

The Other Side of Fear... A Pilot's Life

by Captain Keith Godfrey

This book is dedicated to my friend Remo. He and I have opposing views in most things. We vote for different political parties. While I go on about injustice in the world, he gets on with reducing it. A book about all the help he has given to street children in South America and his other charitable works would be a proper and worthwhile book for you to read on a flight, but unlike me he doesn't have time to sit and mock. He's too busy doing helpful things. Remo and I worked together training British Airways crews. I was the pilot trainer and he the Cabin Crew representative. It was a long while before he mentioned that he too was a qualified commercial pilot. That's the sort of modest guy he is. In his company on board a plane I know that he would bring you a feeling of calm and confidence, so if you have an anxious moment on board I'd like you to imagine that he is your Cabin Crew Chief and looking after you. No-one on his flights could feel anything other than safe and secure.

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*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of ... wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark nor even eagle flew
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

High Flight by John Gillespie Magee Junior

PROLOGUE

After a long career as a professional pilot, I stumbled into helping people to overcome their fears about flying. It has been a stumble that has brought as much to my appreciation and love of flying as the actual piloting of planes itself.

This book is a sideways view of how I see commercial air travel and amazingly my lack of influence upon it. I hope, in a funny way, that this book helps to normalise flying for anxious flyers.

Every fearful flyer should have a strategy for dealing with their anxieties in flight and one of the things I suggest they do is entertain themselves with music, puzzles, facts and other ‘things to do’.

One of the ‘things to do’ that I recommend, is to start reading a book before the flight, and on reaching an interesting part, to close it and then restart it if and when they become anxious in flight. A simple but engaging story is likely to be more helpful than trying to get into the characters of *War and Peace* while the noise of the flaps being set for take off is distracting you.

If this book has any semblance of organisation and order it is not the result of conscious planning. You can fall asleep, wake up, forget which page you were on, pick it up and just carry on reading from anywhere, and not lose the plot or pilot.

Some minor subjects are repeated but from different viewpoints so if you get a feeling of déjà vu it’s because you really might have heard something vaguely similar before.

All the rest is stuff that might encourage would be authors to get on and write the book they’ve been unsure about writing. Or it might even put people off ever picking up another book. But in the best case it will help to make fearful flyers less anxious while they are flying and be an engaging and unusual read for anyone interested in the life of a pilot.

This book is written in a way to make it possible for it to be discarded at any point without giving the reader a sense of loss, and this is probably its most consistent strength.

The use of the words ‘him’ or ‘he’ rather than ‘her’ or ‘she’ is intended for historical accuracy. Either would be more accurate nowadays.

Thanks go to Vivienne and my children for their unconditional love and without which I might have been a better person but, however improbable that is, it’s still more likely than being involved in any sort of incident on a plane. Yes, you probably do need to read that again.

NOW BOARDING

The consequences of clicking links in emails is generally well known, but a few weeks ago when an actor friend sent me an email I had no reason to be cautious. This book is the consequence of that lack of caution. His email linked me to a book written by a pilot. The book was a series of aeronautical dramas where apparently the author's extraordinary flying skill was used to save himself, everyone on board and many people on the ground.

My friend's email ended, "Why don't you write about your life as a pilot to help fearful flyers?"

There are lots of reasons not to, but I'm not the sort of person who's put off that easily. I will admit, but I won't be deterred by the fact that there's a shocking arrogance in writing about yourself. Everyone has an interesting life but only a few people have lives interesting enough to entertain others, and even fewer can tell their story well enough to make it worth reading. The autobiographies of celebrities are often so tedious that it's only constant reference to other famous people that gives them any interest at all.

Years ago I read the autobiography of a well known British film star. It's true that his story was moderately interesting but no more than the life of the shopkeeper in our local village. The main thing that seemed to make his life different from the shopkeeper's was that he only ever befriended, bumped into, went to parties or did things with other famous people. It was just that he mentioned knowing and meeting Brad Pitt and the Queen that gave him and his story any interest at all. And then when I read Brad Pitt's autobiography the single thing that made it half interesting was that he attended one of the Queen's garden parties where he met a famous British film star. So biographically speaking, they're all at it (mentioning famous friends). As the most famous person in the world, the Queen's autobiography would mainly be about meeting famous people, but just less famous than she is. So given half a chance I suppose she'd be at it too, if you think about it.

At work, pilots don't get to meet famous people for long enough to invite them round for tea or to meet the kids, let alone be on good enough terms to mention them in an autobiography. When they *do* come to the flight deck it's for publicity, to know when we'll be landing or to see if we can arrange a cab for them when we land.

When the pilots I know tell stories they usually over-dramatise: the winds are stronger, the storms more violent, the clouds thicker and the aeroplanes more difficult to fly, every situation they fly in needs bravery, skill and their particular expertise. Exaggeration is normal to them and, I suspect, they do it to impress because, in truth, commercial flying is pretty routine.

We suspend our disbelief when famous autobiographers exaggerate because we know that it's just a story. No-one really believes what they say or what they've done because it's a book that you read to pass the time on holiday or when life has hit a new low. A pilot's story has a very limited readership. Few pilots would read it for fear of feeling inferior and much of the public won't be interested because they think that pilots are steely-eyed prima donnas who get too much credit for very little anyway. There's not the demand. No one normal and clinically sane would model their life on anything they read in an autobiography, would they? Even less likely on a pilot's life.

I remember a pilot telling a story of such derring-do that the audience and I were spellbound. It was only at the climax of the story that I realised that I had been his co-pilot on this epic adventure. My recollection of the flight was very different and certainly less interesting. They say a poor story told well, is better than a good story told badly, and that one, was certainly well told.

After a lifetime of tests and checks, where failure could mean temporary or even permanent unemployment, you'd think, of all people, a pilot would know better than to take a chance. Maybe I didn't learn much during my flying career. Maybe I did and that's why I'm writing this? We'll only know when I get to the last full stop, but that might be a destination that we won't share.

I'm expecting to miss the literary jackpot by telling an ordinary story, honestly, and without famous names, but in truth, I don't want to disappoint my friend.

THE TITLE

Why *The Other Side Of Fear: A Pilot's Life*? When fearful flyers describe 'things' that have happened to them, I ask them if they think I would describe those experiences in the same way? Would I use the same words? Would I come to the same conclusions? Why are they fearful while I remain calm?

On one side - the fearful side - there are strong emotions and many misunderstandings. On the other side there is confidence and there is knowledge. Neither is right or wrong. They are viewpoints. Personally, and like many other pilots, I don't like heights. Heights aren't dangerous in themselves but I can scare myself by thinking about slipping, falling or even jumping. Steeplejacks don't think like that. So it's how you think about something that puts you on the fearful side, or on the other side of fear.

"... 'tis none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,"
said Hamlet.

Generally speaking, when we're anxious we don't laugh. So I hope that by including the flip-pant side of my life as a pilot I can encourage nervous flyers to associate flying with being relaxed and entertained, rather than being in a constant state of anxiety. In this book I want you to see the amusing and unusual in the important and the familiar. I haven't deliberately included anything that might result in hysterical laughter. If I have, the book will have failed its target audience. Smile, even laugh if you're amused but, if hysteria takes hold, ask the cabin crew for a drink and then get them to ask the pilots to land immediately.

We all have things that make us anxious. For instance being six foot four doesn't stop you being scared of spiders. Being a free fall parachutist doesn't stop you being scared of dead fish. Being a first violinist doesn't stop you from disliking the dark. It's normal to be fearful of things, but the downside of having a *fear of flying* means you have to be good at long distance driving or reading train timetables.

I'm not good at heights but I'm good at flying, and where heights are normal to steeplejacks, flying is normal to me. It's so normal to me that it's ordinary. For a steeplejack the plan is to stay in one place at a time. For a pilot the plan is not to be in the same place any of the time. When

we're high up, proper pilots like to be moving. Helicopter pilots are different - very different. I went up in a helicopter once, but it remains, just the once.

I thought that fearful flyers, indeed any passengers might enjoy a mixture of plane facts and real life and so this tale is about the ordinariness of my life as a pilot. There are no guest appearances by famous people, and unsurprisingly no famous or important person has been influenced by my life, or the way I fly planes. There are a couple of famous people I encountered but only famous to the people who knew of them, and I doubt they mentioned me in their autobiographies.

Whether this story is good or bad, whether it's told well or not is something I can't change. It is what it is. I've decided to write it and only you can judge whether that was the right decision or not. The book is mainly for anxious flyers who want something to do to take their minds off their surroundings and perhaps relax a little, though my publisher is generous enough to encourage others to read it too. I hope that it'll relax you so much that you won't need or want to read much of it. Indeed, if it's working, you should be feeling like that already. Although, I suppose, you could be feeling like that if it isn't working either.

However, if you do get to the end you'll find a short quiz about the book and if you can answer my question correctly you *could* win a rare, unsigned copy.

So, my fearful flying friends, and others... get ready to fly.

THE SURLY BONDS OF EARTH

Fearful flyers make up almost 40% of the travelling population. It's hard to believe that so many people are nervous about flying. The most important things for an anxious flyer to know is that flying is normal and so are you. You are allowed to be anxious. There is nothing in the Magna Carta or the Bill of Rights that says you must enjoy flying. Despite what you may think, planes aren't balanced on a knife-edge when they fly. They are not potentially seconds from disaster. The passengers' lives don't depend upon split second judgements and actions of pilots. Commercial aviation is remarkably routine.

In my years as a pilot, I suffered no emergencies. Nothing happened that was beyond my skill to manage. I didn't pay any extra insurance premiums and when I told the kids I was off to New York, their reaction was "Whatever". On good days they looked up and said, "See you later." On the days they thought that I might bring a present home, they'd give me a hug and kiss me good-bye. Other than that, Dad just went to work and came home from every flight.

Aviation has a normal-ness and an ordinary-ness about it that the public just doesn't get the chance to see. It's *so* ordinary that you'd be amazed. While anxious flyers struggle to know what to do in-flight to occupy themselves, when I'm a passenger I struggle with what *not* to do. I suppose the rigid discipline in the cockpit makes me react when I'm out of it.

When I'm a passenger, my first choice of 'things to do' is to look out of the window. My second choice is to watch a film, even if the screen is the size of an old iPhone and dimmer than an energy-saving light bulb. Then, I spend ages choosing which newspaper or car magazine to read. Then, I listen to a bit of music, the news or a bit of drama. Then, I go back to a movie or have a snooze. I'm so busy doing so many things that I'd make a very successful anxious flyer.

My plan for this book is to take you from sitting in a state of anxiety to sitting in, what should feel like, a First Class, stress-free seat where you can relax and maybe even smile. You remember smiling, it was when your family decided to cancel the flights and go on holiday by train.

Pilots spend most of their working time briefing each other. Every take off and every landing is preceded by a briefing. A briefing is the articulation of a plan, a formal and structured chat about what we are going to do and how we're going to do it. When everyone knows what to expect and knows their part to play, it's easy to see if we deviate from it. The role of each pilot is to ensure that the plan is carried out as briefed, and to notice and correct it if it's not.

We have very strict procedures and almost all the operational communications are scripted. This is probably why I write in staccato sentences. Briefings are short, vital and to the point.

Because of that habit I have an irresistible need to brief you about this book, I need to tell you the route (the chapters, such as they are) and how will it help or entertain you.

I plan to describe flying not in a series of stories about what I've seen or done, but a sideways view of those things. I'd tell you about the miracle of flight if such a miracle existed or was needed but it's not, so I won't. Flying works not *despite* gravity but *because* of it and all the other laws of science. Uncross your fingers, throw away your lucky charms and you'll see that nothing changes ...the plane just carries on.

Things in this book are roughly in order so there's a bit about me, then something about airports, and stuff about planes generally. Taking off comes before landing of course, but to introduce you to my world of flying there's lots of other 'things' about my life as a pilot in between those chapters. Like the things I did before I qualified and some of the people I met along the way but not in a strict chronological order. But that's how a pilot's life unfolds. You go to work expecting to fly to one place and to be home in the evening and you end up somewhere else and return when the kids have graduated. This book is a written manifestation of a pilot's life; but please remember that life inside the cockpit is far more organised and formal than any part of a pilot's life outside it.

I shall, occasionally, quote and copy the style of Richard Jefferies, a 19th. Century social philosopher whose autobiography was little to do with what he did, but of what he thought, felt, observed, and of his dreams. A man who dreamed of flying machines but was unaware of their mechanical possibility. He dreamed, not of just a solitary person being airborne (of which there had been a few unsuccessful examples), but of people flying together to places "a hundred miles or more away". He dreamed and calculated the possibility of man powered flight and of a motor to sustain flight driven by electricity. These felt like achievable dreams to him, but were outrageous to others of his era. During his short lifetime the nearest he could get to flight, as we know it, was the thought of 'imagining' things beyond the thinking of his time, beyond the normal, beyond the ordinary, something entirely new.

“Beyond that still there are other ideas. Never, never rest contented with any circle of ideas, but always be certain that a wider one is still possible. For my thought is like a hyperbola that continually widens ascending.” R.J.

His thoughts would come to him on long, arduous walks along the Wiltshire hills or laying on the sward on starlit nights looking out into space and beyond the stars. In those moments he felt in the ‘midst of eternity.’ Important moments that no doubt we all have, but don’t commit our precious time to explore.

Jefferies did not believe in a deity. He believed in something greater. How would he have changed the last words of Magee’s poem, quoted in the epigraph of this book: ‘Put out your hand and touch the face of God’? How would Jefferies a stern, serious man, have dealt with my flippancy about his dreams? That is not possible to know, except that no insult is meant. What would he have thought and felt if he could have been with me while I flew through the clouds and sky? I think he would have marvelled but, without disrespect to him, no more than I marvel. His extraordinary autobiography, entitled *The Story of My Heart*, has been a guide to me for more years than he even lived. He endured chronic illness, while I enjoy good health. He struggled with poverty, while I have a fat pension. He dreamed of the things that were my lifelong employment. How different we might seem to be, but how similar we are.

Jefferies was known for his prolific writings on the countryside and of country life, and I am grateful that, unknown to him, he connected my wanderings through the woods and lanes when I was young, with the planes I watched, and eventually flew, but of which he could only dream.

We share a love of the countryside, we share freedom of thought and because of him I live with this thought, written in his autobiography, *“If any man, even a thousand years hence could benefit from anything I have done, then I would have soul life.”* I have benefited, and I pass it on as part of my love of flying. I was lucky to find something to add extra inspiration to my career at times when it may well have become routine.

I hope that what I feel about flying will give you an insight into the unique ordinariness of modern flying and inspire excitement, understanding and confidence to make all your flights enjoyable and extraordinarily normal.

This book is about my love of flying, how I realised my ambition and how it influenced my views of life. I will include some stories about what I saw, some of the people I met on the way

and how those views and thoughts might help a fearful flyer. It is also, I hope a humorous exposé of the stuff about flying that makes me annoyed and uncomfortable but amuses me at the same time. I hope it amuses you too.

John Magee's famous poem, although once relatively unknown, is now quoted regularly.

"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth."

At first glance that opening line seems too simple and too obvious. The *surly* bonds of earth? We can understand the bonds of earth but why *surly*? Is it asking us to marvel at being airborne or saying that we should be grateful? Should we take the science of flying for granted or be in awe at what it provides?

Getting airborne isn't a matter of chance, it's a scientific reality. But for me there's so much more. There's more than just the feeling of elation and joy as you leave the ground below. For me there's a transcendental moment in that, now common, experience.

Unfortunately for so many people, fear denies them that wonderful moment and many other moments too.

TO BE AN ACTOR OR NOT TO BE A PILOT

Given my lifelong intention to fly planes it was never likely that I'd actually end up on the stage. But as my career progressed, and I met a few actors I realised that the two jobs weren't very different. There's a lot of learning to be done, there's a need for technical precision, you don't know how your performance is going to be received and your reputation is only as good as your last performance or your last landing.

My friend, the actor, wasn't keen on flying. In fact he had avoided it for the best part of thirty five years. We met, we chatted. He agreed to join me in a flight simulator and, since then, he's never stopped looking down. Although he's unlikely to take part in the Red Bull Air Race, he's doing fine.

He used to think that flying was unpredictable and always on a knife-edge. Like many fearful flyers he didn't realise that every circumstance we were likely to encounter in flight had a defined procedure. If this happened - do that. And if that happened - do this. Simple to me, unknown to him, indeed, unknown to many.

He'd invited me to see him in a play in the West End. We'd spent the day together, recording my fear of flying CD, so shared a car journey across town to the theatre. During the journey my friend didn't mention the play, he took no time out to rehearse lines or think of stage directions, it was, just a drive across town. I didn't pursue any line of conversation particularly, I just followed whatever he chatted about and left it at that. I thought that his mind was surely on that night's performance. We arrived at the theatre, he signed a few autographs at the stage door and I followed him into the dressing room where we carried on chatting. I wondered if he needed to prepare, look at his lines and concentrate. Eventually I plucked up the courage to ask, "Don't you need to have a quick look at your lines before you go on?"

"If I don't know them already, looking at them now won't really help me!" he answered. It was a very good answer, and unsurprisingly didn't sound rehearsed. Subsequently this has given me the perfect reply for fearful flyers who wonder how prepared I am for things that might happen when I'm flying. "If I don't know what I'm going to do in a plane if 'something goes wrong' by now, then I shouldn't be flying."

But, the difference between the two of us is that I would never say or do anything that might make him feel uneasy about flying. By contrast whenever I go to see any of his plays he'll have a

cup of tea with me, chat and do all sorts of things to make me think he's not going to get on stage in time for curtain-up. He even insisted on showing me to my seat on one occasion. It makes me very anxious about going to the theatre.

But that's show business I guess.

In this story I have occasionally compared a flight to a play. There are some similarities as you might notice, but the biggest difference of course is that we don't allow late comers into their seats once *our* show has started.

But that's aviation I guess.

FAMOUS PEOPLE IN AVIATION

Ask any modern schoolchild “Who invented the aeroplane?” and they’d probably say Amazon, Apple or Google. In fact, the aeroplane was invented by a couple of brothers who made bikes and, if you think about it, not really the best people to make planes. In my opinion, things would have moved more quickly and efficiently if planes had been invented by brothers who were ornithologists or taxidermists. At least they would have had some experience of things that could fly, or in the case of the latter, things that used to fly.

“The impression left after watching the motions of birds is that of extreme mobility, a life of perpetual impulse checked only by fear.” R.J.

My theory is that Wilbur and Orville Wright invented planes because they hadn’t devised a system to steer their bikes, consequently they could only build bikes that went in straight lines. A bicycle that can be used only in a straight line would have a very limited range or somehow have to go over things. What better way of cycling in straight lines than going over things? Why not ditch the bicycle and go over the top of everything. That, contrary to popular thinking, is why the aeroplane was invented.

Sixty years later we have the equivalent of Jumbo bikes. A few designers are known because their names live on as companies, but inexorably as incorporations and amalgamations occur the names will go. Perhaps, in the future, a pop star will name their child Airbus, and the Airbus family will mean something different again.

A few people know the names of brave people who flew from somewhere here to somewhere else for the first time. The first time for them and the first time for us, as a species.

A couple of blokes flew across the Atlantic in a plane that nowadays wouldn’t even be allowed to carry its own engines, let alone passengers. Of the two people on board one was much more assertive than the other because he made the less assertive one get out on to the wings, in flight, and hack away the ice that had formed. They landed as soon as they saw a convenient place. In some respects not very different from the service, and business model, provided by low cost airlines now.

When I was a flying instructor, my first boss, Cyril, knew a chap called Tommy Rose. Tommy was a very distinguished flyer who'd made a record-breaking flight to South Africa. Tommy wasn't dead when my boss wrote to his wife sending his commiserations and acknowledging his wonderful flying skills and character. Tommy replied saying that the note was premature and that he'd let Cyril know when he was dead and furthermore he'd be grateful for another glowing testimonial. I later lived opposite Tommy's wife in Alderney. It's a small world, and made that way by people like Tommy.

Amy Johnson was a famous pilot married to another famous pilot called Jim Mollison. They flew record breaking long distance flights together and alone, which cynics might think reflected the state of their marriage at the time. However they did whatever worked for them, I suppose. We had a 78rpm record at home, one of those very brittle ones. It went, as musicians used to say, something like this

*“Amy, wonderful Amy
I'm proud of the way you flew
Believe me, Amy, you cannot blame me, Amy
For falling in love with you.” Amy, Gilbert and Nicholls.*

Frank Whittle, the inventor of the jet engine, could not have imagined that the engines on the plane in which you are possibly flying right now, would be monitored on the ground thousands of miles from where they are. These amazing innovators had big imaginations that took them far, but not big enough to realise quite how far they'd take us in the future. The test pilots including my boyhood hero, Neville Duke, are now substantially replaced by engineers and computer design programmes. And, why not? There are of course test pilots who fly and develop modern planes and put them through their paces, but they are a different breed. In today's aviation, scientists and engineers are first and pilots are second.

There is one more person I would like to add to this hall of fame. Rear Admiral Dennis Campbell CB DSC, the inventor of the angled deck for aircraft carriers. Dennis was the owner of my house before I bought it in 1989. He became the Captain of The Ark Royal, he was test pilot, painter, carpenter, inventor and very much more. When he and his wife popped in for a chat one day, he was told that my colour scheme for the house was far better than his had been.

So much for fame and talent when you're married.

The only way I'll be famous in aviation is if lots of people like my book.

