off left for the overshoot. “Well what did you think of that ‘Neets?’”

The *really* memorable theft of the plane was one Christmas day when the airfield was closed and deserted. It was a very frosty and ice-cold morning. We had agreed to meet.

Like two truants, we approached the hangar door and pulled it open ourselves. Our breath, forced from the warmth of our lungs, billowed around us in clouds of tiny crystals. Robbie grabbed the prop and I pushed behind the trailing edge of the wing. Fortunately it had lots of fuel and oil. We jumped in and fired her up. A solid throaty rumble as we nudged the throttles up, brought a smile to our faces. We twisted the park brake off and advanced along the frozen taxiway towards the holding point of runway 24. Tiny particles of frost rose into the air behind us as we did our ‘run up checks’ and advanced the throttles in order to check the magnetos. Powdered diamond dust sparkling in the morning sunlight – perfect!

Such delightful irreverence! Is not the stolen apple always the sweetest? Doing something that was not allowed made it all the better. We were like a couple of wild geese. The low sun shone weakly in a pale slate sky, it was a typical winter day, washed out greys overhead and sparkling silver frost on the earth. Because this was the *one* day when nobody was flying, we didn’t have to communicate with anyone, the sky was our very own, it was magical.

I remember being told, when I visited an art gallery in France, that during the war, to safeguard all the precious paintings, they were stored in private farms and little dwellings in the countryside so they wouldn’t get destroyed. Those farmhands who guarded masterpieces from the Louvre could sneak down to their cellars and stare at glorious paintings by Caravaggio, Claude or Watteau and pretend just for that one small but sweet moment that they were their own. One day soon they’d have to return them, but for now they belonged to them. In a similar way, I looked at the empty sky and enjoyed the silence knowing that tomorrow the skies would be everybody’s once again full of VHF signals carrying endless human chatter.

We flew down to Frensham Ponds and did a low approach and go-around on the grass strip there. We went bombing over Butser Hill near Petersfield, swooped down over the lake in Liss and did low level orbits of the Devil’s Punchbowl. We had a romp over Petworth House, had a close inspection of the Shah of Iran’s former residence next to the glorious Winkworth Arboretum then made a couple of 360s over Paul Ghetty’s splendid pile near Guildford. We looked down at all the houses and wondered how many over indulged kids

would be ripping open presents, how many Aunties were knocking back the sherry, how many in-laws were silently smouldering. And thought with appreciated detachment of the panic in the hearts of all those poor mums as they juggled three courses, ten different dishes and the timing of the sprouts!

Oh Lord – how perfectly rhapsodic it was to be in the air.

Thin pockets of morning mist settled in the small valleys, it was spread over the landscape like angel hair. A few Christmas lights twinkled from people's homes. I feel that our winter months are the forgotten relatives in our great family of seasons. Winter's glory is her nudity. It manifests in her ruggedness, resilience and silent splendour – the sparkling winter frosts, the black branches gesturing against pallid skies. The dense cold air is the perfect medium to carry the defiant screeches of the crows, that distinctive clarion call, which trumpets their survival across the land, a sound which has been heard for centuries. That special Christmas morning the earth was like a bulb, stripped bare, but doggedly storing all her goodness, harnessing the energy for next spring when green leaves would once again fill the hedgerows and plump the outlines, when our feisty snowdrops would nudge up through the frozen ground. Life was just ticking over, the landscape in a state of hibernation was conserving just enough energy to make it through. The only movements that glorious morning were the hardy crows hopping around the lumpy farrowed fields and the odd dog walker all wrapped up.

We flew back over Ockham VOR; gave a cursory nod to the old VC10 parked at Brooklands in Surrey, dropped down over the railway line near Byfleet and then banked steeply over onto finals for runway 24. We lowered the final stage of flap and pushed the props up to fine and did a Christmas cracker of a landing on the frosty runway. With our cup of happiness positively brimming over, we put her back in the hangar and pushed the massive hangar doors along their tracks until they clunked shut.

“Merry Christmas,” we ‘high fived’ laughing out loud, then we snuck away!

Emergency Landing into US. Base- Greenham Common

It's not *really* something you are supposed to do – come barreling in unannounced in your little single engine Piper to the most politically sensitive and top secret, USAF base arguably in the world. This happened to my own dear flying instructor Mike. I followed him into exactly the same job and took his place two years later. Whilst we were both there in our respective roles as instructor and student, he told me of the day when he was having a ‘jolly’ as we call it. On his own, building hours, he took off from Booker aerodrome in High Wycombe and had an unexpected incident which resulted in him performing a forced landing into one of the most secure and protected military bases in England, none other than the nuclear warhead itself – Greenham Common near Newbury, Berkshire. It was very much in the news at the time because of all the women camping out around the perimeter protesting about nuclear war.

He told me the story in his own endearing way. Mike was tall, lanky and boyish, he had long straight hair that flopped over his brows, and he smoked Marlboro – he had a ‘proper’ BBC world Service voice.

“Well,” he explained, “I was pootling along and suddenly the bloody throttle linkage came undone, so in effect there was no gas getting to the engine, I had no choice but to get the thing on the ground, I was a glider!”

So with no choice but down, Mike did the right thing and put out a ‘Mayday’ on 121.5 VHF (international distress frequency) and looked out and saw the nice long runway of Greenham Common beneath him.

You know when people just *can’t* do accents? Well that’s Mike and his American is worse than his Pakistani. You see he is just far too British. But it didn’t stop him trying, bless him, for the impact of this story.

“I was aaased all these questions bah all these guys in uniform,” he carried on bravely attempting the Yankee drawl which made it ten times funnier!

Apparently he was surrounded, and arrested by the military, they roped the aircraft to a jeep and towed him off and put him in a room where he had to fill in forms and have interviews and be visited by various uniformed savants with shiny shoes and epaulettes. He started off in a room covered with maps and diagrams of the airfield, when they realised that he could see the bedrock nay the very nucleus of Americas deepest and most arcane defence information they removed him and put him in the room with the coffee machine!

Much chest thrusting, saluting and “Yes *SIR*” went on all around him. I couldn’t help but chuckle thinking of Mike in his Tennis shoes and snoopy sweatshirt and innocent open expression, loving the opportunity to talk about his little aeroplane and then throw in “Anyone got a light?” while phones were ringing in the Pentagon.

“What d’you mean there’s bin a *goddam* breach of security...?”

“Well it’s like this Mr President...”

The RAF police got involved and there was a fair old brouhaha but the amusing thing was that they didn’t *even know* he was on the airfield until West Drayton air traffic control in London (who had received the mayday) phoned to inform them! That is how big the place is! You can just imagine can’t you:

“We’ve got *WHAT* on the airfield ... *WHO* ...

Then like an atomic fly swat (i.e. an overkill), teams of jeeps screech up, men armed to the teeth, alight, to see Mike sitting on the wing of Yankee Oscar having a quiet smoke. The entire fire brigade came hurtling down the airfield and when they saw him, eager to jump into action, shouted: “Is there fire. Is there fire?”

“Only from my ciggie,” said Mike ... Priceless.

Eventually he was picked up by car and a few days later a colleague was dropped at Greenham with an engineer to fix the plane and fly her out.

Funnily enough I had the chance to return to Greenham Common many years later – in 2004. It was fascinating. Totally abandoned, it had that ‘tumbleweed rolling down the street’ look. Weeds towered through cracks in the aprons, the runway was in poor condition and the whole place looked sad and drab. Something which was fascinating though was the peek I had of the

underground command bunkers. They were nuclear proof and pretty impressive if you are into that type of thing. I was struck by both the extensiveness of the underground corridors and rooms, and by the sheer size of the place. There was, it seemed a whole city underground. But it is what I saw *on* those walls which was a bit of a shocker. There was a sketch, done by one of the resident American airmen. In disbelief I drew nearer to a drawing on the wall of a windowless, airless room. It was a picture of a huge Hiroshima type mushroom cloud with a skull and crossbones and the grim reaper underneath and the words 'GLCM we aim to deliver's suppose that is ground launch cruise missile. Oh well I guess if the best salesmen are the ones who believe in the product!

Back outside on one of the many vast manoeuvring areas I was shown the massive drop down steel doors in which the trucks carrying the nuclear missiles were housed. They weighed ninety tons each and looked like they belonged on a Hollywood set of *Star Wars* or *Dune*. They took six seconds to open and fourteen minutes to close. *This* was what the Yanks referred to as 'Heavy Dooty'. I'd never seen steel that thick or bulky.

All around this eerie place ran six sets of fences, barbed wire, there used to be guns, dogs, the whole shebang. Breaching this boundary would have been tricky even for the most fervent anti-nuke happy clapper!

The control tower was solid built in a style typical of the airforce of its time. It was once, I am sure, a hive of communications activity – troughs, peaks, modulated waves, chatter, 'over and outs', and all the rest of the tropospheric scatter! Now it was gutted, smashed and ruined. It was reminiscent of some former African HQ prior to the rebel army advancing. The women protesters had apparently done a 'Luddite' job on all the equipment, once they had finally got in and smashed it to smithereens. Very interesting day out. Mike would have had no problems doing a forced landing on here now. His biggest problem would have been how far he would have to walk to find a pub to call for a taxi! How time can change things.

Mad Robs – An Englishman

Mad Robs – one Robs Lamplough was a maelstrom of a man, always racing cars or flying classic planes with his Biggles helmet on, or jumping out of helicopters onto steep canyons of powder snow in some remote corner of New Zealand. He had bushy white eyebrows a very cheeky grin and was usually clutching the keys to one of his vintage Formula 4 Ferraris or Alphas in which he'd just screamed round the most dangerous terrain in Europe.

During the 'hungry years' of hour building, you will jump at any chance to fly. (Quick insight into the level of my keenness – most Saturday nights in my mid-twenties were spent driving up the M1 to Luton to sit in the back of a Piper Seneca doing a mail run to Manchester just so I could 'be there'. If I was lucky I'd get to press a button on the area navigation box!) I challenge any 'anorak' to beat that!

Whilst I was sitting at Fair Oaks one day, he burst through the door in long leather flying coat and asked if I was free to fly him down to Haverford West. He needed to pick up a Pilatus P2 from RAF Brawdy in Wales, he would borrow his mate Mike Woodley's Cherokee 180 which I would fly, then we would come back in formation. This prospect awakened that little known gland in the brain with a long Latin name which is responsible for the secretion of euphoria chemicals. I had just got my Private Licence and was up for it.

Rob was a 'sod the maps, don't need them' kind of pilot. He didn't really care if instruments didn't work, he was very 'seat of the pants'. We took off from runway 24 at Fair Oaks on a lovely spring day and headed west talking to Farnborough then Lyneham and Bristol. I chatted to a friendly Welsh controller across Wales then contacted Haverford West in the descent. Rob would go from there by road to Brawdy because they didn't allow civilian planes in there. I would wait on the ground in Haverford until I heard his engines overhead then take-off and join him – very 'war time scramble,' I thought.

The unique 'chugging along' type of enthusiasm of the airfield manager was great. He was making the tea when he heard my first transmission, bounded over to the window, picked up the microphone and told me the wind, then he mounted the lawnmower and finished the grass, he did, it seemed, a bit of everything. He had a droopy sort of 'Deputy Dowg' face and the strongest Welsh accent ever.

"Hello dear, and what kind of craft is this one."

"Cherokee 180."

"Oh lovely, yes, I don't know that one but we haven't had this much traffic down h'year for a long time, you're the second one in today," he said, head down entering me in the visitors book and stroking the cat. "Cup of tea love?"

"Love one," I gratefully accepted.

Whilst waiting for Robs to come roaring overhead, he took me round the hangars and proudly showed me the aircraft which were nearly all gliders.

"D'year d'year," he reminisced as he patted one particular glider wing. "Ever been caught in a downdraught? I remember being in this one h'yur, saw a bird shoot up past my window like it was out of a rocket, I was plummeting I was," he chuckled and scratched his head as he remembered the perilous incident.

Moments later I heard the roar of Robs' Pilatus. I thanked the gentleman and jumped in my Cherokee and took off to join him downwind. We had agreed to talk on VHF123.4. He came with a whoosh down my left hand side over taking me. I could see his cheeky schoolboy grin. He slowed and allowed me to catch up and come alongside. It was incredible, it was the first time I had seen a plane floating and bobbing freely in the sky so close to me. Robs wore his mask and flying hat – a true Biggles. The paint job was camouflage and with the German iron crosses (Nazi style) it was truly a picture. He signalled to me that he would lead the way. I followed at full power. We established communication and Robs being mad said he wanted to buzz his mother's house in Stroud. He spent the next ten minutes swooping in and out of those

sleepy Gloucestershire valleys trying to find his mum. I circled above cringing at the thought of the letters of complaint and the punishment such a crime might exact – like a fine, or worse, a ban! I then struggled to dissuade him from flying under the Severn Bridge. He was like a ten month old Rottweiler freshly off the leash and in a park, everything had to be sprayed, sniffed, eaten, climbed or destroyed. We were having some serious fun and it felt *GOOD*.

I lost sight of him shortly after that but heard his crackly transmission telling me to go into Staverton. I glanced at the map and set up a heading which looked good and contacted Staverton on my radio.

“Has a Pilatus just landed?” I asked.

“A-firm,” came back the controller.



Great, I thought, and flew on to the dead side of the circuit and descended into downwind.

“QFE one zero one seven, call finals,” said the controller.

“Uniform Bravo call final,” I replied and went through the downwind checks. I turned at right angles to the runway slowed to eighty knots, lowered the first stage of flap and trimmed, put a touch of carburettor heat on then lowered full flap, and slid down final approach loving the new scenery.

As I taxied in I saw Robs – he had already drawn a crowd! He leant proudly against the plane whilst the re-fueller topped her up. God he looked a sight, long leather coat, old flying helmet with flappy ears and these bushy white eyebrows, and a grin that wouldn't quit! We chatted about progress so far and he suggested jocosely that we 'lob' into High Wycombe airfield so he could check on his Fokker tri-plane. I was beside myself with joy, *what* a day this was turning into! We were sky bound again – 3rd leg. This time Robs did rolls over and under my Cherokee, he closed in then banked sharply away flashing his underside, disappeared for two minutes then popped up on my

right side then slid over my head and slowly descended on my left side. I was thrilled to bits.

Rob's radioed ahead to Wycombe and asked them to pull his tri-plane out of the hangar. I followed him in on the westerly runway. We alighted and walked over to the hangar. Now here was a little plane you had to fall in love with. Its three wings, tail skid, open cockpit and old slim bicycle style wheels painted a perfect picture of a bygone age. Its bright red paint decorated with German crosses looked stunning against the green grass. Rob's marched round it admiringly, proudly pointing out all the beautiful features like the shiny wooden prop and the fabric wings. The prop snapped into life after a few swings and Rob's taxied off into the wind. It was quite breezy that day and he just seemed to lift straight up vertically in the headwind and towards the puffy white clouds.

I thought of Baron Von Richthofen and his famous red Fokker tri-plane. (Although as often happens with war heroes, we find that *actually* someone else – in this case Lieutenant Voss, shot down many more enemy aircraft than his more well-known and posthumously rewarded compatriot Richthofen.) It was built to match the British Sopwith Tri-plane which was a famous and agile fighting scout of the First World War. Fascinating concept the three wings – they were narrower (fore to aft) than the biplane wings, but the same length. The thinner wings gave the pilot a better view and the centre of lift on the narrower wings did not move around as much as on the broader wing aircraft. This increased stability during violent manoeuvres. Apparently if one of the British Tri-planes crashed behind enemy lines, the Germans studied it in close detail. The German Air Commander Hoppner is known to have openly eulogised about the British fighter.



So, here it was buzzing and diving around over my head and I thought of those intrepid fighter pilots who must have nearly frozen to bloody death in those things. How hugely impressive, that, in what amounts to nano seconds (if you think of the 'time' chart popular in Natural History programmes where we *the humans* appear at five minutes to midnight in the planet's history) we have come up with the supersonic, pinpoint accurate, mega manoeuvrable fighting machine of the modern military. There *really* are some innovative and brainy people out there.

"Here it comes," the engineer said lifting his binoculars. Robs was crabbing down sideways so he could see the strip, he kicked it straight and bounced it down on the grass, she ballooned up again and came back down on one wheel and bumped and rocked her way to a full stop, with a cough and a splutter. It had the endearing clumsiness of a young duck attempting its first landing and the same waddle once on firm ground.

Since we were making good progress, he suggested a trip to the Isle of Wight where his third aircraft, a Harvard AT6 was hangared, and in need of a run out! He was definitely making the most of having someone along who would agree to *anything* to clock a few more hours! As for me, I was delighted, great flying – someone else paying, perfect! We flew off in the Cherokee across Surrey and West Sussex, crossed the Solent and landed at Sandown. Here I had a real treat in store.

The yellow Harvard (tandem seat tail dragger with *big* radial engine – used to train fighter pilots) was in World War Two Canadian markings.

"Cmon ol' girl, jump in we'll take her for a spin eh?"

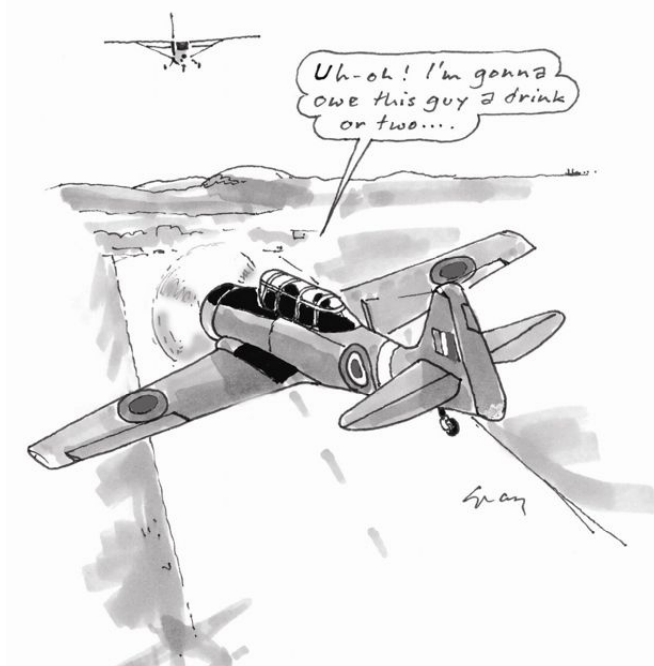
Fearless and utterly unaware of Rob's reputation as a 'nutter' I found the black non slip strip on the wing, planted my foot on it and pulled myself up and stepped into the back seat and connected the heavy five way harness. The engine sounded rugged and meaty, the nose was high in the air. The levers are interconnected by cables front and back, so although he was moving the levers up front, I could see the cables moving right next to me.

I remembered my stall training, which included what we called the HASEL checks – a mnemonic covering the steps you had to go through before any aerobatic manoeuvre. 'H' was for height, a minimum of 3000 feet. At that moment I glanced at the altimeter which read 2000 feet thinking 'ok we've got a bit to go before he starts' and two seconds after that I was looking at my reflection in the glass – *upside-down!* Suddenly my eyes were bulging and the straps digging in I couldn't lift my hands from my thighs, yes we were, no mistaking, indulging in a bit of 'G' here. I knew Robs was an adrenalin junkie after his stories of pylon racing in Nevada not to mention his exploits during the Paris to Dakar rally. He beat up the field that day despite my reminding him that this was sleepy little Isle of Wight and perhaps it might be a bit indecorous to be ripping it up a low level on a summers afternoon. Not surprisingly some local residents called to complain.

Back to Fair Oaks, last leg of this extraordinary day which would have had Indiana Jones putting his feet up! I agreed to pick up the Cherokee the following day with another instructor. Because we were non radio we telephoned Fair Oaks to say we were landing in about thirty minutes. I must

have lost more face during that drama-packed entry into the Fair Oaks circuit than ever before or after. I *assumed* Robs would at least join the circuit over head to give us, and indeed the other aircraft time to check out each other's positions. Oh no, if there's a wall let's, like a tank, just blast on through it!

He careered straight into downwind cutting someone up, hurled it round onto base leg then on final he realised he was dangerously near the aircraft in front, which was probably a good 20 knots slower, so he decided to do a quick 360 to put some distance between us. *Might* have got away with that one had it not been for *his* aircraft which we'd cut up on downwind which had now turned onto *his* final approach and saw a great big yellow aeroplane coming *towards* him— the turning circle is not exactly tiny and we did use some distance during the turn. Apparently (unbeknownst to us at the time, being non radio equipped) the controller in the tower (whose nickname was already 'Panic') was having a full-blown fit. His voice was a positive squeal.



It was pure *chaos*. The plane we were head on with on finals decided to climb and circle overhead until *we* were on the ground, so we completed our turn and landed. All ended well though, no damage, just a few combative scowls and a justly deserved "What the bloody hell did you think you were doing"! Rob bought drinks all round at the bar and yielded to the idea that a radio might be prudent and won everyone round with his unabashed candour. "So sorry old boy I was a damn fool – didn't mean to mess things up ... drink?" The beers were poured and I drank to a defining day – one which I wouldn't forget in a hurry.

Green and Pleasant Landings ***(A Sunny Flight to the West County)***

It was the season for equestrian frolics, the Badminton horse trials in Gloucestershire. Though no horse expert myself, I flew down with my friend Carrie (a talented rider) in her single engine plane, a Fuji, from Fair Oaks in Surrey. We set off due west across England's glorious countryside on a bright delphinium blue day. Small, flat bottomed cumulus segued away in long lines downwind, carried along by the breeze, way into the distance. It seemed we could see forever.

The south coast stretched out on our left, snaking its way into Dorset then Devon. On our right, the Didcot power station blew columns of smoke into the sky above Oxfordshire. We passed the huge Kingsclere mast near Basingstoke then entered the magical hilly area near Marlborough, flew across Wiltshire countryside and admired the white horse near Pewsey. On such days it's heavenly to lift into the sweet un-trespassed space above the ground and view the warm sun drenched landscape as a soaring bird would!

We chatted to Lyneham (military) on the VHF who gave us a squawk and provided radar Information Service. A C130 Hercules was going round the circuit on the easterly runway. In the merry month of May the rape fields are in full bloom splashing the land with vibrant patches of yellow. We swooped down over 'Country Life' houses and along meandering rivers, saw cricket matches and dog walkers on village greens. We clocked the odd helicopter scudding along below us.

Canal boats brightly painted and without agenda moved slowly along the waterways, which were flanked by graceful drooping willows. It was enchanting. We identified the town of Malmesbury on the right, Hullavington gliding site on the nose, and then the unmistakable high ground just to the east of Bristol. A mass of white tents gleamed in the sun about ten miles on, we approached and saw the cross-country jumps, the dressage ring and the avenues of shops and stalls. We'd found it, after what had been an enjoyable 'nav ex'. Hundreds of cars were parked in the field next to the stately home.

A couple of circles round the site gave us time to see the whole area, the views were stunning. Downwind, we lowered the first stage of flap, then turned onto final approach, put out full flap, steadied the speed at about seventy-five knots, tweaked the trim wheel, and just savoured the moment. It was the best kept grass strip I'd ever seen. Power off, into the flare, and another 'green and pleasant landing'! We vacated the strip into a field of much higher grass, closed the throttle and mixture, then slid our canopy back to savour the fresh breeze. Wheel high in daisies and dandelions, that's how we left our little aeroplane parked in a green meadow buttoned with bright wild flowers.

"Hello hello how nice to see our first aircraft. Good flight?"

"Terrific," said Carrie *really* meaning it!

This, we guessed, was the Duke's groundsman who'd come in his Range Rover to greet us.

I complimented him on the state of the landing strip.

"Oh good ... good," he beamed "Well anytime you want to land here you are most welcome just stick a fiver in the box at the end by the hut."

The fact that we had arrived in a plane entitled us to free entry. So we wandered around admiring all the saddles, country jackets, deer stalkers, walking sticks, hip flasks and boots, not forgetting all the wonderful pottery, jewellery and art. I'd never been to an event like it before so it was fascinating seeing the organisations (wildlife hedgerows and shooting to name but a few) which existed to promote and protect the future of our countryside. You have to hand it to the British they'd even erected a "Pig and Whistle" sign outside a temporary pub. There were temptations everywhere, from hog roast, to strawberries and cream.

We watched some impressive dressage, and noticed a few whip wielding dandies striding around with 'Jodhpurd' girls in tow. I welcomed myself to the land of the velvet bow and the low slung riding hat. Eye catching rows of silver and red bunting fluttered in the wind around various stands. More little planes were circling overhead lining up to come in.

The parking arrangements were all arranged by NCP (National Car Parks) and for all of us who've ever parked in one of those, we know how crippling the rates are! The owner's son David was there overseeing the parking, tearing around the place on a quad bike which back then was exceedingly modern and revolutionary! Carrie went for a ride on the back zipping round the fields, it looked like a load of fun so I begged a go too. We were all having a good lark on the quad, until he had to busy himself with his real job of assisting people with their cars in the field. How ironical that nearly twenty years later I should, fly his father Sir Donald Gosling, in a private jet. He is, to this day, one of the nicest passenger I have ever flown. How I've railed about the price of NCP parking but when I finally met the owner it took the sting out of it somehow because *there* is a real gentleman. A wow-it's-a-small-world moment happened when over 20 years later I ran into David in a lovely country pub in Compton where he drinks sometimes with a mate, Stuart Tidy, a lovable rascal. Having learnt I was a pilot, Stuart now says to me every time he sees me, "so... Anita, when are you flying me down to Cuba to buy some cigars, in that private jet...*what?*... that shouldn't cost too much should it?"

The next day we were dropped off by our friends with whom we'd stayed the night. We tossed our bags over the fence, clambered over the gate and walked over to G-KARY. After a quick walk round we fired her up and trundled across the uneven ground to the strip. We slid the throttle up to full power for the 'mag check' which had us momentarily sitting in a 'grass storm' with blades of grass flying everywhere.

"Shall we?"

"Let's do it."

I opened the throttle and accelerated slowly, there is certainly more noise than speed in the early stages of a grass take-off. We bumped across the lumpy terrain. I anticipated those expanded horizons which unfurl in front of you as

you lift away from the surface obstructions. I banked sharply over to the left to avoid over flying the horses and cruised off remaining low to find our friend's house, to take some pictures for them.

"There it is!" we found it nestled in the valley, and did a few orbits. Good to pull a little 'G' now and again with a steep turn!

We headed east from Gloucestershire to Wiltshire then Berkshire, spotting the huge runway of Greenham Common (can't miss that one). Eventually the BAT (British American Tobacco) building in Woking – my beacon in the storm, came into view and we descended over Bisley for the circuit at Fair Oaks.

When we slid the canopy back we had to smack our hands together with a 'high five'. It had been what flying little planes is all about: good weather, some map reading, a beautiful country strip and best of all – avoiding the traffic on the M4!

Sweetness and Flight (A summer evening – Frensham Ponds)

This little flight seemed to encapsulate all that is 'green and pleasant' about English summer flying. I had a great friend and fellow flying instructor called William; he was an eccentric, lovable and very handsome Anglo Irishman with longish brown hair and a cheeky smile. He loved his flying and was a great artist and deft craftsman (he had done a few illustrations for Tim Severin the explorer on some of his adventures). He did beautiful soft pencil sketches of sleepy grass airfields – wild flowers and biplanes parked behind old blister hangars, or of hazy Greek mountain sides dotted with olive trees. His favourite saying was "Shlantra (spelt Slainte) mahogany gas pipes" which he would say while raising his beer and shouting in an Irish accent: "More drrrink!" He was one of life's good guys. He was always laughing, drove a battered old car and had battered old luggage. He owned a little plane – a red Jodel tail dragger.

With all the lessons of the day complete, he asked me if I fancied taking a little jaunt out in his Jodel. We pulled it effortlessly out of the hanger – it was wood and fabric and very light. He hand-swung the prop and we sat side by side in the seats; it was like being in a little boat, sort of flimsy and scant on the controls. He glanced over the few gauges checked the Ts and Ps as we call them (temperatures and pressures) then just did a north/south, east/west with the control stick to check 'full and free' and we bumped down towards the hold of runway 24. He pushed up the little throttle and for the first five seconds there was no acceleration at all. We lifted up gently like a little Winnie the Pooh balloon at about sixty knots and flew away over the green fields on a lovely summer evening.

In our headsets we had Pink Floyd's 'Shine on you crazy Diamond' playing. It was magical. The job of instructing involves the 'patter' as we call it, this is nonstop talking and explaining, we had both been at it all day so the music was blissful. We flew slowly around 'tout tranquil' as they say in

France, just enjoying the soft hazy summer scenery. As we popped over the southern side of the Hogs Back near Guildford, we spotted a hot air balloon.

“Let’s go and say hello,” said Wills.

I raised my thumb. He slowed right down – not that we were doing anything resembling ‘speed’ anyway. This *is* the sort of aircraft in which if you’re in thirty knots of headwind you *will* be overtaken by a heron! But it didn’t matter a jot; to quote Richard Bach:

You will begin to touch heaven, Jonathan, in the moment that you touch perfect speed. And that isn’t flying a thousand miles an hour or a million ... because any number is a limit, and perfection doesn’t have limits. Perfect speed my son, is being there.³

We approached the balloon really slowly so as not to startle them. We moved in close then flew a big circle all around them. We could see they were loving it, from their smiles and waves. It was a one of those ‘moments’– quite surreal – a bunch of basket borne people floating idly across the summer sky raising their glasses of champagne while we became just for a few special moments, their own little moon, orbiting around them.



We carried on south-west of Guildford towards Puttenham and Elstead and finally arrived at Frensham Ponds. These are two ponds in Hampshire; a large one and a smaller one, they are nestled in the countryside and have a delightful little grass strip. Wills lowered the nose and lined up for a landing into the evening sun. We descended over the fields, I saw a few mini sails on the water, everything was cool, in my ears David Gilmour (a keen pilot) and his mates were singing passionately and strumming their guitars.

³ Bach, p. 55.

“Remember when you were young ... you shone like the sun ... SHINE on you Craaaazy di-iamond.”

The ground came up towards us we flew along the grass, Wills chopped the throttle flew her level for a few seconds until her little wheels finally found the ground and we bobbed and rattled as we decelerated along the green grass. He turned her around in a ‘one eighty’ increasing the RPM and putting in full rudder and we parked up near the little ‘honesty box’. This is a small box nailed to a post where there is a handwritten sign asking you very kindly to deposit your landing fee of five pounds (so British!). We duly did and then we walked down the country lane to the hotel on the lake. We bought a glass of fruit juice and went to sit by the water in a caressing breeze.

The lake was dark and glassy. The surface was broken occasionally by a few grebes who dived down and popped up randomly. Mallards preened themselves on the bank near us and at the far side two swans glided elegantly under the weeping Willows. It was a little piece of heaven. At the water’s edge, I noticed millions of tiny gnats, all backlit in the evening sun. They formed a little cloud of staccato dancers, moving jerkily up and down together all in unison as though bouncing on invisible teeny trampolines. It’s amazing how they communicate, because they would suddenly *all* move off together, in a split second, to some other place ... heaven only knows.

We finished our cold drinks and walked back to the little red Jodel. It looked so cute and chirpy parked there on the grass. After hand swinging the prop we stepped in and strapped up. We lined up on the grass strip and William opened the throttle, after a modest acceleration, which a child running along beside would have been able to keep up with, Wills lifted the tail and seconds later we just floated off the ground and the wings were flying again. We banked round to the east and headed back up towards Guildford. We kept very low coming down to five hundred feet at times admiring all the lovely homes with stables and tennis courts, the meandering tracks through the ranges, the village greens and church spires and tidy little fields surrounded by miles of hedgerow. We were still being ‘crazy diamonds’ as we dropped back in to the circuit to land on runway two four at Fair Oaks. I helped Wills pull it back into the little hangar and offered to buy him a drink in The Sun pub in Chobham.

It was a very happy evening and I wish I could go back and relive it. But it has gone. You *really* have to make every moment count in this life and *that* one counted for a great deal.

Transition to Commercial Pilot

I have to say for someone who did the ‘arts’ subjects at college and could barely change a plug, the mental gymnastics required for these new disciplines was considerable. The subjects were fascinating. I spent the best part of six months at the training schools of Oxford and Bournemouth learning all about meteorology, flight planning, navigation, radio aids, as well as electrics,

aerodynamics, hydraulics, pressurisation, propeller and jet engines, oil systems, performance and loading. We were certainly kept on our toes. The slightly batty but likeable technical instructor who was actually *called* Ken and *did* remind me of Ken Dodd used to come bursting into the classroom on a Monday morning, smack his long pointer on the desk of some poor ‘not quite awake yet’ student in the front row and shout, “Electrolyte of a Nicad Battery...? Come on!”

Meteorology lessons were no less entertaining. We had a ‘real character’. He had reached the stage where he talked only in abbreviation (there are thousands of them in this industry and ‘met’ is home to most of them!). He was an ‘old school’, thumbs under braces type – very clear and precise. He would pace up and down the classroom with his baton under his arm waving it occasionally and in his best British accent talk about fronts:

“As the front approaches surface wind **backs**, pressure **falls**, temp **rises**, cloud **appears**.”

Then he’d turn sharply on his heel and march back to the front.

“This will be first CI, (pronounced very roundly as ‘see eye’) maybe CS, then AS and often ... NS.” (These meaning cirrus, cirro stratus, alto and nimbo stratus.)

“In the warm sector we’ll get DZ, RA maybe fractured ST even ... (then the voice lowered and slowed as he prepared for the big finale of fog) EFF GEE.”

Then he’d pick up the pace again ... “As the cold front passes pressure **rises**, wind **veers**, temperature **drops**, cloud will be heavy – (these were his favourites) CU and CEE BEE.” With that he’d give a determined tap with the baton on the picture of the towering Cumulo Nimbus clouds he’d deftly drawn on the board. He loved talking about tropical revolving storms, they involved letters which leant themselves very well to clipped, polished pronunciation – ‘TEE ARR ESS’.

The navigation exam was invariably the one which gave the most headaches. It was a staggeringly fusty and tricky old subject. A complicated and intricate circular slide rule along with a crumpled old ‘Air Almanac’ (circa Flamsteed) were given as tools on day one! The common calculator banned, we waded through problems of kilos pounds and litres; associated specific gravities, not forgetting the true tracks, magnetic tracks and wind/ground speed sums very long windedly on our slide rules lovingly known as the whiz wheel. It has now been gathering dust in the cupboard under the stairs for quite some years.

We had to tackle the subject of mapping the globe – there was Lamberts conformal conic orthomorphic projection (or ‘lamberts pornographic erection’ as Pete the class comic renamed it). Then Mercator, a Flemish cartographer from the sixteenth century who had a cylindrical projection. Anyway most of us used to sit with chin in hand chewing ends of pencils while staring at the board in total confusion as we read about chart convergency being the ‘change in Longitude times the sine of the parallel of Origin’. Then ... there were delightful little facts like: ‘the two reference parallels are secant to the globe’ ... ‘rhumb lines are concave to the nearer pole but convex to the equator’.

Great circles were *curved* on one map but *straight* on the other – all shoulder slumpingly depressing. Then we'd have gristly little problems to work out like:

'On a Mercator, the spacing between two meridians is 14.7 inches, use this information to find the scale of the chart at 53North.'... "WHAT?" Didn't matter *how* many times you read the question it never really jumped out at you! More gruesome questions followed which demanded that we 'find' (most unwillingly!) the track angle at 'x' having been told that a line has been drawn from one coordinate 'x' to another coordinate 'y' on a Polar Stereographic across the North Pole. Those ones had us all, unfailingly clasping **both** hands around the ears looking down at the desk ... 'condemned'.

Then ... to learn that the Mercator map is utterly unreliable above 70 degrees north – why bother! Furthermore I discovered it was *really* a map for maritime navigation. Of course none of us ever used this 'stuff' again in our aviation careers, it had all been for the purposes of mental exercise. It was, along with the lanes and parabolic curves of Decca and Doppler, thankfully never again mentioned. However, I feel that the more skilled amongst us (myself definitely excluded) could have grabbed their parallel ruler, navigation square, protractor and graticule, swung their cape over their shoulders and been of great assistance to Captain Cooke on the Endeavour as he sailed off to find the Southern Hemisphere! Whoever came up with GPS... I would like to say a BIG thank you.

Solid friendships are cemented at flight school and years down the road when you run into those friends again at some airport in the crew lounge, the connection is a deep one – you went through the battlefield together.

Exams and flight tests done, I sent out the CV. It hardly filled half a side of A4! The Christmas parties were no longer just scenes of drinking and merry making, I used them as hunting grounds to prospect, making a B line for anyone who may be recruiting or could offer advice on companies looking for crew. A couple of interviews followed, I set out hopeful that I'd have the same luck as the topless dining job and once again they'd say, "You can start Monday."

Someone at Gama's Christmas party recommended a company down in Gatwick who flew Citations. I called and went along. We chatted about the exams I had just completed at Oxford and what I was looking for out of a career in aviation, I was doing well, I thought – here comes a job offer perhaps? ... then to finish he leant back in his mastermind chair with both hands pressed together in front of his mouth and said, "What about when you get pregnant and want babies?"

"Well that is not even on the agenda."

"Ah yes but you say that now, but if I invest all this money in your training then you get pregnant where does that leave me?"

I didn't hear back.

A week later I landed an interview with British Aerospace at Hatfield. I sat in front of a rather daunting board of 'pinstripes' and had an interesting conversation. Then the old chestnut popped up.

"What about when you want to have babies?"

“Well it’s really not an issue I mean I have not even thought about it and don’t think I want them anyway,” I answered truthfully.

“But you’re **OBVIOUSLY** going to want to get married.”

My eyes darted from left to right, my brow furrowed, “Oh ... am I?”

People normally pay good money for this sort of clairvoyance and here I was getting it for free! I explained I was just looking for my first break, I was ready to work really hard and tried to convince them that it wouldn’t be necessary to train all their crews in airborne midwifery, *and* that I wasn’t the mum character out of Monty Pythons ‘Catholic’ sketch who stands at the sink for fifteen years in an old pinny dropping kids.

I do remember him smiling and shaking my hand at the door saying, “I can see you don’t suffer fools lightly Anita, we will be in touch”

I did have a second interview during which I quite unexpectedly had to fly their Jetstream out of Dunsfold. I wished I hadn’t worn a tight navy pencil skirt. It was nonetheless great fun once I manoeuvred myself into the seat. I hadn’t been up to fifteen thousand feet at the controls before so it was exciting.

Of course I tried British Airways and went to the interview, lo and behold a few weeks later the ‘Thank you for your interest ...’ letter came so I filed it with the cabin crew rejection letter and thought to myself with a smile – well it’s not a Royal Flush but at least I got ‘A Pair’ in this poker game of life. Mind you **that** interview was really revelatory – we all sat round and had to build a big wheel (like you’d find in the funfair) out of a type of metal Lego, while some hobgoblin graduate, with spiky hair and a suit that was too big for him but who had an ‘ology’ from Leicester in something which was supposed to give him insightful perspicacity, sat and watched us all communicate. It was all a bit too much for the very ‘alpha’ Buccaneer pilot from Lossiemouth who had seen combat and a lot more, who made his excuses with a few breathy expletives. It was a seminal moment in my exposure to psychometric testing and the strange exercises which accompany it. Fighter pilot from Lossiemouth – you get my vote hands down where ever you may be!