*“Of all the inventions of casuistry with which man for ages has in various ways man-
cled himself and stayed his own advance, there is none equally potent with the supposi-
tion that nothing more is possible. Once well impress on the mind that it has already all,
that advance is impossible because there is nothing further, and it is chained like a horse
to an iron pin in the ground.” R.J.*

THE AUTHOR'S TAIL

I suppose that all families have apocryphal stories. Whether or not a drunken Aunt Maude really did kiss an unwilling policeman on New Year's Eve will never be known. The story that Uncle George was once a happy-go-lucky tearaway seems unlikely now that he spends all day slouched in an arm chair moaning about the drivel on the telly. It doesn't matter, it's just a story. It keeps our feet on the ground, and fills the otherwise quiet moments at family gatherings.

Our family's story centred on me. It may well have been either of my brothers but it works better with me. Mum told everyone, including me, and more than once, that at the age of seven months I uttered my first word. The word I spoke was 'Messerschmitt', which, if true, was very clever of me, bearing in mind it's a three syllable word and wasn't in my native tongue.

Unfortunately being a British, wartime baby and, presumably, on the side of Churchill it wasn't a very patriotic thing to say. Whether that was the root cause of my lifelong outspokenness can't be known, but looking back it was a pretty dumb way to start a public speaking career.

Maybe it was prophetic, I'm not sure, but apparently Mum knew from that day that I was going to fly. Presumably for the RAF and not the Luftwaffe. Neither of those careers materialised anyway. So much for being a child prodigy.

If motivation and enthusiasm is a part of learning then I was conscious of wanting to learn to fly at the age of nine. We had moved from a house on a road in the centre of a housing estate, to a house which backed on to a wood. If you walked to the far side of the wood there was access to a long and winding road that led to the wartime fighter airfield at Biggin Hill. It was a long walk as I recall but, having recently checked with the digital God on Google Earth, the distance was in fact a little over four miles. I used to make the regular journey with my best friend, Allen Harper. Allen's dad was a window cleaner and his family owned a car. He was a good footballer and played for North Kent. He had a bike with 'drop handlebars' and the latest cut-away football boots. He was a good sportsman and was very polite to my Mum. Together, we won the three-legged race at primary school, and we were inseparable in many other ways too. But I was cleverer than he, although I resisted telling anyone that until now.

In the twenty-first century it is unimaginable to look back and think that two nine year old children could walk, wander or cycle that far from home and back again, to spend the day without supervision, just watching planes going round and around. My recollection was that all I had to

say was where I was going, when I'd be back and then I was free to spend the day doing whatever I wanted.

A birthday present of a second-hand bike made the road journey easier but made the bit through the woods that much harder. It was a good metaphor for life: convenience isn't always convenient, and that things you dream of don't always fulfil your dreams.

Looking back, the mixture of the woods, the country lanes and the distant world of aeroplanes were the ingredients that brought about my love of both the open-air and planes. I didn't recognise it at the time but, of course, they were perfect bedfellows. Later, during my career, my love of nature and of flying would put me in a perfect world. The unobstructed views from five miles up are, as you'd expect, spectacular. The cloudscapes awe inspiring and the freedom uplifting. My Yin and Yang were getting airborne. My Karma was on course. Life was good.

It is seeing ... feeling the existence of the soul in the midst of the stream of light ... in the way of the rush of the wind. R.J

In addition to our weekend wanderings, each year in September, Allen and I would go to the Battle of Britain Airshow at Biggin Hill. We'd always leave very early in the morning and would always walk. The effort of lugging bikes around at the show was too much of a fag (1950's slang for effort). We wanted to be mobile and needed our energy to carry our rucksacks containing the day's food and drink. The highlight of this for me was a huge chocolate Wagon Wheel biscuit. These biscuits, through the years, appear to be getting smaller and smaller, but that's an incorrectly held opinion apparently.

I always envied Allen's picnic. He seemed to have more interesting sandwiches than I ever had. Mine would have only a single filling like cheese or Marmite. His would have cheese *and* Marmite or cheese *and* pickle. That's probably why I stop so frequently at filling stations now to buy triple-filled sandwiches called The All Day Breakfast. It's the only bit of psychological inferiority adjustment that I'm aware of. If Allen is struggling with the psychological problem of superiority, he'll be buying a high end supermarket gourmet meal for four (plus wine) just to maintain the culinary differential over the intervening sixty-three years.

In those days, the teams of aerobatic jet fighters were allowed to fly over the crowd. The Sky-Blazers in their F100 Super Sabres would start their show with a single plane flying from behind

the crowd and lighting its afterburner to create a deafening wall of noise. Noisy musicians, eat your hearts out.

What an opening and what a display...? The vile death and destruction that I now associate with these vehicles of war was not something that a young boy in the 1950's needed to concern himself about.

“Science, as illustrated by the printing press, the telegraph, the railway, is a double-edged sword. At the same moment that it puts an enormous power in the hands of the good man, it also offers an equal advantage to the evil disposed.” R.J.

It seems incomprehensible now, but at the airshow, in those days, you could have a very quick, but a not very high ride in an ejector seat. An ejector seat is an escape device for pilots of fighter jets. At high speed, the airflow outside the plane would make it impossible to climb out of the cockpit. Even if you could get out, anyone escaping would be blown into the tailplane. The pilot needs to be fired out of the plane firstly to avoid the tail, and secondly high enough so that if ejecting at low level the seat and parachute would have time to separate and then deploy the parachute to cushion the landing. Hitherto they had been propelled with a small explosive cartridge, with modern ejector seats, when you pull the ‘handle’ a rocket fires you and your seat into space. Offered to the public now you’d need to be six foot six to qualify so that when you landed you’d still be a normal height.

Imagine the health and safety repercussions of that currently. I’m sure the thing was tamed down a little for the public but the extraordinary fact was that you could do it at all. Just for the ‘bargain’ price of twenty-five pence, personal injury insurance not included; T’s and C’s apply; your home and life may be at risk; etc; etc; as they’d hype it now.

For the modern equivalent of twenty pence you could fire the machine guns of a 1950’s Meteor jet fighter. It is astonishing that spectators were allowed to watch this spectacle from very close quarters in front of the plane. It was my ambition to try each of those things but, as my luck would have it, by the time I was old enough (twelve) it had been withdrawn. Looking back, I see it was a part of my karma that steered me away from becoming a military pilot.

Such were the times that, during the display, you could watch a dummy being ejected from a low flying fighter. The RAF aerobatic team consisted of twenty-two planes, and routinely planes

would fly at breathtakingly low altitudes over the crowds during their 'showcasing'. In honesty, I cannot recall a plane being flown supersonically at the show but there were no rules to prevent it. There seemed to be no restrictions on what planes were allowed to do.

So how did these boyhood experiences influence me? They planted images, encouraged dreams, developed hopes and confirmed in me my *need* to fly. My poor examination results at fifteen were a direct consequence of going to watch the planes at Biggin Hill rather than buckle down to some learning.

As soon as I was old enough, I became an air cadet. I learned to become a glider pilot at sixteen and I even managed to be good enough at it to qualify for an advanced gliding course where I learned to do crosswind landings and aerobatics. Unfortunately, I wasn't selected for a flying scholarship (only three hundred and fifty of these were granted per year) which was recognised as being the pinnacle of cadet achievement and invariably was a good route into the Royal Air Force. A flying scholarship meant funding and training to qualify for a private pilot's licence. Selection was by a military style interview, with serving officers from the Air Force.

Looking back, throwing my hat on to a peg as I entered the interview room might not have been a smart thing to do. However, I thought I'd argued my case very well when the first interview question was "Do you think that's the correct way to start an interview Corporal Godfrey?" I did at the time, and as I've indicated, argued a substantive case. Looking back I suspect that they didn't like losing arguments with bright youngsters.

Paradoxically, I *was* selected as one of even fewer (twenty five a year) UK air cadets to visit to the U.S.A. That was fun. We went to the White House, met the Vice President, toured Ohio, appeared on television, stayed in the Waldorf Astoria, flew around in executive jets, saw inside a B52 nuclear bomber and went home three weeks later.

In the early 'sixties there were opportunities for a few highly qualified youngsters to train as airline pilots at the College of Air Training and those who were successful became the back bone of British Airways for many years. The first graduates were younger than I was and by the time I joined they were well on the way to being Captains and firmly established on the all important and salary-determining seniority list. They had a charmed life based solely on being talented, surviving the rigorous training, working hard, being extremely bright academically and meeting very high standards of flying skills.

For me, it was a different route. I was what was known in the trade as a self improver, now called Modular, which meant that I and people like me paid for and arranged our own training. It was a long, frustrating and often unrewarding task which I shall talk about again later. Without access to an airline it was hard for newly qualified pilots like me to break through the 'small aeroplane' barrier to get experience on a big plane and prove to an airline that you could do it, whatever 'it' was

Most new, young pilots got their break with small, independent airlines who were happy to employ pilots - any pilots - as cheaply as they could and give them as little training as they could get away with.

My ambitions were slightly different. I just wanted to fly and the best way of getting as much of that as possible was to become a flying club instructor and teach people to fly.

It was a job I loved and, as it turned out, I happened to be good at. Being a slow and a poor learner myself, I had an insight into the difficulties of learning which meant I could understand and help the slower students and make the good students into very competent and safe pilots. In less than eighteen months I went from being a junior assistant instructor to becoming the Chief Instructor of the club. I was able to teach at night, on instruments, aerobatics, to train instructors and teach on multi engine planes, and test for licence issue.

It sounds a remarkable feat to pull off, in such a short space of time, but the tests were simple-ish and subsequent tests became easier. Once you got one qualification, examiners seemed to think that you were good enough for all the others. The difference between my chosen career of flying club instructor and an airline pilot's career was one of status and, to me, unimaginable amounts of spending money. The difference between my somewhat ordinary flying club career and that of a military pilot was that mine was seemingly less risky. Although I flew a lot slower and a lot lower, there was always a queue of people ready to pay to frighten me, so maybe it wasn't.

"I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe, and undefinable aspirations filled me. I found them in the grass fields, on the hill-tops, at sunrise, and in the night. There was a deeper meaning everywhere. The sun burned with it, the broad front of morning beamed with it: a deep

feeling entered me while gazing at the sky in the azure noon, and the starlit evening.”

R.J.

LOVING FLYING

Many people find flying planes a fascinating subject so I'd like to explain why I've always loved flying so much. I think that one has to have a curiosity about the sky as a starting point and, even if that's not true for all the other pilots, it's certainly true for me. I have always loved clouds and the weather. As a very young child, I would wonder in amazement that rain could fall when we were on holiday at the seaside. I was fascinated and curious to see the rain sweep across the beach. How could it rain in the *summer*? Strangely it wasn't something that I questioned when it rained at home during the summer holidays.

Like millions of other kids I loved the smell of woodland trees, especially after a rain shower, but I always wanted more of nature and I longed to be a part of it - to be more than just an observer. When I learned to fly at a small grass airfield, from the open cockpit of my taxiing plane I could smell the cut grass. After take off I would be at one with the countryside and its fields and hedges, from a *literally* new perspective. I was part of the air and part of nature, I was never more alive. Childhood and adult life were one.

“A kestrel can and does hover in the dead calm of summer days, when there is not the faintest breath of wind. He will, and does, hover in the still, soft atmosphere of early autumn, when the gossamer falls in showers, coming straight down as if it were raining silk.” R.J.

Height was something that was hard won, the pre-war Tiger Moth needed to be flown accurately to get any real climb performance. Even the gentlest of turns would mean reducing an already meagre rate of climb. But it made every climb a success to be celebrated, like an old car getting up to speed. There was no instant gratification. Everything patiently worked for and in its own time. As I write this, fifty-six years after learning to fly, I realise that I am, for the very first time, reliving those actual feelings. I am in the cockpit again, nothing between then and now. For a moment I am in the midst of the past.

When I fly, I enjoy the sense of excitement, the achievement, the realisation, the fun, the privilege, the responsibility, the views, the precision, the science, the opportunity and, if you value

these things, the triumph of fulfilment. Amidst the human bustle and technical hum there were many moments when I was alone and at one with everything I love.

And it's now that I realise that these first emotions must have stayed with me, subconsciously, throughout my career. It's a wonderful feeling to be at the end of the runway in a three hundred tonne plane ready to take it into the air. But the excitement is no greater than those first take offs from the grass strip in a much smaller plane that had very few mechanical refinements. It might struggle for height and for speed but unlike a jet plane it has freedom ... flying a small plane is like being an artist or a song writer. Flying a commercial jet is like being an architect or a member of an orchestra. They share a great deal but they differ in so much more.

In a small, open plane you can put out your hand and touch the *face* of god. High up in a jet plane you look out and you see the *works* of god.

I've never been keen on the sea, on yachts, on sailing or anything where you can become cold, wet and unable to do anything about either for long periods. I don't like the discomfort of living in, what amounts to, a floating cave... But some people love it and I understand that it's like my love of flying. Some people love solitude and inner peace. Some love risk. Some love speed or excitement. Some people love sport. They love getting tired and being exhausted. They love victory but put up with defeat. The difference to me is that flying embraces all those things, and more. The best Wimbledon champion has to keep working at being the champion. How can that compare with being guaranteed a rush of complete fulfilment by just being in the sky? Flying is everything and has everything. Flying, is supreme.

OLD PILOTS

For some old pilots there's an obsessive nostalgia about old planes. I happen to love the Tiger Moth aeroplane because I learned to fly in one. If one flies overhead I stop what I'm doing and look up. I enjoy the sight. I love the sound of the engine and I spend a moment remembering times past. But that's it, I don't spend the rest of the day wanting to re-live the days of my youth.

I loved those days, of course, but I love these retirement days much more. In retirement nowadays you can idle your days away looking at social media and joining forums. Not wanting to be different, I decided to join the forum for the retired pilots of my old airline. Unfortunately, rather than being an uplifting experience, it was a constant drain on my spirit. Most of them rambled on about inconsequential things that won't change, and indulge in endless exchanges along the lines of "wasn't like it in my day." Well, of course it wasn't like 'it' in your day, because we've moved on over half a century. They spend a lot of time discovering and communicating discounts, deals and other penny pinching schemes. The sad thing is that, in the main, they were all decent blokes when they were flying. "The devil makes work for idle hands," is what their wives say. So now they go sailing instead, which presumably they're happy to accept as not being like it was in the days of Christopher Columbus or Lord Nelson.

I'm not much of a sailor so my interest hits rock bottom when they brag about their exploits and achievements. I really can't see much difference in sailing across the Atlantic Ocean or the English Channel. It's cold, it's wet and there's absolutely nothing to see. Neither can I see much difference in doing it in a custom, ninety foot brigantine or a dinghy bought from BoatsRus, apart from winning the veiled 'mine's bigger than yours' email swipes. On a different tack, if one of these guys broke with tradition and got themselves a submarine and crossed the Atlantic under it rather than on it, then it would be worth a few submissions to the notice board. On reflection though, this may encourage stories rivalling Jules Verne's epic so I'll keep quiet about that.

Eventually, I was invited to leave the forum for saying that, as a group, I thought we had been overpaid, which I realise was difficult for sponsored pilots to understand, but didn't mean it wasn't true. Secondly for making 'disrespectful' comments about a retired management pilot and for expressing left-wing political views. However, I suspect there was more to it than just that, and it was my bullshit detector that might have been the last straw.

My detector measured exaggeration and applied a mathematical formula to expose the probable veracity of a story. I suggested factoring 'stories', by the time since retirement and the number of people still alive to support or dispute the story. My formula applied a multiplication factor to height claims. So, a claim of flying out of Sydney airport and up the coast at five hundred feet, would be corrected to an actual height of five thousand feet. Claims of speeds would be reduced by at least a half. Apparently, military pilots always did everything in very close formation, upside down and at night so my plan was to ban those stories entirely. Furthermore every ex-military pilot claimed to have spent their entire careers on the brink of a court martial which I found boring and said so.

I suggested applying my formula to a wild claim made by a grumpy old pilot who lived under the mistaken impression of having once been popular amongst the younger pilots. Unfortunately, a whole gang of even grumpier old pilots accused me of being disrespectful, cynical and unprofessional. They suggested that if I couldn't behave etc; etc;

"As if ..." I wrote back, and I believe that was the last thing I was able to say to them. The permissions on a forum are simple to apply if you've got Admin privileges, so I was locked out.

It was a real pity because I wanted to tell them about the time I flew from London to Rome at nine hundred mph at three hundred feet and how I flew between the Matterhorn and Mont Blanc.

But that's what's expected of pilots. Tales of adventure, derring-do, blue eyes and a square jaw line. So many attributes, so many disappointments. I admit that there are a few handsome pilots around but they usually turn out to be Hollywood actors pretending to be like us. My wife says the main difference between normal people and pilots, is the way they dress. No pilot that she ever met had any dress sense. All safari suits and suede boots, she claims. They all suffer a fashion time slip of at least thirty years. Modern pilots dress like I used to. Let's face it, it's only the job itself that makes people want to talk to pilots.

Despite my apparent hostility to other pilots and our part in aviation history, I want you to know that I love planes. I loved flying them. I miss it, and them, a bit but it was, after all, just a job. A special job - but if Mickey Mouse had been a pilot he'd be more interesting because he could at least talk about cheese as well. It was the only job I ever wanted but, like all things, it comes to an end. It has a natural span and usefulness. If only the Rolling Stones, and the rest of them would take my cue!

One of the things that I explain to fearful flyers is that flying an aeroplane is no more difficult than any other job. Certainly it carries a great deal of responsibility but then, so do many other jobs but in a different form. I try to reassure fearful flyers that, although flying an aeroplane requires special skills, they are no more difficult to achieve than being a competent accountant, bricklayer, doctor or carpenter.

They are different. Just as I would be incapable of being a good carpenter, or effective administrator, it is possible that other people would be incapable of flying an aeroplane. The difficulty is not in the task itself but in the aptitude and interests of the person involved.

One of the most reassuring things that I can say to fearful flyers is that I agree that being an airline pilot is a very privileged job, but I will always add, that it's not difficult. Just like surgeons, we do our work away from observation which lends it a mysteriousness and a perceived level of skill which is generally undeserved.

To make this book up to date (-ish) the most recent event in flying which has caught the public's imagination was the landing of a passenger aircraft in the Hudson River. As I write, the film adaptation of this event is a box office hit. Much of the public's view of flying will be governed by that flight. It will add to the perceived skill, quick decision-making and bravery needed to be a pilot. In fact, it was something that we train for and something that any pilot I know could have done. On that note I don't mean to dilute the skill shown that day but just point out that it's something I would expect any crew to have been able to do.

I was once interviewed by a BBC radio station when I published my first book 'Flying without Fear', the interviewer asked me if I missed flying. I said that I didn't, that I had enjoyed my career, flown everything I'd wanted to fly and now it was over.

So, he asked "Didn't I want to have my own small plane?"

"No."

"Didn't I miss the excitement?"

"No I don't. Sorry to be a bore, but needing to be at the controls of a plane is now over for me."

He said that all the pilots he knew had planes and had carried on flying. I pointed out that, had I been a retired undertaker, I wouldn't be expected to carry on digging holes in the ground so why was an airline pilot's job any different? The interview had finished by the time the next track faded. There must be something in how I talk to, and about people that makes them want to shun me.

“The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendor of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time.” R. J.

LET'S START WITH AIRPORTS

From what I am about to describe, don't think that I don't like airports. I do, but I like the operational side where we work with precision and a commitment to safety that would re-assure the most nervous of passengers. But the commercial side...?

For some reason, we give airports the same respect that we give to redundant churches, we're not entirely sure of their status, should we just look and leave, wander and wonder, pray or make a donation? The rules aren't clear and the big difference as I see it seems to be that we willingly get on our knees in church whereas at an airport you just end up on your knees.

Nothing compares to an airport. It looks like a shopping mall but isn't. It looks like a sporting stadium but isn't. It looks like an enormous event venue but isn't. It looks like anything other than what it is. An airport is only like itself. It has an aura and odour but no order. It's not the sort of place you'd willingly go and see, like an ancient town or a seafront. You wouldn't think of it as somewhere to pop into, have a look, and then if you don't like it carry on to somewhere else. It's not a place to sightsee or somewhere to stop and have a cuppa. You'd never think of visiting an airport socially.

Imagine going to a railway station and being subjected to the delays and threats that you get at an airport. Imagine going to a railway station and not being able to get out unless you contracted to return on a train two weeks or more later. That's what airlines and airports make us do. A single air ticket is bank breaking, better to waste half a return ticket if you want to travel just one way! In my opinion, airports have too much influence and control over us than is healthy.

Why is it more difficult to get a plane away on time than a train? Train travel is fuss-less by comparison. In aviation someone along the way has said "We're doing these people a favour" And since then, everyone has been keeping to the same mantra. And as processes (an excuse for doing things without feeling) become more complex we, the passengers, are more and more removed from seeing how easily things could be changed.

Only one train can be on one chunk of track at any time, but, providing they are all travelling at different altitudes, more than one plane can share a chunk of the sky. Our sky has a larger capacity for planes, than tracks have for trains. But, for the best part of fifty years airports have been rushing to make sure that everything from the passenger's point of view happens slowly, inefficiently and begrudgingly.

One possible advance in airport efficiency is the proposal to build circular runways but we should remember that there has also been talk of building a bridge to the moon.

TAKE AIRPORT PARKING AND AIRPORTS GENERALLY

The law of supply and demand says the less of it there is the more it costs when people want it. If lots of people want something the price goes up. Airport parking is the most extreme application of that simple, economic law ever used by mankind. Airports, supply and demand simultaneously, sometimes with menaces, which in the UK is a criminal offence.

When you choose to go to the airport by car, here are the choices: stay and pay, or drop and drive away. The drop and drive away is only possible if you have someone close enough to you emotionally to give up their time, get up early, pay for the petrol, risk a speeding fine and then suffer the indignity of not being waved to as they drive away.