Another interviewed followed with Connect Air at Gatwick and I trotted off hopefully searching for someone who didn’t think the sum total of my activities was secretly flicking, doe eyed through Bride magazine and shopping every Saturday for rattles and bibs. In the middle of all this the phone rang one day and it was my friend Mike Woodley from Aces High for whom I had done bits and pieces of work over the last three years as I built my hours.

“I don’t know how you are getting along with the job hunting, but I’ve got something which might interest you.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yea LWT are doing a series called ‘Piece of Cake’ and I’m putting my B25 bomber in it as the camera ship – but it is in the States and needs ferrying back – how do you fancy right seat in that? – you have got the twin rating and you don’t need a type rating to sit in the right seat, it would be good experience so if you want to do it ...”

I couldn’t believe my luck – to ferry a Second World War bomber back over the Atlantic, how could I pass *that* up?

I called the few companies I'd spoken to and explained what had happened. The one I really wanted, a small company called IDS flying business jets out of Heathrow were great:

“Just give us a ring again when you're back and we'll take it from there – good luck.”

So off I went to a very unexpected first job, on a war bird!

Ferry of B25 Bomber over Atlantic

A surge of heart-warming nostalgia sweeps over you when you hear the crackling of those huge old radial engines. When they fire up, black smoke and scorching orange flames roar from the exhaust. Such sights and sounds conjure up memories of the war years – you can hear the sirens, the echoes of bombing and the music of the big bands.

The Mitchell bomber, N1042B, bought by Aces High, was built and accepted for use in training units in 1945. It was sold after a gear incident to its first civilian owner in 1958 for \$835. In 1962, Tallmantz Aviation bought it converting it into a camera-ship for the many upcoming movie productions. I saw it first in Chino, California, just after it had been purchased by Sherman Aircraft Sales of Florida in 1985. She still had the distinctive nose mount and all her film credits painted on the fuselage – ‘Catch 22’ and ‘Battle of Britain’ to name but a few. Never did I think then, that I'd be involved in its delivery to UK for LWTs ‘*A piece of Cake*’ series, made in 1988. Sherman eventually sold it to Consolidated Aviation in Vermont, where we picked it up for Aces High and took her to England.

The first few days were busy, tyres and cylinders were being changed, radios installed, the ferry tank fitted. I just mooched around like a kid in a sweetshop enjoying the wealth of unusual aircraft on the ramps there: Chinese Migs, DC3s and 4s, a Grumman Avenger, a Tracker, Fougar Magisters, seaplanes, biplanes and Navy aircraft. The FAA examiner Vernon Thorpe arrived from Florida to type-rate Alan the English captain.

Vernon was fantastically credentialed – a true ‘all-rounder’. At 70 he was a life member of the Confederate Airforce and their Chief check-pilot on many big piston bombers. He had spiky white hair and his baseball hat read: ‘*I will give up my gun when they prize my cold dead hands from around it*’.

We had a true pro on our hands. He had thousands of hours and numerous Licenses; one of which read ‘Types: ALL’, ‘Restrictions: NONE’. He had done it all in his kaleidoscopic history: gliding, pylon racing, crop spraying, tail draggers, vintage bombers, fighters, Lear Jets, 707s, flying boats – he was just short of Lunar landings!

He would come with us as far as Iceland, so on that leg we would be four: Alan the captain, Vernon, Ray the engineer and myself. I was a new CPL (Commercial Pilot) – both American and English Licenses with the exams behind me but no experience! So it was a plum opportunity to get some right seat hours in something very unusual and of course, ‘do the Atlantic crossing’.

With flight tests and paperwork done and the ferry tank secure, we climbed aboard and around 3.00 p.m. on a sunny spring afternoon, went through the start-up drill on the port engine. The props clicked over eight times then as we brought the throttle forward, she coughed and spluttered into life expelling a black cloud from the exhaust. With both engines started without incident we taxied out to runway 33 at Burlington bound for Goose Bay. The last words Dean Martin – a wealthy pilot/owner spoke to me were:

“Ahh hell Aneeda you should go back on the Virgin Atlantic, you’ll be sucking pond water in this piece of shit.” He’d long since got over the thrill!

I thanked him very much for those reassuring words of comfort as I had climbed up the little ladder on the underside of the belly. All the locals waved us off, including the guy who had taken me aero-bating to his carpeted hangar. Many, who had assisted, were satisfied to see the fruits of all their labour over the last few weeks.

The take-off and climb – my first ever in a war bird, were fantastic. The sounds and smells were all new, as were the handling characteristics, it certainly felt like a tank, rugged and sturdy. At 11,000 feet the views were beautiful and gradually the landscape became more and more bleak as we increased latitude. The four hour flight was noisy and a bit uncomfortable but it didn’t detract from the thrill one bit. If Ray needed to go to the aft of the plane he had to slide back along a narrow passage between the front and rear. There was no gloss or luxury here, this was a crude bare metal frame built for dropping bombs. One nice feature was the astrodome in the ceiling from which we could enjoy panoramic views.

It was a relief to be at last hauling her round in the descent for a final approach into Goose Bay, which was hugely impressive for a neophyte like myself, never having landed in semi-arctic landscape before. Bleak and chilly, I had thoughts of Ice Station Zebra. So far, thank God nothing had gone wrong, or so we thought until we opened the bomb-bay doors and saw at least four leaks in the ferry tank. Because of all the electrics in that area we’d have to use the wobble pump from now on instead of the electric pump, to transfer fuel to the main tanks.

Our plan was to rise the following dawn at 3.00 a.m. and depart at 5.00 because Vernon our busy septuagenarian had a flight from Reykjavik to Orlando that afternoon, he was booked to do a check ride for someone. So we filled the main tanks and decided to leave the bomb-bay tank until the following morning. The old Mitchell bomber was definitely a crowd puller. Two Lab Air pilots jumped out of their Twin Otter in heavy leather jackets with the fur collar pulled up to their ears and gave a long admiring whistle as they approached for a closer look. A British HS125 biz-jet from McAlpine Aviation, enroute to Luton, was parked nearby and the crew came over full of curiosity. They touched the old propellers and sauntered round it eulogising about the old plane wishing they could swap places. They *were* going nonstop in a nice warm cockpit though!

The B25 did have a rugged beauty; solid, proud and old-fashioned, as she stood with an almost pterodactyl stance amongst all the F18s, Vulcans and modern jets. Goose Bay in Northern Canada made a lasting impression on me;

a superbly equipped NATO base nestled in a remote, barren, icy landscape. I even saw my first two Eskimos.

After a short night in the local 'Lab Inn', we drove back to the airport on a dark freezing morning under millions of stars and a bright moon. We had to tackle the big problem of refuelling – the nozzle on the end of the hose was too big for our bomb-bay tank. We had a funnel, but not for 250 gallons – it would take hours! This was when I first appreciated the leg pulling that goes on between the Canadians and the 'Newfies'. The refueller was without doubt 'two bricks short of a full load', which didn't help. Vernon pressed him to find another nozzle for the fuel hose, and reminded him of our tight schedule.

"I don't know nuth'n bout other fuel nozzles," he stammered, blinking nervously through his bottle bottom glasses, looking like he'd burst out crying. He wore an old ripped anorak with furry collar, had droopy jowls and watering eyes. In the end Vernon commandeered his truck and sped off towards the fire station to find one himself. When he came back he let the Newfie have it with both barrels, in his good ol' southern drawl.

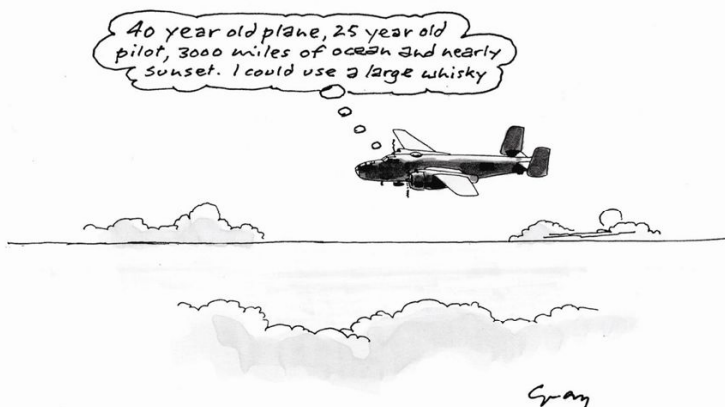
"There are three types of people in the world: those who *make* things happen, those who *let* things happen and those (and stared at him) who just look around and wonder *what the hell* happened!"

Vernon was quite a character and he made us laugh with his 'doggone's and 'goddam's as we sat on top of the wing to refuel whilst being bludgeoned by the cold arctic wind.

Hoping for the best, we climbed the ladder to the spartan yet familiar cabin – it was mercilessly cold. We closed and locked the belly door, buckled up into our seats and ran the check list – fired the left, then the right and taxied out. We sat at the hold for the extremely noisy engine run-ups (increasing the power and holding on the brakes, whilst props, mixtures and engine instruments are checked). The whole frame shook furiously, with the high RPM then rumbled calmly as we retarded the throttles to slow running.

The sky was just beginning to lighten in the east as our world spun. Tender tones of turquoise and gold whispered softly into an otherwise dark and silent sky. The trees, although hundreds of years old were only about five foot high due to the restricted hours of sunlight – they never made it to 'big tree' world but they gestured like elegant Balinese carvings against the pale light. The moon threw an eerie silvery light on the military hangars in the distance, and our engines looked mighty as they exhausted streams of roaring flame from the pipes. Checks completed, boost and props set, we took off on the southerly then banked steeply to the east, into the breaking dawn and took up a heading for Narsarssuaq, Greenland.

Our small petrol fired heater worked valiantly to keep us warm – good job since we had no coffee (voted against because of the seven hours with no loo). If we wanted to stretch our legs the only way was through the rectangular aperture amidships. Ray went back a few times to check things although on this leg he was busy hand pumping the fuel – we estimated a four gallon per hour loss through the leak.



Established in the cruise and backtracking Goose, we set up the Loran (Long distance navigation equipment). Fortunately, for chitchat and general morale, all the headsets had 'receive' and 'transmit' so we kept each other amused. Vernon with his marathon innings had many a yarn: crazy low level pylon racing in Reno Nevada, sea planes round the Florida Keys, and his student in a Lear simulator who screwed up and went completely out of control.

"He cried out HELP me Vernon help me!" Vernon's eyes watered, he shook his head and said. "I swear to God, that poor sonofabitch thought it was for real."

The first glimpse of Greenland was welcome after the icy monotony of the grey mean Atlantic, which had filled me with many a grim thought: being stranded on a life raft and discovering your emergency locator transmitter is unserviceable. How long could a human survive down there? – a thought which had me glancing with undying appreciation at our chunky engines – two powerful Wright Cyclone radials. I was looking through the cowling imagining all the hot metal in those reciprocating parts, the cylinders, valves and pistons turning and burning furiously. All that 'suck, squeeze, bang, blow' as we called it. I was willing them on, sharply aware that my life depended on their ceaseless rotation.

Greenland rises up to as much as 13,000 feet of ice. In the southern and western parts, there is some breathtaking scenery. Alan the captain shared some fascinating snippets with us, he spoke of the abundant fishing, the Eskimo lifestyle, the wandering polar bears, the wide Danish influence and all the wreckages of aircraft that had turned the wrong way and piled in at Narssarsuaq (a notoriously difficult approach). I also learnt much to my astonishment that venereal disease is rife there. I suppose because immune systems take time to combat new and imported enemies!

It was an apt moment to swing out of the observer's seat from the side of the cabin and enjoy the panorama from the perspex bubble in the roof. It was an awe inspiring landscape of ice: hostile, magnificent and other worldly. Savage winds raged around unstoppable icebergs. There were flat plains,

jagged mountains and massive swathes of freezing white and silver. Greenland gradually disappeared under the left wing and we took up a heading of 096 degrees for Reykjavik. We backtracked Prince Christiansund NDB as we started over the second stretch of the cheerless, leaden, ocean.

Having no HF radio we had limited comms. We did hear a passing Lear Jet above us remarking on his smooth ride. We on the other hand were battling along like an industrial ice collector at 8,000 feet. Our only anti-ice was alcohol on the propeller leading edge. I jumped a few times as chunks of ice the size of bricks flew off the props and smashed into the fuselage echoing ominously round the plane.

Our instruments were pretty basic: a wind up ADF, the needle of which just seemed to rotate constantly (antenna iced-up), two VORs which never gave the same readings as each other, a Loran for ever between chains and therefore pretty unreliable, and the little magnetic compass. But most of the instruments could have been museum exhibits at Hendon or Duxford! And *this* mission precluded the luxury of autopilot so we had to stay alert. Anyway thank God for magnetic north, which never shuts down. We had a big old attitude indicator which along with the ball and the airspeed we stared at for hours on end. Everything was from that bygone age – the quilted walls, the heavy five way seat harness and the huge metal rudder pedals, all still going strong and not without their own enduring charm.

We entertained ourselves with stories of other ferry pilots, their successes and mishaps, we talked of the crashed P38s and of the two famous B17s which had gone down during the war and lay intact beneath the ice. Some rescuers managed to drill a hole in the ice and one of the P38s was lifted out in a spectacularly complicated operation many years later. She flew again in the United States and was named ‘Glacier Girl’. How cool.

The route maps were fascinating – there’s high magnetic variation in those latitudes and instead of the relatively straight lines of variation I was accustomed to on my topographical map, these ones seemed to loop and curve all over the place.

Just before sunset, we picked up Reykjavik approach, copied the weather and tuned in the ILS. Descent checks, pumps, lights, fans, altimeter settings, decision heights, etc., were done and the power came back. The props wailed momentarily out of synch as we threaded in and out of low broken stratus. It is strange the first time you see clouds coming straight for you through the bright lights at breathtaking speed. It’s as though you’re riding, flat out through a never-ending cobweb.

On first glimpse of the town, I thought – ‘model village’. Little ‘monopoly’ houses, of similar proportion, with coloured roofs, nestled round the harbour. Hundreds of fishing boats bobbed around on the slate water. We heaved her round onto downwind, the hydraulics were noisy as the gear dropped reassuringly into ‘locked’. She felt heavy but solid as we thundered onto base-leg hungry for the runway after such a long journey. Everything looked fine, we were cleared to land and at last I smelt the rubber as the tyres screeched on to terra-firma. The new brakes were super sensitive so there was

a fair bit of lurching and sticking during the taxi to stand. We cut the mixtures and shut down – the silence was heavenly.

After seven hours of noisy rattling and vibration, the peace was like a neck massage. We snapped open the bottom hatch, climbed down and after a good stretch went to pay landing fees, refuel, and file the next flight plan. Vernon gave us some of his vintage wisdom. Tomorrow, we would be without him, so we listened carefully to his advice and tips about what to look out for on this particular B25 – any what we call ‘gottchas’. He wished us luck and disappeared off to catch his flight to Orlando. I was sorry to see him go – he had become a friend. He was a cheeky monkey, but my God, what an instinctive and deep-rooted understanding he had of old aeroplanes. He was the type to who would cup his ear and say “sounds like the non-return valve in the hydraulic line”.

The airport hotel was prodigiously expensive but had a welcome abundance of boiling hot sulphur smelling water, not surprising I suppose for an island which makes a feature of its hot mineral springs. The menu was an Atkins dieter’s dream, tons of protein in the form of fish, fish and more fish. Salad or green vegetables were rare in these parts. Leaves of rocket were highly prized. I retired to read pages of the flight manual; tomorrow I would be flying. I was very excited.

At dawn I was greeted by a fairytale scene from the window. Everything on the ramp, which I overlooked, had a delicate sprinkling of fine powdery snow that had turned to ice crystals. The B25 looked almost pretty, her hard lines softened by the delicate overlay of hoar frost. I donned the thermals and wool vests followed by ski suit, it was bitter out there.

After breakfast, while flight planning in the foyer, a chap having identified me as a crew member (ski suit, hat, and a North Atlantic air chart in front of me) approached and with a crack of both his knees squatted down in front of me. His cigarette pinched between his teeth he shook my hand squinting as smoke curled upwards.

“You are with de world war two plane hey?”

“Yes that’s right,” I removed the woolly glove to offer my hand ...“Anita.”

He introduced himself. He was a Norwegian photographer doing a glamour calendar. He had a team of models wrapped in the latest winter gear – full length sable furs, thigh high black boots, pink mink muffs and khaki cashmere camisoles.

“But you know, I hev a lot of the military gear as well, so the bomber would be really de perfek bekground. Can we do some shots using your plane?”

I consulted the other two crew members, it was perfectly acceptable. I mean, show me two pilots or engineers anywhere in the world who’d object to a group of stunning, ‘Scando-babes’ with fur coats and stockings climbing all over their vessel!

When we agreed, fingers were snapped, orders shouted and a virtual mobile studio appeared. Gorgeous models (and of course being Scandinavian, some were men, who too, can be sex objects!) started to assume remarkable

positions on the wings, holding poses, and smiling for the cameras despite the penetrating cold. The military clothes bore little resemblance to anything I had seen in Iraq, much more appealing I must confess, skintight combat vest matching nix with full length Russian style heavy coat open just enough to reveal gun in garter and so on. We had sexy peaked khaki caps, high heeled combat boots and furry camouflage hand warmers and ... lots of cleavage.

It all went swimmingly! They were grateful and thanked us, then models quickly shot off – to get warm! It had certainly been a more entertaining send-off than we expected.

We were three now – we climbed aboard and fired up the engines. I was in the right-hand seat, familiarising myself with all the controls and instruments around me. I would be doing gear, flaps and radios after takeoff, then sharing the flying thereafter. We taxied out under a grey sky, received clearance, lined up and opened the throttles. All six levers fully forward! – we released the brakes at full power and surged forward. The airspeed rose, the temperatures and pressures were all green, then we pulled her up into the freezing morning air. We disappeared immediately into thick low stratus.

“Positive climb gear up,” called Alan and I reached for the undercarriage lever and raised it. We retracted the flap and established a suitable heading for this our last leg. Next stop – Stansted. But we would be in cloud until the north coast of Scotland!

In the cruise, we monitored instruments and fuel carefully. Not much to see on the North Atlantic chart just waypoints and coordinates. For the poor relations, like ourselves who were armed with little more than a compass and altimeter, we could no more than hold headings and keep time. What a bubbling pleasure it was to hear the first Scottish voice crackling through on the VHF. He gradually became more readable and his delight was evident when we reconfirmed our type. He made kindly enquiries about our flight and bestowed special attention on us, handing us over to Scottish radar, passing on details such as ‘negative transponder’ and wished us a safe onward.

All the controllers from then on were just oases of support and cheer, clearly delighted by the idea of a wartime American bomber thundering into their airspace – made a change from vectoring the same 757 BA shuttles from Heathrow.

I kept glancing out, at last the ground was visual! Gosh it was good to see it after so long. The fields and hedgerows of Blighty had never looked so good. We navigated by map and VOR the rest of the way to Stansted. There, we were vectored round for the ILS onto runway 23, had a minor tussle with a crosswind and landed her firmly down the centre-line. We had been grasping that control column for seven hours holding ‘straight and level’ and by God it was good to release it. We cleared customs and then took off immediately for North Weald, just up the road, ten minutes chock-to-chock. It felt right to be taking her there since it was, after all a battle of Britain airfield. We indulged the waiting crowd with a few low passes before dropping the wheels and landing for the last time. Ray had, throughout managed heroically to control the fuel leak.

A handful of reporters from local papers and aviation magazines clicked enthusiastically and gathered information. Mike Woodley, the owner, greeted us with a bottle of champagne, which we savoured after all the appropriate toasts. As everyone buzzed around and chatted, I stood near her N1042B feeling an uncanny sense of attachment. I could feel the heat radiating from the body and hear the deep cracking and popping as the engines cooled and metal contracted. People were exploring every nook and cranny taking pictures, asking questions. She had all the patience of a pedigree dog, a 'Crufts' winner which stands uncomplainingly while people lift up the tail or the chin for a good inspection and she stands proud and solid.

Ray and I unloaded the bags and the raft from the rear hatch. We put the chocks under and finally left the apron – the daylight was fading. I looked around in the dwindling light thinking about the cameraman who would occupy the rear position soon strapped in and actually hanging out of the back, his lens protruding clear of the airframe. How brutally different it must have been for the rear gunner, desperately defending his ship from unrelenting attack. Those brave boys, they knew the icy hand of fear on their stomachs. Would they ever make it back home?

I looked at her with billowing appreciation in my heart, the same appreciation a jockey would feel for his horse on winning the Gold Cup. I thought of those who had achieved memorable victories with the B25 and other bombers in the war and tried to imagine what had gone through the hearts and minds of the crew. My escapade was a mere dalliance in comparison but nonetheless I knew I had done something I would always remember.



Fairoaks team: (Left-Right) Simon, William, Lisa, John B, me, John H.



Chris Orlebar – Concorde Pilot.



Gary Numan's Harvard, painted like Japanese zero.



Fairoaks flight center, 1980s – bar night.



The flying club gang, birthday party!



The Pitts special aerobat. Sums it up!



Robbie: friend, and Lance Pilot!



Tornado crew, Prestwick – couldn't talk them into a jolly.



Mad Robs, Lamplough, Playing piano in his flying helmet with British passport!



Over Greenland on ferry flight of B25



Interior of B25 – no frills here!



Reykjavik, ferry flight: me, Ray, Alan and Vernon.



Mike, friend & instructor – glad to be alive!

CHAPTER TWO: Game, Jet and Match! First Job

Flying the Small Jets

With the adventure of the ferry flight behind me I resumed the job search. After a few more rejections I finally landed a couple of offers. One was from a company at Gatwick flying Shorts 360s for a small airline. *If* I had chosen that it would have put me in mainstream airlines eventually where I would have plodded my way up and had my pension. The job I chose was flying business jets at Heathrow. This probably in the long run is not as lucrative, secure or structured but it was the beginning of a kaleidoscope of different adventures and experiences. It was like opening a secret door at the back of the wardrobe, – I discovered a whole new world. And as Edith Piaf sang, *Je ne regrette rien!*

I trained on the jet itself – a small Cessna Citation 500 with the chief pilot a kind man called Brian who took me ‘under his wing’ and I was soon off flying the line as we call it. Here are some of the early trips I did as a novice in this brand new world of VIP flying.

Algeria

The aircraft was a Citation and the destination – Algiers. The passengers (all executives from Shell) were picked up from Rotterdam. It was ‘early days’ for me and my first encounter with non first world air traffic control.

Bearing in mind, this was pre GPS and electronic flight management systems, so, it was somewhat tricky, since DMEs were scant (Distance measuring equipment). If another aircraft reported in, the controller’s voice became markedly louder and more panicky. They had no radar in those days, consequently you would hear rather a lot of “*Tango Alpha wot is yorr pozeeshun?!*” I soon learnt that anything south of Milan and Nice was dodgy and once south of Brindisi ... well anything could happen.

The weather was appalling! Thick harmattan; visibility down to a couple of kilometres or so. By the time we spotted the airfield we were nearly overhead, only to lose sight of it again once we went downwind. All this whilst the exasperated Algerian in the tower was firing out, machine gun style, the latest met report which was fairly incomprehensible and included upper winds and dew points and other stuff which was of absolutely no use at this stage of the game!

I smiled and remembered Hugh my met teacher at Oxford telling me about his landing in a BOAC 707 in Calcutta when the controller had said, (assume strong Indian accent) “The vind between zero and zero nine zero is nothing, and the wisibility is calm”

I turned the volume knob down and just listened out for ‘clear to land’. After an untidy and frankly nerve racking approach and landing (I *was* very inexperienced! and the viz was dreadful), we said goodbye to the passengers and arranged to meet them later at the hotel.

Resplendent though it was, with lofty arches, mosaic floors, pillars and palm trees, the hotel had no rooms for us. There had been a cock-up with the booking but our passengers very kindly offered to double up so I could have a room and Brian my captain would share with the senior executive. I must confess I had never seen two greater opposites. The executive was a mountain of a man, a paunchy grand duke of industry, a loud, authoritative leader – coloured shirt with white collar which he must have had specially made because his neck was the diameter of a small oak! I just couldn’t control the laughter at breakfast the next morning when Brian, a slim, quiet, conservative, Rover driving man with 2.4 kids, a dog and a house in leafy Surrey, admitted that he hated sharing rooms:

“But I couldn’t believe it – he knelt down at the end of the bed, eyes shut, hands pressed together and said his prayers in his huge pyjamas like Christopher Robin. Then said ‘N’night’ and snored all bloody night!”

It was an amusing image.

Shell’s company policy was to have the crew in easy reach, especially in third world countries. So, we were invited, very kindly to have dinner with them. We went tearing round the back streets in a Peugeot taxi, getting bursts of loud, heady Arabic music ‘doppler’ style as it came and went through the open window. It was crowded and dusty, a bustling city of high rises and shanty town. Big old Mercedes and scooters cruised along side by side, through the streets full of people, markets, beggars, mangy dogs, exhausted donkeys and scrawny street urchins. We arrived at an authentic couscous restaurant and sampled the delights of the local wine and cuisine. We sat on comfy burgundy cushions, all velvety and tasselled. The lampshades were mirrored and colourful, the smells exotic. The men were a cosmopolitan group, having lived in all corners from Bangalore to Kinshasa. Stories flowed of embassy parties, missing flights, being stranded in the bush, canoes capsizing, lassa fever, robberies, military coups, power cuts, the whole nine yards. Tensions were rinsed away by the ever returning wine bottle and by the voluptuous belly dancer whose rippling bejewelled abdomen brought smiles to their faces.

The next morning the party was decamping to Oran further into the desert, where they would visit gas fields.

Brian and I arrived about six a.m. and got cracking with the usual preparation, flight plan, catering, hot water (which on this occasion Brian thought it a good idea for *me* to go and find). It shouldn’t be a problem I thought travelling hopefully, there was always a catering department or an obliging staff member in some cafeteria. I eventually found a cafeteria/bar which was three men deep from one end to the other. Algerian men in long tunics, some in fez hats, were gathered round drinking coffee yabbering loudly with one another, smoking strong cigarettes. It was a tad strange standing in a bar full of Arabic men, being the only female with fair hair, a funny uniform

on clutching a small rectangular steel urn. They were all dead friendly and gestured for me to come forward as I held up my urn and said, "*l'eau chaud s'il vous plait.*" A few of them started shouting loudly at the barmen as if he were a complete idiot.

"*Yalla yalla.... mettez l'eau chaud, dedans, dedans elle veut de l'eau chaud!*"

There followed lots of pointing, and grabbing while orders were being barked out.

"Vous etes d'où, vous etes d'où?" asked one man with a huge smile, which pushed his wrinkles right back to his ears and showed his worn brown teeth.

"*Okay! Okay no problem, hut wuter coming coming. You take coffee, have cigarette... voila.*"

Oh well, one day you're having a bacon bap and a mug of steaming tea in a lay-by off the M40 with some chirpy lorry drivers, next you are having strong coffee and a croissant with a gathering of Algerians in an airport café in North Africa. Some, didn't really know what to make of me and glanced strangely, some detected my awkwardness and were friendly. I had a Woody Allen moment, when he imagines himself as different characters in embarrassing situations. I rather liked the one when he turned into the orthodox Jew with ringlets, skullcap and black gown round the dinner table of anti-Semitic New England Socialites.

This airport was disorganised to put it mildly. I met up with Brian but we were unable to get any met or paperwork. However, they did produce the *bill* promptly – funny that isn't it? We abandoned any catering hopes or transport back to the aircraft, so by the time we walked back over, the passengers were on board. (I am sure the airport has improved leaps and bounds since 1989!)

I spoke on the VHF to the guy in the tower, whose strong accent I was getting familiar with –

"*Tango Alpha you are clird taxi to holled of runway ...*"

The berry red morning sun cast a thick rich glow over the sand as we got airborne for Oran, which seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately we were able to do a visual approach (navigation aids were sparse in these necks!).

The Shell passengers left promptly in their minibus for their day's visit to the oil and gas fields which would have their cash tills chinking away happily. We stayed there for a full and should I say *different* sort of day. Three Algerian policemen in 'dress to impress' uniforms, screeched up with lots of 'hello hello welcom welcom' and demanded our passports. Brian, who was a pretty 'reined in' type of guy and enjoyed the telegraph crossword, suggested that I go with them whilst he stay and do the paper work, it would be good experience for me. Off we went to the terminal (if it could be so dignified). It was a bit shabby and fairly deserted and like so many places in Africa, over staffed with police and military who all sport a dazzling array of epaulets, badges and curtain tassels on their shoulders, but who don't actually do much, and who wear of course, the obligatory mirrored sunglasses. Very eighties – but it *was* the eighties!

Next thing, I am filling in forms in triplicate while they all hustled for position nearest me shouting and gesturing, trying to impress and prove that *their* job is the most critical. Our arrival must have been a welcome break from the hum drum of card playing.

“Pliz pliz,” they said, arms pointing to a counter where I would “tek coffee”. I saw a grubby glass, come crashing down in front of me full of **very** black coffee. The head honcho who had arrogated unto himself the role of ‘absolute senior official in charge’, then spooned three sugars from a bowl that was home to a small colony of ants. The spoon was standing up in the glass, just to buy some time I asked: “*Is there a toilet please.*”

That launched them into another jostling and frenzied shouting match as they all tried to be the one to help me. I should have been flattered really. They told me not to use this near one because “iz very very durty” – I should go upstairs. Well as I entered the one upstairs, I was wondering what on earth the downstairs one must have smelled like. There were two cubicles, with squat basins and broken doors, crazed flies buzzed around and the whole stinky place. I returned to do battle with the coffee. Be nice ... I thought ... *they* have the passports after all.

“You English yes? English?”

“Yes I’m English.”

“You like maybe marry Algerian boy ...? Why you no marry Algerian boy?”

They were laughing like a bunch of kids. One, who was examining the contents of his one long nail after a foray up his left nostril, suddenly asked me, having moved on from the disappointment of the marriage proposal if I liked Michael Jackson. He shouted to his mate who disappeared into the office and returned waving a cassette above his head. They clicked it into the player on the counter and with a press of the button I was treated to North Africa’s rising star: Michael Jackson’s Thriller à la Algerian security guard. I could just hear it:

“Tonight Jeremy, I am going to be ... inshalla ... Michael Jackson!”

God I must **really** bring out the child in a man because I stood there watching an apparently very serious, airport official doing the famous ‘monster walk’ from ‘Thriller’ with his hands in front of him like claws swinging from left to right, and the famous slide walk, followed by triple spin, whilst all his Gadaffi look-alike mates stood round in a circle pinching their ciggies in their teeth clapping with undiluted joy and happiness! It was actually wonderfully comical and I laughed out loud with them.

I foolishly thought seven hours would be enough notice for catering. It never came, but they still wanted eight hundred US dollars for it, in advance because it *would* come. We had no cash dollars and they wouldn’t have credit card! But the airport bank was closed and only downtown would “shange dollar” it was sounding to me like a ‘baksheesh in back pocket’ sort of day. I was growing a bit impatient and spoke to the uniformed supervisor who had his own office with a faded picture of the president above his black swivel chair. He was obviously a little embarrassed at the ostensible cock ups of his entire staff, so his token gesture was to pick up the phone, pinch it between his

ear and his shoulder so he could wave his arms angrily. His cigarette smoke made him squint – I think he was *trying* to look like Clint Eastwood, he was certainly after a ‘fistful of dollars’ anyway. He slammed the phone down, nodded reassuringly, his palms facing towards me in a gesture of appeasement saying, “Cat’ring okay, okay no problem okay, cat’ring coming.”

He reluctantly agreed to accept our Euro cheques. That put a damper on the evening theft of funds.

Seven of them crowded round a huge desk calculator jabbing buttons trying to work out the exchange rate for our bill. We went back to the plane empty-handed having been royally ripped off and still no catering. Having done a thorough walk round of the aircraft checking the front and rear holds and all their associated gauges, we prepared for departure.

With battery on and beacon rotating and passengers seated, we started up the engine, just then a filthy old truck pulled up belching out diesel smoke. A skinny young lad jumped out and handed over eight airline meals and three bags of brown ice. There were four or five other lads hanging off the top of the truck all grinning, they’d just come along for the ride.

I unfastened my belt, opened the door to the screeching engine noise and quickly took the meals in plastic boxes.

“Here I’ll take those,” said one of the passengers, so I could get back in my seat and proceed with the taxi check list. \$400 for that lot – it was – for those days, very expensive. Still, as Brain pointed out, not likely to make a dent in the profits of an oil company! Being seasoned travellers they knew not to use the ice in drinks so they stabbed a load of beers into it, and drank those en route home!

We checked our brakes and instruments on the way to the hold, set the flaps for take-off, checked the speed brakes, dialled in the transponder code and lined up.

Up came the two thrust levers

“N 1 set” we accelerated smartly down the centre line.

“Eighty knots.”

“Check.”

“V one rotate.”

“Positive rate of climb ...

“Gear Up.”

We climbed out of the sandy haze gaining altitude.

“...flaps zero ... after take-off check list.”

Once again we tucked everything in like a bird for high speed flight and set off north across the Mediterranean towards the south of France then up towards Holland.

The Elderly Millionairess

One of our loyal and regular customers (and trust me, these are the sort of regulars you dream of) was the charming, skinny, bejewelled, and scented Mrs

‘W’. Hubby had left a considerable pile and she flitted around Europe on a private jet, doing lunch in Paris and weekends in Venice, whilst her money burgeoned beautifully like a tropical cloud, into piles ‘un-spendable’ by one human. She was elderly and sophisticated, always sported dark “Jackie-O” shades, and 60s style tweed suits by Chanel or some designer (who was always a friend). Her brown hair turned up at the bottom, like a child’s drawing of a girl. She was well heeled and gracious, and glided around with her little short strapped handbag over her elbow which showed off her tiny hand mottled with liver spots and barnacled with diamonds. She had substantial connections with the Metropolitan museum of Art in New York.

She once chartered us to fly down to Rome, pick her up and take her to Milan. So she paid the hefty sum for an empty leg out and back to London at nearly £2000 per hour, just to do a twenty minute flight. Still, what the heck, she felt comfortable with us. We were those familiar smiling faces who always dealt uncomplainingly with the small platoon of Louis Vuitton cases, from trunk down to hat box.

On this occasion, I was the co-pilot on a flight to Venice where she was waiting to return to London. It was a stifflingly hot summer day. She had told us she’d be with *one* other passenger, so Don the Captain went over to the terminal and I waited on the scorched tarmac with the aircraft to supervise the refuelling. I calculated the weights quickly of 2 passengers and bags and filled up the wings with fuel putting us at maximum take-off weight. A few moments later a baggage trolley trundled passed me laden down with very superior looking bags. Must be headed for the Gulfstream next door I thought to myself (a decidedly bigger biz jet). But then the tousle haired drop dead gorgeous Italian baggage handler pulled up at our little jet.

“Errr, tango alpha for London,” came the sexy Italian voice.

“No it can’t be!” I protested, knowing with a sinking heart it was probably true. He was grinning and whistling and looking me up and down with that practised expertise known so well to Italian men, as he unloaded the bags. Just then my flustered captain came striding across the apron towards me, shaking his head and announced that she had offered to give another friend a lift back to London, he had to catch Concorde and was running late. You can’t exactly say no, can you? Still when you are an elegant, classy millionairess with designer friends and a private jet at your disposal, a bit of capriciousness is acceptable ... n’est ce pas?

“But we’ve got no room Don, we’ll be overweight,” I protested showing that ‘just out of flight school’ naivety. He threw me a look – it said ... Oh do shut up.

What followed was like a comedy sketch from Laurel and Hardy as the two of us struggled to load far too many bags in the space available. The Citation only has modest baggage space and once we’d filled the back and the nose hold, we were still staring at five more pieces. Scratching our heads, wiping away the sweat, it was like trying to move house with one car!

The suave l’tie baggage handler whistled a love song as he assisted us totally unruffled, he’d seen it all before.

“Eh relax huh? Is cool, is cool,” he smiled, shrugging his shoulders when he saw me sweating. For me it was a crisis for Don the Captain just another day at work. With both holds full we put the rest in the cabin, bags piled up against the walls and door in the front and filled the small toilet area at the back. There would be no weeing and no jumping out of an emergency exit on *this* flight. Hot and heavy are the adversaries of aircraft performance – engines love cold air the density produces more thrust and obviously the lighter the aircraft is the better. So there we were on a stinking hot day and boy *we were heavy!*

Don held the aircraft on the brakes for a long time until take-off power was completely up on the N1 (power) gauges. Even when we released the brakes, acceleration was pretty sluggish, when he did rotate (somewhat late!) he pulled the nose off into an extremely shallow angle of climb, fortunately at Venice there are no obstacles and no high ground. The rate of climb could not be described as spectacular but off we went. We enjoyed the views of Venice and the coastline then shortly afterwards the Alps which never fail to bowl you over with their rugged beauty. I felt a lot more relaxed now we had those two chestnuts *speed and altitude* on our side.

Suddenly I smelt a gorgeous expensive perfume, that’s not Don I thought, then Ah Mrs ‘W’ popped her elegantly coiffed head into the cockpit and in that cool New York accent, said, “Could you possibly radio ahead to Heathrow and ask British Air to hold the Concorde for my friend – he doesn’t wanna miss it.”

God, I thought it must be lovely to live the fairy tale. Don asked for his ticket and said he would try. A bony, very feminine hand resplendent with gems appeared between our shoulders holding a flute of Dom Perignon and a ticket pinched between two perfectly manicured long red nails. I took it from her. The name on the ticket was Mr O de La Renta. I looked up a frequency for the HF (High Frequency) radio which ranges from 3 to 30 megahertz and varies with the time of day and transmitted to Portishead.

“You do it – good practice,” said Don.

So, having learnt in flight school about those waves bouncing off the ionosphere and their skip distance, etc., I did my first transmission.

“Portishead radio Portishead radio this is Golf Juliet Echo Tango Alpha on 6636 position Switzerland, over.”

I made contact and the message was copied, over and out, Concorde would be held for the perfume man. I wonder if they would have held the Concorde for Percy Sugbeth from Barnsley? I remember an interview with a famous pop star – she said when she had *nothing* she was offered *nothing*, but when she became a millionairess, companies could not load her up with enough freebies; have a Porsche, have a Jag, a Patek Phillipe watch perhaps ...

We landed on the long, beautifully lit and unfailingly welcoming runway at Heathrow and then I tuned into ground on 121.9 VHF. They gave us a lengthy taxi instruction directing us to the Concorde. We parked and then rummaged to find his bag amongst what looked like the Harrods suitcase department. He shook our hands disembarked and shot off up the steps of the supersonic. From her seat in the back, looking like Great Garbo, she raised her tiny hand to the window to wave him off. Back at our executive terminal

'Fields' as it was then called, Mrs 'W' climbed carefully down the steps whilst lots of deferential chaps milled around unloading bags and putting them in her limousine. Crisp fifty pound notes were peeled off her wodge and handed out to these grateful chaps. The captain noticed my fascination.