You *can* get priority parking (pre-payment only, Debit Cards only, £1.99 card transaction fee) of course. But the only time I tried it, the barrier wouldn't recognise my booking and made me pay again. Admittedly, I was at the wrong car park, but "1A Overflow North East Short Stay, 24-48 hours, Mon-Wed, excluded April thru' November" is quite a feat of memory and concentration if you're being hooted from behind by the coach from South Terminal Long Stay and an airport official furiously waving at you because you're approaching a no-stopping area and he thinks you're going to ignore the signs.

Not only do you have to remember the exact description of your car park, to get your 1% discount on priority car parking, you've got to read a sign in abbreviated notation on an overhead gantry above a traffic lane that you're not able to get into. As a pilot of course you'd think that I'd find it slightly easier than you because I'm used to going round and round when I get to an airport. But I'm usually at seven thousand feet or more.

Avoiding eye contact with the arm-waving airport official as you go round for the third time just adds to the stress. If you're like me, you circle the terminal like a lion watching its prey. First and second time round the airport terminal, I familiarise myself with the position of the relevant signs. Third time round I read them, fourth and subsequent circuits I'm getting into lane. Within a few hours, I'm parked and ready to find my airline, my gate and a different form of insanity.

The invisible, but catchy, airport strap-line is 'Get 'em here. Get 'em in. Stop 'em. Sell to them. Move 'em on. Get 'em on, off and Get them out!' There's no imagination involved, just rigid, inhuman procedures. In medieval times torture was physical, at least we've moved on a bit from that, but only a bit.

Having been battered to insensibility outside, welcome to the insanity of inside. It's black on yellow or yellow on black signage. Signage. Who invented that word? Is it a word? Somewhere, an up and going executive will be claiming that he thought it up. You can bet your life he's had signage up as far as he can bear it, and is now a recluse in the Bahamas with a flight ban of eight miles radius centred on his infinity pool. These 'high achievers' cause mental damage and social instability but don't stay to see the consequences. I hope the signage to their version of hell is more intelligible than the stuff they left us with.

But it's not just the signage man. There are other humans on the run now. The ones who thought up retail schemes like having a raffle for an Aston Martin Vomitage [*sic*]. The fifty pound ticket is psychologically pitched to make you think "Won't be many people who can afford that... I reckon I'm in with a chance." Yes, you're in with a chance all right, just like the other fifty thousand holiday-drugged suckers who thought the same.

Who's going to be in a fit state of mind after two weeks non-stop arguing with the kids to even remember they bought a ticket, let alone to find it and check it? Where did you put the ticket? It's probably going round the endless belt in a security tray. It's the security department staff who turn up in Aston Martins, I suspect. In my opinion though it's a just reward for all that, "Do I look like a terrorist?" abuse they suffer.

Airports must be as close to hell as you can get without actually meeting the devil. I should think that for many believers it would be a pretty close run thing to decide which is worse. In hell, you're guaranteed eternal damnation whereas the airport, despite its efforts, can't quite delay you that long. Both places are hot and stifling and any chance of getting out seems impossible. Non-believers may even look for a God in the hope of some sort of salvation. But there are lots of other people there who, while looking innocent, deserve to be there. Travel writers and middle management off on a bonding jolly and innumerable TV reporters going somewhere to report that they're there and reporting live.

Gatwick, is called London-Gatwick for some odd reason. But it's still a twenty mile walk to Buckingham Palace if that's what you've flown into London to see. This strange idea has now infected all airlines who take it upon themselves to associate the airport of their choice with a city of their convenience such as Montreal gateway to Kentucky.

There's a strange terminology taking over at airports. You can tell that the social network people have been involved because as you transit the space between 'your' car park and 'your' termi-

nal you can enjoy an ‘interactive space experience’ where you’re invited to join them on their ‘page’. What do you get? First a message thanking you for joining their space and then, as far as I can make out, nothing.

Unless of course you find asinine comments like “Gr8 to be here and sharring [*sic*] your space,” a distraction from the agony of ‘transiting’ twixt car park and gate! Clearly anyone who is “enjoying any space” cannot, by definition, be at an airport. There’s even a sign, probably called a Grafomation Chart, showing your departure or arrival ‘experience’ so which ever way you’re going at the time, you can expect the same pleasurable orientation experience when you’re going in the opposite direction on your return visit.

To make it easier to understand whether you’re coming or going, your Grafomation chart is thoughtfully colour coded the other way around. Instead of grey on yellow, it’s yellow on grey. Well, you think generously, it probably worked well on a Powerpoint presentation when ‘run past’ some exec during a dark room ‘blue sky thinking’ marketing meeting. It’s worth being in a forgiving mood because this garbage-ridden onslaught on your mind won’t stop just because you want it to.

“Please report if this sign is not working,” invites one sign adjacent to a series of others telling you what you can’t do. No stopping. No waiting. No smoking. No photography. No thinking. No reading. No hope. No chance. No nothing. No wonder people need to get away. The only signs telling you what you *can* do are about joining people you don’t know, on their ‘spaces’ or ‘pages’.

I admit that I have a strange take on airports but, nevertheless, I’d replace all these time wasting experience signs with ones that say “Don’t waste your time looking at this notice... You’ll need the time later for ...” and then engage and enrage, but not enrich travellers in making suggestions for what they might need time for later, like joining them on another time wasting moronic Social Media space. Eventually people will realise how silly it all is and stop wanting to be socially networked. If not maybe there’s an airport page for those that don’t want to be socially networked.

The move is towards staff-less airports. Thank goodness for that. At least there’ll be no pretence from the airlines and airports of actually appreciating your stretched loyalty to them. Sometimes, I feel that the only person I don’t want at an airport is me.

“I desire a greatness of soul, an irradiance of mind, a deeper insight, a broader hope.”

R.J.

CAR PARK TO AIRPORT

Although it's difficult to share and compare our emotionally charged airborne experiences, we can continue to share and compare the earthbound bits namely, those temples of gloom, airports.

So, for the sake of passing time, let's relate the experiences I suffer at the airport to the same experiences that you have to endure. When I travel now I try to see everything through the eyes of an anxious passenger and I have to say it's not a happy time. Slowly, through the years, I wonder how far I've mutated into an anxious flyer.

Although my experiences aren't exactly like yours they still stress me. Unlike you, I don't get anxious about booking or thinking about the holiday or the flight itself. My worries are much deeper. My worry, because I travel on a cheap staff ticket is whether there's going to be a seat available and, if there is, will an unexpected full fare passenger displace me at the very last moment as we're boarding? The only fear I have about flying is not flying

Like many things in modern and efficient working practices, our staff travel system has been getting worse as the company has been steadily 'improving' it for us. One benefit of the new computerised system is that I can check to see my on-load priority. When I set off for the airport I have a much better idea of my chances of getting on. Most people, especially neighbours and close friends, don't realise that staff only get on when there are no more seats to be sold, likely to be sold or given away to film stars. Hitherto this has meant loitering around at the check in desk waiting for your name to be called. A family with bags and paraphernalia for a two week holiday might once have spent days at an airport waiting to get on. The downside of internet algorithms and @thelastmillisecond.com web sites and assorted improvements to staff travel, is that there are now fewer seats available to staff.

But if we don't get on we're still liable for our holiday accommodation of course! Your hotel's sophisticated booking system is triggered to sell your room to someone else, on another standby list under the 'if staff travellers don't get on can I have their room at an enormous discount?' deal. This is why you should never set your phone to allowing people know where you are because your hotel will know if you're still in the departure lounge when the flight takes off. Thank you flight Radar!

There are some great parking arrangements at airports now and paying in advance, apparently, makes things a little cheaper and easier but, I've explained much of that experience already. The

provision of transfer buses is the first wonder of the modern world and the last of the ancient world. Which car parks Nobel Prize-winning genius was bright enough to realise that any car park without buses and more than a five minute struggle away from the terminal was always going to be a problem for passengers? So now they generously provide buses. Along come buses and their drivers although, more accurately, they leave as you arrive.

You regard the drivers as friendly only when you're on the bus and on your way, because they don't waste your time waiting for families who have run across the car park in the forlorn hope of catching the driver's eye and finding him in a generous enough mood to delay letting out the clutch. Many people's loss is one other's gain, usually.

In the excitement of actually finding a parking spot within four miles of the car park entrance, finding the bus stop and getting the bus, I usually forget to take note of where I've parked. And, if your experiences are anything like mine, you get so anxious about it that you don't notice where you've been dropped off either. It's a bit like the Bermuda Triangle, only more people are lost on land than at sea.

The smartphone camera is good for recording this important information, but forgetfully these life and time-saving images are the first ones deleted when you run out of data space during your relaxing holiday. Allow a day or two each side of your trip for getting to and from your gate, to and from the terminal and to and from the car park. Remember travel health insurance doesn't cover mental breakdown.

"If every plant and flower were found in all places, the charm of locality would not exist.

Everything varies, and that gives the interest." R.J.

IN THE AIRPORT

Unfortunately the airport signage system, as I've said, has black lettering on yellow backgrounds for almost everything. So one floor at the airport looks very much like the other four, and one terminal looks very much like Terminal Four, or any other. The distance between one place and another is so great that at a modern airport when you're looking for a departure gate you've usually walked so far that you're now arriving somewhere else.

But now, at least, we don't have the agony of checking in at the airport. Instead we can have the blood pressure-raising fun of a "For your convenience, you can check in online." experience. So rather than having a meltdown *at* the airport, you've had it the evening before when the internet connection drops out just as you check in as the main passenger for the umpteenth time.

"The connection seems to have been lost please phone our helpline."

"All our lines are busy. If you want to check in please go to our website at..."

Just as you drop into a coma at the computer you're woken by the sound of the printer delivering eighteen boarding passes in your name and none in your family's. Pray and hope, like you've never done before, that the printer doesn't refuse to print because of "Low ink level in the magenta cartridge." Here's a tip to get around that problem if it happens: print in black and white, and chance getting a different, but amusing little message saying, "Low ink level in yellow cartridge. Yellow required for black and white printing." You've just got time for a couple of hours sleep before you leave for the airport.

Now at least we don't have the agony of waiting in a queue to drop off our baggage, or so it's claimed. How "conveniently dropping off your bags" can be reconciled with a long queue of people having the "new and efficient automatic baggage system" explained to them by people who would be better employed checking in your baggage, defies normality.

Why employ an army of people to help you with the machine's idiosyncrasies? In short, you're having an incomprehensible bit of irrelevant IT equipment explained to you by an ill-trained, disinterested, temporarily employed, "Can I help you?"-badged person for a flight you're beginning to regret booking! Perhaps, after this "better customer experience," they expect you to travel with them again and that you'll remember how to use their new baggage system. Don't forget to help them to improve their service by filling in a mind-destroyingly biased feedback form. For which you'll get a nice email thanking you and a request to fill in another called "How did you find our

feedback form?" Remember that it takes until your next holiday to successfully unsubscribe from these emails.

"There are people in this servile world who will endure any trampling, and at the first beck rush delightedly to proffer their assistance." R.J.

I was in a queue once around which a staff member was patrolling asking if there was anything she could do to help. I suggested she stopped irritating people by offering to do things that she clearly couldn't help with and just join the short-staffed group near the counters. I was surprised she didn't shriek with delight and tell me to put my idea into the suggestion box.

"There's a form over there."

My wife intervened before a fight broke out.

You'll see that, despite my career in aviation, I'm not a fan of the way things are now. I accept that this is a transition where we move from people to systems and, for frequent travellers, maybe it's a move in the right direction. But, if your flight is a romantic anniversary or the end of a lifetime, holiday of a lifetime, going through the airport experience wouldn't be in the top ten romantic things to do after you're eighty. There won't be time.

THE RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Actually, it would be wrong to think that airports will one day be staff-less because it is the human touch that beckons us into the retail experience. At London-Gatwick (Tower Bridge, St Paul's etc still 20 miles) you can enjoy a Disneyland experience as you serpentine along the pavement, each curve mathematically or, should I say, geometrically calculated to give you a head-on view into a retail outlet not of your choice. This gives the staff time to make an assessment of your 'vulnerability' and leap forward to interview you.

"Are you having a good day? Welcome to Himalayan Warm-wear International."

Why would anyone, who is clearly going on a *summer* holiday, want to buy clothing for mountaineers? You're probably going to be 'fined' fifty pounds for having a tiny amount of excess baggage (one sun hat) anyway. Curiously, I don't need Sno Boots when I'm on my way to a sunny beach. If I did need them, wouldn't common sense suggest that I'd have packed them before anything else? Imagine getting to the foot of the Himalayas (nearest low-cost airport, Brussels) unpacking and thinking, "I *knew* there was something I meant to pack. Sno boots, fragrance and - what else did I forget that I could have bought at London Gatwick? Oh yes, a case of Collectable Whiskeys, and a pocket-sized car jack!"

Having avoided eye contact with the salespeople at Himalayan Warm-wear International, and an unnecessary, two-year retail contract at the glitzy fonesRU shop, you are immediately and literally showered with "our latest fragrance" designed by an ageing footballer, recently found not-guilty of an assault charge. *Now* you do wish you'd at least bought a showerproof jacket from Himalayan Warm-wear International. It's relentless. There isn't a moment when you can stop, gather your wits and just think. Maybe that's a good thing? If you had time to think, the only conclusion a sane person could come to is that you're mad.

How can fearful flyers navigate this assault on their already vulnerable senses? My advice is to march straight through, ignore eye contact and get to the oasis of a nice coffee shop.

When we are able to tele-transport like they do in Star Trek or Doctor Who, we can forget airports. I suppose that, in a hundred year's time, airports will be able to put up a sign saying "Established 2015: Celebrating a hundred years of moving the public." Unlike old shoe shops and similar where there's usually the name of the venerated founder (b.1857) painted in shadowed gold, on a bit of wooden signage, there'll be a plastic list of hedge funds, venture capitalists and

nations who have been, laughingly, called owners and the dates of going into liquidation, bankruptcy or administration. Perhaps they will be turned into theme parks? "Airport World of Adventure" with a strap line that says, "Where you can go to re-live all the novelty of trying to travel in the 20th and 21st centuries." In my opinion Airports should get humanitarian aid.

My idea of making airports more fun include on-the-spot interviews broadcast to screens scattered around the airport. Mindless interviewers would ask imbecilic questions about what people are doing here, who they're travelling with and if they've remembered to buy their Sno boots. Or a fifty question, quick survey of delayed passengers, possibly ending with.

"How much has missing your best friend's funeral upset you?" and ...

"Are you likely to take this journey again?"

Anyone with a family who has been delayed at an airport would recognise the benefit of a swimming pool club. Just drop the kids off and pick them up later - two weeks later - if you remember to. Now that airports have dispensed with announcements, an echoing swimming pool would only raise the noise level back to what it was in years gone by, and the benefits of getting everyone in a holiday mood before they leave are self-evident. "Visit our underwater shopping experience and check out our shower-proof holiday wear."

First Class and Premium travellers could have their own pool closer to, or even at, the gate and could be allowed to dry themselves on board. Football pitches and ice skating rinks could be added as and when demand arose. Welding lessons would be useful too. The latest sign I saw at an airport was "Flight A2Z delayed, relax and go shopping." How dare they! Don't tell me what to do!

Airports are intrusive, soulless and to my mind, hallucinogenic.

"It is injurious to the mind as well as to the body to be always in one place and always surrounded by the same circumstances." R.J.

RELAX AND GET A COFFEE INSTEAD

Having parked your car, taken the bus and checked in your bags maybe it is a good time to enjoy a coffee? Put the past events behind you and stay in the present. My advice is not to get anxious yet, because you'll need all your mental stamina to control yourself when you're presented with a coffee in a plasticised paper cup. "We're saving the planet. Thank you for helping us," it smarms in corporate font around the cup. The corporate font being pretend handwriting.

Frankly, I think a better contribution to planetary salvation would be to charge less, make better coffee, provide a china cup or mug and try to mean "Have a nice day." if you're employed to say it. Some up to date coffee shops realise that "Have a nice day" is well past its say-by-date and offer the new "Enjoy-the-rest-of-your-day." Well that doesn't help me enjoy anything, especially the coffee, or the rest of my day because I waste ten minutes trying to think of a smart reply to it... so why they say it, I don't know. Unless it's done to annoy me.

Leave having coffee. Go to the gate. No, have a coffee to calm yourself. Why is the conflict resolution kiosk always unmanned when you need it?

I know that I'm going to be upset as soon as my 'intimate and personal' coffee experience starts because I don't understand why the barista's first action is to turn his or her back on me. Imagine a doctor doing that or a car salesman doing that. It's rude. Then that appalling clatter and banging of metallic coffee bean containers being struck against another metallic object to clear it of the decaying grounds of a previous order. The volcanic spluttering of steam heating milk, I accept, is unavoidable. But then, having finished, they wipe the spout with a disgusting bit of milk sodden cloth to clean it. One day they'll discover the replacement for penicillin living on it for sure. Has no one yet realised that wearing one unchanged, thin pair of diaphanous, rubber gloves all day long actually spreads germs? Washed bare hands are much cleaner even if they have been scratching pubescent facial spots and blisters five minutes earlier. Having accepted a bad start as unavoidable, I start rehearsing my lines as soon as I'm in the queue.

"Not the special beans offer. No marshmallows. Americano, please. Single shot. Medium. With milk. Hot. Cow's. Open grazing. Mother's name Daisy. To drink in. Preferably sitting but probably standing. No chocolate sprinklings. Thank you."

I rehearse declining the special offers of a bar of chocolate, Dan Brown's latest book and three month's free membership of the airport's Airside Mindfulness Club. But they always get me on

the loyalty card which my wife insists that I get stamped because after four years loyalty we'll get one free, small, skinny, cold milk latte. And they'll still ask me if it's to drink in or out! Pity they don't give me the option of throwing it!

Have you noticed how they look you in the eye if you dare to ask them how big a small one is, or how small a big one is? Another "Here to help you" badged person (Barista) maintained sullen eye contact with me, motioned with an almost imperceptible backward movement of his head and grunted, "They're all there" referring to an assortment of cups, mugs and drinking detritus stacked on a shelf behind him. Teenagers speak from, what I call, the Gruntaceous period. The present period will be known as the Costaceous period. If you're ever lucky enough to meet a barista who speaks any form of language you'll discover that small is smaller than medium and big is bigger than medium. A medium, if you do ask, is smaller than a big one and bigger than a small one. The final insult to one's intelligence is the T shirt message that your coffee will be the best this side of Milan, which any nursery school kid can tell you is anywhere ... even London-Gatwick

In my hope of being one-up on the conversational gymnastics I always forget the loyalty stamp which is something I won't be allowed to forget for the rest of the holiday.

That seat /table that you had earmarked for your relaxing coffee has now been taken by a fellow traveller. There's something about coffee that says to me that it can't be enjoyed unless you're sitting down but I always end up holding two coffees while kick-pushing our hand baggage along the floor.

Since starting this book a new procedure is being adopted. After placing one's order they demand: "Name?" To which I now answer, "Theresa." This generates a dispute when I collect my coffee because they think I'm muscling in on someone else's order. Then I waste their time explaining that, as they didn't ask politely for *my* name, I gave them someone else's.

Someone has to challenge them.

"Some, I verily believe, delight to be slave-men; it is a joy to them, they're would not change their condition; not only miserable village wretches, but men in good position, well-to-do sycophants." R.J.

DEPARTURE LOUNGES

There's not much to say about departure lounges except to say that it's another example of bad signage. A lounge is defined as somewhere to sit and relax. Sit, for sure, relax ... highly doubtful. They should be called Intermediate Internment Facilities. As for the idea of boarding families first, clearly no-one in the industry has studied the mayhem that so few, little people, can cause.

Kids love to run away from their parents ... so why not give them an empty plane to get lost in! Much better to board them last when the remaining seats are obviously theirs. Also the pressure of everyone watching will encourage doting parents to stop doting and indulging their offspring and settle down as soon as they can so that we can get the show on the road.

Meanwhile I sit and wonder who is in Biz class and how they can afford it, and I wonder what internet subscription I and thousands of others have forgotten to cancel to that allows people to fly First Class. I try to identify these travellers while I look upon myself, cursing my fate. But it's a complete waste of energy because they're not mixing it with us ... the posh travellers are sipping champagne and nibbling in the Executive Lounge.

How families can afford to take their newborn triplets to an undiscovered country thousands of miles away and manage without their familial baby sitters ... certainly puzzles the will and makes grandparents wonder if they'll continue to be available on their return. But their consciences will get the better of them and they'll lose their resolve by the time they meet them on their return, and by the time they all get home they'll be looking after the kids again that evening.

GATES

You must have noticed, despite the blinding LED lights everywhere, how much you are kept in the dark at the average airport. Despite the fact that you have probably spent hundreds of dollars, pounds or euros on your ticket, despite everything, the amount of interest shown in you diminishes as you get closer (emotionally) to the flight. That is of course if you know where to go, to get closer (physically) to your flight. Geographically, airports are a nightmare. A normal person might think that gate 15 is located between gate 14 and 16. That of course is only the case at airports where there is a gate 14. You didn't spot the new Gate 14A notice on the airport map as you entered? It replaced Gate 14 during the re-furbishment to improve the 'flow'.

You are now going to be late for your flight.

The old Gate 15, re-numbered 13A, as you will soon find out, is in the opposite direction from the way you have been walking. The new Gate 14 is now between gates 21A and 21B on the new departures extension building. Strap line: "Giving you what you need."

If your local airport offers guided tours or weekend breaks, it may well be worth taking one before you fly. I'm sure that Lonely Planet have a book for your local airport. It was only when I started helping fearful flyers that I realised how difficult airports are to navigate from a passenger's point of view. From a pilot's point of view I never needed to know where the gate was because the Transit van crew driver always knew where to take me.