"I know what you're thinking Anita, we are apparently *too* professional for a tip."

"Oh are we?"

"Hey, but look," said Don, "there is one advantage of these trips." He grinned as he picked up the bottle. "She always leaves some Dom Perignon."

I will never forget my first sip that day – it was truly manna from heaven, ice cold and smooth as silk!

My next encounter with Mrs 'W' – I picked her up from Florence. Having just filled both fuel tanks, the airport staff informed me that they only accepted cash or American Express, strange since that is normally the least favoured card. So despite our arsenal of Euro cheques, a Visa and Diners card, they were intransigent. I soon learnt Italian airports are not the best places to get things done. I called our operations back at Heathrow but what could they do? A 'keen to get going' and mildly agitated Mrs W. saw me in the terminal trying to sort it out and approached me lifting her hallmark dark glasses up on to her head.

"What's the problem?"

"They won't accept the cards we have, they want cash or Amex."

"Oh my dear," she said, "if it's just a matter of *money* let's just pay them and go."

She opened her beautiful little designer bag and out came the concertinaed card holder. She let it unfold and it opened like a fiscal accordion. I had not seen that much platinum since I was down a mine outside Pretoria. I was mortified at having to ask a passenger to pay for the fuel it was hugely embarrassing, but thank God she could, it was the only way we were going to get out of there. Still, I suppose when you are buying Titians and Rubens you exact a fair old limit on the card! She removed the platinum Am Ex and I awkwardly stammered out some feeble apology saying our company would be getting in touch to compensate, and meanwhile perhaps some extra peanuts? Even worse was having to go back into the cabin once she was seated with the fuel man's clipboard and the receipt for her to sign. Oh Lord! However, she was gracious enough to know these things happen and she continued to book thousands of pounds worth of flying with us every month. She was a gem.

I regularly flew her to Paris for lunch. It was a luxurious shimmering world she lived in. It was as elegant as a ribboned Louis Quatorze shoe, or an Antique perfume bottle with tasselled atomiser. Flying her was like being dabbed with a big scented powder puff.

Krakov 1989

Pre perestroika Poland – I’m glad we had one trip there before the big ‘changes’ came. Whilst working for Heathrow based IDS (which stood for the names of the two founding brothers) I flew the England football manager and his entourage to Krakow, the team went in a Caledonian 757. In Poland the winter had taken a firm grip – it was drabber than a grey dishcloth drying on a line in a concrete yard. We landed in freezing mist. Down both sides of the taxiway were huge Antanov 2s – big old lumbering biplanes from the Polish airforce.

It was bitterly cold and we sat in our aircraft noticing that some poor young lad in uniform and long trench coat had been dispatched to stand guard by our plane all day. He just stood motionless with his gun by his side. I offered him some food and coffee but he shook his head staring straight ahead.

We waited over an hour for the fuel bowser to show up even though I saw no other planes. When I went to pay the handling (what handling? – we had unloaded the bags ourselves and our passengers had no transport), it was a staggering \$600 and they didn’t want zloty’s they wanted Uncle Sam’s USD. What on earth we were paying for eluded me. Even in superbly equipped modern airports I hadn’t been charged like that, maybe they heard it was a football team. I peeled off the dollars to pay him and turned on my heel to leave. Just as I got to the door I heard, “Kssss Kssss.”

I turned round and he looked right then left, pulled a little tin from his pocket and said, “Caviar, Russian good good!”

“How much?” I asked

“Twenty-five dollar,” came the optimistic reply.

One of my catch phrases at the time because of an American boyfriend who always said it, was ‘I’ll give you a dollar’ (he *had* been raised on Clarke airforce base in Philippines) so it just came to me.

“I’ll give you a dollar.”

Well blow me down he accepted, it was admittedly a small tin but I took five off him and he seemed pretty pleased. That was good I’d already done a deal before leaving the airport, I felt quite entrepreneurial – I was looking forward to downtown.

After the painfully slow refuelling, we locked the plane and went through a mini ‘pantomime’. A man in a decorated uniform, with a huge square head like a block ushered us through. He had one eye looking left and the other looking right, so his stare was a sort of ‘ten to two’ instead of a twelve o clock experience. He sat at the first desk and was ‘Passport control’ so we went through all that, he looked purposefully at the picture then stamped the page. Then he disappeared behind the curtain at the back of the cubical and we heard a “please, please...” and he reappeared in the *next* cubicle where he would now be customs. So we slid five feet to the left and did ‘customs’ and opened our bags. He still had the same granite expression. His humourless austerity seemed unnerving at first but he pursued his craft with the blind unquestioning commitment to the system so typical of Eastern block officials then. Then he

disappeared again – by now we had the hang of it and shuffled down obligingly where the same man was now a ‘Policeman’.

The next cultural experience was the airport café where we waited for the taxi. The menu on a blackboard was in Polish with broken English descriptions. I chose a stew, hoping it would be warming. It arrived in one of those battered rather flimsy tin dishes full of dents. I stared at it, pinned to the spot. The waitress tried to convince me with a few gestures, tummy rubbing and kissing her fingertips that it was good, but my untrained palate could coax no more out of it than the nauseating aroma of fat. This was meat of very dubious provenance. Big chunks of pig skin (*not* the yummy crackling type) floated in a grey green greasy gravy. I might have tackled it but the big bristly hairs protruding from the skin finally defeated me and I settled for a coffee. We asked for the bill, she shrugged her shoulders, this means ‘Whatever you think’. We gave her ten dollars. She smiled broadly and scuttled into the back undoing her pinny, I think she was retiring.

It was no surprise that the taxi drivers all jostled for our business outside. Acquiring dollars was obviously the ‘thing’ back then. The driver dropped us in the main square – he would wait. The architecture was grand and imposing, the cobbled square quite beautiful and on a generous day I suppose could be likened to the Grand Place in Brussels.

Groups of teenagers were huddled round portable stereos smoking and listening to Wham and other ‘bootleg’ tapes. One guy clearly showed his clout as a trader because *he* had Levi 501s – very sought after in those days. He was Poland’s James Dean. Whenever an ‘official’ neared the square they would hide everything just like a scene from ‘Only Fools and Horses’. These were little bubbles of revolution rising, a great change was sweeping over Eastern Europe fuelled by the indomitable human spirit and its desire for freedom as they discarded the manacles of Communism. I suppose these were the first bubbles of Perestroika. Young people will always be curious about other people’s clothes, music and culture. We saw many things on the black market that day. Twelve years later when I returned on the 727, the place was a thriving trendy café society with everything on sale. Horse drawn carriages clip clopped round the squares. The beautiful municipal park was full of people painting and dancing, the same park where a beautiful and most unusual monument to Chopin stands in a vast shallow pond.

In most European cities a three hour cab ride round the city would be well over \$100 but when *he* dropped us back at the airport, he, just like the waitress had done, shrugged his shoulders, hoping we would decide on the price. He sheepishly suggested twenty dollars so when I gave him twenty-five he was well pleased and thanked us as least five times.

I haven’t kept many mementoes from foreign airports, but the weather report I received that evening in Krakow, I have kept and it is in my log book to this day. Brian my Captain went to pay bills and file the flight plan and I went for the weather. The meteorology office was a portakabin. Inside sat a dumpy lady in a thick green woolly suit and little ankle wellies. She had a tea cosy hat and sat in front of a very old typewriter. Her cat was curled up on top of the electric fire. She spoke no English and I no Polish but she knew I

wanted the met otherwise I wouldn't be there. She smiled, nodded grabbed her torch and trotted outside. I peered round the open door out of curiosity. She shone the torch up at the sky then trotted back in purposefully muttering "two thousand" and tipped her outspread hand left and right which meant 'more or less'. I think that was the cloud base done. Then she sat down at her desk with her collection of coloured pencils and started to draw on a piece of paper. It wasn't like the met room in Heathrow that was for sure. Ten minutes later she put her last crayon down, pushed her chair back, stood up and then this little industrious lady turned to me proudly and handed me my met report. I was fascinated; I'd never seen anything like it. When I showed Brian he smiled and said, "Good heavens these were almost obsolete during the war!"

I looked closely, it was a colourful picture; there were blue and red arrows, wind signs, heights in meters, isotherms, isobars and other jolly little pictures of clouds and raindrops. I have treasured it to this day. It is pressed inside my logbook. It belonged to the age of carousels, dolls houses and jigsaws. In the annals of aviation it belonged to the world of old compasses, dead reckoning and Mercator charts!

We walked out to our parked Citation. The long suffering soldier was **still** standing there; he must have been frozen to the bone. He didn't smile back at me. I felt for him, so I offered him my crew meal. He looked nervously at me then at the meal – prawns, roast beef, chocolate cake. He finally let his gun drop and smiled.

"For you, eat it, you have it," I said.

He put it under his coat and walked off.

The footballers returned, the England manager and immediate entourage came with us, the players went on the Caledonian 757. It felt good to press the start button and hear the reassuring whirring of the engine spooling up. With the after start check list complete we taxied past the huge airforce biplanes and took the runway. We lifted into a gloomy night. Before too long we were talking to Berlin – a nice feeling! It was always an education flying to Eastern block countries back then, it made you appreciate the efficiency of our systems and *their* potential once freed from the strangulating bureaucracy. I thought about the Poles during the flight home, how many unsung heroes they must have and particularly about the fact that it was the Poles who were so instrumental in cracking the enigma code during the Second World War. Little did I know during that flight that within twenty years half of them would be living in England!

Farranfore – Ireland

Have you ever been to Ireland? If not ... Go! It's an extraordinary place, there's nowhere *quite* like it. This was my first ever sampling of the emerald isle, as a new and inexperienced pilot.

Farranfore, (or Kerry airport as it is called now) was a sleepy little place back in 1988, now it is a thriving commercial airport. I'm glad I experienced it

when it was in the 'small and unknown' category. It was a quintessential little country airfield. We flew from Heathrow (yes small jets could afford to be based there in those days!) across the sea to Southern Ireland. We broke out of cloud at about 900 feet.

"There it is" said Dave and positioned nicely for a downwind. The landscape was voluptuous and green! We did a visual approach over pretty little farms and cottages. The Irish have a knack of establishing a drinking venue pretty much anywhere and an airport is no exception. All the 'wee ones' were pushed up against the boundary fence, best coats on, noses and fingers poking through the mesh dutifully obeying their parents' excited instructions to "look at the jet plane". Our passenger, a wealthy American married to an Irish lady thanked us and disappeared off to his country castle, and we were bombarded with "Will you com 'n have a drink"? After shutting down, and filling in the tech log, we walked over to the bar. My first time in Ireland, I realised at that moment that drinking and Guinness were truly institutions of gargantuan importance. Through the thick blue stinking smoke layer which I bet never left this room, I could make out a regiment of Guinness levers behind the bar. The place reeked of sour beer soaked into worn carpets. I must have been offered four pints, someone would spot that my glass was half-empty and point to it and say "Will y'have another point" and without waiting for an answer it appeared. There was no sign of this being a flying school, then I just caught sight of a tatty hand written sign stuck to the wall with sellotape "Trial lesson - 25 punts".

My Captain, Dave, had been there before so he had a hero's welcome, he was reminiscing with a couple of the locals about the air show they tried to put on during his previous visit.

"Cor blimey," started Dave. "I remember hearing this loud Irish voice booming from a megaphone. 'Will de owner of de brown K registered Morris please com to de car park cos it's on fire'.

There were minor explosions of laughter (some of which turned into gut churning attacks of whooping cough) from the one guy.

"Dat's royt dat's royt, jeeesus what a crack dat was; did we manage to get any aircraft up dat day at all?"

"Yea don't you remember," continued Dave, "they were dropping those parachutists out of that aircraft and one of them nearly landed on the prop of the DC3 which was taxiing."

"Yes it was a little disorganised," chuckled one of the men, on his stool, cigarette pinched in right hand as he leant heavily with elbow on right knee like Rodin's thinker. There was not an unbroken capillary left in his face. He told us proudly how half the planes broke down, the radio packed up and everybody got roaring drunk.

During the course of this liquid lunch when I became an expert on the Liffey waters, I met some of the locals including a tiny but feral looking woman named Bernadette. Her front tooth was missing and she chained smoked with a determination I had never seen, great horns of smoke shooting from each nostril as she simultaneously took the next drag with such power, the ciggie nearly caved in. "Focken bastard, focken bastard" was all she

muttered as she chewed her nails, and rocked back and forth. The local ‘father’ filled me in with the details, apparently her live in boyfriend had escaped but the source or her fury was that he had done so on *her* horse!

Everyone insisted we return that evening for a tippie. The local landlady, who was accommodating us, drove us to our B&B. Her four children were waiting, two boys and two girls. The eldest boy, about eight had grazed knees, flaming red hair, blue eyes and a cheeky grin. His brother, about six, had thick dark hair, dark eyes and rosy cheeks covered in freckles. The two girls were beautiful; the eldest had black straight pageboy hair and a round face bubbling with mischief. Her little sister, blonde with a cotton dress all smudged with muddy hand prints wiped her nose on the back of her hand and blew her fringe out of her eyes. They all shook my hand beaming from ear to ear, I felt like Maria from Sound of Music meeting the Von Trapps. Their mother scuttled around telling them to straighten their clothes.

“This is a very important lady,” she announced. “She is very very clever, she is a PILOT!!” She knelt down to be at eye contact with them in case they swooned at this information.

“You must treat her very well and not get on her nerves OKAAAAY?”

“Okaaaaay mam.”

I remember many things about that weekend including the fact that they never got my name, I was just “guest”. The kids were jubilant because after dropping my bags in the room, I came out to play. They showed me their potato patch and all their vegetables looking up at me to confirm that this strange person who arrived in strange clothes, understood what all this was. They were all bare foot, tearing around leaping and screaming “Guest, look at this”, “Guest, watch me jump”, “Guest push me on the swing”, “Is it relly true dat yous came in a jet?” asked the lad as he spun round laughing, arms out, imitating an aeroplane. We played with cricket bats and Frisbees and inspected tadpoles in the yoghurt pot, and I gave them all piggy backs. Seamus was determined to find the spare Frisbee so he climbed into what looked like a gypsy wagon, it had two central wheels and a door at one end – it was a kind of store shed. He called me for help because he could not find it, so I crawled in to the far end and our combined weights made it tip up, and we tumbled to the back. With that, their mother came running out of the kitchen in apron and slippers smacking the air with her tea towel.

“I’m only after telling you to leave the guest alone, now com’on she’s a pilot and she’s had enough or you, pilots don’t be doin with all this nonsense.” I assured her everything was fine.

“Wait til I tell your father,” and with that four pairs of feet shuffled in for tea.

We all tucked in to a huge plate of fish paste sandwiches. The girl piped up.

“Mommy can I play with guest after tea?”

“No, guest has had enough of yous now.”

With a flash of her eyes she reminded them to offer me more food. God I loved this family. She was up and down filling my teacup chattering away. She asked many questions about my job and no matter what my answer she looked

me in the eye, nodding and whispered “Is dat royt?” over and over. Her husband returned, a kind softly spoken man, balding, and weathered, neutral and uncomplaining. It was like being in one of those marvellous 1950s black and white films like *Kes*. I congratulated him on his wonderful issue, they had all lined up in descending order and he patted them all on the head.

“Yes der like steps of de ladder, God love ’em.” he said clasping his pipe between his teeth. Having learnt that our take-off time was not until midday, he said he would take Dave and I out for a drink that evening.

What followed was basically an Irish coffee run through the luscious velvety hills of Kerry. I listened fascinated by their accounts of local life, the ‘Rose of Tralee’ beauty pageant, Puck fair where tinkers come to find a wife or just have yet another monumental piss up. A huge goat is the town’s famous statue and landmark (a good indication of their activities). There were tales of childhood adventures and subsequent summer evenings of inebriation in the Macgillycuddy’s Reek mountains. I heard Kerrymen talking about the horse and cattle fair in Killorgin where men would meet women.

“We’ve been married these twelve years and have fourteen childer!”

They all had an irresistible combination of a deeply entrenched catholic fear and a healthy drunken irreverence. The joke:

“What’s the difference between an Irish wake and an Irish wedding ...? One less drunk!” started to make sense. I was offering my condolences to a lad in a pub, because Ireland had lost a football match that weekend – something that came up in conversation.

“Och it’s okaay, like ’cos we’re shite at everything, it duznt opset us ya know!”

Once a few years later in Castleisland, I was following two men down the staircase of a hotel and I thought they were speaking Russian because their accents were so strong. At the bottom of the stairs I picked up one or two words of English and chuckled to myself and said to them: “I have to tell you I thought you guys were Russian?” to which he instantly replied: “Well you’re not too far off because we *are* in a hurry!”

Our landlord and landlady drove us round beautiful countryside, sheep dotted the meadows and uneven stone walls bordered the country lanes, I was in a Kerrygold butter ad! The retreating sun scattered the usual magic in his wake, the sky was just turning pale tangerine at the horizon and hints of amethyst and violet touched the wisps of high cloud. We stopped to admire the ruins of an old castle next to a placid lake, this was too good to be true – like something out of *Excalibur*! Mallards preened themselves on the banks and coots flew silently across the glassy black surface which was streaked with the softest pastels reflected off the evening sky. The castle cut a striking silhouette, it seemed to have found peace in its retirement. The patina of moss and grime only enhanced its craggy beauty and stillness.

We went into an old cottage inn which had a rickety gift shop integral with the pub, they were selling tea towels with old Irish poems and recipes on them, maps, trinkets, leprechauns and shamrocks. We drank yet more Guinness and Irish coffee and someone sang a song accompanied by an accordion and fiddle player. The lad’s voice had a happy lyricism about it, music is certainly

engrained in the Celtic soul. All the buildings are strikingly colourful, giving a real feeling of gaiety. It's refreshing to see in one row of houses, the colours, purple, orange, blue, green yellow and red. It is as though you had asked a child to paint them. "Splash the paint on – use every colour!" It's indicative of an unguarded sort of nature, I think, and when a police station is painted bright pink and blue, this is a good sign.

Some of the bed and breakfasts I have since encountered over there, have had truly amazing décor. Among some landladies there is an endearing touch of the Maggie Smith in the film 'Private Function' when she says arms folded:

"I'm not having Beryl and Stanley at number fourteen thinking we can't afford maraschino cherries!"

Once you have got round the white fake Ionic columns in the garden, you enter a dolls house of velour, colour and gadgets. In one room there was gold guilt on everything, nylon nets, pink candlewick counterpane and a carpet – well I hadn't seen anything like this carpet – it was the 'Big Bang' in thread and weave, it was an acid trippers heaven. In one establishment in Tralee the landlady who was almost blind and nearly deaf, was showing all the symptoms of excessive compulsive disorder, hers was a paranoia about cleanliness. She had used every possible bottle of cleaning agent, and sprayed the place as though exorcising a satanic plague. It was like kipping down in a sodium lauryl sulphate factory, and when I ran a bath, there was so much residual chemical agent on the enamel that in five seconds flat it bubbled and foamed into a towering wall of suds which were tinged with lime green – that must have been the new bathroom spray with added citrus! I'm sure if I hadn't turned the taps off the bubbles would have moved inexorably over the bath edge and slithered down the stairs like a giant spongy worm of disinfectant, asphyxiating everything in its way!

But our family home in Farranfore had been a delight and for a first visit it really awakened my interest in Ireland. The next morning our bill was £15 for bed and breakfast. (I must say that on subsequent visits to south-west Ireland I noticed that everything had become ruinously pricey). We said goodbye and climbed into an old banger belonging to the landlord's friend – they would not DREAM of letting us pay for a taxi, even under protest he picked up my case and said, "Yous 'll go in MY VAY-HICKAL!"

Back at the airport all the bibulous rascals were still in the bar, I managed to find the refueller and pull him out. We filled up and made sure catering supplies were plentiful and the interior clean. Our American and his Irish wife arrived. I found the Jeppesen approach plates for Lugano which was our destination.

We set the flaps, and the altimeter, checked rudders, ailerons and elevator for full travel and set up the cockpit for departure. Loads of them waved us off as we accelerated away into the sky once more. I looked down as I held the control column for a last glimpse of Farranfore and its *lovely* residents. Then we slid away into the cloud. *That* was a very good first trip to Ireland I would say.

Those beautiful peninsulas of Southern Ireland which gesture out into the Atlantic like a bear's foot have become home to some of the world's rich and famous. Celebrities, pop stars, actors and businessmen have built havens of paradise along the windswept shores and within the emerald green interior, and it has become a regular destination for us.

Knock – Enter and have a Guinness

Remember that rather atmospheric advert for the Peugeot 205 which featured the car speeding along windswept craggy cliffs, while waves crashed on the rocks to the sound track ‘Take my Breath away’ (of Top Gun fame?). Well, we flew the film crew who created that off to the west coast of Ireland in search of the perfect rugged scenery. It was December 1989 and we picked them up in the Cessna Citation II from Exeter on a cold wintry evening and flew across the Irish Sea. Somewhere off the coast near Liverpool, I turned to my Captain.

“How come it’s getting light in the north, the glow from the recent sunset should, surely be from the west?” It puzzled me because it didn’t fade, perhaps it was the city lights glowing from the Liverpool area.

“Oh it must be the Northern Lights!” said Brian. It was my first sighting and although it wasn’t exactly an ‘Arctic circle’ calibre of show, it was exciting – strange shimmering glows and hazy light wafted eerily thousands of miles away in space. I turned round and shouted to the gang in the back who I knew would appreciate *this*.

“Hey guys, Northern Lights out your starboard!”

With that, there were lightening quick snaps, as they all, like clockwork, grabbed their photographic cases and flicked them open, in the same movement attached and screwed lenses on and prepared to ‘shoot’. There is something instinctive about photographers, it is built into them, they waste no time because five seconds delay could mean missing that golden opportunity. The whole sky became a gigantic glowing dome of strange light. They took some good shots. It was their first glimpse also.

We prepared for our decent and landing into Knock. I remembered on a previous trip to Ireland, a man had to scare a sheep off the runway. “Sure you can land whichever way you like” was the reply when I asked for the direction of the landing runway, or “Och it looks okaaaay” when I asked for the weather. As this place was remote-ish and on the west side I was expecting a similar unsophisticated set-up. But none of it – as we locked on to the ILS (Instrument Landing System) I was startled by the sophistication of it all. It was the strip in Las Vegas. We had every type of dazzling approach light going, rows and columns of red, green and white lights, shooting rabbits, precision approach indicators, the whole ‘enchilada’ as the Americans would say. We had approach aids of the highest calibre and a runway fit for the space shuttle and something I hadn’t seen before – a luminous windsock, it was floating there eerily in the darkness like a ghostly orange stocking. I subsequently learnt that this was the spot where the vision of the Virgin Mary had taken place so this was Ireland’s new Mecca. It was a case of ‘If you build it, they will come’. Millions of pounds of EC funding poured in to make an airport, which could take the traffic of Chicago on Thanksgiving weekend. Thousands upon thousands of holy happy folk driven by an unshakable faith and fervour would flock to pay homage to ‘Our Holy Lady’ steadfast in the belief that their ‘fay-eth’ would be strengthened.

One of the features of holy Catholic sites, is that a bone of a certain Saint is supposed to be buried there. Bones of the same Saint are in the catacombs of numerous churches and cathedrals. The amount of bones some of these sandals wearing itinerants must have had would mean they must have had eight toes on every one of their five feet and enough arms to make every circus juggler weep. Anyway – Knock is indeed an interesting place, there is no faith like the Catholic one, and no crowd like the Irish to ensure a well-attended day out at the very mention of a vision. I was to encounter this again ten years later in the airline when I used to fly a service from Cork to Lourdes – some of these severely crippled people would not order the wheelchair for the return journey obviously convinced they would be skipping down the steps of the aircraft unaided.

Funny thing was though as we taxied in I couldn't actually see any other aircraft, but I could see crowds of jostling happy people in the bar in the terminal building. There was definitely more Guinness sold here than fuel. I was told that a Ryan Air came in here now and again from Luton but business didn't seem to be *that* buoyant. It felt like being alone on the bleachers of Wembley stadium having got the wrong day for the cup final. Just as I was putting the chocks under the wheels I heard a strong Irish voice come booming down from the control tower which was right beside me and looked like something from downtown Seattle – very modern. I looked up and the lights shining down on me were so bright I instantly went blind, but I could make out his head which was sticking out of a window.

“Would you please come up to the tower when you have finished.”

I climbed about five flights hanging firmly on the rail because I had big floating red spots across my eyes where the light had dazzled me.

“Well hello,” said a beaming Irishman as I entered what was really a very well equipped and sophisticated control room

“Welcome to Knock, I'm Mart'n and dat's Paddy.”

We shook hands. In front of the elderly Paddy was an ashtray stuffed with cigarette ends, (the days *before* health and safety) and the way he looked at me through lifted narrowed eyes I guessed he was a touch short sighted! He finally locked on and gave me a warm handshake and a great smile.

One was the meteorologist and one the controller, Martin explained as he stepped back allowing me to admire the wonders of their work place. What a double act, and what a superb tower and view.

“God lov ya, you must be tired, would you like a cigarette?” said Paddy opening a new packet.

“Well shall we take dees good people over to the bed and breakfast and be goin' for a wee drink with Siobhan and Patrick?”

They had obviously been waiting for us and now work was wrapped up. Then with unexpected hospitality they drove us down to the guest house. I loved the way they instantly took us in like family. They wouldn't entertain the idea of a taxi. I felt that they'd been waiting for us before the party could properly get under way! They repeated over and over what good 'foyn' people Patrick and Siobhan were and how comfortable we'd be at their B&B.

Formalities done, it was off down the pub, even though it was already ten o'clock. Two rules in Ireland: it's never too late or early for a drink, and there are no opening or closing hours. The tiny village was called Charlestown in County Mayo. Locals were waiting for us and the Guinness was flowing. There were still people arriving at midnight. I was introduced to the Priest (there has to be one doesn't there), he was a Chaucerian sort, his nose ruby, and his voice elastic from alcohol. Everyone loved him though and he was doing a very good job of nodding earnestly at everyone's mini confessions even though he was deaf, he kept smiling. My friend William Stoney who had lived many years in Ireland told me funny little stories about things heard in bars, like the chap who went up to the bar and ordered "Tree pints a Guinness, a packet of Carolls (cigarettes) and sum bread and botter for da missus".

A man with a face like the nodule covered gourds we used to draw in still life art classes at school, introduced me three times to the barman and in between, was having a truly animated conversation with himself.

"Take no notice of him, he's had a stroke and it's made him a bit fonny like," explained the barman. "Real shame like cos he played a fantastic fiddle – doesn't know a 'B' from a 'C' now." A group of wives were gossiping about the 'younguns' and admonishing some poor Dara girl who had got up to no good. The landlord then introduced me very proudly to the town's 'entreprenou-er' knowing that he was the town's star and bound to impress me.

"This is *Michael*, he's an entreprenou-er, Michael here fixes our bicycles." He patted Michael on the back and leant over and whispered, "It's his *own* business you know."

"Can I buy ya a drink?" Michael sang at me. He was a chirpy soul, he told me all about his adventures as a kid when he and his mate Kieran would steal birds' eggs from the nests on the cliffs, they would be hanging on for dear life while the waves crashed below. They would catch fish from the Gulfstream waters using string and home-made hooks and they would sell them.

"We were always pinchin the apples from the nun's orchard like, they could never catch us! I'd get me mam to make jam and I'd sell that too!"

He was definitely a born entrepreneur and went everywhere on his bike – he had always kept his bike in tiptop condition – it was his getaway vehicle, so now he had a thriving business.

In the background, a serious pool player was about to be beaten by a saucy plump redhead and he paced calculatingly round the table chalking the hell out of his cue frowning intently at the balls. There was a young couple, just married only about nineteen and they were teased all night by their elders about when they would have a baby and whether the young lad had it in him.

"What's that pox on your lip for God's sake," I heard the flat capped farmer (whose tractor was outside) ask one of the girls at the bar. She did have a small rash on her top lip and she snapped at him.

"Jeesus will you leave it out, I'm only after waxing me focken moustache this morning and it didn't work out!"

The 'Chaucerian' priest kept asking if the Guinness was to my liking and then suggested I join him in a whisky – when in Rome. His mate sang a little folk song about Ireland for me and then challenged me to a response;

fortunately I could remember a poem about drinking so I dedicated it to the two of them:

*“The wonderful love of a beautiful maid,
and the love of a staunch true man;*

The love of a baby, unafraid, have existed since time began.

*But the greatest love, the love of all loves,
even greater than that of a mother,*

*Is the tender and passionate, infinite love,
of one drunken sod for another!”*

The two of them exploded into chesty laughs and awarded me with two more whiskies. Then one silenced the other with a hand over his mouth, cleared his throat and told me to listen to this one:

*The Guinness was spilt on the bar room floor
When the bar was closed for the night*

*When out from a hole crept a small brown mouse
And he stood in the pale moonlight*

*As he lapped up that frothy brew from the floor
Then back on his haunches he sat*

*And all night long, to hear him roar
Send out that bar room cat!*

I thought it such a funny little poem I wrote it down, I am glad I kept it. He delivered it with real drama and expression.

I learned all sort of things that night from those happy drunks, such as the six different words for bog (there are words for forming bogs, Atlantic bogs, raised bogs and so on). I learned that ‘Fitz’ means son in Norman hence all the Fitzpatrick’s and Fitzwilliam’s who roam the land.

At about half past one in the morning the landlord was well oiled and he showed us the door. “Shhh,” he said as he wobbled about grinning, he looked left and right checking it was all clear. This was just to show us he had at least *a little* respect for the law and opening hours. Of course we all knew if the local policeman had been there, he’d have been in for a nightcap. “Goodnight, thanks a million God bless you, goodnight, thanks a million.”

We wandered back through a soup of fog, it hung around like a devilish miasma. There was not a breath of wind. I glanced at the shops. There was a clothes shop, which stopped me in my tracks. I saw a faceless dummy with a cock-eyed nylon wig, she was leaning backwards, no hands, just steel rods poking out from the arms, she had a brownish zip up dress, I hadn’t seen

anything like it since my tiny mousey Latin teacher at school who was a skinny vegan and extremely strange. In the men's window some big shiny ties and round-toed lace ups. Next was a grocery store, their display was a pyramid of tins and a packet of candles. There was an estate agent in which I don't think I saw a house over £30,000. Finally, a travel agent offering coach tours to Lourdes. Some very faded pictures were pinned to a board – people kneeling and praying, one of the coach, one of pilgrims looking skyward in Lourdes and a faded testimonial of a girl who had discarded her callipers. The small modest display was finished off with a plastic ornament of 'Our Lady' in the corner.

Further along the walk I saw through the mist, the vague outline of the VOR station (this is a VHF direction finding aid on which I had relied so many times in flight), I'd never seen one, it looked like something out of a science fiction film sitting there amongst the peat bogs, its huge round white frame and three hundred and sixty white nodules poking up through the swirling fog, it was strange to see it so close up. It would have been a perfect night to film *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. I went to have a look round town the next day in the daylight. A huge Kerry farmer with fingers like pork sausages pulled up in his tractor and gave me a lift back to the B&B. His accent was so strong I could barely understand him.

For our departure the next day we had many well-wishers who came to see us off. The airport manager showed us around and offered us tea. He was trying to promote the airport, I was almost expecting him to say "No landing fees next time if you recommend us to a friend". He asked if I'd show the aircraft to some parents and kids, I was only too happy to. One of them looked up and down the cabin then at the cockpit and said, "And where exactly do you sit?" Another little girl asked me, "Do you see the angels up there in the sky?"

The film crew arrived in the midst of 'jet tours'; they took some shots of the kids in front of the 'plane and promised to send them to the airport. They had had a very successful shoot, good light, good waves they had got what they came for. Whenever I saw the Peugeot ad after that I thought of the charm and friendliness of the place, the Northern Lights, the control tower, the great hospitality, the swirling mists that night walking home, the cracking pub, the ride in the farmer's tractor and of course the feisty characters all bought together by the life giving Guinness, *and* of course the vision of 'Our Lady'!

'Take my breath away!'

Seduction Flight

It was the perfect material for a Jilly Cooper novel. What could be more predictable than a young, blonde 'innocent' from New Zealand and a hardened Arab businessman who was as slippery as a cartload of eels. A well-heeled, finely tuned predator, full of stealth and knavery and razor sharp savvy. The set-up reminded me of some words I once read about one of the Roman

emperors; "... his conscience obsequious to his own interest released him from any inconvenient obligation". In plain speak he didn't allow morals or a conscience to get in *his* way!

"Ah ... right. You're his new PA?" I said when she introduced herself and her situation with a warm handshake.

"Yis," she said with an innocent nod, "that's what he said, I can do all his admin and office stuff to get some work experience here in UK."

"Oh well that's great, hope you enjoy your trip in the private jet!" I said with a raise of the eyebrows.

"Ah know it's fantastic hey, he took me to Guaglinos and Annabel's as well, I can't believe it."

Oh I can, I thought to myself with an inner nod. She was as green as the hills of Rotarua from whence she came.

I felt the creeping advance of a 'conquest' here.

It was the very same Lebanese businessman I'd flown before who had shared the *then* joyous news that his wife had given birth. Sounded about right, nappies, noise, wife out of shape, yep time for a bit of new prowl, and here was a sweet, silky young girl, just ripe. He was notoriously rakish and promiscuous.

The jet was a Citation and we were off to Samaden in Switzerland; a beautiful mountain airport near the resort of St Moritz. It boasts the highest altitude of any European airport. Captains need a special check out to go in there, and the company thought it would be a nice treat for me as a new First Officer to experience the glories of this spectacular approach and landing. You basically let down visually, fly down the valley and turn in a tight space to line up with the short runway, as mountains tower each side of you. It did have a touch of the 'Where Eagles Dare' about it.

The passenger had a meeting with some bankers and she was accompanying him as his "PA". I went through the safety brief and pointed out the cabinet containing coffee and tea. He said there was no need to come back and check on them they could help themselves to drinks.

She was porcelain like an alabaster statue of Aphrodite.. He was dark suave and leathery with a killer suit, gold watch and enough cologne to leave a trail behind him for five minutes.

Because it was winter she had a short black wool dress on and opaque tights with little black flats. This was probably a disappointment to him when he looked up her skirt which I saw him doing as she stood up and leant into the back to get her bag. Much to my amusement I saw him lean out of his chair and dip his head right down almost to floor level to look up her skirt while her back was turned.

No slot delay, and no tricky air traffic control, just West Drayton, Maastricht, Reims, then Switzerland, this had the makings of a good day. Once we punched through the stubborn layer of stratus which had settled over south-east England, like a crumpled grey duvet, we burst into clear radiant blue. It was a gorgeous day, the winds aloft teased the high wisps of cirrus crystals into combs and fish bones. They formed patterns like those made by a pastry

chef when he drags his fork through the vanilla and choccie sauce on the desert plate.

Up at thirty-nine thousand feet I turned round to get a coffee for the Captain and myself from the urn which lodges just aft of the cockpit, then decided against it as I saw the seduction scene going on. These two were definitely 'getting along'. The hand was on the knee, she was giggling and sipping champagne. A neophyte in the new world of business and seduction, no doubt *believing* his words and responding to his practiced flattery. For him I'm sure it was going to be a 'business doing pleasure with her'.

The Alps came into view, magisterial and magnificent, a panorama of snow-capped peaks. Geneva control asked us if we were visual with our descent point. "Affirm," said the Captain confidently.

Then he pointed it out to me. This part was definitely not an exact science. It went something like:

"See the big peak right on the horizon?"

"Yes."

"Well three to the right of that there's a sort of flattish one, well it's between *that* one and the one in front of it."

"Okay," I said impressed with his recognition and memory.

We sailed over the first mountain ridge and descended slowly into a magical 'other planetary' landscape of radiant white. Although I had skied, it was quite different seeing the mountains from this perspective and doing these kind of speeds especially given your proximity to the granite! It was fantastic. *Star Wars* moment.

We crossed at right angles to the runway, disengaged the autopilot and flew across the valley, made our left turn downwind and descended onto base leg. We had dropped below the mountain tops, so we were in a colossal great stony basin of ice and rock flanking us on both sides. The Alps had such a loveliness that day, with their summits draped in snow, gleaming in the sun. I marvelled at the force of those two continental plates and the craggy splendour they unwittingly created when they moved inexorably toward each other and crashed all those millennia ago.

We moved like a little spaceship down the narrow valley towards the miniature runway which is less than six thousand feet long. It was one of those 'best ever' moments.

I read the checklist:

"Fuel crossfeed ... off."

"Ignition ... on."

"Gear ... down three greens."

"Anti-skid ... on."

"Flaps ... land."

"Landing lights ... on."

The tower gave us a wind check and cleared us to land. The Captain demonstrated a short field landing by planting it firmly on the touchdown numbers without a pronounced flare and stood firmly on the brakes for maximum deceleration.

The ramp was a postage stamp. Little did I know *then* that I would come back many years later in a Boeing 727-100 and the Captain (Capn' Jack as he was known) would not only manoeuvre that big plane round that tight valley but actually *back* into the parking spot using the thrust reversers much to the amazement of the airport staff.

The little terminal was typically immaculate and we were greeted by a charming female handling agent who ordered the fuel for us and took care of our two passengers.

Having straightened their clothes, and brushed themselves off, they alighted. She applied some lipstick, thanked us with a lovely smile, shook our hands then stepped into their waiting limo which would whisk them off to St Moritz, where I'm sure she would busy herself with taking down the minutes of the meeting! I retrieved two small bags from the nose section and handed them to the chauffeur who was straight out of *The Godfather*. 'Hey,' I said inwardly, as long as everyone was happy, good luck to them, it beats staying home and feeding the cat. Life is an adventure to be lived not a problem to be solved. I just hoped she wouldn't get hurt. She would undoubtedly learn about life, its many facets and nuances as we are all doing every day!

I climbed up to the tower to pay the bill. Wow what a work place, it had spectacular views all round. Everything was tidy and gleamed with typical Swiss efficiency. I chatted to the meteorologist about the alpine weather systems, he was deeply knowledgeable. He presented me with a big red sticker for my flight case, it had a Lear Jet on it and the words Samedan airport, the highest in Europe, 5,600 feet.

After a cup of coffee, we prepared to depart. It was my leg and we were empty so we could have a bit of fun. We set the squawk, dialled the cleared altitude in, put strobe lights and ignition on and set the flaps. I held the aircraft on the brakes and pushed the throttles up to full power. After the call "V1 rotate" I pulled her up and we climbed out at a considerably steeper tangle than usual, it *was* a buzz. At a safe clearance and altitude I banked steeply round to the right over the snow-capped peaks.

"Golf Bravo Echo contact Geneva on one two five decimal six five, nice flight good day."

So we bid adieu to Samedan and tuned into Geneva who gave us further climb and once again we were on the roof of the world. We headed north-west towards Dijon and Paris.