FINDING AND BEING IN YOUR SEAT

You'd think that having numbered seats would make finding the one allocated to you a simple task when you eventually get on board. In reality you spot a seat row number as you pass it and compare it with the number on your ticket. "If this row is eight and I'm in twenty-four F," you think, and you start to count - or at least you try to count - another sixteen rows. Are you sitting in that distant, empty row or are you just in front of that row full of rowdy football fans. It doesn't matter, because it's impossible to count seat rows when there are people, cabin dividers, cabin crew, cabin baggage and all sorts of obstructions making any progress impractical let alone the mental task of counting seat numbers.

So who then, doesn't feel a great sense of achievement when you eventually find your seat? Finding the row is just the first obstacle. You then have to decide whether seat E is on this side or that side, by a window, or in the middle between two strangers and you start wondering if E comes before D or F in the alphabet which means that when you do find your seat you feel like cheering. That's if someone from four rows back hadn't insisted on using your space in the baggage locker for his round the world backpacking kit bag, mobile devices and a suitcaseful of chargers. Why go backpacking in the natural world and stay in touch with the modern one I always wonder? Come to think of it why doesn't this freak walk anyway, rather than take up my space in the overhead locker and add to greenhouse gases? What a relief it is to be stuck between two strangers with your seat belt "securely fastened" as they say, and watch others going through what you've just endured.

In summer a mixture of body odours settle while the temperature rises as more and more sweaty people get on board. In winter there's dankness and hope of warmer things to come. The open door that would have been a welcome friend in the summer becomes a bitter friend. You wouldn't describe any of it as pleasant, but you'll still get a friendly "Welcome aboard" regardless.

There's anticipation in the air too. Will the guy next to you ignore you for hours or will you know his life history by the time you've started to taxi? When I'm a passenger I feel like I do in the theatre waiting for the curtain to go up, moments of casual caution and yet excitement none the less.

There's something in the air, the native in us realises that this is all a bit different. After the rush and months of anticipation, there's now an instant reality. This is the moment when we either hand over control or have it taken from us. Life is going to change. Here I am now, and in a few hours I'll be somewhere else... without contact with any human beings apart from the few I'm with. I'll soon be hundreds, maybe thousands, of miles away. Is there anything that can be compared to this forthcoming event? Can it be compared to any other journeys in history? Could a Roman general have had a similar feeling marching with an army to conquer distant lands? No. It's the speed of what we are about to do, the contraction of distance, nowhere is beyond the reach of a few hours in this machine. This modern theatre cannot give us pause. As we prepare to shuffle off these terrestrial ties, we should look, see, marvel and appreciate or we could lose our souls.

Speed can hardly come as a surprise as thousands of horsepower speed us through the air, but what's different about this journey is that most of the time you won't be able to see where you're going. No trees going by, no signposts, no towns and no people, just landscapes without names. If you're lucky enough to look out as you pass Paris, the Alps, Sydney Harbour Bridge or New York at least you can get your bearings for a moment but, at seven miles every minute, you could miss it while asking for milk with your coffee! Everyone on board secretly knows that you're going on a time travelling excursion. Gradually, the hub-bub dies down and the cabin crew take their places for the Reading and the Service. The crew walk up the aisles avoiding interruptions and turn solemnly to address their congregation. As the video plays, they act out their parts, "Place the life jacket over..." and magically transport you to a choppy sea where with, great composure you'll find "This... to blow into... to top up..." Oh yes, you think, I could do that. Now where's the whistle to attract a passing sailor? As for tying the straps in a double bow under the jacket? Yes, I could manage that too. The service ends not with a threat of eternal damnation but a route to salvation and another "Thank you for listening." It's a message wasted on eighty four point three percent of the passengers.

The Safety Briefing seems to be a scene easily ignored in this play, dismissed as irrelevant, or to be talked over. The cabin crew try to look as interested and un-judgemental as they can, but beneath those cool expressions they're seething at the stupidity of their congregation. It takes no effort to listen for three minutes. It sets a good example to less experienced travellers and children and warns the crew to their charges. It's a message vital to one hundred percent of the passengers.

I always read the safety card and I always listen to the briefing. Unlike fearful flyers, I get the feeling that if I don't listen I might wish that I had, whereas they get the feeling that if they listen they might wish they hadn't. There is no god of safety briefings ready to test those who listen and ignore those who don't. But however you look at it, common sense says that if the industry is working flat-out to keep things safe, the least the passengers can do is their little bit.

With the briefing over, the cabin crew stomp up and down the cabin checking this and checking that, and with expert eye, at high speed can spot a backrest, table or seat belt not conforming to the rules. They shudder to a halt with practised patience to correct and sometimes assist offenders.

The doors to the holds close with a bang so loud and hard that you'd think an irate loader was taking out a personal grievance on your plane, but that's not the case or cases. The doors are large and close electro-mechanically with a system of their own. All sorts of mechanisms are needed to close it, this catch, before that lever, that lever moves a rod to locate a spigot to engage an arm to position the cog that secures every part so securely that nothing but using the right switch and the right technique at the right time would ever open it again.

SEATS ... POSSIBLY WITH A VIEW

We always plan to set off early for the gate but the departures board, which for the past hour you've been watching constantly, suddenly goes from displaying "Gate not allocated" to "Last call. Final boarding." ... I've been tempted to wait and see if it changes to " You've just missed it!"

If you're really well-organised, while one of you has been waiting for that relaxing coffee the other has spent the forty-five minutes downtime buying magazines, papers and books.

I'm too mean to buy my favourite car or computer magazines during the year so I buy them all before I fly. I feel like a king with thirty pounds worth of magazines to read on board. In first class you get free magazines but there's so much pampering (or there used to be) that you don't really need to entertain yourself reading magazines. And, by the way, in case you've wondered, there is no operational reason that airlines board business or first class passengers before anyone else other than to allow them to parade themselves if you're one of them, or despise them if you're not.

You don't get less turbulence in first or business class seats... It just feels like less. Let's face it who would pay three times as much for their seat as we in cattle class pay and not fool themselves into believing that they don't get turbulence or that "you don't notice it up there."

Working on the assumption that you have reached your gate on time you will have to enjoy the extra disappointment of now discovering that all the newspapers you queued and paid for are now available free.

Stay calm and stay in the present.

I always advise fearful flyers to find and use a simple breathing exercise as they prepare to board. There is no doubt that for some people flying is very, very stressful. The calmer you can remain during all the preparations the better you will be able to deal with the actual flight.

I'm anxious a lot of the time in airports, but not with the expectation of flying. It's the poor customer service that airlines and airports offer now. They just don't seem to care. Everything, especially you, is a potential revenue stream. Don't get the impression you're here to be looked after. Why look after you when they can wring another penny out of you. Take making a booking.

I mean, to get a booking, you have to *make* a booking, that's what making a booking means. Then they've got the nerve to charge you a booking-fee. That's like buying a ticket for a football

game and then the ground charging you to watch it. We'd object to paying a "watching-fee." But this is the airline business so we're here to be swindled... If you can afford a holiday, what do you expect? And, if you want to sit next to someone of your choice, like your partner, or your child, there's a fee. So there's a sitting-fee but without the option to stand or wander around. When will they charge you to get off? I'm going to charge a reading-fee for this book. So far you've only bought it ... Reading-rights are extra.

Regrettably, all airlines are driving down their need for human interaction because the cost of feeding a human being is higher than buying a line of code for a machine. The airline's plan is to get your booking, get you on a plane and get you off it as soon as they can. They make it difficult to complain, especially about delays, by prevaricating. And if you dare pursue a complaint, they'll tell you to go to your insurance company while knowing that the contract is with them.

I haven't yet come to terms with paying for food on a short flight although paradoxically I see nothing odd in paying for a sandwich on the train up to London Bridge. I suppose it's all about setting expectations. Right now I don't know where my expectations are with air travel. When I do, no doubt everything will change again.

When I eventually settle down and have overcome my resentment that I haven't been upgraded to my rightful place in first class, I really enjoy being a passenger. All the fun of going somewhere without the effort of having to work. When I'm in my seat I become a changed person because, like I said, I become a non stop fidget. I'm like the kid at Christmas with too many presents, not knowing which to open first. I get all my magazines on my lap, scan them, reject them, then I check the audio programmes, then start reading a book, change to watching a video and on and on until I arrive at my destination without really having read, seen or listened to anything in its entirety. Yes, I display all the qualities of an anxious flyer, but without the anxiety.

Meanwhile my wife, whom I describe as a dormouse, builds her nest. She gets a blanket for later (always thinking ahead), puts her reading glasses in the seat pocket in front of her. Then she checks possible in-flight purchase opportunities, puts her headset on and ignores me for anything up to ten hours. Now that I think of it... very much like any other day.

We always make a point of listening to the crew and always pay attention to their safety briefing. When we board, we both count the number of rows to the exits and familiarise ourselves with the operation of the doors. Then, we can relax and enjoy the flight.

I usually look out of the window and if we're at an airport with which I'm familiar I like to see which taxiway route we are taking and which runway we are using. During the actual take off I watch the wings bend as they take the weight of the plane and us into the air. I know it all works because of physics, mathematics and engineering but it doesn't stop me marvelling at the miracle of this fabulous experience.

Now that I have more time to look at the ground, I try to identify the places that we're flying over. It takes us about four hours from leaving home to boarding the aircraft. If we leave from London-Gatwick in a westerly direction we are back over our house in less than ten minutes. You are probably saying to yourself doesn't he realise that he is now travelling in a plane which is a whole lot faster than being in the car? Well, yes, I do realise that but it's still pretty amazing to me, and all the time that I can live in the state of amazement, wonder and awe I shall be happy. When I was a child my father would encourage me to wonder. So I wonder. I think everyone should wonder. Kids know too much to be able to wonder properly so as soon as adults are young enough I think they should start wondering.

"Sunward I've climbed." John Magee

In the daytime, there is always the sun to discover above the clouds. It must be one of the most enjoyable experiences that a human being can have. I have a fascination with clouds. I love the flat clouds because they hide everything above them from below and everything below them from above. The bubbly cumulus clouds are like cartoon sheep in the sky to me. (and incidentally, a typical summers' day cumulus cloud contains about as much water as you'd have in your bath). They can appear and disappear in less than an hour. They can grow into a cloud extending above the cruising height of airliners and generate formidable amounts of harmless (to a plane) electrical energy.

But please don't be nervous we're not allowed to fly closer than twenty five miles from the centre of a storm and the aeroplane is built so that lightning cannot damage the plane or upset any of the instruments. For the scientifically-minded, the plane acts as a Faraday's cage. For the technically-minded, the new carbon-fibre construction involves weaving a layer of copper between the carbon matting. (For a pilot thick, rainy clouds are more fun to fly in but less fun for the passengers.)

Once we are up to cruising height I entertain myself with my fidgeting. I hate it if people around me have closed the window blinds. I want to be able to see the sky, the clouds, the sea or the land even just for a moment. It would be unrealistic to think that every human in every plane should, or wants be staring out marvelling at nature but you'd think that a few of the younger generation might be fascinated with our planet. They're probably watching a programme about the wonders of planet earth on an interactive tablet, showing the world in over eight million scientifically-generated colours. In which case I think they've lost sight of the big picture - a picture to which they claim to have dedicated their more enlightened lives.

There are two occasions that I remember when I was flying (as a crew member not a passenger) when members of the so called enlightened younger generation, were not fascinated with things that were visible from the air. The first was crossing the Atlantic and approaching Greenland. There was a strange reversal of lighting where the fresh water streaming from the glaciers and rivers collided with the saltwater of the sea. It looked as if the whole scene had been made into a negative from an old film camera. Within this change of contrast you could clearly see icebergs coming from and going to places unknown by most.

They were to the right of the aircraft and so were on the first officer's side. I had to loosen my harness to lift myself up to be able to see through his window. I don't know what statement of awe that I made but it was insufficient to encourage the first officer to look out. Eventually I said to him, "Just look at that... incredible." He looked away from what he was doing to glance out of the window briefly.

"Oh yeah," he murmured, hardly able to control himself.

If only Twitter had been invented, he might have seen that 'Iceburgs' were trending. That would have made him engage! Spiritually, philosophically, socially there are some stupid people in the world. I hope that, during the interview for the afterlife, he is made to explain his privileged indifference. A capable pilot but nevertheless an idiot person. A person in a place that thousands would have given their right hands for.

He'd be joined by the young cabin crew guy who cursed me for dragging him up to the flight deck. We were flying back from North America overnight and, for at least forty minutes, the sky to the north of us was ablaze with the Northern Lights. I'm sure you will have seen the descriptions: a moving curtain of fluorescent, coloured lights. That's all they are but when you actually see them in flight they are utterly awe-inspiring, or at least they should be.

I called down the back and asked if anyone wanted to see something special. A steward came up and I pointed out of my window.

“Is that all you called me up here for, I’ve got passengers to serve?”

I’m pleased he put the needs of his passengers before his own interests but I can’t imagine anyone actually saying so out loud. Where does this guy keep his soul? What does he talk about when he gets home?

But that’s just me, I guess. I get hurt when people with opportunities, take for granted things that might be a once in a lifetime opportunity for many, and a never in a lifetime for most others. How do they not appreciate their good fortune? Meanwhile, sales of magazines that tell you who betrays whom in the next week's absurd episode of a TV soap continue to soar skywards.

The experience of air travel is still limited to a small proportion of the earth’s population. Shouldn’t we respect that, or is it all me, me, me, money and fatuous bucket lists? The only thing on a half decent bucket list of things to do before you die, is to live. I’m always going to promote the view that air travel is a privilege and a wonderful way to celebrate life if you’re given the opportunity.

“No tyrant, however evil, has yet lacked ready hands to execute his most abominable will. To read how eagerly men have rushed to serve the despot is the bitterest, the saddest matter of history; it is the saddest sight in our own day.” R.J.

WHEN IS THE PILOT ALLOWED TO TAKE OFF OR LAND?

There's a feeling amongst fearful flyers that the success or failure of a flight is down to the judgement of the captain. While this may have been the case many years ago, flying is so routine now that almost everything is enshrined in safety rules and strict operating procedures. There are no circumstances where one aircraft, of a company would be able to take off or land and another plane and of the same type, under the same conditions, wouldn't.

If the weather conditions prevents a plane from taking off then there's no reason that any pilot would ever override these limitations. The weather restrictions concern the wind direction, wind speed and visibility. Each different type of plane has defined limitations, if the wind limitation for take off is thirty knots across the runway and the wind is thirty-one knots across the runway... you can't take off. If it's twenty-nine knots, you can and that's that.

The plane will have been tested, by test pilots, as being capable of taking off in stronger winds across the runway, but if the rule for passenger flights is thirty knots, then thirty it is. Not one knot more. The wind direction and strength has to be within the limitations at the start of the take off run and be reasonably expected to stay that way during the take off.

Visibility is important during the take off because the pilot needs to be able to keep the plane in the centre of the runway. On the flight deck there is equipment to assist us to maintain direction. We can be sure that the runway is clear of traffic because the ground radar controllers monitor all airport traffic particularly near and on the runway. It helps that the runways are long and straight. Nothing would be harder to do than take off along a runway that has bends, traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. It means that in a plane the forward visibility can be almost zero and we're still far safer than you would ever be in a car in foggy conditions.

For landing, the situation is slightly different because a plane spends five minutes or so approaching. So, for those five minutes, the wind and visibility could be constantly changing and might occasionally be outside or within the landing limitations during that time. A pilot preparing to take off can wait for conditions to change while the pilot of an approaching aircraft needs to account for the conditions at the exact time of making the decision to land.

A pilot isn't prevented from making an approach to land if there is a reasonable expectation that the wind or visibility will be within the limitations at the time of touchdown, that is to say

when the wheels touch the runway. If the most recent wind report received is in excess of the limitations immediately prior to touchdown, the captain is obliged to Go Around.

If that happens, the passengers, especially the anxious ones will believe that the pilot should not have tried to make an approach to land. But of course it is perfectly safe to attempt to. Making an approach with an *intention* to land, is not the same as actually landing, which to a pilot is a different phase of the flight. The resulting Go Around is not evidence of bad judgement, but of good discipline showing that if you shouldn't land then you don't. Sounds like very good sense to me.

People who don't mind flying don't think about whether pilots should land or not. They accept that the captain isn't going to do anything that would endanger the plane or its occupants so they sit quietly read the paper or have a snooze. Those who are more anxious can think of lots of reasons why the pilot shouldn't land. Despite how you feel, the only question from the pilot's point of view is, is it safe and is it legal? A culture of safety is something that every pilot has dealt with from their first day in the industry.

A fearful flyer's point of view will be influenced by Hollywood films and silly documentaries on the telly which suggest that the decision to take off or land is down solely to the captain, regardless of rules or advice from anyone else. They imply that all decisions are governed by personal opinion, self confidence, the colour of your eyes and by a special inner determination and commitment. Presumably "transferred" from another career like hedge funding or venture capital? In aviation we stick to the rules and that's it.

There are no parts of Hollywood films or television disaster programmes which bear any resemblance to reality. It is pure fiction. I've never been to a training event where the company training department has said, "We want you to watch this film because it has some important lessons for you. Especially the bit where the camera shakes, the Captain is fighting the controls and the passengers are screaming."

Anxious flyers can often recount stories of when planes shouldn't have landed and did, or of planes that tried to land and couldn't. They feel the same way about taking off, but these stories always have an element of exaggeration and misunderstanding. Never let a fact or two get in the way of a good story. The press doesn't.

Just as there are weather limitations for take off, so there are for landing. A pilot can only land if the wind is within the prescribed limits and the pilot can see enough of the runway at the height specified in the Operations Manual.

Modern autopilot systems can land the plane without any control inputs from the pilots. The automatic pilot will control speed, height, power and brakes. The pilots still have to engage the autopilot, lower the flaps and the wheels, but the rest is automatic. This presents the fearful flyer with a thought: “What happens if it goes wrong?” As you’d hope and expect there *are* back ups on this system just as there are on all the other aircraft systems.

The autopilot doesn’t need to see the runway to land on it. It just measures height, position and speed then works out what to do. A human pilot needs to see the runway to land the plane. Therefore, when landing using the autopilot, the visibility can be much lower than when the plane is flown manually by the pilot.

This presents the fearful flyer with another thought: “Suppose all the autopilots fail?” If the autopilot is being used in good weather and the pilots can see the runway they’ll take over and land it themselves. If the weather reports have given a visibility below which a pilot cannot do the landing they’ll Go Around.

This presents the fearful flyer with yet another thought: “Suppose it failed but did so just before landing?” The answer is simple. Some aircraft have three autopilots so it would just carry on and land. Others, depend upon things outside the scope of this tale, but will either land or Go Around.

In summary, the weather has to be better to land the plane when the pilot is looking out of the window, than when using the automatic pilots. This doesn’t mean I didn’t use the autopilot in good weather because I did. Why work when you’ve got reliable staff?

“An inspiration - a long, deep breath of the pure air of thought - could alone give health to the heart.” R.J.

WHY WEATHER

As one famous comedian said, “If we didn’t have weather what would we have instead?” Weather happens because of our atmosphere. Planets without atmospheres don’t have weather systems.

The properties of the air surrounding our planet are pressure, temperature and moisture content. Difference in air pressure causes the air movement which we call wind. Moisture content we call humidity and the more there is of it, the more likely clouds are to form. If there’s even more moisture it’ll rain. The higher the temperature the more moisture can be contained in a lump of air. When air cools sufficiently its moisture condenses and forms clouds. Bumpy clouds form when this cooling happens quickly and, flat smoother clouds form when the cooling happens slowly and gently. When air is warmed it rises and as it rises, it starts to cool. Air can also be pushed up by another mass of air or be deflected by mountain ranges for example which causes it to rise, cool, and form clouds

The permutations of these properties cause the variations in our weather. When it’s cold you get the frozen version of the same phenomena as you get on a warm day. On a day when the air is calm with little moisture, nothing much happens. In summer, you get a nice warm summer’s day and, in winter, you get a clear cold day. If there is lots of moisture in the air, lots of movement and it’s hot you’ll get a showery summer’s day. In winter, when there’s lots of air movement, you’ll get a miserable, cold, wet and blustery day.

How can TV weather presenters make more of it than that? Furthermore are we all so ignorant of weather that we need forecasters to tell us to ‘wrap up well’ when it’s cold or to ‘take an umbrella’ when it’s raining?

TURBULENCE

I'll make a prediction that you looked in the contents, saw this heading and came straight to it.

The best advice I can give you is to tighten your seatbelt as much as you can to ensure that you move with the aeroplane, and as you settle into your seat tighten it again and again. Keep saying to yourself that, "*Turbulence may be uncomfortable but that's not the same as dangerous.*" *K Godfrey*

You can't concentrate on anything if, rumbling away in the background there's something worrying you, and I know from all the years I've been helping fearful flyers that turbulence is the number one worry. When you're happy that your worries and doubts are answered, I hope you'll get on and enjoy the rest of the book.

Turbulence is caused by the movement of air. It can be caused by the air next to the ground being heated up and rising then falling back to earth when it has cooled down. Turbulence can also be caused by air hitting the sides of mountains or other obstructions and being deflected upwards. Turbulence can be caused when a warm air mass rides up over a cold air mass or when cold air cuts under warm air. These last two conditions are called frontal conditions and the type of clouds that they produce are either flat or lumpy. Either can cause turbulence, but there's no guarantee that they will. Turbulence can also be called by large masses of air moving around the surface of the earth and colliding with each other.

Clouds can indicate turbulence, but do not necessarily show the amount of turbulence that you might experience. Turbulence can occur without clouds. Turbulence can be forecast. Pilots are required by law to check for areas and amounts of turbulence from weather maps, reports and forecasts before a flight. Where possible pilots fly at heights and take routes to avoid turbulence.