The skies were just starting to dress for the evening, small delicate capes of pink and peach chiffon draped over the 'shoulders' of the mountains. Little wisps of high cloud –the shape of 'Nike' ticks turned purple against the deep blue and the sun sank to the horizon. The world looked ripe and sweet like a rosy apple. Always worth being aware though, of the odd hidden worm!

Air Ambulance

There is usually an element of tension when you take on an air ambulance flight. It is life and death, it's critical. You throw the uniform on, and scramble – out the door like a speeding bullet. (Always a great excuse to use the hard shoulder!) The first one I ever did was from Heathrow to Manchester in the middle of the night on a Citation. The situation was 'the big one', it was a heart transplant.

There is always the ice box, but this time *not* filled with the usual yummy cold beers and prawns, oh noooh, *this* ice box is carrying a recently extracted slippery human organ, still purple with life's blood. You know some poor person has 'shuffled off his mortal coil' and a part of his innards is wrapped in ice and winging its way at four hundred odd miles per hour to some other poor soul who is hanging on to life by a fraying thread in some operating theatre waiting for that vital part which will give him a chance for a few more exits and entrances!

As we taxied in, a helicopter was waiting; blades slashing through the rain, bright lights lit the millions of rain drops, which flashed on and off like strobes. The downwash created little waves and ripples moving away in all directions from the noisy beast. It stood like a tethered horse just itching to get away and run the race.

Everyone is like a coiled spring. Medics in white coats jump out, clutching the ice box. Greetings were minimal, the situation and the deafening noise keep niceties very thin. The power increased on the helicopter's collective as the door slams shut. He lifted into a hover, the heavy wind knocked him a bit and he bobbed around unevenly near the ground, sending water streaming away in rivulets. He lifted skilfully, the downwash from his rotors and the ear splitting noise from the engines made us slam the door of our jet shut. I watch him lower his nose and 'whoosh' he accelerated away straight across the runway penetrating the darkness and into the night.

I prayed the mission would go well. Some unknown and desperate human being is hanging on to the hope of another day. It was one o'clock in the morning; we managed a bit of shut eye in the small lounge. We drank coffee and waited ... and waited.

Unfortunately, luck was not with the team *that* night. At quarter to four on that dark November morning the team came back, they were silent and deflated; it had not been a success. The pressures are immense and the skill involved in these scenarios is unimaginable. Against impossible odds these medical stalwarts, with great courage and resolution, fight time and misfortune in their undaunted efforts to save lives. It is a terrific experience to work with them and contribute in the small way we do, albeit sometimes very sad.

Other Stories: From Colleagues

Although it is not a laughing matter, there are I am afraid just some funny instances in this strange twilight world of ambulance flying. You are very much 'on the edge', operating on that knife edge of life. It's the light and the dark and sometimes very little seems to separate them.

Two colleagues told me of their ambulance flying. The first was from a very experienced British Airways pilot who, way back in his career found himself flying single pilot on a Cherokee six (single engine piston). He was ferrying a corpse back from somewhere in the middle of the night. There was no coffin because of the weight penalty, so the body was just covered by a sheet. He was all alone, at eight thousand feet no sound but the whirring propellers, suddenly he hears a loud belch from the back of the plane and some movement! There is only him and a body. Can you imagine the shock and terror in that moment? Talk about the heebie jeebies.

I had to laugh when he told me he just didn't *dare* turn round; he just ploughed on white knuckled with max power and did a maximum rate descent and literally threw her on the ground and ran from the plane. Apparently (or so went the explanation he received) the pressure difference at altitude can make air expel from the lungs or other parts even after a person is dead. I could not control my laughter when he described his reaction.

"xxxx me! I thought when I heard this bloody thing belching. I could have sworn I heard the bugger sit up, I couldn't turn round, I just wanted to get down and get out."

We shared this fleeting vision of 'Beetlejuice' complete with black lips and scaly skin hopping over the back of the seat and sliding into the co-pilot's position. With the words:

"Phew that was a close one, I thought I'd bought the farm there, so where are we? Shall I do the radios?"

The other rather dark and humorous story involved a friend who was flying back from Barcelona with a dead body. Out of deference to the relatives who were in the cabin and who, for some reason didn't want to sit next to their dead 'erstwhile', the body was put in the front hold. Apparently he had to be, shall we say 'manoeuvred' in because there was not enough room to lay him flat. That was all fine and well but unfortunately because it got rather chilly enroute home, by the time they opened the front hold back in England he looked like that character in the British museum named after the peat bog in which he was discovered three million years after his death. I got the impression he was a bit bent up and his limbs a tad twisted. He was frozen solid in the locker and they had to get heaters to blow on him to thaw the poor chap out! Again (what is it with my imagination!) I had darting flashes of them laying him out on the apron, unmoving like a lump of twisted metal which holds its shape, while bit by bit his arms and legs were straightened out with the help of an industrial sized blow-dryer. (He assured me the rules have changed since then!)

The same colleague told me of the day he left Aldergrove in Northern Ireland with a liver in the ice box. It was a critical transplant flight. Normally

the medic present handles any trolley if it has the organ on it. But on *that* occasion the taxi driver who was driving a Renault Espace took it upon himself to be zealous – he was only trying to help, and pushed the trolley which had amongst other things, the liver sitting on ice, in its box.

Unfortunately he mishandled and the trolley hit some rough ground and the ice box went flying. The nurse watched in horror as the liver skidded off across the apron. Don't panic, the organ was well wrapped up in plastic bag, only the *ice* got a bit dirty – honest, he assured me!

I take my hat off to the whole air ambulance concept, especially the helicopter pilots who arrive at a crash scene and airlift the victims out. Those machines are superbly equipped so a medic can start treatment straight away if necessary. The inside of some jets is configured for air ambulance work. On the jet I flew the stretcher and other bits and pieces had to be put in especially for a medical flight, but some planes are dedicated 100% to ambulance work, and they are truly impressive. They sure get busy during ski season!

Many years later, the company I was working for at Luton brought the much loved comedian Mike Reid back from Spain in his coffin.

An Eccles Cake for the England Football Manager

'Cock ups' are an integral part of life, and private aviation is no exception.

The 'cock up' is that single little incident or series of incidents that can turn your day into a downward spiral, at the end of which you give that withered look, that wan smile of hopelessness as you feebly offer one last apology. I remember taking Bobby Robson (the then England football manager) down to Cagliari in Sardinia; he was doing a rekkie to find suitable lodgings for his team, during some up and coming international event in the football world.

The first mistake was the aircraft. The company's Citation 2 had incurred a technical problem so they put Mr Robson's trip onto the Citation 1 – a smaller and slower plane. Really the trip should be sub-chartered out or at least the client should be told that they are on a donkey rather than Desert Orchid. But as always in this business, you don't turn work away.

The route was Heathrow – Glasgow – Rotterdam night stop, and the next day to Cagliari, Sardinia (where we spent two days), and then back to Liverpool where he had an *important* football match to attend. The rot set in when we had to stop in Nice on the way down to Sardinia, because we could not make it in one hop. He was understandably peeved about this, though we did manage to refuel and turn around with the same comparative speed as a Ferrari pit crew – twenty minutes on the ground at Nice is pretty impressive!

It was December and Sardinia was a very pleasant eighteen degrees and the sun was shining. The England manager busied himself with trying to find accommodation for his squad, and we enjoyed the poolside at the hotel. Amongst the entourage was a chubby 'Chris Biggins'-type. He was like a telly tubby dressed for Henley. I think he was a reporter for one of the tabloids. He

had loud flamboyant clothes and big bright garish spectacles and regaled us with stories in his best *Brummie* accent of celebs and their various peccadilloes.

It was along the lines of "... and they were caught red'anded in the guys boat in Port Solent. Oh chroist it was bustin'."

Then a huge chuckle would set his enormous fat shoulders off up and down under his stripy blazer. "... don't know what his missus 'ad to say!"

There was also in the crowd a little man, he looked Spanish or Greek, a property tycoon I believe, He loved football and he was rather fond of himself as well. At dinner he talked of all his money and conquests and then told me he had his own private jet in Spain. When I asked him what he had he replied with a hint of a 'Stavros' accent.

"I don't 'ave a dog and bark myself."

I took this to mean that he didn't bother himself with minor details like *what type* of plane he had, he left that to the staff, he just flew in it. Mmm I sniffed just a soupcon of faecal matter from the 'toro'.

Everyone got roaring drunk and threw one another in the pool. My uniform jacket ended up on the short Spaniard as he hurled himself into the pool. I had a nightcap and coffee with some Dutch men who were actually very pleasant and chatty. I learnt afterwards that this had been frowned upon because they were from an opposing team. One mustn't have divided loyalties!

The journey back to Liverpool was fraught because Mr Robson had a very important match to attend in the city that day. I had asked the hotel to prepare us a few kebabs thinking they would prepare chunks of meat and fish on skewers. They had misunderstood, first cock up of the day – they thought I meant kebab as in that lump of putrefaction that spins slowly on a skewer in Kiosks around Soho. It came in pitas which just crumbled – I couldn't serve them those! So you can imagine the news of the second and more pressing cock up – that we had to go to Bordeaux to refuel. That was as welcome as a car clamping at the end of a long day.

The winds just were not on our side which didn't help. To really bring up the shine on this black eye of a trip, we gave the two coffee flasks to the handling agent in Bordeaux and said, "Fill these please with black coffee and bring them back as quickly as possible." – Well that was the last we ever saw of those! We refuelled quickly but sat waiting with finger tapping frustration for the girl to return with our flasks. She was obviously 'très peesed off' at having to work on the night before Christmas Eve. Mr Robson, who was now inspecting the two pull out tray tables which had broken between the two rear seats, just told us in no uncertain terms to forget the 'bleep bleep' coffee and get going. He was rightly and understandably annoyed.

We launched late and with no hot drinks or catering. We got as much oomph out of those little engines as we possibly could without blowing them up. Two hours and fifteen minutes later we landed at Liverpool. Ever since crossing the '*enemy coast*' Northern France, as it's fondly known amongst crew, I had been desperately trying to raise Service Air on their VHF frequency to make sure there was someone to meet our passengers and transport was ready to take them to the match. Raising Service Air is a feat at

the best of times but on Sunday in Liverpool at Christmas... there was absolutely no chance. I heard a distant voice crackling through the ether but it was someone asking for toilet service at Teeside. I transmitted to ask if they could call their colleagues at Liverpool, but no luck.

So...after doing the quickest, 'pull her round sharpish' type of approach and landing on the Westerly runway, we taxied in to a deserted ramp.

"Where the hell is everybody?" somebody blasted from the back.

"I've had no luck raising anyone on the VHF," I offered feebly, rolling my eyes to myself.

Anyway, they jumped out, throwing overcoats round shoulders, and holding the huge brick mobile phones to ears (it was 1989!) and charged off to the terminal.

"I have to try and make this up to Bobby Robson somehow," I moaned to Dave the Captain. He agreed, but after finishing the tech log, he picked up the Sunday papers with that "don't bother me with it" kind of look.

So, I okayed it by phone with our Operations that I should buy some nice champagne, some first class canapés and some luxury sandwiches for their way home, just as a little apology for the cock ups. So next came the humungous challenge of finding *that* at *this* airport. I entered the building; it was practically deserted, no one at information or car hire!

I pushed open swing doors, and left them flapping behind me as I paced determinedly down corridors, turned corners finding nothing but toilets and locked offices. "Damn! Surely VIPs come to Liverpool don't they," I muttered to myself. Eventually after unsuccessful trawling of depressing corridors festooned with notice boards advertising the company Christmas do, I bumped into a young Service Air girl coming out of an office with a walkie-talkie. Thank God.

"Oh hi, I'm the crew from Golf Juliet Echo Tango Echo ..." I didn't continue, the look on her face meant that I might as well have said, "mwa pudu neh neh imtak embwoto kinonlo ah!" Some really loud voice came ripping through her radio and she jumped, looked at it in horror and failed to find the volume button. I turned it down for her.

"Oh thanks," she said, "only this is me first week like and I'm not sure of everything quite yet ..."

My heart sank, *she* bless her was not going to be able to lead me to the land of first class catering opportunities.

"Oh hi, I'm Anita, the crew off that little jet out there, and I need some really nice catering for the way home, can you help me?"

"Cay-tring?" she said slowly in the loveliest of 'scouser' accents.

"Yea, you know some nice food, champagne, and I need to buy a couple of thermos flasks."

That was it; I saw a deer caught in the headlights, everything aft of the cornea just shut down.

Normally in these sorts of situations a good handling agent if unable to provide catering on sight, comes up with an encouraging little suggestions like: "Well I can run you into town, there's a nice deli, or the Marriott hotel which does good food ..."

“Er ... actually I haven’t been told about any cay-tring but I think I’ve heard me other colleagues mention the cay-tring upstairs, you can hava look if ya like, I don’t know if they’ll be open today being Christmas an all, but all as you do, is go up a floor and they’re at the end ... I think?”

“Okay thanks I’ll have a try, meanwhile could you just go and see the Captain and order some fuel and see if he needs anything else, he’s on the plane.”

“Oh yea right,” she said nervously glad to see the back of me. Poor thing I bet all the colleagues wouldn’t work the Christmas period and she, being new pulled the short straw.

I padded across yards of lino and found nothing. Everyone had gone home, I peered through the glass panels in doors, empty desks. I tried the last corridor at the top and right at the end was something which looked like airport services. Great there was someone in there, I entered.

“Hi, I’m a crew member off that little Citation out there, and we’ve got Bobby Robson on board and it’s all been a bit of a screw up, and I need some really nice first class canapés and some nice Champagne maybe some luxury sandwiches ...”

The heavily booted feet swung down from the table, and the ‘Sun’ was folded tidily away as he looked at me with a grin. He had such a strong Liverpool accent:

“Owzabout a coupla flamin’ dancin’ bears to go with it eh?”

“Oh, right ... it’s going to be difficult then?”

“No offence love and ‘xcuse me French like but this isn’t Saint Tro-f***** pay, it’s Liverpool on a Sunday before Christmas and I’m on me own and knockin’ off at four – I can probably sort you out some ham sarnies and some Eccles cake and some cans of beer.”

I just burst out laughing, I loved it, images of hooking my little finger through the plastic rings atop a nice warm six pack of John Smiths bitter, two of which had been drunk, was just too funny, and the Eccles cake ... it was priceless, what could I say.

We both laughed. He pulled a packet of Embassy out of his top pocket.

“Fag luv?”

The amount of time it would have taken for a cab to get to me into town on a search for gourmet catering and champagne made us decide against it, what with all the football traffic as well. The last thing we needed was for the crew to be absent when the passengers arrived. So I guess it was ham sarnies on white and an Eccles cake for Mr Robson.

A trivial though strangely related footnote: Years later my friend Mark from Wigan the flight engineer on the 727– told me of a strike at Liverpool Airport. His mate Bill was working there at the time. A well-known TV personality, a bit dry and haughty but feted for intellectual penetration – I *think* it might have been Jeremy Paxman, had got caught in these delays and was absolutely desperate to get out and back to London. After wrangling and fruitless toing and froing he was at an impasse.

“My mate Bill the big fat Scouser bastard was approached by Jeremy who said, “You must have *some* sort of advice...I mean there must be some way out of this.”

“The only advice I have for you Jeremy is when you go through them doors to the bar drink the bottle beer ’cos the draught’s SHITE.”

I laughed out loud with him, remembering my little experience up in the office with a similarly cheeky scouser.

I understood why the ‘Fab Four’ composed ‘HELP’.

Ferry of Brand New Citation –And Emergency Descent

The aircraft G-BSVL was a brand new Cessna Citation V bought from the factory in Wichita Kansas. Cornish pasties and savoury pies had paid for this sassy little jet, because the proud owners were two brothers from Cardiff who’d made millions from the sale of their hugely successful food business. Three of us went through the training course at the American flight school, these are very professional, easy going, laid back places full of ‘good ole’ boys’, who invariably have hundreds of stories to tell...Like “I remember one time flying from Lubbock to Boise Idaho ...there was a helluva storm cooking...”. And so it goes on. Fresh doughnuts and endless coffee refills are major features of these establishments.

In the simulator there is always that same smell, that same atmosphere, in those days the graphics were set for night time so everything was dark. All the control panels and instruments shine with various colours. Through the windscreen a mock up of – say Chicago airport lies before you complete with tower and blue taxiway lights. It is only when you taxi round a corner and you get the distortion of the lights as they fold away round the side of the Perspex. When you’re hurling down the runway, however, and you get an engine failure on take-off it is all too real! Nothing worse than just having rotated and you feel that yaw over to one side.

“Engine failure number one.”

“Positive climb gear up.”

Then a boot full of rudder into the live engine, control the yaw and climb away at V2 – our best single engine climb speed.

Up we go to our acceleration altitude, lower the nose to pick up speed then “Flaps up!”

Then we accelerate to our best en route speed and go into the checklist. If there has been a fire we perform the fire drill, closing the thrust lever of effected engine and pulling the associated fire handle.

We were forever shutting down engines: Throttle off, Ignition off, Generator off. Electrical load reduce, Fuel cross-feed as required, etc. Then we’d attempt a restart *or* land with that old familiar one engine inoperative check list increasing our Reference speed over the threshold by ten knots. Emergency after emergency – excellent for those with dangerously low blood

pressure. It's a fiesta of failures and the pressure increases. We covered many scenarios – 'hydraulic failure', 'loss of both generators', 'inadvertent deployment of thrust reversers in flight', and our old favourite – electrical smoke or fire.

So after the roller coaster ride, complete with horns, bells and flashing lights in an airless black box filled with a gazillion LEDs, and buzzing screens, you eventually get into the real aircraft and do a normal take-off in a fully functional machine unhampered by failures, overheats, fires, or jammed controls, and it really is refreshingly peaceful!

However, on *that* particular occasion we were rather grateful for the emergency descent training because we ended up doing one for real, *at night* in the middle of Illinois.

Having changed the stall warning system (mandatory CAA requirement – it *had* to go off one millionth of a 'nose up' degree sooner!) and one or two other things which they insisted upon if it was to have UK register, we had our last doughnut and coffee and said 'so long' to all the 'good ole boys' (who were still telling their near death stories) and set off late on the 27th November 1990 from Wichita Kansas bound for Sept Isles in north-east Canada.

Not long after we reached our cruising level we heard a strange bang which startled us. Eyes instantly scan the instruments and dials. I saw that the *cabin* altitude was climbing – not rapidly but nonetheless it was on its way up which meant we were losing cabin pressure. So, on went the oxygen masks, we flipped the comms switch to 'oxy mask' and communications were established. We closed the throttles and put the nose down and flipped the speed brakes out for a quicker rate of descent and as Delboy would say headed back to 'Terracotta'. I spoke to ATC through the mask and asked for radar vectors to somewhere with an ILS and a good maintenance facility – preferably Cessna. Thank God we were in the United States, I was certainly thankful not to be over, say, Chad at that point.

Fortunately the decompression was not explosive it was just a slow leak so it was just 'minor to mediocre' panic, as opposed to wide-eyed terror when something blows out and you lose all your pressurisation instantly and will be a useless, drooling, blue lipped collection of limbs slouched over the controls like a bonfire night 'guy' before you can say "OMYGO...".

We ended up in a small place called Peoria in Illinois. (No I'd never heard of it either.) We were not carrying the entire set of USA charts so the very helpful controller vectored us round and gave us all the ILS frequencies and inbound tracks and everything else we needed. The oxygen masks came off at ten thousand feet, the pressurisation was under control so we completed the approach and landing checklist and put the little jet safely on the ground.

Some poor engineer had been called at home, had got out of his warm snugly bed, thrown his jeans on, fired up his truck and come into the airport to help a bunch of nuisance English who'd decided to have a damn failure over his patch. *And* tomorrow was his day off.

They were so good to us. The popcorn machine went on, as did the coffee and after hearing our account of the problem he told us to rest while he flicked through the manual.

It turned out to be just a bit of 'Friday night maintenance' – the 'S' pipe which brings conditioned air from the air cycle machine into the cabin. It appears it had not been tightened sufficiently and had popped off somewhere behind the rear bulkhead, which in effect means no more air was being pumped into the cabin.

We slept for an hour on some sofas while this young curly haired engineer fixed it and sent us on our way with that standard American phrase "You're all set".

Off we went intrepidly into the night headed for Sept Isles which lies on the north side of the St Lawrence River in Quebec, north-east Canada where we would sleep and refuel. I looked at the latest weather. Temperature was minus eleven degrees Celsius and there were accompanying snow showers blowing in on quite a hefty wind. Mmm. I thought ... hope all the anti ice-systems are 'tickety boo'.

Bleak is the word, it sure was cold and dark out there and this was very new territory. Familiar names such as Toronto and North Bay gradually gave way to Chicoutmi and Chibougamau and Natashquan. I had visions of wiry little Indians riding bareback with feathers in their headbands who could throw an axe four hundred yards and split an acorn. My God the landscape looked like a textbook picture of the 'Pleistocene epoch' and its associated ice age. We brought our jet down through the freezing air to land at Sept Isles in Canada's frozen north-east. When I opened the door a thousand whirring snowflakes, like crazy white gnats came straight into the cabin – it was what you might call a blizzard greeting. I stepped out and promptly went flat on my face, it was like an ice rink. A huge guy helped me up, he wore a gortex anorak whose fur lined hood was so deep, his face sat back in it some nine inches, I almost had to peer in to say thank you. We chocked the nose wheel, put the covers on and headed off into the small terminal.

We snuggled down for the night at the local motel which had elk heads on every available wall, and offered lovely warm soup and great slabs of meat. The colour scheme was yellow ochre it was everywhere – funny what you remember. Everyone was big and hardy and wore flannel shirts. The night was short, we took off for Reykjavik the next morning.

After refuelling in Iceland we headed off for Bournemouth on the south coast of England. The flight was just over three hours, it was a huge relief when the wheels touched down on that welcoming runway on the edge of the New Forest. It had been decidedly more comfortable than the B25 bomber!

The flying which followed on this aircraft was of the 'fun and games nature'. It belonged to two millionaire Welsh brothers who filled it full of their champagne swilling naughty boy mates (very naughty boys I might add). More about them later in "Please Meet the Passengers!"

Inverness to Teesside *(The alternative way)*

We said goodbye to the passengers – a lively group of larger- than-life Americans who were indulging their passion for bird shooting and salmon fishing in Scotland. Beefy handshakes and sincere thanks were exchanged as business cards were pulled from wallets with the words “If you guys are ever in San Francisco...” Then they walked up to their waiting limos clutching braces of game birds, gun cases and bags which clinked with Lagavullen and Glenmorangie.

We sat in the aircraft enjoying a cup of tea and catching up on the paperwork. Outside a benign autumn evening was arriving like a welcome guest. A pale water colour sky stretched out above us, it was cool and tranquil, the bumpy underside of the cloud was touched with faint hints of pink. My Captain Robin and I discussed the final leg from Inverness to Teesside. He had just left the RAF after many years on Phantoms in the Oman and had a great predilection for low level fast flying. Coincidentally, we had both spent our childhoods in Africa, and I detected in him just a touch of the ‘old colonial’. I could see him in shorts and sandals enjoying a ‘grin and frolic’(as G&T was known) under a rotating ceiling fan in some lodge. He was bright, sporty and chatty, and had a touch of ‘rascal’ about him. Last time we flew together we went to Cannes and had attempted wind surfing, we spent all day falling off the board– and long after I retired he kept pulling up that sail he was no quitter. He was a robust “I say old chap” type, with a zest for life and a touch of that English eccentricity.

“How do you fancy something a bit different on the way back?” he said with a cheeky grin.

“Like what Robin?” I enquired instantly perking up at the thought of strafing Loch Ness at ten feet in search of the monster. “I’m up for anything, but I don’t do inverted.”

Rubbing his hands conspiratorially, he suggested cancelling the IFR plan (Instrument Flight Rules) which keeps us in the airways system and under positive radar control, and filing VFR (Visual) instead. So we dispensed with the upper airway charts and found the low level topographical map – the one pilots use for cross countries or ‘jollies’ as we call them.

“Inverness, from Golf Delta Bravo India India, we would like to cancel our Flight plan and go to Teesside VFR.”

“Rog-gerr, umm confirm that’s India India the Citation,” came back the incredulous voice from the tower.

“That’s affirm sir.”

“Okaaay ... any particular reason?”

“Tell him fun and games!” chuckled out Robin not lifting his head from the map on his lap.

“No particular reason sir, just want to brush up on a bit of nav exercise,” I offered, trying to disguise our hooligan intentions.

“Roger that’s understood double India,” came a serious voice, but one which failed to conceal a cheeky smile!

“Err, I assume you are empty to Teeside?”

“That’s affirmative sir,” I said. They knew we were going to have some fun.

With the checks complete, Robin informed me that we’d do some ‘valley flying’ like the training done for mountainous terrain. And, by the way we would do an engine failure at V1 (take off speed) just for practice. Yep, I was strapped in beside the adrenalin man. The chap in the tower wished us a good flight (wishing he was coming with!) and off we went. Having dealt with the simulated engine failure, controlled the yaw, and raised the gear we climbed up to fifteen hundred feet.

“Right, let’s get down to a sensible height, I get altitude sickness up here!” chuckled Robin in his best ‘Red Leader’ voice. He took the yoke and pushed the nose down and started the antics. We headed at two hundred knots straight for the mountain range started some military style low level exploration of the valleys. Robin was absorbed, inhabiting the role, he was definitely ‘back there’. Out came the best RAF patois used by the fighter pilots when warning each other of “Jerries on their tail” or the “Hun in their four o’clock”.

“Now there is always danger of enemy aircraft, so you must be vigilant, keep low avoid the radar, and when you fly down the valleys you must remember the inertia as you carve your path and turn a little early.”

He demonstrated then gave me control so I could have a go. I turned for the opposite wall of the valley while the plane continued her previous direction for a few seconds, we were describing a smooth rhythmic ‘S’ pattern. It was like carving a sort of grand slalom track. We were weaving down a landscape of interlocking spurs, carving elliptical zig zags, it was *really* thrilling. I was loving the old and the new – our little jet with its suite of modern instruments, speeding over the black glassy surface of this deep and ancient loch. The sides rose steeply into dramatic jagged shapes, weathered by the ice and the wind over thousands of centuries. The loch was motionless and silent, the jet fast and noisy; one mysterious and secret, the other flashy and loud.

My eyes were wide, and my grip tight, the adrenalin was coursing. You only appreciate the feeling of speed in a jet when you are near the ground and have reference. It was marvellously silent in the cockpit and we were in our own little spacecraft skimming along the surface like a pelican, harmonising with everything around, moulding our path into the contours, and profiles of this spectacular scenery. It was unspeakably beautiful. It felt as though we’d climbed up onto the spine of the wind, like a child on to a dolphin, we were there on its back riding fast and free.

Back over the land, the heather created lovely shades of purple as it spread out unhindered over the vast craggy moors. I saw wild mountain streams. There was little activity just a few sheep and grouse running for cover as the noise of our engines frightened them. Undulating, and untrodden, the hills rolled away in all directions dotted by the odd abandoned croft. Above us the sky was vast and clear. Scotland on such a day is gorgeous – I thought of the scene from *The Thirty Nine Steps* when Robert Powell pads across the boggy

moors and finds the shooting party. The wintry high pressure system gave us excellent visibility, about forty miles ... it was perfect. Here and there a cottage was tucked away by a river or loch. Then (just as in the movie) we spotted a party of grouse shooters stalking over the hills. Their Land Rovers were parked nearby. We banked steeply around and circled them once as though we were filming and gave them a bit of a show. They waved and lifted their sticks into the air, rotating on the spot to follow us. We straightened up again and we were gone.



Glancing outside I saw the shadow of our little plane encircled in a halo, you can see this sometimes and it is a neat sight, an image of the jet in miniature within a circle racing alongside, rippling over the humps and bumps in the uneven landscape.

As we approached Durham, we climbed up and enjoyed the expansive views of the city, its cathedral and river. The North Sea glinted in the distance. Teeside was not far away now and we checked in with tower and Robin asked if they'd like a quick fly past – he could not get enough! They were not too busy and said that would be fine. Robin was off in the war zone again.

“You see you're a sitting duck when you come back into the circuit and this is good avoiding action against being shot down by the enemy.”

I was getting the picture, then whoosh my hands became glued to my legs and my cheeks fell a few inches, Robin was pulling some 'G'. We were in a sixty degree angle of bank when I heard, “Ok all yours, you land it!” So rather like a cat righting itself in midair during a fall to ensure a feet first landing, I closed the throttles and levelled the wings, got the speed under control then lowered flap and gear. I did a passable landing, heard the familiar squeak of the rubber hitting the ground then deployed the thrust reversers which crescendoed as we rapidly decelerated, I stowed the reversers and peace

returned to the cockpit. We trundled in along the taxiway. If aeroplanes had faces or expressions, this one would have been grinning from ear to ear. She must have felt like a horse who, after months of being harnessed to a cart is given the freedom of a mountainside to gallop around.

Once we'd shut down, I smiled sideways at him, blew my fringe up with a deep satisfied sigh, and nodded slowly in appreciation of the intensity of the last half hour. We looked at each other laughing, he raised his eyebrows.

"How about that then?"

"Thanks ... thanks so much for that!"

Motley Crue Concert – Edinburgh

November 1989. Checking the week's up and coming flights in the ops room I noticed my initials against a flight on Thursday evening:

Heathrow – Edinburgh – Rtn.

Client: Motley Crew

I was tidying up some paperwork in the office the day before when the phone rang:

"Can I speak to the pilot of the jet taking the band tomorrow please?"

"Speaking ... can I help you?"

"Er yeah, I'd like there to be no alcohol on board, just remove it if you have a bar, probably be best."

"Certainly sir we can do that, any other special requirements?" Then John Cleese from Fawcety Towers crept into my head – chains, muzzles perhaps?

We ended our chat on a positive note, he was polite and grateful and wished us a pleasant journey.

I headed over to the executive terminal, (then called Fields) showed my pass and went out to the aircraft. Maybe they were teetering on the cusp of recovery and needed no temptation. I removed all the booze into a couple of boxes. I wondered what I could give them instead. Rummaging through the dry stores, nothing jumped out as appropriate – ginger snaps, dry roasted peanuts, mmm they'll probably have a few of their own 'condiments' anyway so they won't be hungry. I felt like a Aunty Mavis doing a high tea for some ex-cons. Muesli bars? God no, that was like leaving an endive salad out for the fox.

"These are party animals, Dave, you know, – heavy rock, tattoos, sex drugs rock and roll, fast and nasty!" I explained a little desperately to my Captain when he said, "Motley who? What the hell is that...? can't they drink tea like everyone else."

He had slender knowledge of heavy metal.

"Well they better not make a mess; we've just had the suede done in Bravo Echo."

On that afternoon we filed the flight plan, listened in to the ATIS (recorded weather) and got our clearance from Air Traffic, then waited on the

aircraft. Unfamiliar with these types, my Captain was endearingly curious. The ground handler arrived in his mini bus and out jumped the ‘Crue’. Spotting the long hair, the sprayed on black leather hipsters with criss-cross sides and pointy steel-tipped boots, Dave removed his specs.

“Ah these must be our passengers.”

He had seen ‘Greece’ so he was used to the black leather trousers. The first band member leapt out like a wild thing, clad in a long kaftan coat, the fur blowing in the wind. He took a series of quick pictures with his camera.

“Awesome ... bitchin!” he enthused. The Sultan of Oman’s jet was there, Robert Maxwell’s Gulfstream, various Caymen registered Falcons, the odd Lear and the usual array of United Arab Emirates private jets. Since it was a high security and strictly ‘no cameras’ area, he was politely restrained by one of the ground staff. Two girls tottered on board behind him, fabulous petite bodies, impossibly high heeled stiletto boots, spectacular boobs and lots of leopard skin, furry jackets and long hair. Another couple of skinny long haired guys dressed in black, climbed on, when they were all aboard I closed the door and launched into my excruciatingly embarrassing spiel pointing out the hot water, tea bags and biscuits. Somehow so witheringly inappropriate to the out and out ‘Enfants Terribles’ of heavy rock. However ... I did it, and it was quite funny – they were so nice and somehow excitable, anyone would think it was their first outing! I realised later it *probably* wasn’t due to the goodies from *our* ‘Alpha’ airport catering but more likely the goodies from *their* Pablo Escobar catering!

We were dwarfed as usual by the jumbos and Tristars as we taxied out to runway 27 right at Heathrow. We waited behind one like a mouse queuing behind an elephant, as one of them nudges up in sequence and adds a little power, we have to hold on to our control surfaces so we don’t get shaken around by their exhaust – and that’s just idle power!

We took off and headed due north towards Pole Hill near Manchester. I had levelled off at flight level 180 (18,000 ft) and was talking to London ATC when a voice with just a hint of anarchy about it chirped up from the back:

“Hey c’mon let’s do a barrel roll!” that brought much cheering from fellow rockers.

“Let’s roll this mother!”

My frightfully straight Captain stiffened in his seat, his eyes suddenly widening. He politely explained with a smile that it would be a tad indecorous if our radar blip started dancing around ‘Etchsketch’ style on the controller’s screen at West Drayton air Traffic.

“Oh man that’s too bad, we did one coming out of Salt Lake last year in a Lear – it was awesome!”

We made it to Edinburgh avoiding aerobatic manoeuvres. It was a dark beautiful evening, a navy velvet sky was dotted with little diamante stars. The engines made the familiar descending whirr as I retarded the throttles and lowered the nose, the lights of Edinburgh were beautiful. I dimmed the cockpit lights and prepared to shoot the approach down the ILS. I was fully established and just about to land when one of the guys stuck his head into the cockpit and

took a photo with a super powerful flash. I was completely blinded by the white light, huge floating planets were cruising across my eyeballs.

“You have control Dave, I can’t see a thing.”

“Christ I don’t think I can either, no you better have it.”

We went back and forth and in the end it was a bit of a joint effort, and we, half-blinded managed to get it on the ground safely. A bit angry, I did point out the seat belt signs, in spite of looking like a rebellious savage, he was actually respectfully apologetic. He was a very likeable ‘enfant terrible’.

The stretched limo pulled up and they piled in. Then one band member still in his shades with one boot on the door rim, holding a much awaited cigarette turned to us just before disappearing into the sumptuous leather interior.

“Hey, d’you guys wanna come to the show? If you do I’ll send the wheels back for you.”

Before Dave could decline I jumped in and accepted. It had to be more fun than sitting in the general aviation terminal drinking coffee and picking at the CM2s (the fond abbreviation for cold meal 2) an uninspiring collection of cold meats, tasteless tomatoes and limp lettuce.

“Alright, cool, we’ll send the car back to get you guys.”

An hour later we were climbing in the limo and heading for Princes Street downtown. The chauffeur was a jolly Scotsman who entertained us with pithy, no-nonsense banter – lots of och’s and eye’s.

“I don’t know what the concert’ll be like,” he said, clocking the Captain in his rear view, “They were talking a lot about pissin’ and shaggin’ like on the way down, so I don’t reckon it’ll be too ref-eyend, you know what I min?”

The distant thumping of the music was audible from way down the high street. It was fun watching people trying to peer into the limo to see if we were famous, they took one look at me and got right back to their kebabs. I looked bad enough but the captain looked positively cuboid – hardly heavy rock entourage. The driver dropped us round the back, and we rang a bell by the stage door. A few moments later the door opened and there stood what I can only, at my most charitable describe as a sun-deprived, malnourished, filthy, etiolated, ‘toxed’ out freak.

“Yeah?” he managed to drone, drawing heavily on his roll-up.

“Oh hi,” I said trying to sound slouchy and cool but feeling decidedly like Julie Andrews.

“We are the pilots who flew the band up, they invited us to the show.”

He confirmed this on his walkie-talkie in a voice so elastic he made Keith Richards sound like Brian Blessed doing King Lear. He wore a sleeveless T-shirt with some Gothic axe wielder on the front, his arms were so white and thin I saw not even a suggestion of a bicep. He had not been within five hundred miles of a photon for years. I’d seen more tissue density on my neighbour’s greyhound.

“Yeah, it’s me downstairs, I’ve got a couple of cats here say they bought the band up or sumfink. Is it cool yeah?” He looked us up and down through his fringe and said in a nasally groan, “Yeah ok it’s a rap,” and signalled us

through the door with a jerk of his head. His hair fell straight down over his eyes, perhaps he found his way in life by echolocation.

The music got louder and louder as we climbed the stairs, through each fire door it thumped further into my chest, God we still had two flights and a long corridor to go! We had seats effectively in the royal box (though I doubted 'her maj' would be putting a show in this evening). Decibels rose with each swing door, I was biting my lip with laughter eyeing the Captain who was looking uneasy – nervous whistling, always a telltale sign. We opened the door at the back of the box, and, voila, the living, writhing Hieronymus Bosch party. Inches from the box, stood a nine storey stack of speakers and down below armies of long haired rockers were screaming and shouting punching their fists in the air and thrashing their heads in a ghoulish frenzy. They were like things possessed.

“What extraordinary behaviour,” shouted the Captain in my ear in his best British accent. We were actually watching the support group who, if my memory serves me rightly were called ‘The Scum’ or something equally tasty. After finishing the song, a band member thanked the audience and shouted at the front of the stage, “I want you all to say after me ... F*** YOU! Come on I can't hear ya ...”

This finished poor old Dave off, his expression was one of total and utter mystification. He sat down embarrassed and brushed some imaginary dust off his uniform. Some of the kids caught sight of us and stopped rolling their joints and slugging from their drink bags thinking we were cops. The band was whipping them up into a throbbing orgiastic melee and boy they were loving it.

The main band came on amid cheers and screams and fists going wild. There followed lots of screeching guitars, gyrating hips, rotating heads (that really must give them a headache). The backup girls were driving everyone crazy with their peaked caps, spilling cleavages, studded collars and high heels. One of the group approached the front of the stage and nearly kicked some poor bugger smartly in the face because he was not standing up like everybody else, he was on his feet before you could say f*** you.

We left after two tracks, with a heavy dose of tinnitus and laughed our way down the corridors and back outside. The vampire bat was not there to bid us adieu, but funnily enough the limo driver had judged the brevity of our innings and had waited for us.

“Aye, I thought it might not be yur thing like, bit loud eh?”

I could sense the palpable relief of my Captain as he picked up the Telegraph and folded it reassuringly as he had done so many times. We were through at least two sets of lights before the music finally faded.

The band turned up at the airport about eleven thirty buzzing from the performance, it had gone very well and they were in high spirits.

“Hey did ya like the show?” one of them asked me.

“You know I'm a bit of a George Benson girl myself, but it was great – a new experience.” I tried diplomatically. Actually I had had fun and thanked them for their invite. We flew them safely back to Heathrow where their limo was waiting. They all bounced about and got into the car rather untidily and haphazardly, you would never get a crazy wild musician just easing himself

quietly into the back seat and folding his coat on his knees and placing his broly on the floor. They have to sort of leap and skip about, and walk round the car a couple of times or lean on the bonnet and have a smoke before they actually get in. Great fun. One of them shook my hand and nudged my shoulder with his fist saying “Cool, thanks a lot man” and off they rocked to the next party.

We had a drink together, filled in the paperwork, and through the open door of the little jet, watched the line of landing lights as planes descended heedfully towards ‘terra firma’ at Heathrow. Some of those on board may have breakfasted far away in Singapore. I glanced at my work roster for the rest of the week. I certainly couldn’t complain about lack of variety, the next day I was flying a Saudi princess, talk about two extremes. We’d be swapping the black leather catsuits for the black yashmak.

The Sixpence and the Private Jet

Golf Delta Bravo India India was her name. Double India to us, and David Brown, (the second) I guess, was its owner. A wonderful new addition to the fleet not only because she had bright orange stripes, but she was a Citation 560 not a 550 so had more updated avionics and a rather plush interior and went faster! We had in our fleet G-JETA, G-JETB, and G-JETC, but along came a completely new registration and because it was the owners initials (David Brown) it certainly wasn’t going to be G-JETD!

The North of England was the stomping ground for this plane, that’s where this very successful family empire was based. Inside the hangar at Teeside was a company Land Rover, which could be used for towing the aircraft around if necessary.

Bill, my Captain, who loved a bit of a ‘Clarkson’ type lark about, put his own interpretation on this and one wintry afternoon after a flight, he said, “Fancy a ride in the Land Rover?”

“Sure, why not.”

Come to think of it he did look like a cross between Martin Shaw of ‘The Professionals’ and Jeremy Clarkson. Of course the trip to the hotel was, what you could call ‘the circuitous route’ which meant a half-hour ‘burn up’ on the scraggy heather covered moors. We climbed up steep hillsides in the high traction mode, clambered over rocks and went bombing downhill bouncing over tufts of gorse and heather.

“I didn’t know you did rally driving on the side!” I grinned as my head hit the ceiling and my flight bag flew off the back seat.

The late, low sun leaked just a touch of pink and mauve into an otherwise grey sky and the wind was driving the clouds across it. It was chilly and clear and from the top we had a superb view of the River Tees and the town of Middlesbrough. Everything was going swimmingly until, an irate man in another Land Rover wearing a tweed cap came bouncing up and down towards

us shaking his fist and told us to clear off the land was private. So we did but Bill made sure he got a good 'getaway' ride down the hill to the road.

I flew 'double India' on several occasions, once I came back from Reims in France where some passengers had done the famous champagne tour. I was describing this and details of David Brown's aeroplane to my mum that evening and she told me a story which I rather cherished.

"Oh yes, I remember the original David Brown very well, he was the founder of David Brown and Sons in Park Works, Lockwood near Huddersfield, they used to manufacture huge worm gears, they were the same generation as my grandparents."

She explained how he had three sons David, Frank and Percy.

"My dad worked in the factory, he forgot his tea one day, so, aged about eight, I went up to the factory gates where he was working nights. Percy who was dressed like the proper Victorian gentleman in a grey suit with a flower in his buttonhole saw me at the gates clutching a bag containing my dad's supper."

"Hello love, what's your name?"

"Joan."

"And what can I do for you love?"

"This is my dad's tea, my mum sent me to give it to him."

"You're a lovely little girl aren't you? I'll go and find him."

"Thank you."

Before he went he put his hand through the iron gates and patted her on the head affectionately and gave her a shiny new sixpence. That was a huge sum for a child in the early thirties and she absolutely treasured it.

How ironical that now I should be flying the private jet belonging to the next generation. But talk about full circle, she then told me that when my brother was at boarding school, she dropped him off at the beginning of term and he asked mum for an extra pound so he could give it to his 'fag' as they were called. It was a tradition that the younger boys did odd chores (shoe polishing, etc.) for the seniors. The young lad who did odd jobs for my brother was none other than David Brown the great-great-grandson of the original founder. So the sixpence came back!

The chap whose plane I was crewing was known to my mum's generation as 'young David' back in the Yorkshire days. She went on:

"He had a super red MG sports car in the early thirties and always had pretty girls around. He was a bit of a playboy, and the company started a tractor manufacturing business for him to manage at Meltham to give him some purpose. He made a real success of it and eventually received a knighthood."

He ended up buying Aston Martin I believe, I guess that's where 'DB9' comes from, those famous initials again!

I was actually in Cannes in the South of France flying an eccentric wealthy American treasure hunter (one who dives for treasures on wrecked ships), when I heard the sad news of Sir David Brown's death. He was in the South of France when he died. What a great Northern family, I was so pleased to have

flown their jet briefly and happy that my mum could fill me in on those interesting details of their beginnings.

Sorry about nicking the Land Rover, it was fun though!

Impounded in Siberia

Our flight plan looked innocuous enough: first two nights: Kiev, second night: Stavropol then on to Izhevsk in Siberia. The client was in the oil business – a wealthy Dutchman and we were in a British aircraft, the HS125, or “Ha-kerr” as the Americans call it. It had belonged to the Nigerian president so we were mindful of its previous life – bullet holes in the wing etc! We took off from Stansted and cruised across the skies of Europe experiencing the gradual decline in air traffic control as we went east. The American voices controlling Berlin give you that safe feeling, but once you say goodbye to them, you are off into the multiplying unknown where heavy Slavic accents shout out heights in meters (“mare-tus”) instead of feet and transmissions can be very muffled. Some of those controllers sound as though they have buckets on their heads!

We landed safely on a frozen December morning into a bleak Kiev. The only movement on the barren landscape was the up and down of the hares as they padded resiliently across the fields, somehow steeled against the ‘knife edge’ wind. The ear shattering emissions of the taxiing Ilyushin and Tupolov aircraft just feet away didn’t seem to bother the denizens of this airfield– these were hardy hares indeed.

We secured the aircraft, carefully putting all the external covers on, and took a taxi to the hotel. The driver tore around at breakneck speed, slowing only to point out where we could buy caviar and Russian dolls, he was probably on commission. The hotel had a retro grandeur, a seriously impressive entrance with pillars and flags. The doormen were dressed like courtiers of a bygone age, white feather plumes and lots of gold braid.

The rooms were a staggering \$200 per night which for 1994 was plenty and when I saw the room it went from plenty to daylight robbery. The registration was slow and archaic, forms in triplicate, town of father’s birth, other ridiculous detail. We were presented with a key with a brass bowling ball on the end, there would be no pinching them! The room was standard ‘Eastern Bloc’ for *that* time – small and dark, the water from the tap dribbled out in a beer brown cascade into a huge stained bath, the bath mat was wooden strips, and the supplies were spartan. A dim bulb hung from the ceiling, giving it a rather gloomy feel. The wallpaper was parting company with the wall and the bed was a bit creaky. I must say having been back to Kiev in 2007 it is an entirely different place, contemporary, buzzing cosmopolitan and filled with beautiful high end hotels.

I tried to make a phone call. It involved a decoding sheet – if your room number was between one and two hundred then you dial *this*; if you were between two and four hundred, you dial *that*. This was just for local calls, for international you needed to have done a season at Bletchley Park. I called the

lobby – all international lines were down anyway, they said. So like every pilot on a night stop, I headed for the bar.

“Twenty dollars!” I exclaimed as I saw the tab for a beer, still this was cheap compared to the \$45 they wanted for the spaghetti bolognese. It is incredible how these countries are all primed to fleece every hard currency guest. The leap from communism to capitalism has certainly created opportunity for a bit of ‘ripping off’ here and there! A pair of tights was \$25 in the hotel shop.

Just before midnight we saw our passenger alight from a big Mercedes and enter the foyer. He told us he had ordered a tour guide for the following day to show us round the city. I accepted gratefully, he expressed his wish for us to enjoy the city because the places we were going to after this were “somewhat less comfortable”. A sense of foreboding came over me, visions of frozen grey landscapes, food shortages, and the smell of Chernobyl. I am glad I did not know *then*, how bad this trip was going to become.

After the \$30 breakfast, I went to meet my guide. She was a rotund rosy cheeked lady with a long purple scarf and matching hat, she wore big furry boots, a long coat had raven black hair, and a ring squeezed onto each of her little fat fingers. Here was the living babushka doll. The Captain declined so off the two of us went to explore the wonders of Kiev, a city rich in culture and history. Beautiful monuments, museums and churches resplendent with gilt offered welcome colour under the drab December sky. She recited her ‘blurb’ on the history of Kievan-Rus, of its founding brothers, the migration of Slavic people, the glory of past eras in this, the mother of the Eastern cities.

The medieval glory of monuments such as the Byzantine cathedral of St Sophia and the stunning Baroque churches of the eighteenth century contrasted sharply to the austere ‘battleship’ grey constructions built in the style she called Stalinist classicism – perfect style and proportion but lacking warmth and passion, (a bit like the mass murderer himself I suppose) they looked cheerless and grim in the slanting rain, not a Baroque blunder or a Rococo riddle anywhere to soften the hard lines.

Back at the hotel I met Alain the Captain to discuss tomorrow’s details. We’d leave at eight o’clock for Stavropol, he’d contacted our handling agent, everything was set. Of course you always have to add what we affectionately call ‘buggeration factor’ when operating in these parts so we agreed to meet two hours early. The morning brought nothing new weather wise. An angry, bruised sky frowned down on us, thick, rain-filled stratus cloud scudded along just above our heads. Freezing drizzle fell, it was grim. We refuelled, signed for the catering and ordered the de-icing (which cost an amazing \$1000) making the total bill for two nights into something resembling a phone number.

The passengers arrived, their spirits up, the oil business was obviously buoyant. We read the check list, buckled up and called for taxi. I looked at the Jeppeson charts, these are what help us to navigate the world. They are huge flimsy maps folded up to diary size, covered with thousands of routes, airways, beacons, reporting points, airports and anything else that helps to furnish us

with our situational awareness and confer reference on the ever changing landscape below.

The flight went well, though the ‘comms’ sounded like gobbledygook at times. When we were cleared for descent, Alain retarded the throttles and lowered the nose into the gloom. The outside air temperature was minus twenty, they had no recorded weather information but we knew what to expect. The navigation beacons were the old NDBs – non directional beacons as opposed to the more accurate VORs which is a VHF omni range. Fortunately we had a hand held sat nav. The cloud base was about five hundred feet, we descended on the instrument landing system and touched down onto an exceptionally rough and snow covered airfield dotted with old abandoned Russian aircraft and a 1930s style tower. I’d tried repeatedly to contact the handling agent, but my transmissions went unanswered. The purpose of a handling agent is to ensure limousines are awaiting the passengers, to handle customs and immigration, do all the paperwork and provide all the ancillary services. After a long wait a couple of fearsome men marched up in sweeping grey coats and standard Russian mink hats, guns slung over shoulders and handed us a thick wodge of paperwork. The archaic, dinosaur style bureaucracy which slows these places down is really depressing. The papers, which felt just like the old school loo paper had to be filled out in triplicate. No one could move until they were done.

The general idea in, shall we say, more ‘civilised’ airports is that the passengers are met by a well groomed multilingual girl in a smart suit with a nice smile who cannot do enough for them, they are then whisked away speedily, their bags loaded. *We*, however, were all bundled into a rusty clapped out mini bus and driven (in first gear all the way) to a dilapidated concrete building. When they could finally find no more paperwork for us, we were released. Fortunately the boss and his colleagues had come here many times, knew the ropes and took it all in their stride. This attitude is a godsend for the pilots who are frequently blamed for the cockups.

A Russian navigator named Sergei would accompany us on the next leg of our journey to a place called Izhevsk where nobody would speak English and for which we had no approach plates...we were to meet him in the hotel. We motored precariously over snow covered roads, skidding and sliding. The defog blower despite its loud noise, managed only two half-moons of clear screen at the bottom which had our driver cocking his head at a right angle to see out. The snow now came at us horizontally and we were defended nobly by two frantic windscreen wipers. I cleared a patch on the window with the back of my hand which turned black. There was nothing to see in the lifeless monochrome landscape. We met Sergei and had dinner with him at the hotel (God if we had known just *how* much we were going to need this guy!). The place was quite a bit worse than last night, towel and soap getting smaller, and now a linoleum floor with iron framed bed. There was no décor apart from a faded picture of the Virgin Mary. I was grateful for seven years of boarding school in the 1970s – it was a good grounding for all this.

I heard the encouraging sound of a band as I walked through the foyer, then on entering the dining room I saw three guys on a stage wearing blue

velvet suits, ruffle shirts and gigantic bowties which matched their cummerbunds. The lady wore a blue velvet suit and shiny pink blouse and blue patent zip up boots. Her hair, so utterly fatigued from years of bleach just did not move, her chest and waist were somehow one, and this merry ensemble were chirping out Spanish Eyes. What topped it all was the bucket in the middle of the dance floor to catch the drips from the leaking ceiling. Mmmm wonder what the menu is going to be like! As it happened I did not need to worry because there wasn't one. They brought you food and that was that. It was the 'keep it simple philosophy'.

The band were now encouraged by the arrival of the fourth guest and launched into a medley of cheesy popular songs, 'Please release me' was amongst them, funny – that one stuck in my memory. Resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't be sipping 'Saint Emillion' tonight, Alain ordered 'the' wine – there was only one type. I am not fussy and I was ready for a drink, but this truly made my eyes water. The waiter returned, and with an apologetic gesture lowered a plate in front of us the contents of which bore a remarkable resemblance to the stuff you scrape off the barbecue before it goes into the garage for the winter. We tucked into the bread and the thick skinned tomatoes which sat on a cushion of the brightest oiliest mayonnaise I had ever seen. The band was grooving along now, still no dancers though – maybe the bucket was a deterrent.

Sergei briefed us during this feast – he'd do all the radio work and translate instructions. He had all appropriate charts, etc. He brought out some pictures of his wife and kids. It seemed he had the sort of wife who made a few days in sub-zero Siberian hell holes, a not altogether unpleasant break. Then he showed us some shots of the plane he flew. I had never seen anything like it. The navigator sits in a room downstairs from the cockpit, there was a desk and a curved window rather like a small bed and breakfast; and then a horrifying array of ancient instruments and slide rules. I was waiting for the sextant. We exchanged stories planned an eight o'clock meet then went to bed – the band had that cocked head, raised eyebrow plea on their faces which said 'please don't go'.

A quite savage day awaited us, huge snowfalls overnight dumped great piles on the tree branches which drooped and bowed under the weight. Once in the taxi, we trundled down the treacherous road back to the airport. The inefficiency was absolutely staggering. Although we paid a hefty bill for handling services, there was no transport, we all had to drag our own bags across half a mile of treacherous icy taxiway in a brutal and biting wind to get to our aircraft. How grateful I was for my ski boots and thermals. An Aeroflot 727-ski as we call them taxied past creating great swirling clouds of snow almost blinding me. You would never be this exposed on a ramp in Europe. I could not dispel the caterwauling strains of a Gene Pitney voice from my head. Chorusing "Oh Mis-ery, Mis-er-eeee".

We reached the HS125 aircraft which was covered with ice. Defiant stalactites hung like daggers from the leading edge of the wing. With frozen hands, Alain the Captain, put the key in the lock of the door – frozen solid. We did the trusty Zippo lighter trick and held the flame to thaw the lock. We

opened the door and climbed in. Our breath issued out in little clouds of fog, the remnants of some coffee had frozen in a cup. The first task on taking over a dead aircraft is to start up the APU (Auxiliary power unit). This is a small jet engine with a generator which provides electrical and pneumatic power on the ground so you can have wonderful things like radios, lighting and more importantly – *HEAT*.

That frozen, godforsaken morning in Stravropol was the first time I'd ever known the APU not start, due to cold! A little door on top of the aircraft has to open to allow induction air in and it was frozen solid. There followed a 'Monty Python' sketch in which Alain had to give me a leg up onto the wing, which was like an ice rink. I had so many layers on, I slid around like a fat skittle. Rather than flick-flacking up there like Spiderman I was more like a penguin, arms flapping, sliding along on my tummy unable to find stability anywhere, I climbed onto the engine nacelle by placing one foot on the intake and heaving myself most unceremoniously onto the slippery round engine. Alain was encouraging me with fine chatter like you'd give to a colleague caught on a cliff face as you talk them into the harness. Once on top I could reach over with my Swiss army knife and smash the ice away from the intake door. I descended precariously and 'de-winged' backwards tumbling back onto the snow. After several attempts, the APU coughed complainingly into life.

Banging our hands together to keep circulation, we tried to contact the agent to order the de-icing equipment. Not a soul was out there. Sergei spoke to the tower frequency, they shunned all responsibility for ground activities – we would have to find ground staff. Easier said than done as in these temperatures they are not exactly milling around to see if everything is ok. They are huddled in a portakabin jostling for position round the fire, flicking dreamily through brochures of Cypriot beaches.

Sergei went to find the de-icing. Meanwhile we thought it wise to try and start an engine. Up on to the wing again and with my head and half my body disappearing into the tunnel of the intake, I scraped the loose snow off the fan blades at the front of the compressor. Back in the cockpit we attempted a start – nothing, no rotation – engines were frozen. A tired old truck of wartime vintage, with bulbous wheel arches and round headlamps trundled up and two men alighted – their heavy wool hats had the flaps *down*. They unravelled yards of canvas hosing. This was the heater to thaw our engines. Alain hauled himself onto the wing and held the end of this hosing into the engine mouth. It took almost an hour to raise the temperature enough to initiate a start. We took turns to hold this 'elephant trunk' heating tube. Finally we got the engines turning and burning and turned our attentions back to the more sinister problem of aircraft ice.

Amidst all this adversity, I must say Alain my Captain never lost his sense of humour. He's an independently wealthy English/Lebanese guy (who lives in Nice and London), he smokes cigars, likes the good life and he flies because he loves it. His runway line up checks were; "full tanks, ray-bans on!" God he made me laugh because he had Italian leather shoes on with thin socks! For fun we spoke Pidgin English because we'd both lived in Nigeria. The catchphrase of that trip became "We are havin' de time of our lives". He never

let things get him down. He took frequent cigar breaks during which he would wander off into the blizzard as if he were Captain Oats about to say those famous last words – “I may be some time” – only to stand behind some tractor or blast fence, and savour the aroma of his Cuban cigar. It was one of the funniest things I had ever seen because by the end of the smoke the snow would have advanced up to his knees and his nose was the colour of a tomato. I was not surprised when one of his friends told me that during a ski trip in Val d’Isere he had fallen while off piste and when they found him three hours later buried up to his neck, he was – yes – smoking a cigar quite calmly.

The de-icing mixture was about as useful as an ashtray on a motorbike. It was actually freezing on flow back. The next thing in this ghastly nightmare, the passengers turned up, and we were far from ready. They were just happy to sit there in a warm aircraft and drink coffee. Fortunately we had jumbo supplies of Marks and Spencer’s instant cappuccino. After a couple of hours of pathetic and futile de-icing, the light faded. The ice stuck determinedly to the wings and windows. Our navigator shouted tirades of undecipherable Slavic at the ground crew but it was all in vain. The blizzard just kept dumping more snow on the super cooled surfaces and freezing into another layer of ice. We had no choice but to abandon the flight and return to the hotel. The only way to secure a take-off the next morning was to get the plane into a hangar and keep her warm. We were told there was no room, naturally all hangarage was kept for Aeroflot aircraft – I could feel some Yankee dollars exchanging hands shortly. It always amazes me how the ‘Uncle Sams’ especially in neatly wrapped up bundles can thaw the most icy of demeanours and elicit nods and activity from previously unhelpful officials, to say nothing of miraculously creating space in hangars that were full five minutes ago.

The passengers left and Alain and I prepared to taxi the plane to a hangar. We pushed the throttles way up above normal RPM then realised the wheels were frozen to the concrete, so we stepped out into an arctic wind and crazy whirring snowflakes and tried to dig the snow and ice away from the wheels. By now we were both frozen to the bone, no feeling in my feet, poor Alain must have felt he was walking on stumps. No wonder Napoleon, Hitler and whomever else, had got a well-deserved hiding when they attempted to take this place. Russia is not for wimps! If you were a woolly mammoth then maybe ok! After applying a huge surge of power we moved carefully forward over the frozen tarmac. *Clunk* went the wheel down a pothole. We used differential thrust on the engines to try and free ourselves.

“Could you get out and marshal me in, it’s a bit tight?” Alain asked, so I jumped out and ran into the hangar. It was quite a sight, the exhaust whipped up the snow and it swirled around violently in two huge tunnels resembling small horizontal tornadoes. I gave Alain the hand signals and he crept into the hangar, it was excruciatingly noisy – what a relief when he chopped those engines. A couple of mechanics were eating pickled eggs and drinking vodka at the back of the hangar. They nodded and cocked their heads as if to say ‘relax it will be ok here’. There was of course no transport so we trudged, heads down, back to the terminal building – a flattering name for the concrete

block from which wire cables protruded. We climbed a filthy slushy stairwell to find Sergie who'd gone to file the flight plan for tomorrow.

There he was at a desk pouring over maps doing everything by hand using slide rules and a straight edge. Grey computers the size of filing cabinets stood in the corners. My mind drifted off to the operation room at Zurich where you stand in front of an electronic world map, touch any area and with that reassuring high speed k-shhh k-shhh sound of the laser printer, out comes your weather report. The agent then produces your computer flight plan in seconds with all the frequencies, beacons waypoints, fuel burns and everything else your heart desires on it! It is handed to you by the immaculately dressed Carl with shiny gold cufflinks and just the right amount of pure white shirt sleeve showing below the creaseless navy suit and, of course the perfect Swiss watch – probably an atomic watch guaranteed to lose no more than a nanosecond per Millennium. On this perfect pile of paperwork is a Swiss chocolate with the Matterhorn on it– with compliments.

I looked around, no it wasn't Switzerland – we waited patiently while he ploughed through what looked like the original navigation exam set by the Civil Aviation Authority at flight school and with which every pilot will be sorely familiar. It was not *quite* 'half earth convergency times the sine of the parallel of origin'... but it was nonetheless bloody long winded whatever it was he was doing. He was extracting sunset and sunrise information from old almanacs, like an eighteenth century savant from the Royal Greenwich observatory. Two burly pilots chatted in the corner and I heard lots of "schnitzens, neeyets and pooshka" type of words, not an unpleasant sounding language, in fact very attractive and earthy. They drew heavily on cigarettes, had thick moustaches and wore full length wool coats and fur hats. Probably wondered what the hell I was doing there ... for that matter *I* was wondering the same thing!

Another night there brought nothing new, the band hadn't changed their repertoire but after a bottle of the chateau sputnik they actually sounded quite good and I was tapping my feet. The trusty bucket still stood isolated in the middle of the floor, catching the water plops.

Next day, same weather. We agreed to be completely ready to taxi before moving from the hangar, that way we would not turn into an ice sculpture. I was dispatched to pay the bill. As I marched head down through the blizzard, I was muttering that *THEY* should be paying *us* for this godforsaken stay. The next scene was more withering inefficiency. There was one tiny window around which thirty or so people pushed and shoved, some trying to elicit information others trying to buy tickets, all were shouting and all getting nowhere. I unfortunately had to wait in this queue. I went upstairs to try and find *anyone* official but there was just the miserable empty ops room from last night where Sergie had worked. At this point I was cursing everything Soviet, Yuri Gregarin, Lenin, Rasputin; even Olga Korbut got a derisory mutter.

I stood for ages inching my way forward, tempers were fraying. When it was my turn I presented her with the aircraft registration and asked for the bill. She looked at the paper, then looked at me with total and utter vacancy then drew her shoulders up to her ears and put two hands up in the air. She shouted

to the back for help. The three thousand US dollars in my bag made me a bit furtive. Out came a comrade from the back, his face like he had just sucked a lemon. He tossed my papers back at me and mouthed exaggeratedly as though I were deaf.

“Priv-ayte flight, upstairs!” I protested loudly back to him that there was no one ‘upstairs’ I *must* pay, we were waiting to take-off, and if they did not help me NOW I was leaving without paying. Since there was no liaison, maybe I should have just left, it would have gone unnoticed. He gestured me to follow him, up the slushy stairwell we climbed, past the mangy cat – poor beast, no food here, even the mice would throw themselves on the traps.

In the pokey little office he asked me what services we had had.

“Hangarage, one night, and de-icing which did not work,” I returned. He jabbed at his calculator.

“Three thousand dollars,” I knew it was dodgy so I tossed my head back, folded my arms and stared at him. He read that correctly – international body language for ‘do you think I’m stupid’.

“Sorry sorry one moment please...” He jabbed earnestly at the calculator trying to convince me he was using some sort of formula to work out the bill. “Ok ok three hundred dollars! Is ok, is ok” It reminded me of haggling over Polo shirts in Bangkok. I peeled off three crisp notes and placed them on his desk, he was well pleased.

I hurried back to the aircraft, brushed the snow off my coat and took my seat, it was cozy, Sergei was in the jump seat. After the checks and a thorough brief we lined up. Alain advanced the throttles, I called eighty knots (a good moment) then ‘V1’ (take-off speed) a very good moment. We lost sight of the ground at two hundred feet. The fuselage gathered in all her extremities, the wheel tucked up into the belly, the flaps slid back into the wing, the machine tightened up ready for high speed flight. We were all unaware then that the place we had left was a veritable Shangri-La compared to the little treasure of Siberia we were headed for.

Sergei took care of all radio transmissions; we certainly could not have managed without him. I tuned in frequencies, read check lists and kept the plog and finally gave flaps and undercarriage according to Alain’s request, while he, glued to the instruments, flew the plane. With normal levels of pandemonium we landed off a Non Directional Beacon approach (NDB). These are not renowned for their pinpoint accuracy, even when the needles are reading spot on, it is not unusual to break cloud and see the runway in your two o’clock, so swift alignment manoeuvres are necessary. Mmmm this runway made the last one look like a billiard table. So here we were in Izhevsk, to me that sounded like Slavic for ‘Grim’. It was a numbingly depressing barren landscape – the sort of place which you would come to if you had six months to live because it would seem like six years. Here was a place of inconceivable hideousness. (See picture of airport loo.)

Unbeknown to us, there had been a rather serious screw up in the paperwork by our handling agent at Stansted in the UK. Normally all airports and all FIRs (Flight Information Region) must be informed (by fax) of all the details – time and purpose of flight, over flight times, points of entry and exit

into *that* particular airspace and permission to use that airport. (I have found that the grottier the destination the more demanding and difficult they are – as if they think we actually *enjoyed* going to these hell holes.)

The handling agent in UK had inadvertently omitted Izhevsk from the list of ‘must contact’ mistaking it for some Belarus airport – maybe the four letter identifier code was similar. So some Belarus airport now had all our details and *this* place had nothing on us! Izhevsk was politically sensitive being the home of the Kalashnikov rifle and utterly unused to ‘G’ registered planes. They had no record of our coming nor had they given permission. The increased volume in Sergie’s voice told me he was getting hassled. Then he ran out of rebuttals. He went from aggressor to victim in five short minutes. He slipped off the headset, looked at us like a condemned man and said slowly, “They say you hev no owthority to be in zis place.”

“Hey no problem,” I chirped, “we don’t want to offend anyone, let’s leave.”

Unfortunately it was not that simple. Hefty guards glad to relieve months of boredom approached eager to exercise their rusting authority. They climbed on board and a heated debate followed featuring lots of ‘shnitz-ing and neeyetkov-ing’ once again. The boss, very perplexed because of upcoming meetings told us he was taking an Aeroflot flight out of there and we should stay and sort it out.

The plane was impounded, we were stuck there. Boris a tall Russian who spoke very little English was our ‘man’, he tried to help us but proved ineffectual against the powers that be. There was no telephone service and the mobile could not reach England. We were left with just the HF radio (High Frequency) with which, if you are lucky it is possible to obtain a phone patch via one of the stations – Portishead in England or Stockholm in Sweden. We tried fruitlessly to reach anybody who could help us, but we were well and truly...buggered!

The thin watery light of day faded – night fell. Turning to Boris, we enquired about a hotel, he looked at us with pity.

“Zer is not so good hotel in Izhevsk,” was his apologetic summary of the situation. Alain tried to console me with comforting allusions to hot bath, nice meal and bottle of wine. We wrapped up like ice mummies, cut the APU, locked her up and trudged miserably over to a friend of Boris’s who had a waiting car. There was simply no call for hotels in a place like this, it would be like planting attractive flower beds round a rubbish tip. They were trawling their minds for somewhere to take us. At least they were trying to help. The car was knackered, loads of pendulous junk swung from the mirror. But at least we were in a car.

The town was a faceless, devastatingly depressing collection of grey concrete buildings all uniform in height and shape. In their broken English (which was far superior to our broken Russian) they said we should try the mental hospital which would probably be the only place to receive us. There was a pervading sense of doom. After a little uneasy shifting in my seat I asked timidly if there was any plan B at all. I had images of emaciated pyjamad nutters with shaved heads and staring eyeballs grasping their heads as in

Munch's painting 'The Scream'. The severely disturbed wandering around on lino floors while blood curdling screams came from tormented souls locked in icy attics. Images of straightjackets and injections drifted past and I shivered. God I would never again deride Hiltons for being 'all the same wherever you go'. Sensing our ill ease, the car suddenly swung off the road and headed out of town.

Poor old Sergei had stayed at the airport under instructions, I was beginning to wonder if he'd got the better deal. The picture was starting to take on a Beckettian absurdity. There we were hurling around the frozen wilderness of Siberia, a Captain from Nice – female co-pilot from Ascot – clutching bottle of Nuits St George just in case it is last drink ever; Boris the bold whose hat must have seen off an entire mink farm (and who, I have been told since writing this has been shot by the mafia); then his friend who drove like a maniac whilst chain smoking, and finally the driver's son who turned to us in the back, and stared at us continuously like he had been abducted by aliens. Occasional chuckles of pidgin came from Alain, my Lagos buddy.

"We are havin' de time of our lives – no be so?"

The car screeched to a halt.

"This can't be it?" I laughed nervously.

"Be ready for anything," was Alain's reply.

"But we're in the middle of a bloody wood."

With that the door was flung open and Boris's friend was removing our bags. So this was our hotel for the night, a shack in the woods. I stood knee deep in snow. The wind was so strong, the moon was positively cantering across the sky behind the clouds. Then dogs began to bark and snarl. I glanced furtively around, the dogs/wolves were standing in the snow between us and the front door. Boris told me *not* to look straight at them and it would be ok. Well, I thought, here I am in a *real* life Grimms fairy tale. I should have worn my Red cape!

I started wading through the snow muttering ridiculous things like "There's a good boy" in an unconvincing whimper as their top lips curled back revealing impressive canines. I am no vet but *that* particular expression is 'beast-speak' for "I want to eat you" isn't it? They barked at us with hostility giving me that 'being in the thick of things' feeling. I had to see the funny side of tramping through a Siberian forest being howled at by wolves under a full moon dragging a Delsey suitcase with heated rollers and a full complement of aromatherapy bath oils in it – when what I *really* needed was a gun, an axe and a small bottle of suicide pills. It's *always* tricky knowing what to pack.

Our driver exchanged some pleading words with the warmly wrapped chubby lady who was obviously running the place – whatever it was – digs for wood choppers maybe. She then took us up some stairs, there were two small corridors of about five rooms separated by a common room which had one of those folding football tables. I was almost joyous at the thought of at least playing a bit of table football, then noticed both plastic goals were missing. It was like the smallest grottiest student common room in the worst polytechnic imaginable. Alain lit a cigar and said, "Ok, maybe we take a rain check on the meal, wine and hot bath!"

Wondering if there was a loo or a basin we ventured downstairs where the hefty lady – of many aprons and no English – gestured toward the toilet, just one, which needed a coin. Since we only had \$100 dollar bills, she kindly gave us an advance. The only water was a cold faucet in a huge white ceramic sink. With a bit of sign language we asked if there might be anything to eat. She waddled in front of us with a rocking gate signalling us to follow. In the ‘dining room’ there were four Formica tables with wooden stools. Two rugged labourers sat at a table ripping apart giant crusts of bread with battered red hands the size of spades and washed it down with tumblers of vodka which they poured from a bottle. The label on the bottle was by now familiar – Cyrillic writing, black triangles and back to front R’s and K’s. They slammed the glasses down, and dragged their wrists over their mouths as they refilled, one of them blowing his cheeks out to suppress a belch. They nodded acknowledgment at us, one smiled, he was missing a front tooth. We must have been a puzzle to them. By now everyone involved in this ‘Hotel California’, her daughter and a handyman had gathered to come and see us. They were very friendly and I was grateful for that basic humanity which resides deep within most of us. She put a bottle of Vodka in front of us and a serious knuckle of bread with some fatty salami. We made merry, and after three of those vodkas I was in a chalet in the Italian Alps having antipasta and the two woodchoppers were gorgeous; downhill ski champion Alberto Tomba and swarthy friend.

Piling on every piece of clothing I had, I snuggled down in the child size bed, which felt like one of those remedial boards you sleep on after a slipped disc. Snow fell in outsize flakes and the wind howled and whistled, but the wolves seemed to have padded off elsewhere. I slept.

Boris came for us in the morning and drove us to the airport. Our aircraft now was just a big mound of snow.

“We are going to need a spade,” I moaned.

“Get your Visa card out and start digging, we don’t have a spade,” joked Alain, this was followed by another “Time of my life”.

The bureaucracy – a vestige of the old regime, is quite simply crippling. No matter how enthusiastic and resourceful you are, reaching the ‘powers that be’ is impossible even if you have the negotiating skills of Condoliza Rice. Apologies, explanations, pleading – it was all futile. I spent that entire day on the HF radio trying to acquire a phone patch to our operations in the UK to ask for help. We drank endless cups of coffee or chocolate and used the loo in the airport building which was so utterly disgusting it looked like a murder scene. I recoiled in horror with my hand over my mouth when I first saw this festering toilet. A cubical with no door, a black rancid hole in the floor the edges of which were rotten, putrid and covered with mould and slime. A broom was propped up against the wall, and strips of torn up newspaper in a brown plastic bin. The stench hit you like a boxing glove and the whole place was under a shallow layer of liquid – god only knows what.

“Oh don’t exaggerate Anita!” I knew people would say, so I took pictures (please check out the photo!).

Desperation was upon us. It was becoming dark and grisly. I did not find out this next snippet of rather interesting information until many months later back in England, but Gillian (Alain's wife) was really going through hell, this is what she told me a long time after... This incident had been *very* serious indeed to the point where she was expecting to read it in the Sunday papers.

She was dealing with a Russian called Cherkasov who was responsible for permits and clearances. He was furious. The Russians were extremely sensitive about breaches of security after Mathias Russt, an adventurous German, managed to get past security and land bang in the middle of Red Square in a light aircraft. When Inflight at Stansted had requested our exit permit, he and his team had said words to the effect of "Exit permit? hang on, where is the *Entry* permit"? And that's when trouble began.

Nobody wanted to take responsibility, so therefore each person was desperately giving their excuses exonerating themselves in order to avoid a sacking! Alas not even the British Embassy would help her, least of all a Squadron Leader Wheelbarrow (no joke) the resident military attaché.

This was before mobile phones and Gillian had sleepless nights trying to help us escape. With HF and phone patch as the only means of communication you had to go through the "over" and "go ahead" stuff which made it clumsy that is ... if you could get though at all! On top of this was the time difference to think about. Cherkasov called us brigands and pirates and apparently got very nasty. In the end after lengthy machinations with border defence and aerospace heavyweights, Cherkovsky suddenly decided we could go, *only* to Moscow for fuel and then leave immediately and never return... Sounded like a super plan to me!

Our passenger was naturally concerned for our welfare in Siberia and his expensive private jet, it was he who had dispatched Boris the English speaker with some blankets and food! The reason Sergei our navigator had been 'dismissed' was because he was Ukrainian and the Russian authorities at Izhevsk took a dim view. They didn't like each other so he had to leave – not a cheery prospect when impounded in Siberia and your English speaking navigator is waving at you in from the back window as he is driven away to 'destinations unknown' with an apologetic look on his face.

The times of the day effect the heights of the ionosphere (the layer of atmosphere off which our radio waves bounce) so transmission is not always successful. Hour after frustrating hour trudged past as I sat with the headphones on trying to make contact. I was tuned in on 11306 Megahertz when suddenly Speedbird (British Airways) came crackling in calling Stockholm. There followed five minutes of chat at readability one (weak reception). Stockholm suggested 10291. Readability strength goes to three. My heart quickens like a crash victim's in the mountains when hearing the first thrashing of helicopter blades. Then I listened to the most extraordinary conversation, Speedbird pilot had requested phone patch and had got through. A little piping Scottish female voice, like a lark comes on the air.

"Hallo love."

"Hello, just to let you know I'm in Russia." (Oh good I thought he's out here too– misery seeks company!)

“I’ll be on the six o’clock shuttle hopefully,” continued Speedbird.

“Och that’s gree-t, will you pick up Ian and Eileen then and bring them round on your way home?”

“Yep I’ll do that no problem, everything OK love?”

“Aye everything’s just fiyne love, look forward to seeing ya later for dinner!”

“OK see you tonight ... Stockholm from Speedbird thanks for your help, over and out.”

Visions flew around my head. The husband picking up friends and returning full of anticipation to his wee lassie. Single malt being spun in cut glass tumblers, honeyed by the leaping flames in the grate, laughter, kilts, haggis steaming on the table with neeps and tatties. Wee bairns creeping downstairs in fluffy flannel pyjamas to kiss the guests. Warm tartan blankets thrown over comfy sofas. The men retiring to nurse balloons of brandy after supper. My head slumped against the glare shield, as I pictured more rancid toilets, icy water, granite beds, fatty cold meats, warm vodka – the type made from Bulgarian potato peelings, and all this lived out in a giant deep freeze.

We did finally contact Gillian who was trying hard to help us, but alas it was too late to achieve anything that day. The British embassy would not help us. Completely disheartened, we once again had to abandon the aircraft. Boris took us to a large austere building near the airport; it had all the welcoming charm of an abattoir. The foyer was simply enormous and bare, but for one tiny kiosk in the far corner, like an old ticket office in a provincial cinema. There were no keys because there were no locks. Good old Boris had pleaded our case with the strange woman in a kiosk. The woman who had no teeth, and a thick head scarf showed us up a staircase to a long linoleum corridor, with damp patches, and a flickering fluorescent light.

The door to my room was already open – a dog skulked out unhappily after she clapped her hands and hissed at it. I noticed a weeping sore on its hind leg. It had been having a well-earned rest on my bed, which now of course had become a giant flea colony. Being very allergic to animal hair, I could feel the hives itching already. Maybe it was too cold for fleas? Then I remembered from Biology O’level that they can survive for years in ice cubes and then burst into the most exuberant fiesta of life when the cube melts and spring off at the speed of light as though nothing had happened.

Alain and I drank a bottle of wine from the aircraft.

“We have to get out of here tomorrow, it’s the last bottle,” he laughed as he lit a cigar. There were no curtains to draw so we just looked out the window as the grey dish water sky of day turned unspectacularly into the blackness of night. We ate a few dry crackers off the aircraft and enjoyed the luxuries of an en suite bathroom. The big cracked tiles had dirty brown grout, the loo had no seat or lid and there were exposed pipes everywhere, there was just cold water and no soap or towel but having been in Siberia for what seemed like a year now this was beginning to clock up a few stars! Fortunately the sub-zero temperatures precluded the stench from this plumbing which I’m sure would otherwise have been face crumpling.