But, of course, what is turbulent to you may feel normal to me. Aircraft are strong enough to fly in turbulence. If you have your seat belt securely fastened you will be perfectly safe. You should make it a habit to continually tighten your seatbelt throughout any flight. Although your body will be secure, your tummy will still float up and down inside you and that will exaggerate the feeling of the plane's movements. Remember that a feeling of falling will always be more pronounced than the feeling of going up. You are likely to exaggerate the number of times that the aeroplane goes down compared with the number of times the plane goes up. Because the plane

will maintain a steady height in turbulence it must go up as much as it goes down. But up and down means only a few feet at a time, not hundreds or thousands of feet.

Remember, and remind yourself during turbulence, that the feeling of going down is much worse than the feeling of going up. As for asking how long the turbulence will last? Well, you might as well ask how long is a piece of string. The answer is: it depends. Let's say about eighteen inches and twenty minutes.

From the pilot's point of view it is difficult to win with the passengers. If the pilot says nothing and you encounter turbulence everyone will want to know why s/he didn't speak, or if you are warned about turbulence and nothing happens then the pilot is considered to not know what's going on. If the pilot doesn't speak to you, make up your own cabin address to reassure yourself. Here is an example which you can record and use, royalty free.

"Hello everyone, this is the captain. As you will have noticed I have put on the seat belt signs because there is some turbulence in this area. I know that some of you are anxious about flying in turbulence but I want to reassure you that flying in these conditions is perfectly safe. Remember, this aeroplane has been built to be able to fly in this sort of weather and that it is no harder for me to fly the aeroplane now, than in any other conditions. Please make sure that your seatbelt is secured as tightly as possible to make you feel more comfortable. I will, of course, turn off the seat belt signs so that you can leave your seats as soon as we are clear of this area of turbulence."

In the cockpit, after we have turned on the seat belt signs, we reduce power and slow down very slightly. We also put on our shoulder straps to make sure we're secure, and on the plane I flew, we turned on the continuous ignition. Although the engines will run normally without it being turned on, it provides an extra level of safety. I add that because I want my explanation to be technically correct but, from your point of view, it makes no difference to how you'll feel on board.

Remember that in turbulence, a plane it is very unlikely to move more than half the height of the average room, but to you it will feel much more.

Although air traffic control radar has weather suppression to make the aircraft more visible they will usually know where the areas of turbulence are because they will have received reports from other aircraft. On most flights we can speak to other aircraft to see what the conditions are like further along the route, and an exchange of turbulence information is normal between aircraft

flying on almost every route around the world. Turbulence, to the pilots and crew, is more an inconvenience than anything else. Please don't draw any conclusions from the pilot speaking to you or not speaking to you, it depends upon the day, it depends upon the pilot and it depends upon whether s/he has remembered to speak to you. It is so routine to a pilot that you shouldn't misunderstand the importance or otherwise of making an announcement.

Turbulence is a word which I genuinely loathe writing but unfortunately in the process of helping people to overcome their fear of flying the word turbulence occurs frequently. Remember that turbulence is uncomfortable but feeling uncomfortable is not the same as being in danger. The causes of turbulence are simple and the familiar comparison with rivers and water cannot be improved upon. Normal turbulence can be compared to rivers running into each other or the flow being displaced by rocks and other obstructions in the river. Severe turbulence can be likened to white water rafting.

But it is not the only way of describing turbulence, try this: At the equator the sun heats the ground. The ground heats the air above it. When a chunk of air is hotter than its surroundings it will break away from the surface and float up into the sky, like a hot air balloon. When this happens, the rising air has to be replaced or there would be a vacuum on the ground. On a planetary scale, air from the North and South Poles is drawn towards the equator to replace the ascending air. This is a simplified explanation of the actual process, of course.

Similarly, air over North America, South America, Europe and any other large landmass will heat up more quickly than the surrounding oceans. Consequently, this warmer air will rise from the landmasses and will have to be replaced by air above the oceans. These air masses collide with the air circulating between the Poles and the equator. Imagine millions of tons of air colliding with millions of tons of air going in a different direction. This will cause disruption and the air churned up as a result will cause turbulence.

Not only does this happen on a worldwide scale but it also happens on a local scale. The air over a village will heat up more quickly than the air over the surrounding fields and so, once again, it will break away from the surface and float up into the sky. This air contains moisture which, at ground temperature, remains invisible but when cooled (as it is when it breaks away from the ground and rises) is condensed into visible water droplets which we call clouds. Half the bubbly clouds you see on a summer's day are forming and half are dissipating, therefore, when

you fly under or through these clouds, there is a good chance of the plane either going up or going down. This is turbulence.

I'm sure that you have sat on a beach on a windy day wishing that there was some sort of shelter. The obvious shelter is a windbreak which, when in place, protects you from the wind. When the wind hits your windbreak it doesn't just disappear, it goes somewhere else, if you've ever had a small bonfire while there has been a light wind you will have seen how the wind swirls the smoke around. The air around your windbreak will do the same. On a much bigger scale, when the wind hits a mountain range, a town or any ground obstruction the air will be displaced. It will be displaced upwards and cause a ripple or wave whose effect maybe felt hundreds of miles away and extend up to the cruising height of your plane. In an aeroplane you will feel this as turbulence.

The turbulence that you experience will range from gentle to uncomfortable. You may even experience severe turbulence although that's unlikely because, throughout my entire flying career, I have only ever experienced severe turbulence twice.

I almost forgot to mention, the reason I really dislike writing the word 'turbulence' is that I have to do it so often and secondly that my careless fingers often hit the letter "k" as well as the letter "l" and I end up writing and constantly correcting the word "turbulkence."

Apart from that I don't mind turbulence at all.

BEING A PASSENGER

*“And, while with silent lifting mind I’ve trod
The high untrampled sanctity of space,” J.M.*

I’m not a backseat car driver so when it comes to flying as a passenger, it really doesn’t concern me. But fearful flyers always ask me if I’m a good passenger and whether I get nervous about the skills of the crew. It’s only when they ask me, that I even think about it. Apart from the pure love of it, I think nothing more of sitting on an aeroplane than sitting in the garden.

I can’t remember exactly how old I was when I took my first flight, but I know that we were on holiday in Bournemouth, England. Taking the train there was about as far as we could afford to go. The flight cost Mum and Dad ten shillings, which was nearly a morning’s work for Dad. Four hours work spent in ten minutes!

The plane we flew in was an Auster which, I’ve since discovered, was registered G-AJEP. Registration marks are important to pilots, because we can later claim to have ‘flown that one’

The flight was from Christchurch Airfield, Dorset coincidentally, where the horse freighter that I flew in later years was built. Mum and Dad kept it as a surprise and pretended we were all going to sightsee in Christchurch rather than play on the beach that day. Not much of an alternative to kids who were only interested in the beach. I don’t think that springing surprises on children is the best way to get a positive reaction. I remember being particularly grumpy until I saw the plane and realised what we were going to do.

Dad let Mum share the ride with me so that was another ten bob gone. Nearly a whole day’s pay gone in ten minutes now! I don’t think there was enough money left in the holiday fund to let my brothers have a ride as well. But I never heard a word of resentment from them, ever.

When we were airborne I remember Mum pointing out, in disbelief and amazement, a field of cows appearing to come up the side of the window. As I remember it, the pilot was sullen and disinterested in everything, including my Mum’s enthusiasm to show me what, she proudly announced, was to be my career. He didn’t welcome us, explain anything to us or even say goodbye. If I think of all the joyriding (in the old sense of the word) pilots I met subsequently, this guy was no different, he was just building his flying experience at someone else’s financial and emotional

expense, and no doubt destined to be one of those awful training pilots that I flew with twenty-five years later in our national airline.

When it was my turn to take people on pleasure flights I tried to generate excitement as we went out to the aeroplane and most certainly during the flight because they might have been moments that changed someone's life.

I have had the pleasure of a few passenger flights since I retired, and as I have said, the company staff travel arrangement isn't what it used to be. My seniority and length of service qualifies me for a *reduced fare and standby* first class flight once a year. Had I been able to stick with the agony of travelling in a Transit van for a little while longer I could have qualified for a *free and confirmed* first class seat, every year. I admired the pilots who could commit themselves to years of extra work to get something free just once a year. I was of the opposite view and retired early on a very comfortable pension and spent time in the garden while they toiled for a "free and confirmed" ticket. Freedom, I suppose, is in the eye of the prisoner.

It hurts me to not get that free first class ticket every year because it's the sort of thing money can't buy.

Another commodity we can't buy, however rich we are, is time. As soon as I had enough money to live on I stopped working. Much better to be lounging in the garden looking up, than working and looking down however much you love your job and however much you're adding to the rainy day fund. Anyway it only rains when you're working, as soon as you retire it feels like non stop sunshine.

"This sunlight linked me through the ages to that past consciousness." R.J.

It was a mistake to think I could write about my experiences as a passenger. There's nothing I can think of as a passenger that that will have more interest to you than I have expressed so far. Anyway enjoying flying isn't how far, how often or how much you pay, it's how it makes you feel.

There are a couple of things to mention so that you don't think I'm totally unmoved by being a passenger. I crossed the Atlantic in 1960 in an old, oily piston engined DC6 which took a long time and was very noisy, but very exciting. We went via Iceland, Greenland and other places to get to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington DC. We came back on a military troop-carrying

DC6 as well! In tremendous contrast I returned to London from Cape Town in a very luxurious VC10 after my flight down through Africa in a light aircraft.

I should add that a couple of other passenger flights do come to mind. One was in a first World War fighter called a Vickers Gunbus and the other was when the Formula One world champion took me to Silverstone in his Beechcraft plane. I wandered around the pits, watched the race, he came fourth we jumped in and flew back to Fair Oaks.

In summary there hasn't been a flight that I haven't enjoyed and that's a lot of flights. Except the one where I was very airsick while trying to teach someone to do aerobatics.

PILOT WEATHER FOR PASSENGERS

“I’ve chased the shouting wind along,” J.M.

On sunny days, when I’m running one of my Fear of Flying courses, I like to tease fearful flyers by asking them, “Would today be a suitable day to fly?” If it’s sunny, they always say yes and if it’s raining they say no. But I can’t blame them. When I was learning to fly I initially thought that because it was raining my lesson would be cancelled.

Just because the sun is shining doesn’t mean it’s a good day for flying anymore than a foggy day means it’s a bad day for flying. Weather just doesn’t affect planes in the way that most people think it does. They think with their car driver’s head on. If it’s bad on the road it’s bad in the air. This is as preposterous as thinking that you could make water invisible. (see later)

Commercial flying is bound by very simple weather considerations. What’s the wind doing? What’s the visibility? What’s the cloud base? I need to know the surface pressure and I need accurate reports about the prevailing weather conditions to take off or land. And that’s it. If you plan a family day out next Thursday and the forecast is for a bright sunny day you’ll be disappointed if it’s raining when you get up that day. You’ll spend the morning worrying if the sun will ever come out and if the rain doesn’t stop until lunchtime, you’ll begin to think that the forecast was not very good. You’ll have made plans based on a forecast made a week before, about an entire day. By comparison the forecast I need as a pilot, is given to me an hour before I fly and will be updated every thirty minutes once I’m airborne, with the final update coming immediately before I land. I am always certain about my flying conditions, I know exactly what the weather is when I take off and when I land.

The wind and visibility would not seem to be a great deal of information for the important tasks of taking off or landing, but it's all a pilot needs in order to fly safely. Remember that the information is relevant to what the pilot needs at the time. Forecasts are used for the planning of flights. The rules state that, for every plane, every airfield and every airline and every combination of plane, airline, airfield and sometimes crew, that unless certain minimum weather conditions are met then the flight cannot take place. So, every commercial plane that takes off and lands is bound by these rules. A pilot may not change the rules or break them. If we can’t see far

enough along the runway to take off then, guess what? We can't take off. When landing if we can't see the runway at the prescribed height, guess what? We can't land.

Some days may be bumpier than others. Some days you may be able to see further from cruising height. Some days it may be cloudy, other days clear, but none of this matters if the weather doesn't meet the legal criteria at the departure or landing airfields. If the weather at the destination deteriorates during the flight and the plane cannot land at its planned destination, legally, there has to be another airfield available to land at. At that diversion airfield the weather has to be forecast as being suitable to land at the time the plane would expect to be landing there. These weather conditions are called minima. During a flight, the crew will check the weather at airports along their route to see if they are above or below their minima. In the event of needing to land urgently pilots will always know which airfields are suitable to land at or not. Even so, at the actual time of landing, even at a diversion airfield the pilots must ensure the weather minima are met. The same weather minima apply if an aircraft is using an airfield as a destination or as a diversion.

Though an anxious passenger probably finds this complicated, to the pilots, who use these rules everyday, they are familiar and simple to use.

In reality it's neither rocket weather nor plane surgery.

“It is easier to speak to those who have had similar experiences than to those who are as yet ignorant”. R.J.

HOW CAN I RELAX IF I'M STRESSED?

There is a very good joke about stress and planes. Why is it that in a library if someone were to scream everyone else would tell them to be quiet but on an aeroplane, if someone screams everyone else joins in?

Stress is the difference between a perceived task and your perceived ability to perform that task. If you don't have sufficient time or if you believe a task is beyond your capabilities you will be in a state of stress. A familiar stress is an examination or a driving test. You don't know until you see the questions or are given the route whether you'll be able to perform well or not. When you realise that you can answer the questions or that you can manage the route, the stress subsides. Washing-up is normally stress-free. To be asked to wash-up a fifty piece set of priceless, Ming dynasty tableware wouldn't be stress-free. You'd start imagining consequences that you wouldn't normally consider whilst washing-up. Being unfamiliar with a task brings its own stress.

The difference between being a fearful flyer or being unperturbed by flying, is a matter of awareness, knowledge, interpretation and stress. A fearful flyer will be aware of almost everything on a flight, relevant or otherwise. Your anxiety will have been triggered by fear which sends a shot of adrenaline into your system, this is a normal, physiological, defence mechanism. The adrenaline makes us alert, it quickens our breathing, it increases our heart rate and adds chemicals to the blood to enhance coagulation. At the same time our eyes dilate and all our senses heightened. These things enable us to run away from perceived danger, take up the fight or make us freeze.

When a fearful flyer boards a plane, they will have a body full of adrenaline whereas I'm pleased to say, and you'll be pleased to know, that I don't. Therefore fearful flyers respond to a stimulus more quickly than I do. It means that they will notice more and will be more 'on guard' than I will. A severe look on the cabin crew faces will mean nothing to me but, by contrast, a fearful flyer will see this as a sign of danger and worry. And so the cycle of fear and response will continue. The bang and clatter of things in a galley will arouse suspicions for some passengers but will just annoy me because it will stop me from sleeping.

There was some interesting research done on the effects of stress on human performance. The Yerkes-Dodson law is well known in flying. It shows that up to a point, our performance in most tasks improves as our stress levels increase. When stress levels get too high our performance

starts to deteriorate. For instance when we get up at the weekend there are usually only social pressures so, if we are late rising, it doesn't matter but during the week it's rather different. Most people have some pressure at their workplace so if we are late getting up on a day when we're to meet a very important client, stress will start building rapidly.

Imagine that we are going to give a presentation at an important morning meeting and we intend to set off early but we're ten minutes behind schedule before we even leave the house.

We get into the car and discover that our partner has not left enough fuel in the car for our journey — our stress level goes up a bit more. Then, we think that we have left out an important part of our presentation, our stress level goes up again. Then, we might wonder if there will be enough time to add it to our presentation. Each thing makes us more and more stressed and less and less able to deal with the problem. Stress consumes our spare capacity at an alarming rate, so fast in fact, that we're lucky to notice it happening. What would happen to your stress level if your boss phoned to tell you that the meeting had been postponed until the afternoon?

Just reading this you can almost feel the effect this would have on your stress levels. If you live in a constant state of high stress all the time, just one more worry means that you could lose control of the whole situation. Professionally, we would probably look for another job. Socially, we would probably do fewer things. Domestically, we'd change our lifestyle. When stress levels are too high an anxious flyer will choose not to fly. Once you have recognised the stressors, you can start to reduce your stress levels. Apart from in the most extreme medical circumstances there is always a way to reduce stress levels.

Stress is tricky. On the one hand it lets you know that you're stressed in order to protect you, on the other hand when your stress levels are very high, it denies you the insight to deal with it. The Yerkes-Dodson curve shows that too much stress becomes the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back."

The less stressed you can be before you fly, the greater your ability to deal with things that come along and worry you later. The more anxious you allow yourself to become at an airport or on a flight, the less capacity you'll have to deal with it. The more spare capacity you have, the easier it will be for you to find solutions to your stress.

When you experience something in flight that makes you anxious you shouldn't immediately react. You should wait and then, after waiting, think about your response. The human brain is very complicated and has developed in-line with our needs and our surroundings. The first ver-

sion of the human brain worked at an instinctive, reptilian level, it then developed to a mammalian level but neither of those changes compare with its development to arrive at our present human brain.

Of course, there are occasions when we revert to lower brain functions. The message of fear goes straight into our reptilian brain. It's this that makes us react immediately and instinctively when we're flying. It's much better to wait and resist the natural temptation to react immediately. Wait and think about what might have caused your response. That moment's delay will allow your brain to avoid reactive mode and put you into thinking mode and give you time to use one of your relaxation techniques to take control again. Avoid reacting with your reptilian brain.

There are three simple in-flight exercises which are worth learning about.

Here is a simple exercise to help with muscle relaxation. It can either relax you or send you to sleep. I find that it works for me when I'm unable to sleep. You start by tensing up the muscles in your toes, ankles, calf muscles, thighs and so on.

After you've progressively tensed all the muscles from your toes, continue up through your abdomen, up to your shoulders, down your arms to your fingertips and on up through your neck and face. Hold your body in tension for a few seconds and then gradually relax all the way down from your head, your shoulders, arms, abdomen, legs and, lastly, your feet. Repeat this exercise until you are asleep, relaxed or unstressed.

This exercise for breathing relaxation is even simpler. You inhale and exhale whilst counting. As you start to breathe in, count up to five. Hold your breath for a count of two and then exhale for a count of seven. I have seen diaphragmatic breathing described in a way that needs pages of detailed instruction but, in keeping with making things as simple as possible, those two sentences will have to do. I know that Einstein used to do this breathing exercise but used a much simpler explanation. (see later)

Timing these exercises is just as important. Do the breathing exercise when you are feeling most anxious. Therefore, you should plan to do your muscle relaxation just before this. For example, if you're anxious about taking off then you should do your muscle relaxation while the plane is taxiing and your breathing exercise during the take off.

A third relaxation exercise consists of thinking about a nice, peaceful or happy place to be. My 'happy/peaceful' place is in a hotel in Thailand, resting in a Jacuzzi looking beyond the end of the infinity pool and out towards the islands. Ideally your happy, peaceful place, should not include

people as they lend movement to the scene, which will disturb the tranquillity and peace you are trying to achieve.

When you have completed your muscle relaxation, reward yourself with your peaceful place. Remember to do these exercises in groups of three. Not three people! Muscle relaxation followed by your breathing routine and finally reward yourself with your peaceful place.

ONCE UPON A THURSDAY

I know that “Once upon a...” should be at the beginning of a book, but I’ve written the beginning already and I couldn’t fit it in, what with all that stuff I needed to explain. And because this isn’t a story that has a logical timeline I’ve decided to squeeze it in here. I don’t suppose that it’ll matter too much either if I insert the ending here either because it turned out that we all flew happily ever after...

The next bit of this tale is about getting my flying licences, and, though to me and my Mum, it’s a wonderfully inspiring story, to everyone else it’s less than ordinary. But if you think about the title and reason for this book it’s immediate inclusion is logical, if not vital. It’s an in-flight time waster.

We had always lived in, or near West Wickham in Kent. I passed the 11+ examination and went to the Beckenham and Penge Grammar School for boys. This was an important achievement if you were working class but, as I discovered later, would not get its alumni into the government, judiciary, the BBC or any other job where connections were essential.

I suppose the best things you learn at any school other than at public school is that ignorance is bliss, especially when you are the one kept in ignorance. At least it helps you to remember and keep your place. When I was almost sixteen, we moved to Shoreditch in London where the highlight of living there for three years was being stabbed in the stomach by some low life villain whose friend I had offended at an Air Cadet meeting. Mum insisted that I went to hospital. Dad insisted we went to the police station so another domestic row broke out. I should have gone to the Police and reported them all.

I was now occasionally attending Dame Alice Owen's Grammar School for Boys at the Angel Islington. It was Thursday morning and I hadn’t scored well in my inorganic chemistry test. I finally had to accept that I didn’t understand a single thing about Inorganic Chemistry. Lots of C’s and O’s and H’s and short lines between them with numbers up to six or so alongside them but I couldn’t make a connection which, they tell me, is the point.

By Thursday lunch time, or dinner time as it was known then, I had been offered another invitation to see the Headmaster to discuss my attitude, my miserable progress, and my doubtful future. I mentioned wanting to become a flying instructor. After a long deep breath, his considered opinion was that to be a flying instructor - a Good flying instructor - I needed a Good A-level

pass in Inorganic Chemistry plus one other Good pass in a Good subject. The Headmaster explained that he had a very Good friend who was a flying instructor who had assured him that Good passes were prerequisites for success in my chosen career as a “What was it you wanted to be, Godfrey?” From my point of view it was Good riddance to all of it.

I promised him that I would work harder than I had been working in previous school years, which wasn't a difficult promise. In retrospect though it was the first, but not the last time, that I set a low standard which I was unable or unwilling to achieve. Anyway, by Monday morning I'd got a job as a hospital porter (General Duties) at The London Chest Hospital, Bethnal Green.