The next morning I looked outside and saw an old lady thrashing some rugs against the ground, I guessed she was the housekeeping service. Clouds of choking dust rose like a small bomb exploding with each pounding. Fortunately it *was* the last night, Alain's wife Gillian managed to negotiate with someone in authority who allowed us to take-off the next day. Because we were in the dog house, we were given permission to land at Moscow *just* to get fuel then we had to leave the country – they could have beaten me and made me do lines, anything just as long as I could get OUT. We will confess to our sins as long as we can head 270 degrees! V1 (point at which there is no abandoning the take-off) that next morning from Izhevsk was undiluted joy. We picked up our passenger from Sheremetyevo in Moscow and started for the long journey home. We shared stories en route, the passenger too had been through a few adventures! We all agreed it is amazing what *one* tiny slip up in the paperwork can cause.

I *did* return to Russia – the following year on a private Boeing 727, how different that was to be. We stayed in the Grand Kempinski near Red Square, enjoyed a sophisticated piano bar, ate caviar and slept in a five hundred tog goose down duvet. The towelling dressing gown was so fluffy it sat almost two feet high when folded, *with* its matching slippers. It was beautiful, and very different from my jaunt in the Siberian outback. Fortunately they didn't check my name on the PNG (persona non grata) list! I heard a couple of years later that Boris had been shot.

“Na zdorovje!”



Mike Woodley with
Oscar winning actress
Halle Berry on set of
James Bond



Stavropol Russia – Alan trying to defrost the engine intake in savage weather.



Me in cockpit of B25 bomber.



Airport toilet in Izhevsk. Russia.



Ensuite in "hotel"
- Siberia.



1st job on Cessna
Citation Heathrow.
Looks like the 'L'
is for Learner!

CHAPTER THREE: Lift is a Gift but Thrust is a Must

Flying the Heavier Stuff – Boeing 727

If there was ever a ‘sliding doors’ moment, this was it because I so nearly went out for groceries, but because the sun was shining I stayed in the garden to read ... I would have missed this phone call (being *just* pre mobile) and subsequently this opportunity which led to many wonderful things.

My friend Pete from Oxford flying school called one afternoon.

“Yannie (as was his name for me), I don’t know if you’re interested in doing a hostie job out of Heathrow tomorrow, it’s on a Boeing 727 for Banque National de Paris going to Luxemburg. They are looking for another cabin crew – I know you are between jobs right now...?”

Jobs can be scarce so I was always ready to snap up an offer of work, you never know who you’ll meet!

I accepted and was soon dusting off the overnight bag. The safety training is compatible between front and back. We have all demonstrated use of emergency exits, life vests evacuation procedures, etc., so, I was ‘checked out’ so to speak. The other girl was a senior British Airways purser so she would lead, I’d just help her. It was a job and I was happy! I stayed in the galley, until she got busy at one point and I came on to the trolley to assist with a few drinks. It was a short flight, I recall throwing plates and glasses into any available cupboard or drawer when the captain said “five minutes to landing”, in order to secure the cabin.

Sometimes in life you just have to take the ball and run with it. It was on this flight that I met the freelance American Captain who was looking for continued work in Europe. Through a few contacts, namely Pete (of earlier phone call) and his acquaintance – a Pakistani 727 Captain who was looking for another Captain to job share, I found him work on a private 727 and in return he gave me a job in the right hand seat about a year later (no type rating needed for right seat on a private plane). It was a terrific break! Soon I was accompanying him to Kuala Lumpur to pick up an executive Boeing 727 from the Sultan of Pahang and ferry it back to London.

Here are some of the times on that fantastic Boeing 727 starting with the initial type rating which I did in flight school in California.

Initial Type Rating *Check Ride Boeing 727-200*

With the ground school completed it was off to the simulator for two gruelling weeks! The flight school in California was the toughest challenge so far. Every detail in the simulator (and many were late at night when you are not at your sharpest) was full of emergencies. It's a nightmare of gremlins in the shape of bells, horns, flashing lights and a myriad of horrors and multiple failures which make you wish you were having root canal surgery. Once that's over and you have completed the arduous test during which you've put out fires, landed with two engines out, lost all your hydraulics, lowered the gear manually and sat with goggles and oxygen masks on while the cockpit fills with smoke; then struggled against raging crosswinds to land with asymmetric flap ... (pew) ... you generally ring your shirt out, physically unfold your white knuckled fingers which have locked into an eagle's claw after hours of gripping the yoke, and head off with fellow students for some cold beers!

A couple of days later you go through what is innocuously known as the aural. Sounds like a friendly light-hearted chat eh? But it is in fact a finger knotting experience with the FAA in Los Angeles where you sit in front of three very important and well informed men who will do their best over the next two hours to dismantle you with questions. Golden rule if you are not sure, *don't* dig a hole for yourself because as sure as the pope has a big hat, *they will* throw you in it and bury you. I'll always remember my first question, it went something like...

"So Aneeda, werall coming outta say, Salt Lake one evening and there's a helluva storm cookin' and as soon as we get airborne we have a nine light trip on our electrical panel; what will be the status of the AC transfer bus at this point?"

Try to look cool and calm. Heart's thumping, I swallow hard and I think of the electrical schematic, yes there it is ... the AC transfer over on the far right hand side linked to AC Bus three *and* the battery charger, yes there's my clue. I answered him correctly and sighed a huge internal 'pew'.

"What's the difference between a phase imbalance and a differential fault?"

"Tell me about the CSD disconnect switch?"

"What's the procedure for dumping fuel?"

"What are the power sources for all eight boost pumps?"

"In hydraulic system B, what if we had zero on the pressure gauge but no low pressure light on?"

And so it went on for two hours; questions about the oxygen system, brakes, gear, pack cooling fans, flaps, pneumatics, pressurisation problems, leading edge devices, fire fighting and so on. I got some wrong and they corrected me in a constructive way – I benefited from their vast knowledge of systems. I was like a puppy with five tails when it was all over.

The **final** part of this type rating (which was a Captain's rating and therefore quite a bit tougher) was the three circuits and landings, which had to

be performed in the aircraft, *not* in the simulator. The school was using a TWA 727-200 (the bigger one) over in Kansas City, Missouri. They sent us over in pairs or threes whenever the airline could fit us in. We had to wait for a) the training Captain to be available, b) the FAA examiner to be available, and c) the aircraft to be free and not flying a revenue flight. Progress was slow and I was one of the last to go.

I hoped for the best, there were just two small problems. They ‘buddied’ me up with a Saudi who was checking out as flight engineer. Kill two birds with one stone, he would work the engineer’s panel and get assessed while I fly the detail and also get assessed. The only trouble was this trainee engineer – Mohammed, simply became unglued at the thought of working with a woman. It just finished him off totally and reduced him to acts of muppetry and impenetrable silence. He lost his nerve, his tongue and it seemed absolutely all his knowledge. I really felt for him actually. The other small problem was that the biggest bone shaking thunderstorm to hit KC (as they affectionately called the place) in ten years, happened to go through *that* evening at *exactly* the time of my check ride.

We met at nine p.m. in the airline’s operations room within the airport. I introduced myself to the TWA chief training Captain and also to one Captain Gann who was the senior FAA examiner. I got the impression they didn’t relish these check rides with students from the flight schools – all a bit of a strain and a tad complicated, they would much rather be knocking off! We went through the rigmarole of checking licences, paperwork and logbooks. I asked a couple of questions such as: “Would you like me to leave the flaps at fifteen degrees since we are staying in the circuit?” The TWA man seemed to think that a reasonable idea, though the two Captains were much more concerned about the weather at this point because the forecast was hideous and the pressure was dropping rapidly. I had a fleeting vision of being sucked up into the eye of a tornado like one of those cheap 1970s movies of airliners which are *so* obviously models being bounced around against the painted background. It is an image I quickly drove out of my head. There we all were, strangers, a motley crew and we had to get the exercise done.

So, the rather unnatural situation *is*, that, the training Captain sits in the right hand seat playing rookie first officer, I sit in the left seat playing Captain in charge of the flight (yet I am the least experience of all), the poor Saudi engineer who has all the promise of a small faun caught in the headlights, is perched uncomfortably at the panel behind the co-pilot, and the head honcho Dan was standing behind me checking *everybody* out. I understand that I am supposed to be showing leadership qualities so I initiate things such as the checklist.

We have no ground crew so we don’t have to bother with push backs and disconnects. The red beacon light is on and I call for start on number one. My ‘co-pilot’ holds the start switch to ‘ground’ on the overhead panel and when the N2 rotation reaches 20% I eased the start lever forward to idle and observed the fuel flow. I call EGT (exhaust gas temperature) rising which indicates light up in the engine. I should have had a call from the engineer of “Packs closed, 40 psi” prior to start but I didn’t, so I turned round over my

right shoulder and confirmed it myself so my examiners would see I hadn't overlooked that. The disconcerting thing – I'm getting nothing from the engineer's seat, no calls, no familiar and reassuring little ditties like "Start valve open" no comforting words that I long to hear like "oil pressure". Mmm it is testing my reactions. Just my luck on my first 727 flight **ever** in the left seat in command and I have lost my flight engineer the linchpin of the whole operation. Oh well I mustn't let it worry me, I must carry on and do my best.

His lips are moving slowly, I think he was begging Allah to come and sort it. Examiner Gann was trying to encourage Mohammed to come back into the programme.

"Okay Mahoomed," he is saying, "we got one and two started, let's check Hydraulic system A."

I turn to confirm with him that engine two bleed switches are closed and that he's done the electrical power changeover and all the generators have had volts and frequency checks and are in parallel. "Essential power on number three?" I prompt him realising now I'm going to get nothing out of him.

"That's okay Aneeda, I got it," said Mr FAA setting up the panel realising that I needed to turn my attentions to *my* job.

It was indeed a bizarre situation, and it all started to feel surreal. The whole airport was being suddenly lit as if by football stadium lights, just for a split second, as bolts of lightning forked menacingly from wicked black clouds. Cracks of thunder exploded from a riotous night sky and the rain came down – the sort of rain which causes poorly built houses to detach from their foundations and bob down the river. I ask Mohammed another question about brakes and hydraulics and he mutters something at which point Dan pipes up with something really quite comical.

"It's no good praying to Aarla now Mahoomed, we ain't in Sordi now my friend, he ain't going to help ya, see *she* is the Captain and you gotta do what the Missie says see."

I really had to stifle laughter at that one. Lord how did I get myself into *this*? We taxi across the wet airport towards the hold. The TWA guy guides me with rights and lefts, so I don't have to bother with the ground chart. Discussions are now heating up about the weather. Dan picks up the mike from the jump seat and talks to the tower who answer him:

"Yea, looks like the eye of the storm should be passing over head in about twenty minutes. You all might have time to get the three patterns in before the worst hits."

It is getting late and people are tired. "What d'you think Dan?" says the TWA guy looking out intently through all the cockpit windows obviously wanting to bin it.

"I dunno buddy we might just be okay and if it gets real bad we'll just come right back and land," says Dan wanting to get it over and done with – a sentiment I am sharing, the plane is busy tomorrow and I don't want to hang around for days.

"Yea it's really closin' in though."

"Yea it's pretty horrible out there."

And so the exchanges go on. Meanwhile Mohammed is now just staring into the panel focusing about two feet behind it, we've lost him and he has failed his check ride before we even get airborne, poor guy.

With my right hand on the throttles and left on the steering tiller and tightly strapped in I decide just to break the ice a bit and have a little joke. I remember some moustache twiddling RAF guy I met once at an airshow who used to fly Wellingtons or Stirlings in the war telling me that all the night missions were left to the English, the Americans couldn't do the night flights. (How true that was I had no idea!) But I thought I might pull their legs a bit since our situation was pretty grim.

"Oh come on you lot," I said, "don't let a bit of nightfall and a spot of rain throw you, it's typical, just like in the war eh? You didn't like night sorties *then*, that's why you left them to us Brits."

It was either going to get a laugh or it was going to be *really* inappropriate and fall like a lead ball and take me with it through the cockpit floor. Dan laughed out loud, patted my shoulder and said, "I tell you what Aneeda ... you're alright."

We decided to get airborne, so here in this filthy storm over Kansas I'd do my first circuit in the 727-200 which had a maximum takeoff weight of 200,000 pounds (about ninety-one tons). The conditions were far from perfect I was nervous. I did my safety brief:

"Left seat take-off from runway two nine, full power wet runway, anti-ice on, packs on, any malfunctions before 80 knots anyone call stop, between 80 and V1 which is 115 knots, we will call stop for significant loss of engine power, fire or failure, if I abandon the take-off I will close the throttles apply maximum, braking and deploy the thrust reverses and speed brake. If the malfunction is after V1 I will continue the take-off, advise me of the failure and I will call for the appropriate action and ..."

Then came a welcome interruption.

"Okay Aneeda, that's alright I'm sure you know it ... now let's get outta Dodge." (Which I assume means Dodge City in mid-western speak.) Good! As I lined up, a flash of lightning illuminated the whole place so I got a quick impression of the entire layout. Here goes.

"Window heat ... high/ignition ... on/antiskid ... on/strobes ... on/transponder ... on."

Dan came in reassuringly with Mohammed's checks: the boost pumps check and the CSD oil cooler ground off check, then auto pack trip normal – all engineers items.

On the runway I stood the throttles up and said, "Three stable." I pushed them forward and felt just an immense surge of power. Fantastic.

"Eighty knots ... check."

"V1 rotate."

I pulled her up into the night sky calling for "gear up". The wheels lifted and clunked solidly into their wells in the belly and nose. I climbed at the 'V2' speed plus ten knots to 1,500 feet, levelled off, the acceleration was monumental, it would be at 350 knots before you could say knife so I pulled

the throttles way back. I was instructed to turn almost immediately crosswind and to keep the turn going into downwind.

“After take-off checks,” I called and asked for the flap to remain at fifteen degrees.

It was turbulent but I steadied her out at 150 knots. Abeam the threshold, gear down, turn the corner, flaps 25, ease her down at about 700 feet per minute rate of descent, I looked for the approach lights, judge the descent, call for flaps 30, landing checklist, it’s looking pretty good, I am nervous though. I ask for the reference speed for landing and bug that and also bug plus ten knots on my air speed indicator. I came down the approach; the examiners don’t seem to be too terrified they’re letting me get on with it. My scan is rapid, speed, horizon, fuel flows, back to speed, out the window, check the profile, looking good nicely on approach speed. The wind buffets me a bit, it’s a first and it feels exciting.



“Okay Aneeda looking good, bit of wind from your right.”

Into wind aileron down, opposite rudder I mantra to myself in anticipation of the crosswind. I am keeping it tightly in the bars of the flight director coming down, there is often a tendency to level off too high with inexperienced pilots – it’s a sort of fear of the ground, so I chant to myself “keep her coming down.”

I get near the ground, the lights are coming up at me, speed is good, ease off the throttle, not too much. I am ready to flare, power levers off, oops a bit early right aileron down smidge of left rudder, where’s the ground, I have flared a bit high, we are a bit spongy, still no ground, V ref minus 10, a bit untidy, then clunk there it is. Oops a small bounce, but I quickly remember the rule – ‘hold or re-establish normal landing attitude, add a little thrust if necessary’. It wasn’t necessary – the bounce wasn’t too high. DO NOT whatever you do push the control wheel over, this could lead to damaged nose

gear and a touch of the old Barnes Wallaces! Quiet a hard second landing not brilliant.

‘Hold the nose wheel off keep straight,’ I mutter.

“Okay,” chirps up my ‘co-pilot’. “I got the power, I’ll set that for ya.” He pushes the EPRs up to about 1.4, moves the flap lever through the gates from 30 back to 15 degrees and calls V1, we are off again. Phew I am relieved – I have one under my belt. I think momentarily of Chris my ATPL instructor from American Flyers Fort Lauderdale. He was a bit of a ‘bacci’ chewing, gun wielding, red neck who drove a pick-up and liked shooting wild turkeys.

“Don’t ever be intimidated by an airplane Aneeda,” he used to say, “just strap the bitch to your ass and *fly her* ... don’t ever let her fly *you*.”

Not exactly the “Sterling job old boy, but a bit more positive on the power perhaps” debriefs enjoyed by our RAF boys but I did, however, in this lonely moment, appreciate his angle.

The tower transmitted, warning us that the eye of the storm was moving very close, he suggested we maintain runway heading and go out towards Topeka in Kansas and fly around there until it went through. So off we went, we climbed up to 8,000 feet, My TWA guy talked to the controllers and we just followed their instruction for a while flying headings. It gave me a welcome break.

“Go ahead and engage the autopilot Aneeda, you can relax a bit.” So we enjoyed an unplanned night cross-country watching the sky change colour and shape as fearsome explosions of positive and negative charges fought it out in the heavens.

The ‘Fed’ used this calm time to try to bring poor old ‘Mahoomed’ as he called him, back into the programme. I overheard him asking a few questions about the fuel and the environmental systems but there was no joy. He had lost face and, death, I am told is the more favoured option in that culture. He had shut up shop and gone for the night. Anyway I just had to concentrate on completing my detail successfully, one landing down, two to go. We were vectored back by the tower, it seemed the worst was over. We turned back east and dropped down to three thousand feet. I slowed her up and we joined downwind. Under 200 knots, I called for flap two, then five, then started muttering to myself which always helps my concentration.

“Level off, that’s it power set for 150 knots, hold it steady ...”

I asked for gear down and turned onto base leg and then on to final approach.

The TWA ‘co-pilot’ was feeling quite relaxed and was feeding me some useful bits of information about attitude and fuel flows and so on. I was feeling good, feeling strong. Down the approach, still a bit of wind, stabilise the speed at Ref plus ten knots ... keep her coming down, full flap that’s it, now fly level power off, back wheels give a little screech as they touch the runway, hold the nose gear off, let it lower, gently bently.

“Nice jab,” came the reassuring words from the head honcho behind me.

And so I went round for the last time and completed my three circuits. As we taxied in we could still make out the distant bolts of lightning which had moved off to the west, the rain still fell. Squally gusts made ripples across the

puddles which shone under the bright ramp lights. I savoured the moment moving this great hulking mass of metal slowly down the taxiways, waiting until the nose had long overshot the turning (because of the aft position of the nose wheel) then moving her round with the small wheel, feeling all that weight following through. Such a small wheel for such a large object. It was so quiet inside, unlike outside where a couple of ground crew stood with their fingers in their ears.

We went through the shut downs. Dan did the engineers panel, I closed the throttles and moved the start levers to ‘cut off’ watching the EGT fall. Park brake on, ignition off, anti-ice off, probe and window heat off ...emergency lights and radar. The ground engineer signalled to me that the chocks were in place. We unstrapped and walked out of the front exit down some steps which the ground crew had wheeled into place.

Back in the office. “Well congratulations Aneeda, that was alright, let’s get ya all signed up here ...”

Then the paperwork – forms needed filling, logbooks signing and so on. The night shift employees were already busy in the office preparing for tomorrow’s flights. A nice girl in operations knew I was on test and asked me how I got on.

“Alriiiiiight congratulations, that’s awesome...”

They are so friendly the Americans aren’t they?

“I got some coffee on would you like some? Sure wish I could offer you a cocktail.”

Dan stamped all the papers and gave me the appropriate FAA forms, then walked me to the terminal.

“Aneeda, you did a good job, and that wasn’t easy with Mahoomed and all and the damn weather but you hung in there ... if you ever need a reference, here’s my card, I’d be happy to...”

“Thanks very much,” I said, really meaning it.

“You okay for a ride?”

“Yes I have to call the hotel and they’ll come for me.”

“Okay, you got a dime?, the phones are over there.”

I thanked him, shook his hand and walked through the deserted terminal. It doesn’t sound much but completing your first major left seat check ride on a big aeroplane is as big as your first solo. I was elated and shattered. I wanted to party and celebrate, but with a hotel bar that shut hours ago at ten o’clock and a teetotal Saudi Arabian as a colleague, I think there was more likelihood of running into Elvis. I called the hotel bus and a young lad from Wisconsin obligingly picked me up. I would love to have been going to a humdinger of a party to celebrate with friends, but I was somehow in the twilight zone, alone, in a storm, at night, in ... ‘East Jesus’. I bounced along in a hotel bus with a youth in a green bus boy’s uniform towards the airport Ramada. We chatted and though I was longing to talk shop, and relive my experience, I, instead learnt all about the Green Bay Packers, his home town of Kinoshka, how people from his state are called ‘Cheeseheads.’ He offered me a beef jerky which is air dried meat in a stick. He was a nice lad and it was all a bit surreal and unconnected!

He knew I'd just done a flight test. Bless him, he knocked at the door twenty minutes later with a bottle of unchilled Michelob Light on a tray.

"All the liquor's locked up but I found this one in the kitchen."

"Oh you're a star, thanks so much."

"Congratulations on your test," he smiled and he turned on his heel in his fez hat and gold epaulettes and was gone.

Fortunately I had a bottle opener on my Swiss army knife (pre 911). I sipped the beer as I peered out of the rain lashed window across unfamiliar territory. What a weird feeling, all other accomplishments along the way during the years of training and testing, we celebrated in the bar at Oxford or at Fair Oaks with much animated debriefing, but here I was celebrating on my own. I wished I'd had company.

I know ... I'll call the only person in the world who would truly be delighted to hear from me at this ungodly hour of the morning ... my mum. They must be the only ones who are able to tolerate a disturbance of this magnitude (from stage four slumber to bolt upright) without the minutest trace of annoyance. She even managed squeals of delight and lots of "Oh darling that's wonderful" even though she didn't have the faintest idea what I was on about. Dear mums.

Back in the UK I ended up flying a rather special 727. It used to belong to billionaire Malcolm Forbes and it was painted money green and money gold with the huge words "Capitalist Tool" on the tail. Nothing if not understated!(see picture) I loved it, it had huge cream leather swivel seats and sofas inside, an en suite bedroom and a special pulley at the back where he used to load all his Harley Davison bikes. This man had a profound grasp on FUN. It had now been bought by a man from the Middle East and I along with two other Americans ferried it back over the Atlantic, in rather shorter time than the B25!

The Magic and Mystery (and Money) of the Middle East

The Middle East certainly plays a premium on the senses. There are so many 'firsts' awaiting you – the hubbly bubbly pipes, the gold, the mosaics and minarets, the aromas of perfumes and oils, the exotic beats of the music, voluptuous veiled belly dancers and the tea pourers in the market. I recall clearly on a balmy evening in the Damascus souk the pinpoint accuracy of the boy pouring the amber coloured tea from his pot, his arm at full stretch above his head, into a tinted egg cup, and didn't miss a drop.

Because of the cultural differences, little things make a lasting impression such as the woman dressed head to toe in black with a small metal visor round her nose, trying to eat noodles in the hotel in Kuwait. A woman peering through the little mesh window in their headdress checking out the price of kitchen cleaners in the supermarket. Then the boys and men in the crisp white dish dash, walking along the promenade swinging worry beads and stopping at

cafes to take coffee. The lamb being carved from the skewer and served with pita and chilli on the roadside at midnight.

We, as crew make many trips there, so here's a photo album type glance at some of the memories.

The private Boeing 727-100 I was crewing was equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks in the forward cargo which gave us extra range, although we couldn't quite make it in one hop to Dubai so we would land in Larnaca on the island of Cyprus to refuel. It was always a pleasure hearing the chirpy Greek voice on Nicosia radar.

"Calimera Bravo echo, descend flight level nine zero ..."

"Five Bravo, yassos cleared to land runway tutu (22)... wind two four zero five knots."

I never tired of that scenic approach – cruising out to Dekelia power station then turning back along the beach front and down to the runway immediately adjacent to the sparkling blue sea.

After refuelling, off we'd head east towards Lebanon, then depending on the destination turn on track accordingly, sometimes Damascus, other times over to Kuwait, Abu Dhabi or Dubai.

After the first Iraq/Kuwait war, there was of course extensive damage. Naval bases, military installations and huge swathes of land had to be rebuilt. We all know there is nothing like a war or its clear up to provide excellent money making opportunities. There was much fat to be picked off the carcass of *that* war. We flew a Middle Eastern man around who was doing particularly meaty deals which yielded him astronomical commissions. I soon realised how adept they became at evading enquiry, if ever someone asked him what he did, his reply was "I do my best".

His best was good – millions of dollars every month in commission. Kuwait was rebuilding its military with what seemed like unlimited funds, so you can imagine the fierce competition to sell equipment there. He was a deeply religious man and there were icons of Mary and Jesus along with crucifixes and engraved prayers all over the aircraft – we even had one in the cockpit. He was a committed *Christian* (that was the only reason I was there for a start – don't think I'd have been employed by a Muslim). He was always very fair with me. This deep religious conviction didn't stop him sitting round gambling tables losing and winning hundreds of thousands in a blink, or discussing the buying and selling of arms. The light-hearted chit chat of parabolic trajectories, explosive warheads and intermediate ballistic missiles tripped off the tongue with the same consummate ease as 'Our Father who art in heaven'...

He had, I believe convinced them to buy Russian equipment, to rebuild the naval base. So many journeys were made between Moscow and Kuwait. It was impressive hearing a senior Russian speak fluent Arabic. At 35,000 feet over Iran one day he came into the cockpit and asked exactly where we were.

"We are between Esfahan and Tehran sir," I answered.

"My God don't let us get engine failure here and go down, they will kill me!" So I surmised he'd made a few enemies here and there. (Years later after I had lost touch, I was told two London businessmen were after him for an

obscene amount of debt he'd run up in their casinos – I would imagine *they* were *not* the sort of boys to cross. They had his plane impounded at Bournemouth!) Later I read he was suing a casino for extending him credit!

I had a bit of a soft spot for the Fat Man as he was known. He invited me and my boyfriend to be his guests at Les Ambassadors club in Mayfair. He put his arm round the head waiter and said in that delightful Arabic accent: “She can have all what she want – it is her birthday!”

I will never forget the champagne flute which was nine inches high and so delicate, when you pinged the rim with your finger it had a resonance so sweet, it was like a humming bird tightrope walking across a piano string. He threw 2 chips down – £100 each and told me to enjoy a gamble upstairs after dinner. I did and I won, my Yorkshire genes kicked in and I quit while I was ahead. Result!

He was a big... no, wait, he was...an absolutely **gigantic** gambler, often hours late for departure because of his addiction. Once I saw him lose six hundred thousand in minutes. His mood was often determined by his luck on the tables. He always stayed at the Noga Hilton on Lake Geneva, he had a private suite on the whole of the top floor with his own elevator. The Captain once got a frantic phone call to bring more MONEY at ridiculous o'clock in the morning so he could continue at some casino, near Lausanne. Boy he couldn't help himself.

Approaching Kuwait, flying around the famous ‘golf ball’ tower as we called it, is an experience in itself. The modern buildings and the glittering waters of the gulf give a powerful impression of their wealth. The airport is immaculate but *HOT*? Even though I was raised in Africa, I had never felt heat like that. When I opened the front door, there was a wind blowing and it was like standing in front of an industrial size hair dryer on ‘max hot’ setting.

There are lots of contradictions about the place. We joined the boss and his business colleagues for lunch in a hotel.

I *do* remember the resident English catering manager with whom I had a long chat. He prepared the food for the aircraft for our onward journey. He was from the North of England and quite happy to be chatting to some Brits – he was looking forward to coming home. I gave him a peck on the cheek as I shook his hand. Oops I was in trouble.

“You **can't** do that ... it is just *not* done,” murmured the hostess in low tones squeezing my wrist. She had lived in Saudi and was more au fait with the rules than I! I found the segregation and draconian moral rules strange at first especially given the alleged reports (whether they're true or not?) of the lustful defiling of young boys. It was somewhat disproportionate that an innocent peck on the cheek could cause such sterneration, still, when in Rome...

We had the chairman or a similar ranking member of Taylor Woodrow on board, bound for Abu Dhabi. After the arrogant, demanding types from the sultanate of ‘Givme’ he, with his John Mills-ish face and manner, was rather a breath of fresh air. He was a cashmere V-neck/suede brogues sort, polite, modest and intelligent. In fact a jewel of courtesy; he came into the cockpit, interested in our activities and he chatted at length and with probing insight

about the Middle East. Our boss *told* us to buy shares in Taylor Woodrow – I was a fool not to ... they soared!

Abu Dhabi was, I thought a really stunning place, very aesthetically presented with its elegant corniche. We landed in forty-eight degrees – owch! Thank god for the flight engineer who had to do the walk around and put the gear pins in and pump the rear air stair up. We could have wrung him out afterwards. However, like everywhere in the Middle East the air conditioning is simply glacial. All I know is – to turn ambient air into the refrigerated air that streams out of those units, something, somewhere is working hard. Let's hear it for freon and expansion chambers! When we returned to the aircraft after a couple of days the apples in the fruit bowl had actually **baked** – you could have put your finger through them.

“Salaam alaykum,” chirped the men in dish dash in the airport who came to greet us. We sat in a beautifully cooled room which had all the chairs round the periphery in a big circle rather than clusters of four here and there. A man bought round tea on a large brass tray and we drank it from little coloured glass cups decorated with gold filigree. It was pepperminty with a hint of herbs – delicious.

“Shuckran” – one of my very few words of Arabic!

Not quite as crowded as crazy neighbour Dubai, the place is still lively but in a somehow more low key way. At the Meridian pool in Abu Dhabi, I met a most extraordinary man. He was a South American mercenary. He was a **big** boy, dark skinned and wore a bandana. He had more scars on him than a manatee round Key West, Florida. He'd done Angola, Mozambique and all sorts of nasty wars which had left him looking rather 'harpooned'. He had one scar, the size of a fried egg but was very forthcoming in explaining the science of it all! In his strong Hispanic accent:

“Sometimes eet better to be shot really close range cos de bullet ... he just pass through but when it is some distance ... den it cause much damage eet tear the flesh more ...”

And so it went on, I only came up to the bar for a pina colada and left with a crash course in bullet wounds, different knives and how to rip someone's throat out with your bare hands. It was a fascinating insight into the life of a mercenary, and his nocturnal tactics. I imagined his card 'Name' and then 'No war too small'.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He explained he'd really landed on his feet as bodyguard to one of the Sheiks rich sons who had a huge boat which it was his duty to guard. He had a zippy sports car and accommodation and was enjoying himself thoroughly. They had met at the gym in Los Angeles and that was that. Just looking after the rich boy and his gin palace instead of sleeping rough, must have been a nice change.

“But... I kinda miss the thrill you know!” he said with a wry smile.

All a bit tame for him I suppose poncing around in a red Ferrari with no daily fix of skinning a porcupine then ripping out someone's oesophagus. Apparently many of the bodyguards out there are men like him.

Next stop was Damascus – the boss’s home country. This has got to be one of the most fascinating cities in the Middle East and mercifully free of all the Kentucky fried and McDonald’s which blot the Emirates. (Nothing against fast food though, I have never really fancied anything that gets served in a ‘bucket’.) The city boasts many stages in its evolution and is reputedly the oldest continuously occupied city in the world. There was a city here before Abraham! Egyptians, Hittites, Israelites and Assyrians have all settled there and it has been part of the Persian, Roman and Byzantine Empires. In town there are Aramean and Roman ruins and beautiful dwellings called hammans which had lovely architecture and courtyards. The souks were lively colourful and aromatic, filled with music and exotic artefacts – silver cups, mother of pearl inlaid furniture, goblets, jewellery, and carpets. Inside the city we visited the famous place where Paul was lowered in a basket over a city wall to escape persecution having converted to Christianity. The city eventually became Islamic and as a result there is the most splendid mosque.

The streets are narrow and ancient but alive with freshly squeezed orange juice stalls and funnily enough – wedding dress shops. I had never seen so many white meringue dresses in one place before. Damascus is a rich and intoxicating city, splendid and mysterious. It groaned a bit like an old horse when the saddle is thrown over its back every morning, but somehow it trotted on. I have a lovely picture of my dear friend Susie (the flight attendant) and I dressed in long dark robes with our heads covered before going into one of the holy places. There is a special beauty there, you know you are touching at least the hem of the garment in which ‘history’ itself is clothed. With a bit of imagination I was back in ancient days amongst elegant women bearing amphoras of water on their heads swaying up dusty streets while traders came from Asia with spices and silk. Olives, music, camels, palm fringed oases in the desert, I saw it all. In reality it was probably a fly blown dump full of iniquity, violence and disease but ... I like to be a ‘glass half full’ person.

Dubai – well what can one say about the place, it has grown beyond all recognition now. When we first went we stayed downtown and went to the revolving restaurant on top of the Forte hotel. Jumeira was not built, there was little traffic and things were cheap! What a stunning approach to Dubai airport, the view from our cockpit is truly amazing. When you land from the sea towards the land you are treated to a view right along the coast, from Bur Dubai, the creek, along from town to Jumeira then off into the distance(which used to be relatively bare). I would enjoy the changes, which were fast and inexorable, every time I returned. It only had to be weeks then the big sail of Jumeira beach was going up, then the palm island started, and bit by bit, fronds would be added. Then the marina went up with all its sky rises making the place look like Manhattan. You know when it takes you 45 minutes to get to an *airport* hotel, there is a traffic problem!

Dubai duty free was a favourite stop for us. I was mooching around once in my uniform buying some goods and I noticed an Egypt Air pilot in uniform sort of following me around and staring at me. I ignored him at first but he was so concerned and baffled by my appearance, it was obviously causing him great concern. The idea that I might, be up there, doing the same job as him, in

the same sky! “Al hund du allah” he was praying now. He plucked up the courage:

“You are crew no?”

“Yes I am,” I said courteously.

“But er, but you are cabin crew no?”

“No, I’m a pilot same as you.” I smiled not feeling any resentment whatsoever, he was just acting from within his own frame of reference.

“Ooh I see,” he nodded pretending to get it and I went back to looking at the baklava.

We parted momentarily and then ran into each other at the perfumes, he was still floundering on the rocks of incredulity.

“But, you don’t fly the plane – I mean ... you not controlling the plane?” and he made driving actions with his hands.

“Yes I do I fly the plane from the front just like you.”

“Ah...Oh... okay, this is very good, very nice, congrato-lashun!” he gave a smile so big his face inflated like a balloon, he shook my hand repeatedly and really looked as though he’d made a ground breaking discovery.

The 727 being an ex-airliner seating more than one hundred and sixty passengers had a very generous baggage hold. We certainly made full use of this – the engineer kept his golf clubs in there; the Captain, his scuba diving gear and *all of us* filled it with goods we purchased in various countries but especially when we went to the Middle East. It was nice to know if you wanted to buy *anything*, a mountain bike or a television, complete music system – even furniture and carpets – there was ample room to ferry it back to Luton!

Sometimes if my colleague was busy at the aircraft, I’d remain in the handling agents’ office. There I would sign all the papers, and pay the bills. It was entertaining watching their faces when I got the credit card out to pay – that was too much – a girl flying, *and* handling money. Inshala no! It has I am sure, changed now. (Let’s hope!)

I have to mention one of the more unusual ‘post flight’ check list items. After landing in Jeddah, I was told I had to go promptly to the handling agents’ office – Jet Aviation and put on the full black Burka in order to leave the airport. It was a strange, doing the post flight walk round, putting the gear pins in the undercarriage, etc., dressed in flowing black robes which flapped in the hot wind. I just couldn’t help making Darth Vader sounds as I swooped around the wing tips and secured the cargo hold door! Julie the flight attendant and I were wrapped up head to toe in our black gowns, having a seriously good laugh, she used to be a dancer so she did a little routine in hers which had me doubled up! It’s a strange old game – but, once again, when in Rome...

En route home from the Middle East we cruise over great swathes of deserted scorched sands in Saudi Arabia making you realise how big the place is and how hardy those Bedouins must have been moving about on camels searching for the next bit of shade or drop of water. You can look down for hours onto an empty baked wilderness. Lawrence did well out there! The Middle East, particularly the Emirates, will always be a big destination for private jets – so you leave the sun block in the overnight bag!

“Salaam alaykum!”

The Party Plane – Forbes Private 727 ***“Everything in moderation, including moderation!”***

It was undoubtedly the paint scheme of the century. Yes Malcolm Forbes, American billionaire certainly had a wry sense of humour. This beautiful executive jet was a statement. The saying ‘if you’ve got it, flaunt it’ had never been so bracingly exemplified. A gold coloured front and wings ahead of a dark green tail, the green paint coming forward into the gold in a big ‘V’. N60FM was its registration, it was a show stopper. Then in true reflection of the entrepreneurial spirit that is America, and in honour of our friend uncle Sam the subtle words “FORBES Capitalist Tool” were painted on the tail – marvellous! By the summer of 1996 our boss had decided he wanted his second 727 so I was sent over to the States with Captain Jack to ferry it back with the engineer who’d been flying on it for quite some time, that was good, he would know the plane well.

I know Mr Forbes, one of the richest men in the world had used this plane (amongst many others) to ferry his friends to Morocco for his final birthday bash, which took place over several days and I am told was the shindig of the century. We first saw it *prior* to the removal of the Forbes belongings, my God this plane had seen some serious ‘action’. Life aboard had been a nonstop ‘thrill fest’.

He had a specially unique ramp up the back stairwell to haul his Harley Davidson bikes up, he enjoyed cruising around on his Harley once he got to destination. There were pictures strewn everywhere of famous people – the Reagans, Casper Weinberger, Elizabeth Taylor, senators, ambassadors, heads of state, movie stars, singers and actors. It was *thee* party ship, complete with thick carpets, bar, televisions, pale leather seats all with max swivel and recline and the flashy bedroom with en suite (could *that* suite have told a thousand tales!).

As always with these aircraft deals there is endless paperwork and ours was particularly complicated because the plane was over a certain weight and was being exported – it could fall into the wrong hands. The FAA looks *very* carefully at this and we had to have *this* Certificate of Deviation and *that* Certificate of some other thing. We were ramp checked in Newark on Super Bowl day. (BIG game in America!) They (the Feds) found something they didn’t like and we were grounded to sort out ‘red tape’ issues. During this time we had become friendly with the English pilot from Sussex called Toby, he was Malcolm Forbes’s helicopter pilot who was hired to land on the back of his boat. He was only a little guy and looked so young, but he was highly qualified. He knew we were waiting, so he kindly offered to take me up in the Forbes helicopter, a beautiful Augusta 109 in exactly the same paint scheme as the Boeing 727.

The captain said, “You might as well go for it, the paperwork isn’t quite ready yet, go and have a nice day out, I doubt anything will happen today.”

So off we went in this wonderful helicopter flying all over the magnificent houses of the Hamptons and the Catskills swooping down over tennis clubs

and beautiful parkland. En route back to Newark, Toby's mobile phone rang, it was Jack.

"We're ready to go, finally got the paperwork sorted. The FAA has released us – get back here when you can."

"Okay," said Toby, "we are on our way."

The next half-hour was like something from a movie, we flew right along the glistening Hudson river, a wall of skyscrapers running alongside us, I was looking *up* at the buildings. I took a picture of the trade towers, something which gives me an eerie feeling whenever I look at the photograph after 9/11.

He asked for clearance and we flew low level right over the runway at Newark, I was **loving** it! He raised the nose pulling back on the cyclic at which point his hands and feet are in a tightly coordinated dance, just small but accurate movements lowering the collective and concentrating! He brought the mighty machine into a hover and slowly put us down squarely right at the back of the matching 727. I opened the door, the noise was intense. The wind blew all around me as I shouted my thanks to him, shook his hand and closed the door. It looked damned impressive to have the jet and the helicopter in the same livery, I ran up the back stairs of the 727, pulled the lever to raise them, the door clunked heavily behind me and I was in the quiet cool luxury of the executive interior. I walked into the cockpit where the engines were turning and we were ready to go. The helicopter hovered in front of us nodded his goodbyes then flew off to the west.

We taxied out.

"Boost pumps ... on."

"Hydraulic pressure ... check."

"Door warning lights ... check"

"Three stable ... thrust set ... eighty knots ... V1 ... rotate!"

We were off. The views of New York were fabulous. But the joy didn't last. We were airborne only minutes when the engineer discovered a problem with the fuel dump nozzle valve system. We ended up coming back into Newark where we stayed for another night until the problem was fixed. Some engineers came to assist and the problem was sorted ... I was beginning to think this plane would never make it back to the UK. But we eventually did, after a long trek straight over the Atlantic.

We finally touched down at Luton, and the aircraft went straight into Service for its new boss for whom we flew it all over the Middle East where its flamboyant paint created a lot of interest. We carried dignitaries, arms dealers and heads of State. I think Mr Forbes would have been pleased that his toy was still on the circuit! Even if the new passengers were not quite the 'party animals' *his* crowd had been, we, the crew certainly kept the tradition alive and didn't let him down!

Flying High

The old Boeing 727 makes a terrific business jet and it's in *this* role that many of them end their days after their airline role. Malcolm Forbes, Donald Trump, Wafiq Zaid, Prince Bandar, Andre Agassi and various sheiks and Sultans are just a few among those who have enjoyed the luxuries of this plane. (Wafiq was the first person to carry a defibrillator on board.) Although heavy on the fuel, they are cheaper to buy and offer the passenger a beautifully spacious cabin, complete with en suite bedroom, dining room lounge and kitchen. I flew a couple of 'exec' 727s in 1995 and 1996 and again in 2003. Here are a few memories of some ... eye opening times.

Monte Carlo Grand Prix

On the ramp at Luton, it was a sunny breezy afternoon in mid-summer and we were doing what we knew best ... **waiting!** We were off with some 'players' down to Nice for the Grand Prix in Monaco. Pre-flights include loading the GPS, getting the correct maps and charts and setting up our departure with headings bugged and radials set on our instruments (all analogue!). I listened to the latest met report and worked out our take-off speeds. The APU (auxiliary power unit) is the little jet engine in the belly providing us with electrics and pneumatics, keeping us in pleasant air conditioning and subtle cabin lighting.

My bit done, I'd help the two cabin crew. We'd have to vacuum the whole plane, run a light sponge along the suede ceilings and walls to ensure an even nap, polish all the wood and generally make it shine like a crown jewel. Tasks would vary – I would roll up little white towels and place them in an iced tray, or maybe fill all the cut glass bowls with every type of exotic nut and dried fruit imaginable.

The CD player would be thumping out something jazzy and the smell of fresh flowers filled the air. In the master bedroom fresh crisp sheets and exquisite bedspreads covered the bed, and plump silk pillows were scattered. The en suite bathroom boasted a dazzling array of gold taps and expensive toiletries. A padded leather lid covered the loo and matching towels were folded perfectly over gold holders. It was opulence at its best, resplendent with expensive aftershaves perfumes and soaps, every last detail was observed down to the silk slippers tucked under the bed.

Beautiful dried flowers sat on polished TV tops, and priceless ornaments, discreetly lit, adorned various corners of the cabin. And, of course we had enough champagne on board to see us through a Royal Ascot week. Trays of mouth-watering nasturtium adorned delicacies were brought in by the catering company. The main courses of fish, steak, lamb and chicken were slid into the storage space in the galley along with beautiful salads; the olives and meze would be put out on some surfaces. The best bit of course was that we would eat the leftovers!

The first Bentley, was it an Azure or a Continental? pulls up right at the aircraft steps and a dark skinned man alights, pulls a couple of leather bags from the boot then tosses the keys to the handling agent. A few minutes pass and another Bentley purrs up to the aircraft steps, two men step out with that practiced nonchalance, they have expressions, which say, 'Yep ... I'm cool'. They climb the stairs, I see big smiles, firm handshakes, creased linen, dark shades, general chutzpah. Then shortly afterward, Batman arrived in his 'batmobile', a famous British pop star. He pulls up in one of his jaw dropping, futuristic cars, complete with gull wing doors. It *is* actual aero dynamism *itself*. All the handling staff gathered round to have a good look at what was certainly an expensive toy. He is a speed freak and spent the whole journey to Nice in the cockpit entertaining me with stories of speeding fines and ongoing run-ins with various constabularies, but the cops couldn't catch him in this particular car because it's too fast. What an excellent chap. If I recall, one of his plans for the New Year was to go to Russia and fly faster than the speed of sound in a Sukhoi jet fighter.

Two more players in this game of 'dolce vita' arrived in a huge black Mercedes. I see sockless feet in loafers, linen jackets, narrow dark sunglasses and lots of gold. Hands run through hair as they climb the steps slowly and deliberately. This is starting to look like a 'boys tour' of pulsating proportions. Drinks are being poured in the back, ice cubes are chinking against cut glass, handfuls of nuts grabbed from bowls are being shaken into tilted back mouths. Gold lighters flick open and shut, the smell of cigarette smoke mingles cordially with that of aftershave.

I entered the cockpit, put my headset on to listen for any updates in airfield data, through the window I see a limousine pulling up. Ah here come the girls. Out step beautiful young things. I see a bright pink *extremely* tight crop top, a nut-brown belly adorned with sparkling gem, dangerously high heeled open toe clogs, spray on jeans with a few strategic tears in them, and an arsenal of designer bags. One wore daringly low black hipsters secured by sparkling diamante belt slung through the hoops, and an even lower black T-shirt. There was cleavage EV-erywhere, or as our 18th century chums would have said: "an apple dumpling shop". They are laughing and giggling, as they climb aboard, I greet them at the top of the stairs. As they enter the cabin they smile beautiful bright smiles and toss their long shiny hair and we shake hands. I recall Eastern European and Swedish accents and exotic unusual names. They walk down the corridor carefully in their high heels whispering to each other clutching their designer handbags and went to join the party in the main cabin. Because there is a bedroom with ensuite on board immediately aft of the cockpit, this creates a small corridor between the front and the main cabin area. It now smelt like the Harrods' perfumery.

Eventually we're "all aboard", a charming trendy Indian gentleman came into the cockpit, he was learning to fly so he was keen to be in our 'space'. He was Mr Asian cool, tall and statuesque with a ponytail, black leather jacket, dark shades, and dazzling white teeth. He was a pop singer; I asked what kind of music – he said "Punjabi funk" which I thought sounded 'different', I instantly thought of Hollywood musicals where ranks of dancers leap and twirl

about, in colourful costumes, heads going from side to side and some man with a haunted agonised expression, is singing and dancing his way through the pains of unrequited love.

He gave me a quick rendition – his head tilted and his arms outstretched then his fingers stabbing downwards a few times with a knee coming up.

“O-KAAY.” I thanked with raised eyebrows and a slow nod.

“It’s very dancey, you’ll like it,” he assured me, “I’ll be playing on the boat.”

“I shall look forward to it,” I smiled.

We eventually took off, the lively *English* pop singer, having made roads into the drinks cabinet was with us in the cockpit, drink in hand, and was in fine voice. We were only five minutes out of Luton, enjoying the serenading, when one of the party came bursting into the cockpit and said, “We’ve forgotten Costas, we’ll have to go back, he’s got the *money*.”

They were so busy partying that nobody had noticed his absence. Someone managed while still in phone range to get him on the mobile, he was on the M1 and only minutes away. I think there would have been no U turn if it had been just Costas without his attaché case! Small eddies of excitement stirred in me as I thought perhaps we might *get paid*. (To be one or two months in arrears is quite normal on some of these private jets.) But alas the dosh was just gambling and fun money for them. The trip would preclude the sweetener of that darned inconvenient thing which we kept asking for ... salary.

“London radar Delta Bravo Echo request return to Luton.”

This is **not** a usual request unless you’re on fire, they assumed we had a major problem and asked if I was declaring an emergency.

“Negative,” I replied. (Well it’s a sort of emergency leaving the case of cash behind.) Naturally they assumed we were in danger.

I won’t horrify you with the costs involved in returning to land followed by another take-off, it is prodigious – there are landing and handling fees, ramp charges, not to mention the **fuel!** I explained that our missing passenger should be arriving any second so I requested to stop on the taxiway, engines running and wait, we could drop the rear stair for him. I really should know better by now – 10 minutes away always means 30 minutes.

Then a voice from the tower:

“I’m afraid Bravo Echo you are going to have to pull onto stand and shut down, you’re blocking the taxiway there.” We parked and shut down.

Everyone was laughing, I thought to myself the laughter might be a little more subdued when the bill arrived. Eventually a flustered Costas arrived armed with a big bag and huge smile and off we went.

Nice was outrageously busy, special published approaches were in operation – a little more long winded than usual. We dropped down over the mountains near Montelimar, flew out to sea round the Cap D’Antibes (mandatory for noise abatement). You must fly a circuitous route into Nice so as not to disturb the residents, who all want to *get* there by private jet but don’t want to *hear* one once they are sipping martinis on the floating pink ‘cadi’ in the pool! I flew in towards the beach and turned right onto final approach to see the familiar parallel runways of 04 left and right jutting out into the blue

Mediterranean, it is a beautiful setting. The mountains were clear in the distance. The views were fantastic, huge speed boats bounced along the water leaving trails of white foam, there were water skiers, swimmers, and jet skis, in this – the ultimate playground. Boats the sizes of palaces were moored out at sea off my starboard. The beach was dotted with cheerful umbrellas, fun seekers, topless beauties and bat and ball players. Brightly coloured parachutes were being dragged behind boats, people strapped in the harness, legs dangling. The sea was deep azure fading to whitish blue near the shore, big sparkles of sunlight bounced off its surface everywhere and over this whole scene, the dome of undisturbed blue sky.

I called for the landing checklist.

“Antiskid ... five releases.”

“Ignition ... On.”

“No Smoking ... On.” (And if you think *that's* going to make a difference...)

“Gear ... down 3 greens.”

“Flaps ... thirty thirty green light.”

“Hydraulics ... pressure and quantity normal.”

At this point on short finals you are only feet above the windsurfers! The pop star in his crazy hat, gave a running commentary as I came down the ILS as though it were a space invaders game.

“Yeah, nice one, correcting left, intercepting the localiser ... alright were on the numbers now girl, yeah, wheels comin' down, nailed it, nice one kicking off the drift ... into the flare and ... beee youtiful.”

It was a nice change to have someone taking an interest!

All our passengers shot off to Monte Carlo to the best hotel in town, we stayed in Nice but the hosts very kindly invited us on the boat the next night to join the party. I had a good friendship with the flight attendant so she and I coordinated dresses the next night and decided to go and have a *thoroughly* great time.

Six of us (two of the crew had relatives with them) piled into the mini bus taxi. We were a merry crowd laughing and joking, “Just think we're getting paid for this,” then laughing even harder when we realised that we in fact *hadn't* been paid. The driver was abusing every other car:

“Eh bas, qu'est ce qu'il fait ce conard ...? Ah merde!!” he moaned as he leant on the horn with one hand and twiddled his moustache with the other. Then he waved his hands, lifted his shoulders to his ears, and pointed at his bonnet and the gap they were inviting him to squeeze through. “Tu es fou ou quoi?” All very Nicoise!

He dropped us at a very swish looking hotel in the center of Monte Carlo. Photographers were at the ready to snap stars as they alighted from cars, their lenses went up, I was all in white and Anna all in black and for a moment they thought we might be celebs, then they tutted disdainfully at the stench of our commonality, lowered their lenses and lit another Gauloise.

The walk along the harbour towards the boat was quite simply a reverie. I'd never seen so much glitz and opulence crammed into so tiny a space. All along the quayside, diners were tucking into lobsters and champagne, waiters

scurried about serving hundreds of bottles of wine and on the water people were settling into the serious business of ‘mega posing’ on the backs of their gleaming white boats, some the size of small ships. Girls in ‘can’t go any lower’ backless dresses with diamante straps showed off their tanned backs. Guys in tuxedos with the bowties casually undone held champagne flutes and lowered their shades to get a better look at the passing bevy of beauties. There should have been a sign up at the entrance to the place: “ALL those NOT going to Gordon Brown’s party please enter here!” Live music and heady perfume wafted through the air. It was like walking into a dream, a million bulbs twinkled in the crepuscular light around the harbour, fairy lights adorned the decks and were strung across all the awnings of the bars and restaurants. Fireworks exploded filling the dark sky with kaleidoscopic fountains over the distant hills and the whole scene was reflected in the still waters of the harbour.

We found our boss’s boat – it was a cracker, a full crew all in their whites waited to greet us as we walked along the gangplank and onto the spotless wooden deck.

“Good evening,” said the immaculate Captain with outstretched hand. We were asked to remove our shoes to save the wood, then we climbed up to the main deck – a beckoningly spacious area where food and champagne were being served amongst mingling people. It was polyglot humanity – so many different nationalities. I spotted the beautiful girls who had been our passengers, and I noticed to my surprise that they hadn’t taken their high heels off so had that luxury of those extra few inches.

The Jacuzzi was bubbling away at the very front of the top deck, next to it our Indian ‘funk man’ was pounding out the Punjabi funk. We were all dancing around the deck which was a hoot – especially since I had a real northern comedian right behind me and he wanted to sing along but didn’t know the words so just chanted ‘pop-pop padum’ and ‘mango chutney’ and anything else he could remember off an Indian menu; he was very tuneful and kept good time, I have to give him that.

Some of the guys made trips to nearby boats to touch base with their fellow Indians and Middle Eastern mates. There were some ‘heavy weights’ in from Saudi, their boat was actually out at sea, little tenders were moving back and forth. The boat became more and more crowded as the night went on, the pink champagne tumbled endlessly from bottle to outstretched glass, and spirits were high. Some were keeping clear heads, dishing out business cards selling everything from mobile handsets to Gulfstream Five jets.

My mate from the north (who’d missed his vocation as a stand-up comedian) came up to me at one point and said, “See that woman over there Neets, the one in the goldie top?”

“Yes.”

“Apparently I’ve just heard that she’s offering a grand if someone’ll shag ’er.”

I had to swallow quickly before I burst out laughing. It was the *way* he said it (in that northern ‘wukkin’ men’s club way) and the fact that he’d even *found* that information out.

“Oh well I see you have all the latest boat gossip, nice work.”

“She’s lucky ’cause the way the booze is flowing on this boat, she’s in with a fair old chance.”

I threw him a ‘don’t be mean’ smirk and we went off to tour the cabins. The bedrooms were pure Ivana Trump, jade statues, bijou ornaments tons of gold, and about three million mirrors. The white carpets throughout were deep enough to sink your toes into. All the bathrooms were gleaming and the wooden doors so polished you could see your reflection. A woman came out of one of the toilets in an eye blinkingly scarlet dress and we engaged in a little conversation. I was actually looking into a face which didn’t move a single muscle as she talked. Speech came from the mouth miraculously because the face was set like stone, not a lip curled up, not an eyebrow lifted, not a cheek budged even a millimetre, the only movement was the eyeball itself. I guessed this was platinum package offered by the beauty clinic, Botox: buy five get one free after fifty sets of false nails.

One of our hosts suggested going to a night club called Jimmy’s.

“But it’s five in the morning?” I said.

“That’s a great time to go, everyone will be arriving now,” he replied. “Hey this is Monte Carlo Anita, it never stops.” Just then I noticed one of the girls we’d flown down who’d been dancing and sipping champers all night and had a luck changing blow – a savage one I’d say. I saw some furtive mouth to ear negotiations going on between two men, next thing she was taken by the elbow and handed over to a greasy fat dodgy looking bloke, with dark skin, a white suit and two earrings. “Eki thump” I said to myself “keep drinking girl”.

Reassuring images of duvets and pillows and nurturing thoughts of my Novotel bedroom which had been tiptoeing playfully round my mind, were banished as I toughened up for ‘second wind’. A small crowd of us walked to a taxi rank near the port, and to my surprise there were hoards and platoons of people from all nations waiting for cabs to go on to this famous night club. I must say it was well organised because, taxis from normal cars to mini coaches were cruising up constantly. There were even gloved guys there to slide open the doors of the Renault Espace for you. I sat opposite a very inebriated Swedish guy whose eyes rolled around his head and who mumbled and sang – it was a sort of medley of incomprehensible Scandinavian. Then he sat bolt upright shouted something at me in ancient Norse with wide staring eyes, laughed manically then slumped in the chair and was out.

The night club was quite simply unbelievable. People were queuing up outside at dawn. We decided collectively that I should try and get past the bouncer by mentioning the names of our clients, and bring one of them out to assist our ingress! Fortunately it worked and I padded down a long dark tunnel into the club. It was a nightmare of decibels and human beings, you couldn’t move. The human sardine factory. I had never seen so many surly looking girls crammed together on a dance floor glancing from left to right to see if any one better was around.

People could barely move their shoulders on the dance floor let alone show off their swing moves. There were noses in the air, lips pouting. The words ‘get over yourselves’ came to mind. We are a funny old lot aren’t we?

We long to go to clubs where a drink, *ANY* drink be it a glass of champagne or mineral water cost one hundred Euros, where you can't even if you have vocal chords like a QE2 tethering rope make yourself heard. I managed to spot one of our crowd and waved, he came over. He was pretty short and almost scrambled over people's heads.

I explained that we were all outside and since amongst the Bentleys, Ferraris, Aston Martins there were models, racing drivers and crowned princes of Europe with their billionaire mates, the chances of a couple of lads from 'oop North and two girls based in Luton being chosen by the all-powerful bouncer were, well, slim to say the least.

Once we were all inside the volume precluded any chance of conversation but thankfully, the boss bought a few bottles of champagne, for simply colossal amounts of money. The dear flight engineer from South Africa, such a nice chap, skinny as a rake and I suspect not *that* worldly, he found it all terrifically amusing, like a kid in a sweetshop.

"Chroyst I could buy a small place in Transvaal for what this lot costs you know," he shouted in thick Afrikaans accent. And he made some 'Emperor's clothes' type of comments such as, "Not really that many people smiling hey?"

Fair dues, he stayed out until lunchtime the next day. Being so small he managed to scale up one of the trees or pillars inside the place, for I remember him perched up there like a little gibbon looking down on the heaving mass of humanity. I saw a strange creature, could have been male or female, not unlike Prince, white suit, heels, bling, bum fluff moustache and side burns, I just caught snippets of his conversation going on right next to me with the crowned prince of 'Sleazaria'.

"What you want? I can get anything, you want girl? boy? two girls? three boys ..."

I felt like chirping in 'goat? sheep? horns, shorn or hairy?'

There was not a square inch anywhere to sit, even standing became difficult, you had to keep raising your glass way above your head to allow passing traffic. The bar was ten people deep all trying to order drinks. Skeletal models from Uzbekistan wearing no more than a sequin handkerchief with lips like pink grapefruit segments perched on fountain edges whilst flotillas of adoring shade wearing aspirants got splashed and shoved trying to procure a drink for them. Talk about the ceaseless litany of materialism, it was a handbags, glad rags, and most definitely rutting season. Some people had just given up all hope of finding the loo or their friends or any purpose whatsoever and they had just slumped 'in situ' holding their shoes, yawning with their brows on their folded arms. These were like the weaker or injured. I could hear David Attenborough in sotto voce saying:

"And these poor creatures ... exhausted by the fierce competition ... will not mate this time ..."

Cabs were becoming scarcer by seven thirty in the morning, however, our chap had his flagging interest reawakened when we said 'Nice' because he knew he could charge us like an injured bull and he duly did. Whilst waiting for the cab in the watery light of morning, we saw three policemen absolutely kicking the living daylights out of some poor bloke on the ground, God knows

what he had done but he was certainly paying for it now. Unusual to see in Monte Carlo, much more likely at a football match, maybe someone had tipped the police off that there was an English football fan in town.

Nice airport was awash with the world's finest and most impressive private jets; from the crew bus which took us to our 727 we trundled passed thousands of millions of dollars of gleaming hardware. They came from all over: Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Caymans, USA, United Arab Emirates, Russia and beyond. We did two shuttles back to Luton, the most memorable for me being the second one. The moon was a baby's fingernail that evening and the sky a perfect blue. It was my departure, and we had the gregarious English pop star with flamboyant hat, in the cockpit with us again.

I lined up on the runway. I pointed out the moon just before I pushed the throttles up to 'three stable', and he broke out into a perfect rendition of "Fly me to the Moon".

"Eighty knots."

"Check."

"VI rotate."

"And let me play among the stars."

"Positive climb ... Gear up."

"Let me know what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars ... in other words."

"Flap five."

"Speed checked ... flap five."

"...darling kiss me ... Fill my heart with song ..."

"Flaps two."

"Speed check, flaps two."

"And let me sing forever more ..."

"Flaps up, climb power, after take-off checklist."

"Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars ..."

As I banked her round through west after the take-off climb and on to a northerly heading we all savoured the most spectacular unobstructed view of the coast. Lights twinkled on the promenade, boats were lit on the calm water, and the mountains rose up in the distance behind Nice and Cannes. Our flying enthusiast pop star was by now stood in the cockpit in his crazy hat, drink in hand, sliding and grooving around gesturing at the moon as he sang. Yes ... it was a nice one. (This WAS a private flight!) We climbed up and headed towards Dijon, the VHF communication frequencies were absolutely saturated with aircraft all departing Nice. Flecks and feathers of faraway cirrus sat high up in the atmosphere catching the evening light.

At Luton, everyone said their goodbyes and thank yous. The Bentleys and Mercedes were brought to the aircraft and bags were loaded. The last to leave was our pop star who jumped into his gull-wing door racing car along with one of the bevy of pretty girls. I hoped she was ready for a hundred and twenty miles per hour because I think that is what he had in mind. He sank into his super low bucket seat and floored the accelerator and was gone in a mighty roar. We all retired to the luxury of the cabin to finish off all the delicious catering and have a drink. Whilst relaxing after a flight the handling agents or refuellers are milling in and out doing their jobs, it is customary to invite them

to enjoy a drink and any leftovers. Those were the moments when stories would be shared about the passengers and the trips. The agonies and the ecstasies of various journeys. Many a laugh was had. Then I heard a real eye opener. One of the funniest. Our male flight attendant told us a blinding story of his previous trip.

Sounds like the Mile High Club

“I kid you not mate, there was just bodies shagging all over the bloody place.”

These were the bluntly honest words of our friend, a male flight attendant from up north and blessed therefore with that dry delivery and razor sharp humour. (I saw him pick up the microphone once in the bar of the Intercontinental in Delhi and do the most perfect imitation of a compere of a northern club.)

“Ladies and gentlemen don’t go away there’ll be more music from the band after their short break and we’ve still got the raffle to come, and plenty more dancing.”

The silver hair and the tan meant he looked quite the part.

He told us about the orgy on his previous trip on the same Boeing 727, during which every guy on board was having sex (or was ‘plugged in’ to coin a phrase). “I had wondered why they’d requested ‘no female crew on board’—front or back. Then ... it made sense,” he said with a cheeky grin.

“I was walking down the middle of the cabin and all the flamin’ lights were off right so I was shinin’ me torch on the floor to see where I was going, I was trying to get to the bar at the back. I kept the torch down so I wouldn’t disturb them, and all I could see were just arses moving up and down. That sofa had six of ’em on it and in the big armchair here was a blonde with huge knockers just bouncing up and down. I swear I just couldn’t believe my bloody eyes, and there were four of ’em in the bedroom. It was unreal.”

We were killing ourselves laughing at the thought of all this and we were positively crinkled when he then told us that as he was going into the toilet to afford them some privacy, one of the girls, concerned he didn’t feel left out, offered him some ‘fun’ as well! What a sweetheart!

“I have to say at that point I thought ... well beats the hell out of workin’ in an office! Here I am in the middle of a flamin’ orgy at thirty-five thousand feet.” He of course was giving updates to the cockpit who were doing their best to find pockets of turbulence!

My friend continued:

“At one point this Eastern European girl came up to me in tears and said she’d had enough like, she wanted to get off, she didn’t want anything from them they were just too bloody rough for her, she’d made a mistake. Poor girl...but, what the hell could I do? I think she was a bit intimidated by it all obviously not very experienced.”

I agreed, saying it’s a bit difficult to pull over and drop someone off at thirty-five thousand feet. It wasn’t the syrupy fantasy she’d entertained. If she was expecting to step into a scene from ‘The Bridges of Madison County’

make tender passionate love with someone who stroked her hair, told her she was beautiful and wanted to stay by her side, buy her a cottage and a puppy, she was a bit off target. These guys (and I've worked for a few of them) have a diet of pornography, Marlboro reds and Johnny Walker. Sex with them is, I would imagine, pretty dirty, hard and nasty and probably not particularly conventional! Without being declamatory or judgmental, most of them are, hard, promiscuous, pleasure seeking, libertines and you play by their rules if you go into their world. Beware before you jump into these pools for a swim, sharks circle and waters can be murky. It was all too much for this young Uzbeki girl. But hopefully this would be a lesson in the darker more debauched byways of humanity. As Guy de Maupassant and some of his nineteenth century contemporaries showed us ... There's as much to be gleaned from the sleazy back street brothels as from the glittering 'pompadour' salons!

The clients had requested that no female crew should be on board, so my mate had the whole experience to himself but was also left with the task of clearing up which he described as nothing short of ghastly!

After the laughter we had a few grimaces and an "Oh perleeease." when he described the condoms left all over the cabin!

"I mean, fair dos, have your fun but clean up after yourselves for heaven's sake!"

It reminded me of my friend's dad (a Yorkshire man) grumbling after her mammoth 21st party. During the 'rekkie' of the damage, he said, "I don't care about the couple having it off in the bushes, but I do object to underwear being discarded on my herbaceous border."

They should have cleared up after themselves I mean it's just not cricket!

This little yarn prompted a story from my friend – a hostess whose plane was parked next door. She used to work on Saudia Royal Flight, and was talking about the shenanigans that went on there. Girls were chosen to go onto the 747. There were obviously tiers of employment and depending on how 'hard' you worked the more you earned. (This is a plane with lots of what they call 'mejilese' or low comfy lounging sofas.) They all lived in compounds in Saudi Arabia, but a few of them did, when repatriating end up with flats in London, diamond rings and convertible sports cars. I myself remember flying Saudi women who would be covered head to toe in Black when they boarded, no sooner were the wheels in the wheel well and "ker-pow" it was Channel suits with miniskirts, perfume make-up and large cocktails! Well as Cindy Lauper says: "Girls just want to have fun".

The Far East and Back

Whilst on the subject I told my story of a free-lance trip, I flew on a private Middle Eastern executive Boeing 727 in 1996. The boss – well what can one say? Egomaniacal just does not come close. A captious and deeply unpleasant individual he loved to bark and bully. We started at Southend in England of all places and flew to Paris then Bahrain then Dakar. We had the shortest rest I

can remember – that would be the kind when, on waking, you feel as though a thimble full of sand is in each eye. We pushed on to Borneo for one day then it was the most gargantuan and never-ending journey back. In one day we flew from Borneo to Paris via Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, and Bahrain.

There are three things I remember about this Homeric voyage. One was the tale told by the two English flight attendants. Apparently the boss would return to his jet dressed in his suit after a meeting, then summon the girls to his private bedroom with en suite and expect to be dressed in his Arabic robes so he could relax. Apparently he would stand, arms outstretched like the Christ figure on the hill in Rio being adorned in his exotic gold and green silks along with matching slippers.

The second, was, not being allowed *any* hot food at all on this twenty-six hour journey because *he* didn't like the smell of hot food from the galley. So we were restricted to a tray of sandwiches whose edges curled up like autumn leaves thirty minutes into the flight. This was as teeth grindingly irritating as was his temper, which could fire clay. When he boarded the aircraft in Borneo the outside temperature was about forty degrees C. The packs (air conditioning packs) have to be **off** for engine start so that maximum bleed air is directed to the engines to start them. Although we had had the air conditioning on it was not man enough against these punishing temperatures.

He burst into the cockpit hissing and popping like a chip pan. The aircraft should be cool, why hadn't we got the air conditioning on and so on. The Captain was French and of gnomic stature in every way and simply didn't say anything. I reached for the Boeing check list and was about to show him the start procedure which clearly states:

Beacon ... on, Galley power ... off, Packs ... off, but I was given a combative scowl from the left seat so I dipped into my pool of hard won self-control and tossed it back on the cowling. This poor guy had to fly this megalomaniac around all his miserable life, *I*, on the other hand was just free-lancing for this one trip. With tongue in cheek the engineer expressed his surprise that given he spends so much time in the sandy arid wastes, he should feel the heat at all.

The most lasting memory was during the cruise when I got up to stretch my legs in the small area just aft of the cockpit where there was a coffee machine for us. He had some dignitaries on board from Malaysia, I didn't know *exactly* who but there were some profitable liaisons occurring – daughters marrying Sultans and so on. There were big businessmen/minor royalty ... certainly 'heavy hitters'.

From their lounge, they saw me standing there just outside the cockpit, and they called me in to speak to them. They were polite and friendly and we engaged in conversation for half an hour. The subject was aircraft because they were thinking about a Challenger 601 (a beautiful Canadian built jet) they were very inquisitive about the Boeing and were obviously enjoying the space, so we discussed costs. I made the point that the Boeing costs only about four or five million to purchase but was very heavy on the fuel, and restrictive on the noise. The Challenger and Gulfstreams were well over thirty million to buy but were lighter on fuel, plus the 727 had old technology in the cockpit as

opposed to the high tech electronic flight displays (EFIS) and Flight management systems of modern jets.

We compared the enormous space you get in an airliner size biz jet and that in the slimmer narrower, but infinitely more modern jets. Then one of them showed great perspicacity:

“What about if you put the modern glass cockpit into the old Boeing then you have the space and comfort *and* the hi-tech side?”

I said it has been done – it is costly, but you end up with a very desirable aircraft!

“You’d have something like a 757 (Bill Gate’s friend had one at the time) which would be incredible.”

We talked animatedly, they asked me how I got started then passed me a couple of business cards. We shook hands, I returned to the cockpit.

A short while later the young lackey knocked on the cockpit door and sheepishly said that the boss would like to see ‘the girl’. I looked around and concluded that that must mean me. I went aft to his private office. When I entered I had to suppress a chortle because it was so ... well ... ‘James Bondish’, he was Doctor Evil in the chair with the cat (only the cat was missing).

“Why did you talk to my passengers?”

“Because they called me in, wanting a chat about aviation, it would be rude to ignore them.”

“I see.”

I clocked the room whilst I was there. I had a feeling since this was tea and no biscuits, I probably wouldn’t be in here again, it was a beautiful room. There were breathtaking artefacts and carvings, they looked somehow Maori. A world of inky opulence. I looked straight at him and raised my eyebrows prompting the obvious forthcoming bollocking.

“It seems you are quite the expert on aeroplanes,” he sneered as he flicked imaginary dust of his clothes.

“Oh thank you very much,” I fired straight back over the net determined not to give him the satisfaction of intimidation, which was clearly the aim here.

“So, er tell me, what has 757 got that my aircraft has *not* got?”

‘Okaaay’ I said to myself, doing a high speed appraisal of the situation. He was hurt because passengers have mentioned interesting chat they had re aircraft, new versus old, big versus small. They probably mentioned updating a 727 cockpit and *that* being a winning combo – it’d be like a 757. Oh dear, toys were now being thrown from pram here because audacious girl had suggested there might be something better out there, therefore he *isn’t* king of the castle.

“Well,” I drew out slowly and determinedly, “Are we talking avionics, nav. systems, fuel burn, climb rate, range, noise restrictions, space, **size** (saved that one ‘til last) ... because we could go a long way with this?”

With that I was expecting a hand to go under the polished table, press a button and the floor to open revealing a gyroscopically stabilised pool crammed full of starving piranha with the odd gold Rolex lying on the bottom. But instead I got the flick of the hand which meant piss off and be quick about it.

That journey home was a long and exhausting slog. I sat for hours over the sea between Singapore and India having to listen to the HF radio and because we had no Selcal (when the controller can call you so you can remove the headsets) I had the hissing of interference in my ears the whole time. The stops were short and for fuel only. Having said that fuel stops can be painfully long – on a trip on a different 727 that same year it took us half an hour to find the refueller in Lahore Pakistan. It was the middle of the night and I finally found him asleep on top of an old lorry. So you can never be too certain of an expeditious fuel stop.

We pressed on to Paris. We had left Taiwan on the twelfth – my birthday, by the time we arrived it was no longer my birthday I had spent it schlepping across the world for “Dr Evil”. Still no worries we had a bottle of champagne and headed off to the Crazy Horse Saloon and the Champs Elysees. We were so exhausted, we thought ‘pah’ what’s another few hours, let’s party.

I knew I wouldn’t work for this man again and without doubt, *he* wouldn’t be calling *me* anytime soon! It was the last trip I did before joining the airlines at Gatwick, I had had enough of the disregard for crew duty hours on these so-called ‘private flights’ and I was tired of it. I thought I’d have a change, try the airlines and work to a roster. It was a character building experience and useful learning curve during which I made some really good friends.

Flying for an Airline – Feline Pilot!

Nothing could be further from private jet charter than ‘bucket and spade’ Airlines. I enjoyed the contrast and lived through some real ‘moments’ during the three years of flying Boeing 727s for a Gatwick and Stansted based charter airline taking holiday makers all round Europe. I made some great friends. Most of the engineers (‘ginger beers’ as they were fondly known!) were ex Dan Air, therefore seasoned ‘been around the block’ types; who loved a beer, a smoke, told loads of dirty jokes and could fix anything. My chief pilot – dear Tony, a lifelong friend was an eccentric character whom we nicknamed Bilbo Baggins, due to his extraordinary likeness to the lovable gnomish scatterbrain from Lord of the Rings. On our first encounter – my training flight, he arrived two minutes before departure (rather than the customary two hours) and had one trouser leg tucked into his sock, the other out, and great clumps of grass stuck to his shoes. His buttons were askew and he’d lost his mobile.

“So sorry Anita ... overslept.” He did have legendary bags under his eyes, was partially deaf and was always losing his expensive hearing aids. You always knew when Tony was with the previous crew because slipped down the side of his station there would invariably be a hotel key with a big plastic tag attached the size of a cheque book with ‘**Copthorne Hotel** please return if found’ written on it. Some days you’d even find his house and car keys. Eventually he got so tired of losing his mobile he just left it at home.

“That way I always know where it is!”

He was deeply intelligent just a bit lateral! I loved him!

Another funny character was Captain 'Ray'. It was trendy at the time for names like 'Kevin' and 'Sharon' to appear on car windscreens. So he stuck our names Ray and Neeta to the windscreen of the Boeing as we pushed back from stand 11 at Gatwick going to Corfu. An amused handling agent took a picture of this and sent it to us.

We did Europe and sometimes beyond. Rowdy passengers were often a problem. The trouble normally started at the bar in the terminal. Long check in times and delayed departures compounded the problem. Groups of lads, in festive spirit would head for the bar to see who could pour the most pints of lager down their necks before boarding. Some of them managed a staggering four or five *even* at five thirty in the morning. A group were climbing the stairs onto the aircraft one morning when one lad caught sight of me in the cockpit shouted to his mate, "Oi Darren there's a f***ing *BIRD* in there, look!"

"Naah?"

The cockpit door was open and as they boarded, his mate stuck his head in the cockpit and said, "Bet they don't let ya park it love!!"

Guffaws of laughter followed, which I must admit had me chuckling.

There were happy drunks whose biggest beef was the queue for the toilets, and the refusal of more alcohol, but occasionally we got some nasty ones like the boxer with a gold tooth and long black leather coat and dark shades who obviously could kill with his bare hands; he ended up picking up one of the stewards by the neck, *that one* was a tad nasty. I don't think that flight attendant has ever been the same since. One of his party smoked in the toilet (probably not just tobacco), another threw an empty drinks tin at the cabin crew. We handed him over to the 'professionals' on landing at Gatwick. There was a chap – a *big* chap who was trained and indeed was a trainer himself in anti-terrorism and 'security' commonly known as 'agro'. He would be waiting for us on the gate and come straight into the cockpit.

"What seat number?"

"Thirty-one A."

Whoosh, he was off, quick as a flash down the back. He'd ask the person to come with him and if they refused (which was usually the case!) he'd handcuff them and lead them off the plane. I saw him once throw a guy to the ground and put his knee in his back in the aisle! This usually brought cheers and rounds of applause from the other passengers.

It was a comfort to know that service existed, it was better to get the problem inbound to the UK because if it happened outbound to, say Tenerife, we'd get little to no help at all from the security services at *that* end. The Gatwick boys were 'no messing about' sorts, swift in their assistance – proper 'Sweeneys'. Fortunately it didn't happen very often. I have a lasting memory of one guy in a scruffy old anorak being led off down the ramp yelling and screaming, "I'll see the lot of you tossers in court!"

A less serious incident was the day the purser came bursting in to the flight deck: "There are three guys at the back, they're pissed and blowing up life vests."

The Captain was a tiny, bald, slip of a man. 'B' the flight engineer was a bit overweight so he puffed and panted after the smallest of tasks. Climbing

the aircraft stairs had him swooning and wheezing. I was fond of 'B' a lovely man, he got so breathless that he could never quite finish a sentence, the last couple of words would be mumbles and a sort of hum. All his kids seemed to be constantly backpacking round the world and phoning up to ask him to send more money.

Whenever I flew with *both* Adrian (big lad) and 'B' together Adrian would tell me to bring a pot of grease and a crowbar so I could squeeze around them in the cockpit!

On this occasion the small Captain and 'B' both looked at me and said, "Go on Neets you go and have a word, they'll listen to *you*!"

I went back. The idea (as taught in our security class) is to start nicely and calmly, appealing to their sense of reason.

"I know you're on holiday guys and you all want some fun – I understand but unfortunately tampering with any safety equipment is an offence and you will be fined." They really were like little school boys nudging and laughing.

"Watch out here comes the bird in uniform!"

"I bet you want to blow one too don't you?"

Explosions of congratulatory giggles from the two mates for *that* gag! They apologised but I said one of our cabin attendants would take their details and they would be hearing from us because that is the policy.

"Well it's only fair if we take *your* number as well ..." his mate chirped in, "just in case you lot lose ours then we'll call *you* to make sure that you punish us correctly!!"