Back at school there was a neat pile of text books on the desk where I normally sat. It was an undramatic end to a very ordinary - in fact, less than ordinary academic career. Mum and Dad were furious. But I could pay my way at home so I tried to sell them that idea. Dad believed that working people - 'the likes of us' - could only educate ourselves out of our environment and that my action was unforgivable. It took years to prove to them, that in my case at least, all's well that ends well.

As luck would have it, (cliché seven from the footballers' guide to writing an interesting autobiography) the position of hospital porter at a weekly wage of nine pounds, seventeen shillings and eight pence a week had been advertised the previous week in the Hackney Gazette. A quick hunt through the jobs had revealed this gem of employment, and subsequently given me the confidence to think about leaving school. I phoned on Saturday morning, was interviewed that afternoon and was offered a career on the spot.

TO BE A PILOT OR NOT TO BE A PORTER

While my pile of books remained motionless on my desk at school, on Monday morning I cycled quickly to The London Chest Hospital in Bethnal Green, London, and clocked on at 8 o'clock on the dot. My morning's training consisted of being shown the porters' room where porters relaxed between jobs, a tour of the wards and a cursory visit to a full house at the morgue. I wasn't exactly missing Inorganic Chemistry but, looking back just a few days did suggest that it had a small upside.

But Chemistry with a 'Good pass' wouldn't pay the flying lesson bills that were to come, but dead bodies and 'general duties' around the hospital, would. I committed myself to a career in hospital portering with an ambition to reach the top as soon as possible. Promotion to boiler room stoker would come just a year later.

How to clock in was the only bit of proper induction training I was given. Working people can't be trusted to turn up to work on time, unlike their white-collar counterparts. So, apart from the general humiliation of not working in clothes that you could wear socially, you also had the daily humiliation of getting a mechanically-produced, inky time-tick from 'teacher' or 'Big Brother' at the clocking-in machine, deliberately positioned at the entrance to the hospital in full view of other staff, patients, visitors and anyone else who enjoyed feeling superior.

The reason given for this, we were told was that any overtime could be paid the following week. It was not a question of trust or status, we were assured.

"We have no reason to mis-trust anyone." Really?

Although the rule, to clock on personally, was quite specific, the way around it was explained to me within minutes of my arrival. The 'arrangement' was that you could turn up twenty minutes late for your shift and find that you'd been be clocked in by the bloke already on duty. The return favour was that you'd clock in the next guy at the correct time and then hang on until he turned up. This way we all worked twenty minutes less each day.

You'd think there was a flaw in this somewhere. But the reasoning was that you were doing a mate a favour in your own time, he benefitted from turning up late in the hospital's time. Frankly, I'm amazed that the union didn't ask for twenty minutes extra pay each time we went home late, but that's the way it was. It was an extraordinary economic theory but the sort of thing that has been practised for years by governments wishing to improve GDP or productivity figures.

On the night shift, the telephonist would do the clocking-in and clocking-out. Because of different schedules for night porters and telephonists, the porter on duty could leave early and the next one could arrive late, each being clocked in or out by the telephone man, who also organised the work for the porters on a request basis from the wards. If our system was working properly and there was no porter on duty when needed, the telephonist would report that, "The porter is busy right now, I'll send him up when he's finished." It was a high-level mind game that we never lost. A city trader would call it "shorting."

During the day, three porters were on call and there were certain duties that were performed only when the head porter, who was a very nice man, had allocated the job. You weren't allowed to think ahead and prepare for any of the routine jobs. They *had* to be allocated. One regular duty was to clean the brass fittings on the main entrance door. The other, bearing in mind I started in the autumn, was to sweep up the leaves on the wide sweeping drive as the doctors swept past in their big motor cars. If you timed it right you could be out there for hours, lazily clearing up after the doctors. That wasn't the only time we cleared up after the doctors, but I'll tell you more about dead bodies later. On a nice day it was good work. When it rained, not such good work. Little did I know a lot of these 'transferable skills' as they'd be described nowadays, would never be transferred.

What I learned, within a very short time, was that things don't work without order. There needed to be an order of things, staff and tasks. The staff pecking order was: consultants, doctors, head porter, maintenance staff, nurses, technicians, administration staff, house governor, matron and, finally, porters. This order was devised and enforced by the party boss, the head porter. Years later I was to see a very similar structure in British Airways, but with a CEO replacing the head porter's terms of reference.

The application of these hierarchies was simple. The head porter would always and immediately attend to the needs of the two groups he perceived as being above him. Any other job had to wait - and wait they did - until he was ready to deploy his staff. He was the first example I saw of good leadership, political manoeuvring and sheer bloody-mindedness. As Hamlet said, "The insolence of office." His deputy George was very different, as we'll see in a while.

The task order was as rigid as the personal pecking order and organised by the same head of party. There was brass to shine, leaves to sweep, sputum pots to avoid dropping, oxygen bottles to refill, floors to wash, filth to clean up and dead bodies to move. Just as the hospital admin and

nursing staff had a hierarchy, within the porters' room there was a strict people and tasks order too. Jobs in order of pleasantness if you were at the top, or in order of unpleasantness if you were at the bottom. The intricacies of the system ensured that I always got the dirtiest and least popular jobs. I would always be working while the senior guys sat and read the Daily Mirror, had a smoke and chatted idly about the Royal Family, the government and football.

I had my next taste of a dead body on the Thursday of the first week. It was the day that Mum had made corned beef (no pickle) sandwiches for my lunch. So the morning was brass, sputum pots, a visit to the morgue, a demonstration of 'the stiff lift' and then forty-five minutes respite in Victoria Park enjoying cold meat. Thursdays have a special significance, since then. I was sixteen and I felt that I grew up a lot that morning.

After lunch, with the brass cleaned, leaves swept, no spilt sputum and oxygen replenished throughout the hospital, it was time for the 'bins'. Though I had passed English Language and English Literature during my school experience, I hadn't really had any practical experience of euphemisms. 'Bins' was the thrice daily job of collecting the leftover food from breakfast, lunch or dinner from the wards.

People in hospital, especially a heart and lung disease hospital, don't have big appetites. At the time the National Health Service was in surplus (either that or nobody cared what was spent) and gigantic portions were served to patients who could only just look at the stuff, let alone eat it. The meals would literally take their breath away which, in most cases, they were struggling for anyway. As a result there was waste on a colossal scale and therefore lots of work in transporting the slops from wards to a shed whence it was collected by pig farmers - a rare breed in Bethnal Green, I would have thought. But that's where it went, apparently.

This is probably the first time in fifty years that I've thought much about what we did. And not much of it is very pleasant, even as a memory. Okay, it's not hard like being in bomb disposal or helping people in war-torn parts of the world but it wasn't white-collar work and calling it blue-collar wouldn't be very accurate either.

The slop was collected in receptacles of increasing size. Each ward would scrape food from the plates into a small holder that was transferred to a medium-sized holder and so on until it ended up in the galvanised dustbin that we, the porters, carried on our backs, down the stairs, because the stink was too much for the lifts. (a ruling made by someone important in admin.)

Eventually each bin was transported to the back of the hospital and into the shed where we tipped it out, mainly into another larger bin but sometimes inadvertently on to the ground. The remaining slime in the bins was removed by a hose pipe and a little horse play. Disgusting, but a pleasant break from brass, leaves, pots, general duties and dead bodies.

Little did I know (another popular phrase that good authors avoid) that it was here that I would learn the basics of Coriolis effect, and gyroscopic precession before understanding it more fully under Navigation and Meteorology. (A 'Good' pass was achieved three years later in the commercial pilot's examination.)

Fred, had been a junior porter since he was very young, and though his life was almost intolerable, he had a great sense of fun. He was kind, generous and thoughtful. People like him, but with more intelligence and networking opportunities would have been made a Saint or given a gong. Alas, Fred was just Fred, his only child, a daughter, suffered from all manner of developmental problems and lived in a home which he and his lovely wife could only afford to visit fortnightly, but with overtime might make be able to make an extra visit in between. His weekend treat was a bag of bull's eye sweets that he and his wife would enjoy while watching the telly. He rolled the meanest of fags and I think, if his arthritic hands could have wrapped a fag paper around a single strand of tobacco he would have done so. Not because he was mean... he was poor.

Back to the pig swill and half washed bins. Fred discovered that with the right mixture of water and food, and a rapid, rotating motion of a floor mop he could get the semi-liquid contents of the bin spinning fast enough for it to rise up the sides and expose the bottom of the bin. On removing his mop, he'd chuckle at the apparent magic of this phenomenon. I have never seen anyone that happy or content in all my working life.

But, if you knocked the bin over, accidentally or otherwise, while this circulation was going on, the bin would fizzle around on the ground like an earthbound firework spilling its filth anywhere and everywhere. Looking back on it I suppose it was a highlight of a pretty mundane day. The main thing was that Fred loved it and, in truth, so did I.

Now for the Coriolis effect and gyroscopic precession that I learned about with the bins. Well, the truth is that Fred wouldn't have wanted me to spoil your fun reading this book by explaining the technicalities, except to say that gyroscopic precession is that funny force that you get with a spinning bike wheel when you hold the axle and try to turn it. It's a bit like that but only a little bit.

I think any reasonable and independent observer would agree that pig-swill spinning was educational, time-wasting, and utterly disgusting. It's probably the sort of thing that they do at Eton College and other public schools and call "super fun." Everything else we did as porters could be under the heading of clearing up and cleaning up other peoples' muck, from bloodstained floors to the 'stained' ceilings and walls in the hospital toilets. (I don't know, you tell me!) However, for the dramatic climax of life as a hospital porter I have saved what I see as the best bit until the next chapter. Without these foregoing descriptions of our serious dedication to porters' work, the following accounts of a porter's career would seem improbable.

"The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendour of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time." R.J.

LOWERING THE DEAD

The London Chest Hospital was built between 1851 and 1855, on the grounds of Bishop Bonner's palace. His ghost haunted the building and drunken sightings were reported regularly. The mortuary of the London Chest Hospital was located in the basement at the northern end of the hospital block. It was conveniently off site and out of sight of the longer-living customers, as patients are now called.

Most fair-minded people would consider it right and proper for a hearse to be able to arrive, load and depart discreetly. Outside the mortuary there was a big enough manoeuvring area for the hearse drivers to reverse in so that the open door of their vehicle would meet the doors of the chapel whereupon the departed and departing 'customer' could be re-positioned, in solemn and private dignity, to take his or her penultimate journey. Private entrance gates were provided to the mortuary area to facilitate this transfer. Nice enough gates but not Pearly. More preparatory. It was all very practical and speedy but executed in very good taste.

The stone steps down to the basement were original and the only modification to this genuinely Victorian place was that gaslight and footpads had been replaced by dim, electric light bulbs and dimmer middle management. It was eerie, damp, cold and smelly. Not the smell of death but of s, cleaners and preservatives that disguised the smell of death and decay that would have otherwise issued. There was a strict ban on smoking, presumably because of all the alcohol and preservatives that were liberally hosed over bodies and building, and of course, we didn't have a certificate to do unplanned cremations.

After leaving the life supporting environment of the ward, ex-customers were escorted to the mortuary, where they could patiently and quietly await their next taxi ride. The morgue was accessed by a manually operated lift. A continuous rope was connected to a large pulley wheel up in the roof space, which when pulled, moved the 'Stiff Lift', as it was referred to, in one direction or the other. The lift access doors were badly fitting 19th Century wooden bi-folds, and on each floor a flimsy, ill-fitting wooden bar prevented the doors opening accidentally. With the doors open it was possible to fall from the top of the five storey building on to the top of the lift cage wherever it was below you, or to the ground. There were no doors on the actual lift itself, so if you fell from there it was a slightly safer, one floor fall to the next lower landing. It was despair-

ing, dark and deadly. It was the most unpleasant place I've ever been. (In which case, I admit I've had an easy ride through life.)

Therefore it was always a case of lowering the dead as they came from wards on upper floors to the morgue in the basement. Raising the dead was above our pay grade.

ONE

Customers who had, passed on, deceased, departed or, like Monty Python's parrot, 'gone to meet its maker' were all referred to as 'One'.

"There's 'One' on Lewis Ward."

"There's 'One' on the slab they're coming for."

"There's a moving 'One' in the fridge."

Not literally moving, but that 'One' was to be moved to another location.

Sometimes, but worse, to my young mind, was the pre-emptive strike. An action initiated by the words, "There's 'One' expected on Lewis ward later." It was a point of good manners and principle not to arrive early on these occasions. In all the years I was at the hospital I'm pleased to say that I never saw the morgue trolley waiting expectantly outside a ward or by a bed.

With 'One' to deal with there was always a scramble in the porter's room to busy oneself with an inconsequential or uncompleted task or to be out of eyeshot when the head porter arrived. More often than not, the message with the word 'One' in was delivered personally by the head porter. So when the door opened and the boss appeared we knew there was 'One' on the cards, in the offing or a dead certainty. The first 'One' I want to tell you about, concerns the event that occurred just before evening visiting, sometime in 1960. In those days friends and relatives were restricted to the very limited visiting hours of 7.30 p.m. and 8.p.m. I shall describe what happened by using the modern Hollywood timeline technique, but without the sound of a clickety-clacking typewriter. All times are p.m. - postmeridian, though of course the central character in this moving story is very postmortem

Note: Since 1957 someone in admin had forbidden the use of the electrically powered public lift for, with or by dead people. It proclaimed that: All qualifying bodies would always travel on the 'Stiff Lift'. Naturally there were times when this restriction was inconvenient. This is, dare I say, one such occasion.

7:18. 'One' was notified to the Porter's room

7:20 Porter devises plan: Get to the ward. Collect body on trolley. Cover it with the crucifix embroidered blue cloth. Summon electrically powered public lift. Insert body. Close doors. Run down to basement. Summon lift. Get body out and off to the mortuary.

7:27 Unaccompanied, but draped 'One' wheeled into electrically powered public lift.
7:28 Porter scampers down three floors to the basement to call same lift.
7:29 Hospital visitors admitted, in error, one minute early.
7:30 Unknown member of public calls electrically powered lift.
7:31 Lift with 'One' arrives at public level.
7:31 Lift door opened. 'One' remains motionless. Public wonder, realise and react.
7:32 Porter arrives in basement and unsuccessfully calls lift.
7:32.1 Startled member of the public closes lift door.
7:32.2 Unknown person (probably staff) calls lift on intermediate floor.
7:33 Porter leaves basement to find lift.
7:33 Until 07:42 Lift operates between floors as requested and declined, by staff, public and well wishers.
07:42 Lift stops.
07:42 Lift, body and porter re-united. Lift, body and porter descend to basement.
Normal service resumes.

* * *

The lift containing an unaccompanied dead body haunted the lift shaft for approximately fifteen minutes. Perhaps the only redeeming feature was that it might have been useful preparation for the journey to an afterlife, in either direction, but I'm only guessing because it wasn't part of the Hospital's mission statement at the time.

'Bishop Bonner in lift?' was the headline followed by a nice little front page piece in the Hackney Gazette by a young local reporter. An internal enquiry was unable to ascertain either the truth or a plausible explanation.

But as Hamlet predicted, "*That undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.*"

On this occasion he was lucky to get there at all, let alone return.

DEAD MAN WALKING (the rock and boulders incident)

(Rock and boulders is London cockney-rhyming slang for shoulders.)

'One' occurs, one might assume at a time inconvenient for many, especially the 'One' concerned. Nowhere was this more true (another excellent example of phrases to be avoided by a good author) than the day of the outpatients clinic. Thursdays, nine thirty a.m. to four thirty p.m. On the day in question (the clichés are coming thick and fast now) all seemed normal. George, the deputy head porter and I were working together. In the absence of the regular head honcho, George found himself in charge. Weighed down by the responsibility, his decision making fell below the standard required. 'One' occurred very unexpectedly during an otherwise routine examination by a doctor in one of the 'not so private' outpatient consulting rooms. For those familiar with pressure in the health service now, the following actions would not come as much of a shock but for the time, even I am prepared to admit it was radical.

Plan A. George reasoned like this: the reputation of the hospital would be diminished if a trolley, complete with its dark blue shroud emblazoned with a golden crucifix, were to be pushed empty into a consulting room but full upon exiting. There was a brief discussion about a body double (in the literal sense of the word) being used. This double would make way for the 'One' in the consulting room and would subsequently make a live exit via a window or similar while the actual body would replace the double. Someone questioned why a full trolley would be wheeled into a consulting room and then out again without good cause. I don't think George could really counter that one so he agreed that Plan B would be better.

And that is how it came to pass, the 'One' was carried out, feet dragging across the ground, supported on the one side by an arm around George's shoulders and its other arm around mine. Eyes closed, mouth ajar, head to one side, slightly forward and relatively free hanging. We each held on to his arms like grim death, and walked him out of the Department.

And that, by most standards of normal behaviour, would have been that. The trouble with George was that, like Fred, it's unlikely that he would have qualified for Mensa. This is not a judgement but a statement with which they both would have agreed, if they'd known what Mensa was. But let me explain why I think that most people would have suspected something very odd about someone being 'spirited away' from a consulting room in this way. First, in true British style, I think most observers would have been happy to ignore what they thought they saw and

continued minding their own business, just wondering if their appointment would be on time. But when George held a conversation with the corpse along the lines that, “When we get you somewhere else you’ll be feeling a lot better”, I thought he was overdoing it. At least George didn’t suggest that I took on the role of a ventriloquist and answer on the bloke’s behalf.

Maybe he did and maybe I did but whatever happened, I’ve buried it in my subconscious. I have never knowingly spoken on behalf of the dead.

I probably don’t need to point it out but I must: we were in a hospital, a place stuffed full of people qualified to resuscitate the dead and the nearly dead and yet, this important task had, to the eye of the patient observer, been delegated to two of the portering staff? But what better place to try to revive someone than in a consulting room with a Doctor present? I couldn’t justify it then, when I didn’t care. How can I justify it now? It has been a lifelong, or should that be lifeless, burden to carry on my shoulders.

I’d love to end the story by saying that as we turned right at the end of the corridor that there was a large bit of black and yellow signage on the wall saying “To the mortuary” but there wasn’t, so maybe we got away with it.

There was a rule that if we took case notes or X-rays to our sister hospital The Brompton, in West London we had to be in our hospital porter’s uniform. The uniform was a brown, badge-less warehouseman’s coat. We all conformed and did so without question. Maybe it is that like in the SAS or the Seals? Maybe our unquestioning ability to comply with orders and instructions made the porters at The London Chest Hospital, Bethnal Green the ruthlessly efficient team that we were.

Sadly I have to say that the hospital is now closed. Our motto could have been influential elsewhere “Portant mortui.” (Carry the dead.)

Things happened when I was promoted to boiler-man/stoker but are insignificant compared to portering. One night I fell asleep having worked all day at another job. The boiler over-pressured and set off warning sirens throughout the hospital. Wards either ran out of steam and hot water, or had a surplus. I was in a state of panic so I shut the whole thing down. The chief engineer, who was dragged from his bed twenty miles away, arrived in a good mood I must say. It took eight hours to get the hospital going again. Fortunately, it wasn’t anything serious.

During my three years and more at the hospital I had learned to fly and gained enough flying experience to qualify as a flying instructor. Even in a modest moment, should I ever suffer one, I couldn't ever describe those years as being easy. It was a lot of overtime, a lot of work, a lot of walking, waiting and lonely learning. Everything went into flying, but it was worth it.

With my new qualifications I was able to leave soon after the boiler house event, thus maintaining a 'Good' medical C.V. if I had ever needed to change careers.

"If you argue yourself into the belief that you cannot walk to a place, you cannot walk there; but if you start, you can walk there easily." R.J.

A YOUNG INSTRUCTOR

The day after I had taken my flying instructor's test, armed with my licence, the ink hardly dry on the endorsement to teach, I set off for the club where I had got my private pilots licence. The chief instructor was in and I asked him if I could have a job. He said yes and I started that afternoon. I was lucky. In those days you might have waited months for a job, but an instructor had just left to join an airline and there was a vacancy. We fought hard over the pay and conditions. The boss said, "It's ten pounds a week and ten bob an hour. Mondays off." And I said, "Thank you, Sir" in my best negotiating voice. In truth I would have been happy to do it without pay, seven days a week.

Imagine, all that work and sacrifice to pay for flying lessons and then getting a job where I was being paid to do the thing I loved. It's the stuff of dreams. Although now it has a proper runway, it was then just a fifty acre grass field about ten miles from Heathrow. The airfield was an old, wartime, training field and the boss, Wing Commander Cyril Arthur, had stayed on after the war. He was wise enough to tap into my enthusiasm. I got the jobs in the cold, open-seater Tiger Moth while he sat in an enclosed, warm and heater equipped Piper plane.

It also meant that for a while I got the low ability customers, who had just about managed to learn to fly on a simple plane and perversely wanted to improve their skills by flying a more difficult plane with a tail wheel. Cyril argued that, despite their inability to fly an easy plane, a customer had every right to enhance his incompetence on any plane of their choosing and, at ten bob an hour (50p), what on earth was I doing arguing about it?

Landing a plane with a tail wheel or skid means having to land the plane in the same nose high position as it has when it's parked on the ground. Considering you can't see anything over the nose while you taxi, while you take off or as you land, it was a tricky task for a pilot low on experience, skill and judgement. By contrast, for an instructor low on experience but with some skill and judgement it was character building. I spent that winter, warm on the inside and cold on the outside, and in many ways not being able to see where I was going. But at least I was flying and reducing my considerable debts.

I loved instructing and I can still remember my favourite students, the outstanding students, and the ones whose skills or lack-of-skills still haunt me. There was Mr K who got his foot stuck

in the rudder bar, despite explicit and detailed explanations from me about the dangers of getting his heels stuck in the metal plate that protects the cockpit floor.