His mate considered this line such a blinder that he spurted his mouthful of beer all over the headrest of the seat in front which was the final straw for the long suffering occupant, a woman in a turquoise tracksuit and a head of bleached permed curls who rose out of her chair like a magician's poodle from a top hat. Furious, she turned round, planted the hands barnacled with 'bling' and sporting long square manicured nails firmly on her hips and glowered at them. Her mouth was tight like a sutured cut – her red lipstick bleeding up and down the lines.

"I think you should arrest the bloody lot of them!"

She had obviously been camping on the sunbed for the last month because she had a face like fried red cabbage.

When one of our hosties asked her to please sit down and fasten her seat belt, she started pointing her finger and waving her head which sent her dangly earrings flying around like glockenspiel keys. Then a secondary scene erupted, the mad, poodle perm lady thought she'd let me know just what she thought of this 'poxy bleedin' airline'. When asked to sit down again she launched:

"I'll have you bloody know, my Derek and I go on *THREE*' holidays a yeeya, we're not bleedin' paupers ya know and I ain't used to being treated like *this*. Call this a bleedin' aeroplane, it's a bloody disgrace, I've seen better interiors in public bogs! The seats are falling apart it smells and you've got no bloody entertainment, I mean we must be on the only plane in the whole bloody world which doesn't have any entertainment!" (She *did* have a point.)

Obviously this lady's family were used to this, the husband raised his paper a bit higher, the son whose baggy trousers had slipped round his thighs,

pulled his woolly cap a bit lower, kept his shades on and kicked his feet in laceless oversized trainers while he upped the volume in his headphones and continued his spiritless munching of Pringles. The daughter who took gormlessness to quite another level just looked at her mum with no expression whatsoever and then went back to twiddling her (I would guess) brand new belly button ring which had turned septic and was bright red.

Then the life vest lads started to join in and tell her to shut her gob and so it went on. I did apologise for the lack of entertainment explaining that the 727 was an old aircraft which is why the seats were worn.

“OLD!!” she splurged before I could finish. “It should be in the bleedin’ knackers yard, it’s the antiques flamin’ roadshow this is!”

The incident like many others ended safely and everyone calmed down, but there were times (and I experienced two of them) when we had to call upon the services of our friendly flying squad as we nicknamed them.

It would be unfair *not* to sympathise with irate passengers, God knows I’ve been one myself trying to go on holiday! They are often uninformed, no one tells them what’s going on, and they endure dispiriting delays, then (only in the case of our airline) sit for hours in a seat with no movie. The more modern jets of course had the entertainment system. It can be a *bad* start to a holiday. (Funnily enough despite the ‘high mileage’ interior of our 727, Princess Margaret was a passenger once or twice and I saw her sitting in the front row sipping a scotch.)

I cringe when I think of the unceremonial dumping, at Gatwick, of a plane load of holiday makers who were bound for Manchester. This meant they incurred a long coach journey. The reason was that there was a backlog of delays and we needed *that* aircraft for the next flight which departed out of *Gatwick*. That is rotten. How our company rep could stand there on the ramp seeing the passengers off and give out orders as to their coaches – it was shameful!

Due to extensive delays one summer night at Gatwick we took off for the Greek island of Kos and we were out of duty hours to do the return journey (we are allowed to do, say thirteen hours but if we go over this we *have* to take rest, it is a CAA rule). Unfortunately the passengers who were all waiting eagerly in Kos to return home were met with the unwelcome news that the crew had to night stop and we would be leaving tomorrow at eight a.m.

Next morning, when we all marched in to the little terminal wheeling our bags behind us, our long suffering passengers gave a standing ovation and shouted: “All right loves, had your beauty sleep have you, yea don’t worry about us we’ll just sit in this bloody terminal another 24 hours no problem.” I totally understood that frustration, but unfortunately we were bound by the rules.

There were some quite ‘revelatory’ moments working for an airline, where else would I have acquired such detailed knowledge of the S and M gay scene in Brighton? With all those gay flight attendants around me who simply *could not wait* for an opportunity to gush and tell, I had a crash course in gay-athons and fetish parties. There was one particular guy who played host to a permanent colony of cold sores round his mouth and could hardly hold himself

back on a Monday morning to fill us all in (whether we liked it or not) on his lurid gang banging weekends, the bondage and whipping, the manacles and shackles, the rubber and truncheons. He was great for my diet because I never accepted a scrap of food from him when he was looking after the cockpit. We would all politely decline anything that was offered. God we heard some stories. We got truckers in women's clothing the lot! – I will never look at lay-bys on the M1 in quite the same light again.

We had one 'good ole boy' Captain from the deep south of the USA. Well 'listen up folks' this Cap'n L (said with real southern drawl) didn't take too kindly to gays, and he certainly didn't "wanna hear that s**t". He tried hard to fathom it out and show a modicum of acceptance. Pete the flight engineer and I tried to be neutral and non-judgemental to diffuse the situation.

"Hey it's just their preference, each to their own, as long as they do their jobs well ..." We offered to keep things 'sweet'.

'L' just said, "Ah guess so," and looked out of his window pensively with his coffee. I thought the conversation had reached closure, but he turned back a good ten minutes later and said, "But you know what I have a real hard time with?" obviously having been unable to dismiss it.

"Oh are we still on *that*? ... What is it?" I asked.

"They all might be nice guys 'n all, but at the end of the day ... they have to find some guy's big hairy butt attractive, and *thay-at* is what I personally have kinda a hard time with!"

Pete and I were crumpled, it *was* funny! We were forever smoothing things over.

We had one flight attendant, very sweet but who'd barely ventured out of Essex. Her boyfriend was a body piercer and she had a stud in her tongue (she had to remove it for work).

"Doesn't it get in the way of your food?" I asked once.

"No not really I get the odd noodle wrapped around it but vats about it."

One day in Nice we were all sitting round a table and she said, "Neets, what's salad Nick-o-I-see."

"It's a salad with tuna and egg and olives."

"I fink I'll have the burger."

She, was absolutely without pretence or guile and became a friend.

Duty time cards were something every crew member had to keep and she could never quite get the hang of local time and GMT (which we call zulu) and between which there is an hour's difference in summer. When European time was one or two hours *ahead*, again, it got more confusing. Having finished late after an exhausting multisector day, we ended up in a hotel in Bournemouth. The Captain, Adrian, arranged for the bar to stay open so we could all have a nightcap. We all agreed to meet downstairs in half an hour. As we dragged our bags up the stairs she said, "Is that half an hour local or half an hour zulu?"

"I'll just knock on your door when I'm going down hey?"

"Ah thanks."

December was a festive roster with fun filled flights to various European Christmas markets. One day, it was Vienna. The whole crew went off to eat KFC. Don't want to be stand offish but intensely reared foul, deep fried, isn't

really my culinary paradigm so I said I'd wander round the Christmas market (splendid in Vienna!) and enjoy the, hot choccie and Viennese pastries.

"I fink I'll go with Neets, she can show me all the culture and all them nice markets."

She really appreciated what little snippets of information I could remember about Franz Joseph, Maria Theresa and their happy band of Hapsburgs and their glorious Austro-Hungarian Empire. We had fun that afternoon amongst the wooden cabins and sparkling lights; bought some lovely home-made Austrian bread and gingerbread men with smartie eyes.

Christmas time! – the airline became busy with flights to Lapland (during which we would all wear our red Santa hats). I'll never forget landing on a clear and steaming runway in minus thirteen degrees while all around the airport perimeter the snow was twenty feet deep! Those Scandinavians have bad weather procedures well and truly 'down'! The Germans might do heated car seats, but those Fins, they do heated runways! One bad memory was departing for Northern Finland, the plane had just come out of a big maintenance check during which all the seats had come out. Unfortunately the engineers had put the seats back in row by row from the front – but three seats were left out. (There are different ratchets in the floor rails so left rows aren't necessarily dead opposite the right rows.) The configuration looked perfect but we were actually one row of three short! Try explaining to a family of three who are standing there holding their boarding passes as the purser does a head count for the fifth time believing she is going *bonkers*! That was dreadful, not being able to understand for the life of you why the plane has less seats than last week, yet looks the same!

We did get some sideways glances from the passengers at times. On one flight I had to wear ridiculously unsuitable lycra hipsters (with silver rings round the waistband!) because I forgot to pack my uniform trousers – I got distracted by the phone mid packing and they never went in the case, so all I had was what I travelled up to Manchester in (for the night stop and early start) – thankfully they weren't the pink ones. I did look like a ninny though!

I managed to upset everyone by smelling of cow dung one day after we'd night stopped in Teeside and went to the Stainton Arms for the evening. Peter the engineer, who loves his 'Scottish wine' said, "C'mon it's pretty late, let's go as we are and get some food and drink." So we just threw a fleece on over uniform trousers.

Walking back down the country roads to the hotel in the pitch black I thought it a good idea to cut across the field, seeing neither the bull nor the carpet of cow pats. I ended up running then tripping into a load of them. I went to bed to be greeted the next day by the revolting sight of my trousers caked in dung, frantic scrubbing in the sink followed, but a faint acrid redolence, from my foot well wafted throughout the cockpit for the next few sectors! We discouraged cockpit visits on the next sector for fear the passengers might think it really was a manger!

As the summer progressed you could count on strikes down route. An old favourite is the baggage handlers strike around August when the whole world is on holiday. Ah yes, memories of Heraklion at two a.m. and not an **inch** of

parking space. There were planes... everywhere! A landing aircraft could not even proceed to a stand because even the taxiways were clogged with aircraft. We were not allowed to unload bags ourselves, (so insisted the baggage handlers) but I remember distinctly, three of us *INN* the baggage hold, and two cabin crew down below, making a chain to offload bags. We weren't exactly singing "hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to work we go" ... but it **did** work. In other corners of the ramp, British World, LTU, and Air 2000 were doing exactly the same. The few Greek staff on the ground were powerless against six angry, determined crew members all emptying their baggage holds! It was a fight. Often we'd have to hang around until three or four in the morning before the authorities would release us for the five hour flight back to Gatwick, and that *blinding* morning sun which was brutal on the eyes! But the most tiring bit was then sitting in the 'Road to Hell' morning rush hour to get home. I used to walk in at 8am. looking like roadkill- my family thought I was taking holiday makers not taking part in the Greek and Trojan wars!

The Football Flight

Santiago, Barcelona, Turin, these were just some of the European capitals where important football matches took place. Not being an aficionado of the sport (I thought UEFA was something you stuck in an ice cream) I don't know the difference between leagues, European championships, FA championships, cups, divisions or anything else! Here is a sport which never seems to boast a single 'local' in any team. Madrid is full of guys from England, Dutch teams are full of guys with dreadlocks, 'Van De' somebody's playing for distinctly un-Dutch teams, and French sounding chaps playing for Germany and you're hard pressed to find a single molecule of Mancunian DNA in Manchester United. Anyway I am a self-confessed zero when it comes to football.

We had, however, a lucrative contract taking fans down to see these matches - a memorable one was Turin. We could enjoy an eight hour day stop in the town during which time we could stroll, shop and have lunch. Our gay flight attendants went into frenzies over the Italian designer gear and spent fortunes on sunglasses which were knocked up in China for a fiver. Similarly a hostie who probably earned no more than ten thousand a year, spent a good portion of it on a Louis Vuitton handbag. It was, I thought just red, plain and ordinary.

"Why are you spending so much on a bag, can't you see that it is a rip off."

"But I really really want it."

"Wait 'til one of your mates goes to Dubai and get exactly the same thing for twenty dollars," I urged her, feeling so deeply grateful that I didn't fall victim to the ruinously expensive designer accessory band wagon. But she bought it and surprisingly enough didn't turn into Victoria Beckham, or any other model in a glossy magazine, no, she still looked like good old short, red headed freckly Sarah from Manchester clutching a bag which could have come

from anywhere. I learnt much from my cabin crew about the justifications of being ripped off; I am to this day, still unconvinced.

In Turin, life continued as normal except for the thousands of Carabinieri (policemen), ambulances, steel railings, cones, police horses, and mean looking guys from the military with microphones. Isn't it strange that whenever English footballers go anywhere, the town becomes a fortification. I was ready to see grandfathers coming out of their homes with pitchforks, grandmothers wielding saucepans. I shamefully can't remember who was playing, but apparently it was a riveting match packed with all the drama we have come to expect – long haired guys rolling around screeching in agony clutching their ankle as they writhe and weep because someone kicked him in the shin. Then staggering painfully to their feet, making a few phoney limps and suddenly sprinting off with the speed of a greyhound. Quick recovery is a wonderful thing isn't it?

Back at the airport, all the planes were lined up, Airtours, Monarch, Air 2000, British World and many others. We all await, jockeying for position, eager to board the passengers and get out! Everyone knows what lies ahead – Bedlam. There were guys staggering around everywhere, people boarding the wrong aircraft, cabin crew directing them to their rightful planes. On the radios, the pilots were all chatting to the tower on VHF eager for their clearances. The unlucky ones (of which we were in the number) had late passengers which, of course delayed the departure. Fifteen minutes grace was all they'd get *that night* – because who knows how long they could be.

We were missing two; I sat in the cockpit watching British World, Monarch, and Airtours taxiing out to the hold. Sabre, our airline was of course the last one. The ambulance services were taking 'no more'! They were packing up for the night, so any Brit left now was on his own. Fiona our purser did the head count, entered the cockpit and said there was a guy who was so sick she didn't want to take him, his condition was just too dangerous, he was unconscious, and his mate was hardly George Clooney in ER. We called the agents to get an ambulance, their reluctance was apparent, they were *really* hoping to get shot of the Inglesi, but they did assist him off the plane and into an ambulance, his mate stayed with him. At that very moment when we were just about to close the doors for the second time I saw two guys with their jackets tied round their waists running across the tarmac towards the plane.

"Think we might have some late comers here."

"Okay," said the Captain, "we do have two seats 'cos of the off loads, I'll see how Fiona feels about taking them."

They had arrived in a drunken panic and asked if there were *any* seats left going *anywhere* in England. Obviously the Italian handling agent had pointed to us.

"*Andate!! ...in fretta!*" she shouted pointing the aerial of her radio towards us. They made a run for it. '**Clunk**' went the big red handle as Fiona reopened the door and a ground crew pushed the stairs up to the door. It was clear the Italians didn't want them on *their* soil that night. They hadn't flown out with us and having missed their booked flight (the Airtours Captain had departed without them) they were trying anything just to get home.

Luckily for them we were still there and they bounded up the stairs two at a time and said, "Quality! ... cheers mate, nice one guys thank you!" he winked and waved his tin of Carlsberg special brew at me then bounced his way down the cabin crashing into every other row on both sides. I guess the relief at not being stranded in a Turin bus shelter for the night had reawakened his enthusiasm.

"Hey if you're happy with them we'll take them ... your call."

"Yea what the hell," replied Fiona "they are not going to get home otherwise and they are no more drunk than everybody else."

(This was 1998 – the world has tightened up **considerably** since!)

Well, this was a flight during which every sick bag was used! The flight was a series of frantic visits into the cockpit by the cabin crew giving us updates of inebriation.

"Ask him exactly what he's had?" I suggested to one of our poor inexperienced juniors who was finding it hard to cope. "Then at least I can get him medical help at Gatwick, if it's serious."

She was more Lancashire than flat capped Fred Dibnah this girl, the strongest northern accent I'd ever heard. We all loved her announcements after landing at Rhodes.

"Laaaydies and Gentlemen, on behalf of Saaybur erwaays welcome ta Rhooorrs."

She came bursting into the cockpit, her usually sweet nature being tested.

"I can't oonderstand a flamin' wud they're sayin' these lads."

"How bad are they?" I asked.

"One of 'ems out sparko, and his maaate is mutterin sumit about three eez and gramarcharlie, I don't know whether they've left a maate behind called Charlie if he wants his grandma or whaaat!!"

"Just leave them and check occasionally in case they need the therapeutic oxygen."

"Right okay then," she replied

"Well you're certainly in at the deep end on this one?" I laughed trying to cheer her up a bit.

"God you're not kiddin, place stinks like flamin' brewery, I've never seen so many people being sick!" It was during the clean up at Gatwick later that night whilst on her hands and knees that one hostie, when asked by the engineer what she was doing, shouted, head down, marigolds on, 'lookin' for the flamin' glamour!"

The airspace over northern France was busy that night and Paris control were handing us over to our appropriate London ATC frequencies. Those headed for Manchester were routed to Daventry, those for Gatwick to Mayfield, and those for Stansted up towards Barkway. Descent began, thank God. Anti-ice, altimeters, go around EPRs and reference speeds were set for landing; the hydraulics, pressurisation and circuit breakers, checked – we were number five in traffic and routed downwind for runway 26. We turned final and saw the electric carpet, those welcoming orderly dazzling lights of Gatwick's ground. The landing gear clunked into position, the flap motors ran to full travel at thirty degrees and down we came.

“Three greens, thirty thirty green light, cleared to land, landing lights on,” sang out the engineer.

There are no words to describe the chaos of the cabin. Some just segued away quietly totally out of energy. Others woke up wondering where they were, some came round with the words “any chance of another bevvie”?

We managed to finally disembark them all. There were two at the back passed out in their seats. Someone’s T-shirt read: “A woman’s place is on my face!” The other one’s T-shirt read: “Give me head ’til I’m dead!” each tasty caption accompanied by an appropriate and equally tasteful cartoon. The cabin crew stood there looking at them with their hands over their mouths just giggling. One had his head back, mouth open and was snoring loudly.

“He’ll be flamin’ lucky to get any girl to go near that *bloody* ugly face with *that* dribble runnin’ down it, I’d rather sit on a flamin’ cheese grater,” said Miss ‘Fed up’ from Crawley.

The flight engineer finally trowelled them out of their seats and told them they must leave the aircraft now. I swear they had no idea where they were, as they walked down the cabin one said to the other as he fumbled in his jeans pockets.

“Hey you’ve got the car keys mate haven’t you?”

“No I haven’t got them mate, you said you’d look after them.”

I knew it was going to be a long night for *those two*. I have witnessed the ‘disappearing car syndrome’ in airport car parks. It’s amazing that birds with a brain the size of a mung bean can find their way back after a three thousand mile journey to a nest in a roof of *a certain* house in *a certain* street, after six months away, yet people after a few drinks can stand in a car park, utterly unable to recognise *anything* a mere eight hours later.

“I’m sure it was *this* row, no no I remember this blue jeep ... wasn’t it near that bus shelter-y type thingie?”

“There’s bus shelter-y type thingies all over the bloody car park!” snarls unhelpful mate. And so it goes on as they march up and down hands on foreheads trawling their battered memories for clues.

Meanwhile the long suffering industrial cleaners arrived to reconstruct the cabin and try to eliminate the stench of vomit. Amongst the rubbish was even a pair of shoes – explain that one to me, I hope he wasn’t walking home. We filled a whole bin liner with sick bags and *that* about sums up your average football flight.

(Just a tiny ‘sermon on the mount’ before leaving the pitch.) I do think the fans are very loyal and the recent announcement of ticket price rises is grossly unfair.

“But we have to pay all the wages and the running costs ...” say the pundits. Is it fair that the cost gets passed down to a working class dad who wants to take his two lads out for the day? Could they *possibly* contemplate for the sake of humanity and right and wrong, the reduction of the player’s wage. Ok he can kick a ball accurately, probably balance it in the nape of his neck, and run very fast but wouldn’t it be a tad fairer to trim a smidge off the quarter of a million a week he earns? I’m sure he’ll still survive. Yup I know ... it will *never* happen, along with cheap fuel ... dream on!

What did Alexander Pope say? ... “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.”

Samara, Russia

In the winter of 2002 our boss picked up a lucrative contract flying Italian engineers out to Russia, to a place well east of Moscow called Samara. One crew would pick them up from Milan and fly to Gatwick, the second crew would take them on to Samara. Then a local carrier took them to their final destination – Kazakhstan. It was a lengthy journey and if we had a headwind we would be twitching around about Berlin as to whether to come down for fuel because this place was right on the edge of our performance envelope in terms of distance. There wouldn't exactly be oceans of fuel sloshing around on landing! It was grim, cold, and pretty depressing. Lines of Ilyushin, Antonov and Yak aircraft were parked on the grey icy ramps. After the usual nausea of forms in triplicate, visas, passports, birth certificates, disclosures and references we would be ferried off in a bus from the Bolshevik revolution to what was generously termed a ‘hotel’. The unfamiliar Cyrillic writing was everywhere amongst the grey concrete.

Because this was considered a ‘hardship post’ our boss had most benevolently agreed that the bar on arrival would be ‘comped’ or free! When you consider nine crew members, this shows the rather lucrative returns he must have been getting on this contract. So on arrival which was always roughly 2 am, we'd go to the bar for a nightcap. A few things stick in my mind about this hotel. The rooms though obviously very basic, did have the same radiators as the old schools. Massive great units of corrugated iron which could heat an assembly hall. In the corridor walking toward the lift I thought it a bit breezy. I walked to the end of the corridor, passed four dead plants in plastic buckets and pulled back the yellowed net curtain. I was rather glad I hadn't stepped any further because there was no window in it, it was the latest thing in air conditioning – a forty foot drop onto a pile of gravel. I opted for the stairs rather than the lift and found the bar at the end of the first floor. Having glanced around I cast my expectations for a good evening fairly low. But I was pleasantly surprised. I entered the bar, there were two Russian girls asleep, one on a bench and one on a chair with her feet up. God these poor girls, they had obviously been told to serve the crew who would be coming late!

They were both gorgeous creatures in that retro Russian way – dyed burgundy hair, miniskirts, boots and tons of make-up. I apologised for waking them but they sprang into life and applied lipstick. On went all the strip lights, then the wall mounted telly, all hissing and crackling. On went the stereo, good, a touch of Russian folk music for ambience, I mused, when suddenly at a thousand decibels came Kool and the Gang shrieking “Oh yes it's ladies night and the feeling's right ...”

Funny isn't it what they think *we're* going to like, just a lamp and some ethnic Russian ballads would have been nice.

But here we were inside a loud fluorescent biscuit tin of a bar with distorted sound bombarding us from all angles. Gradually everyone came down having changed out of uniform. Out came the vodka from the freezer, no label, and it was poured into tumblers. It was more like mescaline. After one of those my colleague thought he had one eye in the middle of his head, had somehow found solutions to all his problems and felt as though he was on a high speed train – one of those ones which uses magnetism and has no contact with the rails. The engineers were enjoying themselves immensely – well, free beer and lovely girls in miniskirts, it was worth the five hour flight! The menu came out – it was two pages of just single words in a list. There weren't meals per se, it said: perch, egg, tomato, cucumber, potato, all as single items. Oh well at least it made it simple. We all ate and drank and did our best to communicate with the handling agent and the two girls who rather enjoyed the party in the end. Many of the local girls coveted this job once they heard about all the Italian engineers who would be frequenting the place.

We slept until midday, then returned to London with a different bunch of Italians who had done their two weeks in Kazakhstan, they looked decidedly chirpier than the ones going out.

I returned to Russia many times – it's not my favourite place. It's strange how Russia, so keen to be doing business with the West now is still a quagmire of inefficiency. Corruption is like a woodworm.

We flew many extraordinarily wealthy people in and out of there all having a slice of the pie. I was stopped one afternoon, having visited the Kremlin, on the Russian equivalent of the Champs Elysees by two aggressive cops who were trying it on.

“Excuse me can I see your passport please?”

“Well I don't carry it, it's back at the hotel.”

“We have to fine you four hundred Euros.”

“No you don't – just come with me to the Marriott which is up the road and you can see it.”

“No it is O-fence to not hev passport on person.”

These guys know visitors like us have foreign currency so they try because occasionally they get a hit, but they chose the wrong person that day, I was brought up amongst Nigerians. I knew as soon as they started to reduce the fine to 200 euros, they were having me on.

“I didn't know the rules, sorry, but as I said please come back to the Hotel and I'll show you all my ID.”

“Ve can put people in jail for not heving peppers.”

“Okay well let's go then and I'll explain to your superiors in the police station what has happened,” and I made a gesture for ‘handcuff me’.

They tried one more go at 100 Euros but when I just smiled politely, looked them in the eye and shook my head, they cleared off to try someone else but not without hissing at me in Russian. Cajoling surly corrupt officials has become second nature.

As I moved off I saw a ‘New Bond Street’ type of shop window which was simply enormous. It had a huge cut out of a skinny super model in a fancy leopard skin bra trimmed with fur. The square footage of the shop was

staggering, it could have been a car showroom. There were just a few exclusive pieces of luxury lingerie in there hanging on little individual silk padded hangers. I saw a bra which cost two hundred and twenty Euros. Up a sweeping staircase some little lace panties adorned the three shelves on the top floor. Outside this shop, an old lady, worn out, shrunken and bent wearing about four overcoats and a headscarf was pulling one of those dilapidated carts that would normally be attached to a donkey. With fingerless gloves she rooted through a dustbin. There are some sad sights out there. I am no sabre rattling socialist but the iniquity there is hard to stomach.

Certainly for me, it's more a case of 'From Russia *without* much Love'.

Lourdes

Ireland became a common destination after we picked up a contract to fly the sick and disabled hopefuls to Lourdes to be cured of their illnesses. This is when I first saw the deep and blind faith which burns in the Catholic soul. We'd fly from Dublin, or Shannon down to Lourdes with some very unwell people. Sometimes up to a quarter of them needed wheelchairs, some were in callipers, some on breathing apparatus, others bent with arthritis, some completely crippled. They believed that they would be cured by a visit to the sacred place where the vision of the Holy mother was seen. Being somewhat of a humanist/atheist, this unshakable belief in the power of our lady was astonishing.

"How come there are only four wheelchair requests for the return and over fifteen on the outbound?" I queried looking over the passenger manifest in my seat. My Captain feted for his sarci sense of humour and a 'seeing is believing' attitude, looked over his bifocals and said in his best 'oirish' accent.

"Because the Lord is going to make me legs wuurk again, so he is." Yes it was true many of them only ordered wheelchairs for the outbound, so convinced they were of the miracles to come. One splash of the holy water and they would be doing a Van Morrison 'skippin and a jumpin'. I quietly told the man at Serviceair to have a few more standing by 'just in case'.

I did notice with a touch of amusement how the priests (all very able bodied) who were accompanying these pilgrims would make sure they plonked themselves in the best seats with the most leg room and wasted no time diving into the Jameson. I have to say some of those passengers touched my heart profoundly. I went back into the cabin to help with the long disembarking procedure. I held the hand of one elderly lady who stopped me, wanting to talk. Her hands, although old and wrinkly, had the softest of skin, her palms were like silk. She had pancreatic cancer and was frail, but she laughed and smiled refusing to indulge in her own misfortunes.

"What a clever girl you are, you're lovely," she said putting my hand to her cheek. There were others in so much pain their friendliness and optimism were *really* humbling. I squatted down to be at eye level with them trying my best to make them laugh and be a good listener. I discovered on those flights a little part of myself – a part that loved helping people and the fact that a laugh from a handicapped person gives more reward than a new car. People's

feelings are more important than ‘things’ or objects. It was rewarding to play a tiny part in their joy, some had saved up for years to do this trip.

We invariably needed all the wheelchairs again to disembark in Ireland, having said that, I will always remember that unflinching faith. I found myself wanting to be a ‘happy clapper’. I felt leaden booted, cynical and a victim of my ‘if that’s true I’ll eat my hat’ attitude, so bound up with logic and proof which can be somewhat juiceless. I didn’t ‘convert’ as such, but they did show me something – quite profound about the power of hope.

The Honey Bucket

This is just a bit of toilet talk, but nonetheless quite humorous. The contents of the toilets all go into a holding tank. On the Boeing 727 there are forward and aft toilets, which are electrically flushed into this holding tank, which is primed with three gallons of disinfectant, dye and a deodorising solution. There is a timed flusher and rotating filter and the holding tank does its job perfectly. The truck complete with hose and pump which empties this at airports throughout the world is affectionately known by us, as ‘the honey bucket’. At all airports (well so I thought until a brief visit to Sierra Leone) this is a very efficient means of emptying. Along comes the man (be careful to call him the hygiene engineer) who unscrews the big filler cap, attaches the hose and ‘Bob’s your uncle’ the contents are sucked out into *his* holding tank on the truck, he refills you with water and blue disinfectant – job done.

In Sierra Leone, when they came to the aircraft, we said we would like the toilets servicing, and asked if they had the honey bucket.

“No no no – not hee-ar – we doon need dis machine we can do it ourself.”

“Okay this should be interesting.”

Then two Africans approached with a couple of black bin liners one inside the other and proceeded to search for the door housing the filler cap into the plumbing of the waste lines, so they could hold the bags below and “catch de content inside de bag”. Well that was certainly a first. I wonder if the writers of the systems manual at Boeing in Seattle would now insert an amendment into the toilet servicing chapter – ‘Can also be emptied manually’. I think perhaps not.

On this subject of the toilets – a quick deviation. When I was doing my Boeing 727 type rating in California, the ground school teacher who was a tubby, piggy faced cynic with the most sarcastic sense of humour told us about the big blue ice ball that was hanging from the toilet drain on the underside of a passenger 727 – there was a leak or the drain heaters were not working in the toilet (something like that) and the effluence was escaping, but due to the temperature of minus fifty-six degrees it just remained in a great big ice ball, it was *blue* because of the chemicals. In his words:

“Anyhow, this godamn ball o’ blue ice full of all kinds a piss and crap in suspension finally breaks off and falls to earth. As luck would have it, fell on some one horse town in Iowa, so you can imagine George and Marge in overalls and apron eating their cornbread on the porch, never been further than

the end of the road, suddenly see this blue ice ball falling from the heavens, so they think it's some kinda f*****'sign from outa space and they've been singled out for a journey to another dimension. Then they were kinda bummed when four hours later it's melted and they got a yard full of goddam airline turds.”

He was wiping away the tears as he told this story!

Back in West Africa when Adrian, the Captain went to pay the airport fees, there were bullet holes in the building big enough for him to get his fist through. Of course he was utterly ripped off – but you expect this in Africa. (Like the time they paid 4 US dollars per gallon in Ougadougou having just paid 1 US dollar at Stansted.)

When our 727 landed in Sierra Leone during the troubles in 2002, the crew were whisked off in a massive great Russian helicopter out of harm's way (that means *away* from the bit where they were physically **firing** on foreign aircraft and off into the jungle part where we'd hopefully be in a compound and have to grapple with less pressing threats like bandits, cannibals and tribal killings). The helicopter was crewed by three and went low level at night with no lights, which was a tad non-conformist. But there is much Russian hardware down there – tanks, helicopters and all sorts of equipment which arrives in the massive Ilyushin 86.

The hotel was fine. Under the balmy African skies the crew went to the pool later that evening and against the background of screeching cicadas and other sounds of the night, they went swimming. They left their belongings on chairs around the pool and – strange, but the contents of their wallets seemed to diminish considerably. ‘Teef man’ as they are known in West Africa move deftly in these parts.

Something amusing or terrifying usually happens in this part of the world. Adrian my colleague and the Captain on the Sierra Leone trip told me of his previous visit to Monrovia in Liberia to collect Charles Taylor (Chuck as we called him), well famed for genocide and butchery. The airport ‘Roberts International’ was so completely decimated and wrecked, when he requested temperature and QNH (pressure setting for the altimeter) he got:

“Sorry, please everyting is broken, we don have any equip-ment!” Adrian had to fly out over the sea and use the Radio Altimeter to get a height readout, you only hope it's reading the surface and *not* the seabed! When he landed there was no fuel so he had to fly fifteen minutes north to Spriggs Payne which is about the size of Redhill (small for a 727) and reverse taxi down a narrow rough track with sheep and goats everywhere; he said he must have done the equivalent of ten landings in tyre wear!

Back at Roberts International in Monrovia, old Chuck wouldn't board via the rear stair which is part of the plane, an integral piece of Boeing structure, therefore ...SAFE! No, no no, he came up the **front** even though there was no staircase there!

“Why?”

“Because he's de **Pres**,” said Adrian sarcastically.

He was actually the former president of Liberia who sponsored the Revolutionary United Front in order to destabilise Sierra Leone, the country which was preventing him from taking the Liberian capital.

“So ...” in propa African style, he brokered the deal with Burkino Faso for the supply of mercenaries with payment in diamonds to be made in Sierra Leone.

“Eh heh ... sweet.” You can just picture the interview can’t you?

“I have always don de best for mah peoples, and I will fight corrup-shon where ever it is!”

The trouble was *that* day, all that was available at the airport was a rickety old wooden ladder like a window cleaner would use, they propped that on the side of the front fuselage and he climbed up that and into the entry door. “Because propa airstair no deh!”

‘But it deedan matter because he was entering at de front and not de back – ees betta’. That appealed to his sense of rank, better to climb up the front than use the proper sturdy metal staircase made by Boeing because that was at the *back*.

Never a dull moment in ‘dis beautiful Africaa’!

Just a closing mention whilst on the subject of the airports in Africa. A few years later when back on the private jets I landed at Dar Es Salaam, as I taxied in I noticed a party going on under some gazebos *right* in the middle of the parking area. In Europe the airside parking and taxi areas are **very** highly protected and policed. You **can’t** go on them without appropriate passes. Movements are strictly controlled by ground frequencies and *nobody* apart from authorised staff is allowed. But here was a party with people dancing, a couple of dogs running around, a barbeque smoking away and everyone enjoying beer and some women in colourful African headdress waving their hands above their heads.

“What’s going on over there?” I asked the African handling agent after we’d shut down.

“Oh dats a patt-ee.”

“A party!” I said, “what *on* the actual ramp with aircraft taxiing all around!”

“Yes som big bank I tink HSBC have just paid for a new extension to the airside, today it is opening so dey are celebrating!”

Different world, I thought to myself. Why not? They trust themselves not to cause any problems. It would, I felt sure run smoothly and without incident, but it *was* a funny sight. I just somehow couldn’t imagine pulling in at Luton and seeing a few guys throwing some sausages on a barbeque and a bit of Karaoke going on in the middle of Stand sixteen outside the Britannia hangars!

Freight ... or is that... 'Fright'

It was my 'bête noire' the least enjoyable flying I ever did. I remember so vividly the great shards of freezing rain lit up under the huge fierce stadium spotlights. It was bleak. Under these Gestapo lights, men in all weather gear would be running around like workers out of an Orwellian nightmare. Guys in what looked like fallout suits had microphones attached to their mouths and were shouting instructions at one another. They wore dark boiler suits and gloves. They moved quickly in an atmosphere of panic and hard labour. Handheld radios on full volume shrieked out instructions.

Goods would be loaded into hug steel igloos which, once on board would be pushed back by our gloved men in their 'nuclear' suits. The floor of the freight hold (which was the entire back of the plane – a huge space) was covered with little castor wheels and the igloos would slide across them and go crashing to the back. They would continue shoving them down one after the other, until we were full, from port to starboard and up to the ceiling. It was like being in a rather sinister, science fiction movie full of menace and clatter. And it was always so horribly cold – I didn't survive long enough to experience the summer months, I am sure they were much more pleasant! It was a hideous unreal scene – a collection of steel conveyor belts, huge steel containers and grumpy people who understandably wanted to be home in bed. If the scene had an expression in celluloid it would be dark David Lynch's *Eraserhead*. It had all the ingredients: struggle, oppressive industrial environment, mutants, screaming and sleeplessness. I'm sure Ingmar Bergman could have got involved.

The load sheets were vast complicated things the size of a broadsheet newspaper. It really was the first time I felt I didn't belong and I had no desire to belong. Vast quantities of, sometimes, decidedly unsavoury 'stuff' would be loaded. We had to look at the contents – these were astonishingly unpalatable at times, and the Captain would then sign the acceptance form. Some nights we carried Hepatitis B, (what form *that* takes I don't know but I saw those words!). There were vaccines, strange bacteria and other sinister things– I assumed they were going to some laboratory for research. In my short time there we carried radioactive material, toxic and infectious substances and all manner of hazardous concoctions. Normally I am glad of my imagination that can, at times, fizz like two huge alka seltzer in a glass of champagne, but on *those* flights I could have done without it! I would be cruising along through the starry night skies of Europe and have visions of the 'Alien'. I'd see small but deadly bacteria escaping from the rivets in the igloos and multiplying in a frenzy of self-replication. The Captain would have a heart attack, the flight engineer after having trodden on his only pair of specs was rendered blind, so I would have to do the Sigourney Weaver bit, grab the crash axe and go into the fetid ochre coloured air contaminated by escaping miasmas and engage in hacking off slimy tendrils as they fought their way out of their cold steely cages. Fortunately and perhaps not surprisingly this never happened! Such imaginings sure helped to keep me awake though!

Because freight flying is invariably at night, you have to learn to adjust your body clock. At the base in Liege, which was the European hub for TNT Federal Express and many others, they provided a crew room where you could rest. One night, in dire need of some shut eye I went in – it had six big reclining leather chairs down each side and it was dark, full of snoring exhausted men and it stank of cheesy feet. I lay in one of those chairs wrapped in my huge anorak one night thinking ‘Nah this is NOT for me’. Glad I experienced it but it really was just too bloke-ish and too hard. Utterly grim is the word actually. Once you had got your voucher and had your free meal downstairs in the dungeon canteen, you could have a snooze until you were woken by some kind ops staff. I was so deeply asleep one night and had to be shaken out of my recliner. Then you faced the very depressing prospect of two legs, say to Lisbon and Seville with a bunch of chemicals in a plane without a loo flying through night storms. It was a cheerless prospect. I met some cracking engineers though, especially Peter Shaw, who saved the day in Orebro (north Sweden) with his ‘Scottish wine’. You could never get your comforting pre sleep beer out of the ‘rule book’ Swedes. Peter would always treat us to a tot of his Scotch!

When you got to destination at about seven a.m. you would breakfast on meatballs and herring (in Sweden), then go off to the room, snap your curtains closed, put earplugs in and try to sleep while hoovers went off in next door rooms. Later that afternoon, you would rise and prepare to do it all again. I take my hat off to guys who can do this every night because I found it the most dispiriting and depressing activity. I only did it because the airline I was with picked up a lucrative freight contract and we all had to take it in turns to rotate out to Belgium and do a week of night freight. I found it tough and didn’t last long.

It was a fascinating insight to a world which is so tightly and efficiently run. The logistics of getting goods, commodities and parcels (and the odd nasty!) all over the world takes a hell of a lot of organisation and staff. We were only one small part. It involves the delivery *to* airports, loading, unloading *then* distribution *from* airports at the other end. All the time it is followed and tracked. It is undeniably an impressive and complex network involving many professionals.



Interior of executive 727



Executive lounge on board.



Master bedroom & ensuite bathroom on board.



Our lovely hostie dusting the cockpit after a flight.



Hosties Susie & Donna singing Celine Dione into wash-up brush mikes!



The Forbes 727 – The most beautiful jet I ever flew.



Me in the middle of 727 crew, Lapland, N. Finland – note spectacular paint job of the Cougar!



Airline days. Crew going for lunch – Santiago Spain.



Pushing back from stand at Gatwick, our names Neeta and Ray on windscreen (Ford Escort style) a good practical joker that captain.