Starting a take off in one direction and actually getting airborne in a direction nearly ninety degrees to it, is an undeniable learning curve however you look at it. Perhaps my student went on to suggest circular runways. Instructing gave me great confidence in handling a plane, and variable direction take offs like that became a regular a feature of my life at the club. With some students I felt lucky to be anywhere at all on the airfield during take off let alone landing.

All airfields have what is called a local flying area. It's a place designated for club pilots to fly in. It's large enough to fly safely without getting in the way of other aircraft and minimises the noise nuisance for the people living nearer the airfield. If you know south England and the Guildford area in particular, this is where we flew. The ponds at Frensham were a good landmark and the ridge of high ground known as the Hogs Back was a nice straight line for practicing flying straight and for aerobatics. When upside down you could look up and see the road and how likely you were to come out of your manoeuvre in the right direction. The Cathedral was another good aiming point and nearby there were two clearly visible large roundabouts and a road junction.

Aerobatics: Looping is the flying of a circle upwards, It's not called looping the loop, well it is, but not by pilots. It's called a loop. A roll is when the plane stays level but lowers its wing as in a turn but continues going all the way round. But we don't call it rolling the roll. It's just called a roll. Sometimes it's a slow roll when executed slowly ... which is difficult or it's called a barrel roll when you go up and round and over which is much easier to do. A stall turn is climbing almost vertically upwards and as the plane slows at the top of its climb, to apply the controls so that the nose goes sideways and comes around to a downward vertical position. A good aerobatic pilot can combine parts of each these manoeuvres and produce some very graceful or very spectacular displays. That's aerobatics and don't let anyone make it more complicated than that for you.

* * *

A little later in my career, I was flying in the local flying area and saw another club aeroplane following the Hogs Back Road. I was in a highly aerobatic aircraft and thought that it would be good fun to come up behind this aircraft and fly a corkscrew (barrel roll) around it. In my irresponsibil-

ity I thought that it would be rather spectacular from the other pilot's point of view to see my plane upside down, above and in front of it.

Later, I discovered that it was my boss in the other plane who later reprimanded me with a very short statement, "If I ever see you do that again you won't have a job here or anywhere that I have influence." He deducted my flying pay for the day, and nothing more was ever said about it. To have subsequently disrespected his judgement would have been unthinkable. If only life could be like that now: mis-behaviour, correction, respect and understanding.

Wing Commander Cyril Arthur had been a pilot in the First World War, had suffered over twenty engine failures and had survived two midair collisions, albeit at a fairly low level, but he had nevertheless survived the impact and the fall. He was a skilled pilot, a good teacher and, fortunately, recognised that young people, including pilots, occasionally do brainless things. He was influential in my discipline as an instructor and as a human being.

I taught some interesting people to fly. The very, very rich ones were always a delight. It didn't matter how bad they were, they could just keep spending, and I could keep earning until they were good enough. Many *did* keep spending and some, despite their wealth, still weren't rich enough. The boss had his pick of the middle-aged, good-looking lady learners. I was left with whoever he didn't fancy.

What I never understood about learner pilots was their inability to dress for the occasion. If they played golf they'd come dressed in their golfing clothes, if they were motor racing people they came in their racing overalls and jockeys arrived ready to ride the favourite at Epsom. Does this mean that they went about their day jobs in their flying helmets? I never taught anyone who was a deep sea diver but maybe we were too far from the sea.

* * *

One motor racing chap I taught had won the Le Mans twenty four hour race. And to describe him as utterly brilliant and a natural pilot would almost be defaming him. The amount of instruction I had to give him was minimal, he listened carefully did exactly as I asked without unnecessary questioning and generally, worked most things out for himself. Unlike all other learner pilots, he had to do this on an advanced two engined plane.

His sponsor's insurers wouldn't allow him to fly in a single engined plane, because they considered it dangerous. Forgive me for asking ... but two hundred mph along the Mulsanne straight, at night, in the rain is safe? And it's not just at two hundred mph, it's with someone trying to overtake you whilst you are trying to overtake someone else. He was a charming, talented and modest man. Unlike me he was difficult to insure as a pilot though.

BOLD PILOTS

Apart from teaching there were a few administrative jobs for a junior instructor. One job that fell between admin and teaching was the responsibility of 'checking out' pilots on different aircraft. At a flying club where there are different types of planes, having a pilot's licence didn't mean that you could fly any plane that a club operated. You needed to be familiar with how it flew and where the various controls were, and how they worked. It normally took about an hour's flying to become competent on an unfamiliar plane. With experience on a few types under your belt just a ten minute flight around the airfield would normally be enough. One experienced pilot I checked out was Mr Thomas Bindermann.

His story wasn't boring, but it wasn't spectacular either. In many ways it was very ordinary and that's why in the end it turned out to be so extraordinary. This is my side of his story.

It all started on a very ordinary autumnal morning in 1964, Mr Thomas Bindermann arrived at the flying club. It was a quiet day so I was able to entertain him in idle chat for longer than usual. I make a point of this because for the whole twenty minutes or so that he and I were making small talk and exchanging pleasantries, his wife stood, out of view, immediately behind him. When she did speak, it was just her head that appeared. Her body stayed hidden from view. There was no doubt in my mind that she was loyal to, but distant from her husband. However odd her behaviour seemed then, it was to be the least strange thing about this story.

During our chat, Mr B announced that he had been a jet fighter pilot in the Canadian Air Force. He wanted to be checked out to fly one of our small, four-seater, tail wheeled planes so that he could fly "somewhere." Details were sparse but on the information he'd given me and the fact that he had a valid licence to fly, I was happy to fly with him to see if his skill met the club's requirements to hire a plane from us.

The plane we flew was of British manufacture but, unusually it was fitted with an American engine. During the preparation for our flight, I briefed him carefully, telling him that, during the take off, the plane would swing to the left rather than the right which was what he might otherwise expect. This was because of the corkscrew effect of the propeller on the air. The effect is increased when the pilot raises the tail during the take off. (This is called gyroscopic precession.

For pilots reading this I'll add asymmetric blade effect and torque effect too.) Mr Binderman was unaware of at least three of these important features of tail draggers and probably all four.

The controls of any plane are simple. There's the left/right movement of the control stick or wheel which, unsurprisingly, makes the plane tilt and turn to the left or right. There's a forward and back movement of the control to raise or lower the nose. And, finally, operated by the pilots feet, is the rudder control. The rudder moves the nose from side to side and is used to prevent the plane from slipping sideways when banked. Correct use of this control is why your food tray doesn't slide off your table when turning in a big plane. It's also used for keeping the plane straight when going along the runway.

Unfortunately, these basic principles seemed to elude Mr B. On his first take off and to my dismay and confusion, he tried to keep the plane pointing along the runway using the wrong control and so failed the basic requirement staying on the runway.

I reminded Mr B that, "This plane swings the other way, remember?"

Of course if you had no idea how to keep the plane straight anyway, being told this is meaningless. I was still a new instructor, still low on experience but learning much faster now.

A light aircraft doesn't need much space to get airborne and on this occasion we managed to get airborne in a direction only thirty degrees to the grass runway. Was my learning curve getting better I wondered?

After many, but only marginally better attempts, I eventually cleared Mr B to fly solo and instructed him to fly a few circuits of the airfield to practice both taking off and landing. Subsequently he was, cleared to take passengers with him. Mrs B never flew with him. A month later, I arrived at work to discover that Mr B had taken the same plane to Bristol with another pilot. The next day our plane was returned by a pilot unknown to anyone at the club. Insurance, club rules, licence validity all seemed not to matter. But as far as safety concerns went, this one didn't go very far anyway.

Some hours later, and now in very poor visibility, Mr B landed in an old pre-war, two-engined plane. I and two other club instructors watched him park and jump out. He came over to us.

"I need someone to teach me how to fly my new plane please."

Teach him how to fly a plane which he'd *just flown* from the airport at Bristol? A short flight of about a hundred miles, admittedly, but enough to endanger himself and many others. That was apart from the illegality of the flight.

The most senior instructor available took Mr B for a lesson in his new plane and returned with the verdict that he was probably the most incompetent person he'd ever flown with. A story in itself.

It's enough to say that, many, many flying hours later, Mr B had an endorsement on his licence to allow him to fly a two-engined aircraft and, from that point on, his flights were legal. The world hadn't been saved but neither was it being threatened quite so severely, things were improving slightly.

Immediately he had his new licence Mr B declared his intention of flying his plane across the Atlantic. A few days later he proudly showed us his modified fuel system which consisted of a fuel tank strapped across the rear seats and operated by a hand pump from the pilots seat.

Mr B was a smoker. It would have been unwise to have a naked light within fifty yards of his modified plane but Mr B dismissed the problem of smoking so close to his temporary tank with a shrug. The extra fuel capacity would allow him to fly from Scotland to Iceland and thence to Greenland and or Nova Scotia, he told us, puffing away on a fag. The club instructors were puzzled at the statement of flying to Greenland or to Nova Scotia, because reaching the first wouldn't guarantee reaching the second. From a navigational point of view, in his direction of travel, you couldn't overfly one and continue to the other. He needed to make a choice of destination before take off, or very soon after. However, it was a point that we allowed to pass without comment, but with a metaphorically raised-eyebrow or two.

The pilots' briefing room at the flying club was large enough to contain two large plotting tables. Each about eight feet square and about six feet apart. It was here that trainee pilots would lay out their maps to plot flights to Farnham some thirty miles distant or as far as the coast nearly sixty miles away. Having two tables meant that two, three or four pilots could easily prepare their flights at the same time.

I arrived early one morning to find Mr B kneeling at eye level at one table, while his wife followed his instructions to move a map on the other. I noticed that that he had, on his table, a map of Scotland and a bit of the North Atlantic, and another map with Iceland and assorted bits of the Atlantic on the other table. With the maps on different tables he was aligning them so that he could draw his track line (the intended route) from and off one, and on to the other, thence to his destination in Iceland. We normally measure direction with single degree accuracy for all flights. We make allowances for flat maps representing a curved planet by applying factors and adjust-

ments. What allowances he had made for the maps being the wrong distance apart and, therefore, not being in the right place geographically, only his creator knew. We didn't.

Attempting to fly his aircraft across the Atlantic with this sort of planning seemed outrageous. The last I saw of Mr Bindermann and his plane was as it took off and disappeared into the late autumn haze, south towards Guildford, and presumably sometime after that he turned right.

Later reports confirmed that Mr B had reached Iceland. With his extra fuel he might just have made his next stop but it seems that he took off from Reykjavik and flew around for about an hour checking the weather. Without re-fuelling, he set off when, presumably, he saw a break in the weather. This hour's worth of fuel usage was to be his downfall.

Just over a week later, when the bad weather had cleared, the wreckage of his plane was found about sixty miles from his destination. There was no Mr B on board.

I discovered recently this article from a local newspaper, The Telegram: July 28th 2014

* * *

It is now nearly fifty years since Bindermann ditched his twin-engine plane in the Labrador hinterland, walked away from it and disappeared.

At thirty-three, Bindermann was youthful and likely impatient. The plane was down; it was August; by foot, Goose Bay would be a long way off, but an achievable goal nevertheless. He was sixty miles southeast of the airport town.

Bindermann's up-ended Gemini was found five days after he reported he was crash-landing because of fuel shortage, but, except for cigarette butts and footprints at the scene, no more was found of Bindermann who was flying home from a combination business and holiday trip to Britain.

I do not know whether anything more was ever heard or found of Bindermann. Nor have I learned what became of the plane — whether it was brought out or left there to deteriorate. Logically, there is more to the story.

To which I shall add, before or after the crash?

DOGS AND LEARNER PILOTS

Mr JW was a precise man and bordering on the debonair. His lapdog was groomed to a similar standard. His dog hadn't mastered language which was surprising because every communication I had with Mr JW was handled through the dog. Not only did Mr JW want to learn to fly but so did the dog. "Don't you?" The dog, whose name I always refused to use, thought it was a nice day to have a flying lesson so he ate his breakfast quickly and they drove to the club. "Didn't we?"

Whether the dog actually drove to the club or not I'm not sure but, looking back, I should have checked with it or its owner. "Shouldn't I?"

The three of us agreed that today would be an excellent day for a trial lesson and we set a time to meet later. Relations deteriorated slightly, when Mr JW realised that I was serious when I said the dog couldn't come up with us, but nothing that affected the teacher/student/customer relationship. Subsequently, a dog minder was brought along to entertain and, presumably, talk to the dog while Mr JW and I were airborne.

In order to get a private pilot's licence you have to learn to control the plane, to fly solo around the airfield, and to learn how to perform emergency or precautionary landings in a field, in case of bad weather or total engine failure. A student pilot would make accompanied, cross-country flights prior to flying them solo when the required standard of navigation was reached. The next step would be for the student to fly another solo cross-country flight and make landings at nominated airfields and return. A final test of competence in general handling was all that remained for a student pilot to qualify for a licence.

Mr JW had been a good and reliable student with only the occasional growling reference to not being allowed to bring the dog with him. Maybe the dog understood better than Mr JW. I should have asked it. "Shouldn't I?"

He reached the required standards and, when he was ready, the dog and I authorised him for a short cross-country flight to a town about twenty-five miles to the South, and directly back, ideally without landing. Estimated flight time was about an hour.

Thirty-five minutes after he took off the telephone rang and, although it was unusual to hear from a student who wasn't supposed to be making an away landing, with Mr JW nothing ever surprised me.

"It's John here. I've had to land in a field."

“OK John, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine thank you (woof woof) I’ve landed because I’m lost. The farmer whose field I’m in says I’m about five miles north of Guildford.”

“How’s the plane?”

“It’s fine.”

“Good. How big’s the field?”

“It’s OK-ish.” (woof)

“Mr JW, can I hear a dog?”

“No.”

(woof woof)

“Mr JW, I can hear a dog... is it yours?”

“Er, no. Yes.”

“Why is the dog there?”

“I brought him along.”

“Mr JW, I said no dogs when we fly.”

“I’m on my own now so I thought there’d be space. Now that I know where I am shall I fly back?”

“NO. I will come and collect the plane as soon as I can. Stay and look after the plane and I’ll be with you as soon as possible.”

“I need to feed Johanne (the dog) he always likes to eat after he’s done his toilet.”

“Has he messed in the plane, Mr JW?”

“Obviously not! That’s actually why I landed - because he needed to,” and, no doubt out of earshot said, “Didn’t you?”

He hung up and, presumably, went home. He sent a cheque for the flight and we never saw him again. Probably because I didn’t ask how Johanne was feeling. Not very exciting but very strange except, I suppose, to dog lovers. “Isn’t it?”

OLD PILOTS (PART TWO)

Mr and Mrs F were extremely wealthy and in their early 60's but behaved as if they were in their late 90's. At the weekends they came for flying lessons together and during the week she came on her own. However Mr F still thought it proper and appropriate that he flew solo before his wife did, despite the fact that she was ready to fly solo weeks before her husband. Nevertheless I managed to find all sorts of excuses to meet his requests and thus maintain the respectability of this Jane Austen-modelled marriage.

She often got lost... One day she headed off towards Heathrow Airport. Fortunately, I was with another student and saw her take off and turn left instead of right. I decided to follow her. I flew alongside her, and while she wiggled and waved, I grimaced and gesticulated. (If emoticons had been around at the time I think I'd have been the angry, red-faced one, and she'd have been the yellow smiley one wearing dark glasses.) Meanwhile, I was speaking to London air-traffic control, explaining what was going on, while trying to shepherd her away from Heathrow's air-space.

"It was a such lovely view," she said later. It was, but unfortunately not one that she was entitled to.

Between them they spent the equivalent of four years of my wages in less than six months. They both eventually qualified for their private pilot's licences and threw a party to celebrate their achievements. I was the guest of honour and, during the proceedings, with a great flourish, a short tribute to me and a long tribute to themselves, they presented me with a gift for all my efforts - an envelope with "a little something by way of thanks."

They were from the stockbroking classes where there was a lot of decorum, and a lot of money. I was towards the other end of the social spectrum where I hope we showed respect and good manners but without so much money. After receiving the 'little something' my personal decorum was being stretched. I needed to know how much was in the envelope. Surely it would make a substantial contribution to paying off my debts?

Disappointment is a thing that working class kids get used to so it didn't hurt as much as it might have done when I discovered that the cheque barely covered the cost of my petrol to get to their palatial home. On a more generous note, they weren't obliged to give me anything at all and

at least they *did* do what almost everyone else didn't. Except the CEO of Audi who gave me a brand new car for half price, and a chap who gave me a beautifully engraved watch.

YOUNG PILOTS LIKE ME

When I was, a fairly young, twenty-three year old instructor one chap I was teaching, was a racing driver. He was two years older than me and reasonably well off. After qualifying for his licence, bought his own plane. Where most well off private pilots usually buy a single-engined plane this guy was rich enough to buy a high tech twin-engine plane. This didn't stop him being a really nice and talented guy, why should it?

The main reason for the trip was that he wanted to fly to South Africa to take part in the Kyalami Grand Prix. He asked me to accompany him on the flight which I was more than keen to do. He had the aircraft equipped with a long-range radio which was supposed to help us remain in contact with the ground over the more remote parts of Africa. It was a somewhat old-fashioned piece of equipment which trailed a long aerial from the aircraft by a fishing reel mechanism in the cockpit. I can't recall whether we were successful or not in making contact with anyone during the flight, but at least it gave us peace of mind.

The most significant part of our adventure was when I was expecting my boss to brief me on the dangers of flying over hostile terrain and through the weather that we were likely to encounter at low-level around the equator. All he said was, "Watch all the points and don't forget the basics." Bearing in mind the furthest I had flown previously was to Abbeville in France, a distance of about hundred and fifty miles, and now I was going on a flight of over seven thousand miles. It confirmed that he was a man of few words.

We set off for South Africa in time to arrive for Christmas or New Year's Day, I can't remember. The journey there was relatively drama free except for almost running out of fuel over Libya. We had set off for Alexandria which un-notified, suddenly closed at sunset. By then we had insufficient fuel to return to our point of departure, Benghazi. The Royal Air Force at Mersah Matruh fortunately accommodated us in our last few moments of need. After that we flew down Africa, via Luxor, Khartoum, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, dar es Salaam, Blantyre, Johannesburg and probably some other places that I've long forgotten about.

But I haven't forgotten about the flight between Khartoum and Addis Ababa where we were uncertain of our position for over two hours. We had failed to pick up transmissions from a radio beacon at Debra Marcos which was our only navigational aid on that six hundred mile section of the route. And we'd had no radio contact for at least three hours. It wasn't the sort of place to

make an emergency landing if you got lost. There were many stories of what was likely to happen to a wandering white man if discovered by indigenous tribes, and the benefits of having a “chit” with him. True or not, it was sufficient to make a young man concentrate on finding the destination to keep his manliness.

We flew on from Addis with increasingly difficult diplomatic clearances and unfamiliar weather but with patience and care we made our way down to the Cape. Without doubt, the best part of the flight was to chase the Zambezi River at treetop height to about a hundred and fifty miles north of Beira. We were dodging the intense rain showers, inside which the visibility would have been almost zero, and navigated in the bright clear spaces between them. Now that we have 24/7 television there’s bound to be a documentary of someone cutting their way through some untrodden jungle any time you turn it on, so my experience would be unremarkable by modern standards. But to thunder, at very low altitude over lots of tiny jungle villages in 1966 was eye opening. When we reached Cape Town my mate stayed with friends and I went home on a very luxurious BOAC VC10 aircraft. My friend paid my fare with a personal cheque on the spot and I paid him back over nine months.

CONFESSIONS OF A PILOT

One day a chap came into the aero club asking about Joy Flights or, as they're called now, Flight Experiences. I said that we did them and how could I help him? He said he was a photographer and he would like to fly around Guildford Cathedral

We looked at a couple of aircraft before he decided on a particularly old one. For the enthusiasts among you, it was an Auster. A simple, high-wing, underpowered, smelly but, relatively spacious, four-seater plane.

"Ah, this will be perfect," he said, with a smile. He asked if he could sit in the back to see what sort of view he would get. I didn't think much of it at the time but he seemed to point his camera inside the aeroplane rather than seeing how much of a view he'd have of the outside. When it was all settled, I got the aeroplane out of the hanger and the mechanics and I put it into a position where we could start it up.

I was ready, the plane was ready and he was ready. Suddenly he asked if he could bring his girlfriend along, and, when I agreed, he went to fetch her. She was by any standards a very good-looking woman with a fine attribute or two. I was twenty and this was 1964 and there were experiences I had not yet experienced. Within an hour I would be a different person .

We took off and flew to the local flying area and he asked me if I could circle around Guildford Cathedral so that it could be in the background. Once again it didn't occur to me immediately, that if the cathedral were to be the background, what would be in the foreground? I soon discovered. He asked me if it was okay if the girl undressed. I probably whimpered that it would be alright although I couldn't really speak on behalf of the Bishop. So around and around we flew with Guildford Cathedral as a backdrop to a naked woman who clearly wasn't a virgin named Mary.

In many respects, I was a relatively inexperienced pilot and so I took the opportunity of practising some left and right medium turns whilst keeping the turn and slip indicator showing a correctly balanced turn. Even on a day such as this it was important to not only maintain a good lookout but to fly accurately as well! I have to admit that my concentration on looking out and at my flight instruments wasn't 100%, and I'm still not sure whether or not I got a quick glimpse of two big roundabouts and a junction. Or a Cathedral either, come to think of it.

Modesty prevents me from a more accurate account. Sufficient to say (authors' cliché) that she did a discrete and photographed practice disembarkation at the far end of the airfield and then a more respectable and forward facing disembarkation at the parking area. I have said elsewhere that my pay at the club was ten pounds a week plus fifty pence for every hour flown. A long Joy Flight like this earned me another forty pence. He gave me a one pound note and hoped that I had enjoyed the flight adding that if there was anything else his girlfriend could do for me, just give him a call and he'd arrange it. Having an extra pound was certainly the highlight of the week and the flight.

Now that we have the Internet, I have searched lots of sites to find those photographs so that I can validate the entry in my flying log book. So far, I have not found them but I shall continue to look. In particular, I want one of Guildford Cathedral and one showing the aircraft registration. Honestly the stuff you see on the web, ostensibly related to flying!

* * *

I was asked just once about joining the "Mile High Club". She was married, an enthusiastic and capable student with a big appetite but I said the time would be better spent on level flight and stalling. She to do one and I the other. Speaking of Near Mrs, the correct term is Air-Proximity Report.

CONCORDE PILOTS

Concorde pilots are a funny lot. More like out-of-work Shakespearian actors than pilots. In the main they were okay but they did need to tell you what they flew. On 15th July 1979, or thereabouts, I was sitting attentively at the engineer's panel of a Tri-Star, on the way to Athens, watching the aircraft systems doing their work when the flight deck door burst open. I don't know what stage directions might have been given if we'd been on a stage but he certainly 'struck a pose' as they say. Standing in the doorway appeared a smartly dressed pilot complete with hat. "Captain Walpole!" Pause one, two, three. "Concorde." he announced, I looked up at him and offered my hand and with neither pose nor pause introduced myself.

"How do you do, Keith Godfrey. Austin Healey Sprite Mark 1."

Probably one of those career limiting statements that I was prone to making.

Although I missed the opportunity to fly Concorde by the skin of my teeth as a co-pilot, it was because I had only five years until retirement that I missed it as a captain. The company insisted on a six year commitment because of the training costs involved. I guess I was lucky because there is no doubt that the training had a strong emphasis on the technical side, and ground school was not my forte. The myth or truth of the training was that, by some historical management decree, a quarter of applicants would be failed on each course "*pour encourager les autres.*" I would have to have been with an extraordinarily dumb crowd to have been sure of success. Apart from being admired, being bought drinks at the pub and going on the cruise ship lecture circuit, there was no particular advantage in flying Concorde. I don't feel that my career was incomplete by not flying it. I have friends who flew it and they still speak to me, even if it is mostly about Concorde

It remains one of the most graceful aircraft ever conceived and constructed. To watch it take off was show stopping. To watch it overtake you whilst flying was startlingly beautiful. To see it land was poetic. But despite having the opportunity to fly on it whenever I wanted to as a passenger, or in the cockpit with a pilot friend, it didn't have much appeal to me. There was no sense of speed and since speed was its *raison d'être* and admiration of it was *de rigueur*, I found it *de trop*. The British view was that it was a British invention. The French, *au contraire*.

I met a man one March on a flight from Edinburgh who said he was going to New York in September. He said he would be flying Concorde because he needed to get there quickly. My

suggestion that he went in August, because it would be a whole lot cheaper, didn't go down well. What I don't understand is, if someone is so important to a business that s/he has to get somewhere faster than the speed of sound, don't they have the authority to send a minion to do the dirty work? I bet they would if they could only get somewhere by car ferry. There's nothing that an expense account can't overcome, especially vanity.

Despite everything that I respect and love about Concorde to me it was an outrage socially and economically. Can anything justify the huge public cost for a few elitist travellers? Except sick kids going to see Father Christmas.

“So men in this generation should be laying up a store ... and organising, that the generations that follow may enjoy comparative freedom from useless labour. Instead of which, with transcendental improvidence the world works only for today.” R.J.

... and now it's a museum exhibit, what a hideous waste of money.

STUDENT PILOTS: MR ANGUS MACGREGOR

At least I think that's what his name was. It might have been Rob Roy. In fact, that would have suited him better. I met Mr McGregor at the Glasgow Flying Club where I instructed on my days off. Angus was a true Scot although he was neither red-headed nor did he wear a kilt. Mr McGregor took his flying lessons very seriously and in some respects was a more than competent student. He and I got on reasonably well. He prepared for his lessons and listened carefully to everything I explained. However navigation did not come easily to him. For some reason he found it difficult to understand that if a plane travelled at a speed of ninety miles per hour, that in one hour it would travel ninety miles. In two hours it will travel one hundred and eighty miles, in three hours it would travel two hundred and seventy miles and so on. Therefore, in thirty minutes it would travel a distance of only forty-five miles.

We were on a cross country flight from Loch Lomond to a place just beyond Prestwick. The task was to calculate the time it would take to fly to Prestwick airport from the northern end of Loch Lomond. The distance to fly was sixty miles and the speed at which we planned to fly was ninety miles per hour.

Because sixty is two thirds of ninety, it would take two-thirds of an hour which is forty minutes. This was a relatively simple navigational challenge and I thought that it would be an easy problem for Mr McGregor to solve.

Each attempt drew a blank, despite several big hints. I asked him: if we flew towards Prestwick, from our start point at the north of Loch Lomond maintaining a speed of ninety miles per hour, after one hour would we be still going towards Prestwick or would we be beyond it? He eventually agreed that we would be beyond our destination. It was difficult to get him to calculate precisely how far beyond Prestwick we would have been, but at least we were making progress in two directions now, navigationally and intellectually.

If we flew for just half an hour would we still go beyond our destination?

“Aye, but that’s a more difficult thing to determine.”

I had a brainwave. I converted time distance and speed into money. If he were spending money at the rate of £90 per hour...

“Aye,” he said, “It’ll be precisely forty minutes to Prestwick. Anything more would be a waste.”

If the teacher sees the problem from the student's point of view, a student will often find the solution. I lived in Scotland for seven years, and the rumour that Scottish people are careful with money is entirely false. Ask any bar or pub owner.

Mr Angus MacGregor was proud of his Scottish heritage. He would not refer to my being English but would prefer to call me a Sassenach, a term that comes from Saxon but which can be used as a term of disliking, derision, disrespect or downright loathing.

He would often refer to the misdeeds of the Sassenachs but the bitterness in his style was born not of hatred but of sheer pride of his heritage. One day I plucked up the courage to ask Mr MacGregor why it was that, with his feelings towards the English, he was apparently happy to fly with and be taught by one of them.

“Aye,” he said, “I have given that a great deal of thought since I met yee, and as far as I see it, flying is intrinsically dangerous and if anything were to happen during our flying lessons — I would at least had the pleasure of taking one of you ***** with me.”

It was a curious reasoning but in the interests of safety, entente cordiale and friendship I was happy to accept his point of view and to leave it unchallenged.

CLAUDE AND OTHER THINGS

Claude was an enthusiastic private pilot. He ran a small garage in London and made enough money cheating people on car repairs to fly every weekend. Eventually he'd swindled enough people to get his own plane. But I malign him unjustly, he was more like Robin Hood. He robbed other people only so that he could help the poor, of which he considered himself a leading member.

Claude was a more than competent pilot, he had a lovely, happy manner, he was always ready to laugh and had a cripplingly stupid sense of humour. He was the sort of guy, that if you owned a reliable car, would be a good friend.

Claude was keen to learn aerobatics and I was keen to teach him. We both enjoyed the fun of his losing control trying to 'roll off the top of a loop'. Despite my efforts I couldn't persuade him to "get more speed and be smoother!" Eventually in a moment's quiet as we lost control yet again I jokingly called him something fairly rude. On the ground later he confided that, "He'd never been called one of those before and hoped that the next time he was upside down he wouldn't be called it again." It was a great relationship bearing in mind I had an unreliable car.

I can't remember which his favourite plane was but I heard that, after his death, he wanted it to be used in a short ceremony following his cremation. To put this story into perspective, you need to know a bit more about propellers. All prop-driven planes leave behind them a spiral of air. It's a corkscrew of air that spins from the propeller along the fuselage past the tailplane and onwards behind. American and British aircraft propellers generally rotate in opposite directions. An English plane would send air spiral to the right (if I remember correctly) and an American-engined equivalent plane would spin it to the left.

So if you stand behind a plane with a running engine, on one side the air will move away from you while on the other side the spiral of air will hit you. From a pilots point of view, this means that you would need to apply the rudder one way or the other to keep the plane straight as you applied power to take off. (You might remember that Mr Bindermann had difficulty recognising this phenomenon)

It was Claude's wish that, after his cremation, his ashes should be dispersed in the slipstream of his favourite (British) plane whilst it sat on the ground, "For their last flight together," as it were. Unfortunately there were two versions of Claude's favourite plane. Only the American air-

craft was available for the ceremony, an important fact that went unnoticed by the master of ceremonies and the mourners.

The plane was taxied into position and parked with the engine running slightly above its normal idling speed. The mourners lined up behind the plane on the side that was appropriate to the British aircraft. They took their places in a line. Someone said a few solemn and appropriate words about Claude and the hereafter while his ashes were sprinkled into the slipstream and thereafter into the faces of the crowd. Presumably grief or dignity prevented anyone from running out of the way as the human ash cloud engulfed them. It would be true to say that even after his death his well-wishers came face to face with Claude and that he, in his turn, touched those who cared about him.

* * *

Another car-dealer who kept his plane at the airfield could see into the future. He told me that on the next Tuesday night it probably wouldn't be a good thing to go kissing with my girlfriend on the bit of the airfield that was a sort of lovers' lane.

My girlfriend and I chose to go for a drink that evening. Mysteriously, his recently-insured plane blew up and caught fire close to where I might have parked if we'd decided to go to the airfield for our entertainment. I wouldn't want you to think that I see this as a particular highlight of my life, or even that I think it's anything worth talking about. It's nothing like being in Rome when it caught fire but I see it like this. I'm an ordinary geezer... What the hell happens to people who have exciting lives? Is it a real life version of an Arnie Schwarzenegger film?

* * *

I happened to be on a train on the London Underground which was hit by another train while we were stationary just outside Holborn station. We were stuck in darkness, smoke and mild panic for several minutes, but that probably happens to most people when they go on an unplanned day out to London. Perhaps, if I'd taken a job in the City, more things like this would have kept happening to me and a book about a banker's career would be quite exciting compared to the ordinariness of flying airliners.

* * *

I landed in a field after the engine stopped, in a small plane I was flying. The farmer insisted that I signed the visitors book just below Sir Yehudi Menuhin's signature, that's as close to fame as I've been.

* * *

I've had British Royalty on board my plane but it didn't seem to fly any differently. Neither did I think that I felt nervous but when I spoke to the passengers I meant to say that they were on a "normal shuttle back up service" but what I said was. "You're on a typical shuttle buck up service." Maybe I was nervous? But probably a lot less so than my passengers who wondered if a captain who spoke like that could be relied upon.

GETTING MY HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

I have been very fortunate in my career because I started flying at low level (flying club), graduated to flying a bit higher (horse freighter), then flew a pressurised plane that could cruise at twenty thousand feet (Vickers Viscount around Scotland) and at the end of my career I was flying at nearly twice that height. As a result, I have enjoyed each layer of cloud on the way up and, with the advent of automatic landings, I have enjoyed them on the way down too. The low cloud or fog, that would have prevented a plane from landing in my early days ceased to be a problem at the end of my career.

I was still young when I first fully appreciated clouds. I was lucky enough to be away on a school trip in Austria. We were in a village called Galtür and from my hotel window I could see the clouds forming on one side of the mountain while, on the other side, it was perfectly clear. This was a source of wonder and amazement to me. On the first morning, I woke to see patches of mist drifting along the valley and down the sides of the slopes. Even now sixty years later, I am still fascinated by the formation of low-level clouds. If I have my camera with me I always stop to record a nice cloudscape.

When you first learn to fly, you aim to stay out of the clouds. The art of flying in cloud (which the press would call “blind flying” but a pilot would call “instrument flying”) is something which is left until a little later in one’s flying career. My first experience of flying in real cloud was in a Tiger Moth which had very basic instrumentation. If I say that this venture was not very successful and resulted in some anxious moments, it will be the biggest understatement in this book. But I did learn that there was more than one way of losing control of a plane and falling out of a cloud.

As I became more experienced as an instructor, I would teach some basic instrument flying but this would be simulated with screens and masks rather than actually being *in* cloud. After mastering the skill of instrument flying a small aeroplane in cloud the next step was to master the same skills on a twin-engined aircraft.

But first I had to *qualify* on a twin engined plane. I learned to fly multi-engined aircraft on the same type as related in the story about Mr Bindermann. Though once the pride of rich plane owners before the war, the Miles Gemini had little or no single engine capability. A modern two-engined light plane would be able to maintain height easily and even climb with just one engine op-

erating. The Gemini would only maintain height flying on one engine under the most favourable circumstances. However the advantage of the Gemini over a single engined plane was that if one engine stopped you'd have more time find a field to land in. The disadvantage was that with old worn out engines, you had twice the chance of one of them stopping anyway! At ten pounds an hour to hire it was the cheapest, if not the safest way to learn to fly with more than one engine.

Eventually the time came when I needed to pass my Instrument Rating Test. The training was conducted properly and resulted in more success than my lone efforts. I spent many hours with a very patient instructor learning how to fly along the airways and to make instrument-guided approaches at major airports. Right now, it seems extraordinary to me that all the effort, heartache, disappointment, excitement, cost, and frustration of learning to fly a multi engined aircraft on instruments, into big airports is now contained in a few casual paragraphs.

STILL IN THE CLOUDS

The Tiger Moth is an expensive plane to hire now. When I was learning it was the cheapest available and so, almost by default, it was the type most enthusiasts learned to fly in. With open-cockpits, a set of wings both above and below you and a splutteringly noisy engine it was a ‘real aeroplane.’ There was no starter motor so a mechanic was always needed to ‘swing the prop’ to start it. There was something very, very special about sitting in it as the engine ticked over, listening to one’s teacher giving instructions and then permission to taxi to the take off point. Cautiously, I’d open the throttle and for the first couple of lessons the instructor would have to nudge it a little more to get the plane moving and to show me how much power was needed.

There was almost as much to learn about taxiing as anything else. Weaving from side to side to see what was ahead required almost as much skill as normal flying, especially in strong winds where you had to use all the flying controls to taxi effectively. The nausea-inducing smell of the rubber in the old fashioned communications mask was the smell of learning. Even my instructor would release his mask in flight and replace it only if he needed to speak to me. Thousands of wartime pilots learned to fly in the Tiger but just a few years later they became almost obsolete as hundreds of unwanted ex-RAF planes were broken up and destroyed. To fly one now costs almost a hundred times what it did when I first flew it. To fly a Tiger Moth was to be airborne and living high.

The very best way of enjoying the clouds is to be in an open-cockpit, light aeroplane. There is nothing more uplifting than flying around and in and out of those glorious, fluffy clouds that you see on a hot summer’s day. With a plane that turns sharply and flies slowly you can follow the billowing curves, climb over the smaller bits, dive under the base of the cloud then pull up and over the fibrous edges, or dip the wing into the top and fall into the whiteness.

“It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it as the butterfly in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life.” R.J.

To be in a man-made machine and be at one with nature is an incongruous combination. There were a few moments when, up in the ‘sanctity of space’, where I had a sense of complete fulfil-

ment. I knew that, after some gentle fun around the clouds, I too could tumble into a short eternity.

Before my moment of eternity I would take my plane high above the top of a bubbling cloud and then, when my thoughts were ready, I'd dive down one side of the cloud. As I lost height my inner excitement would grow. I'd dive lower, faster, faster and faster until I was at the limit, and then I'd close the throttle and pull up as hard as I could along the side of the cloud - up, up and up, slower and higher towards the very top of the cloud.

I'd roll slowly towards the cloud, still climbing, turning more and more until I was at the top of the cloud, still rolling over, still slowing, still climbing. If I judged it properly, I'd be hanging upside-down ready to fall into the cloud as the speed dropped to nothing. Before the final descent, I'd prepare for my moment of perfection. Every thought stopped for that magical moment. No sound of rushing air, the engine almost silent, the plane gently, gently turning, weightless and ready to fall.

“Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds, and done a hundred things” John Magee

One quick glance up to the cloud below me and then - perfection, as we fell. A moment of total harmony with everything I loved as I dropped into the cool, misty whiteness. Into a white oblivion. Into the midst of eternity.

*“And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrampled sanctity of space,”*

Then I'd fly back to the airfield.

* * *

One of the wonderful parts of becoming an airline pilot is the comfort in which one can enjoy the beauty of being airborne. Although nothing could surpass the freedom of my small plane, it was a

time to enjoy youthfulness. But we are not young for long enough. Soon - too soon - we have to become responsible and respectable. Career, marriage, children, mortgage.

But respectability is evidenced by what you do and have, it shouldn't change what you feel. I hope that all young pilots get a feeling of elation and inspiration as they climb up, through layers of cloud. I hope older pilots feel the same on seeing the summer clouds, recalling their youth and early flying fun. Perhaps those are the unspoken moments of perfection that bring pilots together? There's no better expression to me than "having your head in the clouds" to describe special moments.

On most passenger flights there comes a time, during the climb up to cruising height, when you can just begin to see the sunlight through an ever-decreasing thickness of cloud, and, in a jet aeroplane especially, you suddenly burst out into the crystal clarity of a bright blue sunlit sky. There's no fanfare. But surely it's an experience worthy of one? Nothing marks the moment, it just happens and we move on. And yet, by comparison, thousands gather at Stonehenge to watch and celebrate the 'special' sun rise on the summer solstice. Why that day in particular? Is it really any different from any other sunrise, natural or not? We could have built a Stonehenge for every day's sunrise, then what celebration? Would too many celebrations of our life giving sun dilute this transcendental experience?

In a slower aeroplane a pilot will often reduce the rate of climb so that you come out of the cloud slowly and don't leave it below you too quickly. Flying close to the top of a layer of smooth, flat cloud gives a wonderful feeling of speed.

Today it would not be considered good airmanship to zoom along the top of a cloud through which you have been climbing for a while. On the occasions, in Scotland, when we did this, it was one of the few times one had a real sense of speed. I'm sure that some of the passengers enjoyed it and I'm sure they knew we were enjoying ourselves too.

My first commercial job in a big plane was flying horses around to racecourses in Europe which meant that we couldn't fly very high. We spent most of the cruising part of the flight in cloud. For the year that the job lasted, I experienced more lightning strikes than in the rest of my flying career. The weather radar on board was less than adequate. We almost never flew higher than ten thousand feet. Flying higher than that would have upset the horses and, being unpressurised, the pilots would be on the limit for flying without extra oxygen. Although I would not

like to imply that it is any more turbulent at the lower levels than elsewhere there is no doubt that it *tends* to be smoother above the layers of cloud.

My next job did not elevate me into always being above the clouds either. Flying with the Scottish Airways division of British Airways meant that I spent seven years enjoying the glorious highlands and islands and getting plenty of practice flying in bad weather. Although occasionally flying higher than ten thousand feet, the frequently changing weather in Scotland meant that we were often in and out of layers of cloud. Flying in an environment like that was a constantly uplifting and rewarding experience for me.

It was not until 1977, that is to say eighteen years after I learned to fly that I consistently found myself flying above the clouds. The Lockheed Tri-Star was a gentleman of an aeroplane, delightful to fly and, on the routes I operated, was a very high-performance machine. It took the Tri-Star only a few minutes to get above the level of cloud that I had been so familiar with for those previous eighteen years.

CAPTAIN WHO HERE?

“Roger, Wilco. Over and out.” is what a typical Hollywood producer thinks that pilots say. In reality it’s a message that isn’t, couldn’t and wouldn’t ever be used by a pilot because it’s meaningless. In this example the words contradict each other. There is not, and cannot be, a correct version of this nonsensical bit of Hollywood script. But there’s a good reason that I mention it here.

Once upon yet-another time, I managed to get my first job flying a big plane through talent, flying experience and by having a contact high up in the airline I was applying to. Normally, getting an airline job was a catch-22 for an inexperienced young pilot. You needed experience *on* a big plane to get a *job* flying a big plane.

So I didn’t feel bad at trying to cheat by using a connection.

On a previously unsuccessful attempt at entering the airline industry, I’d had the good fortune of teaching the Chief Flight Engineer of a national airline to fly. He too, was pretty high up the tree in aviation. He was also a delightful man, though I couldn’t always understand what he was saying, due to his having a strong Italian/Jewish/American/Dutch/Norwegian accent. I mentioned to him that I was going for an interview with a small British independent airline and, by chance, he knew the Chief Pilot.

“Mention my name,” I think he said, “And Tom will give you a job.”

I was, at that time in my life, very shy and retiring so it was with reluctance that, at the end of the interview, I said, “Pete from ‘such-and-such’ wishes to be remembered to you.”

“I suppose you think that name dropping will get you a job. Well, it won’t because I was going to write to you and say that we didn’t need you, haven’t got enough experience.” was the grumpy response.

On the positive side this was another occasion I’d saved a company postage and stationery and in addition I’d saved myself a lot of worry and anxiety waiting for the inevitable rejection to come.

The irony was that the grumpy Chief Pilot died soon after the interview and, as a consequence, the company was split into passenger and freight divisions. Within a few months I got a job with the airline freight division because of a friend. My then-wife had encouraged me to get a proper job flying proper aeroplanes. And by that I guess, she meant not lounging around as a flying club instructor flying small planes, flirting with young, female students and staying out late drinking,

but to guarantee her a more comfortable life as a respectable airline pilot's wife. Neither of those needs were to be met as it turned out. But I was flying a *big* plane at last.

The freight we carried were very valuable, thoroughbred racehorses. We had even moved to another country (Ireland) to pursue my wife's ambition and we had been there just a few days with our new baby when, with great enthusiasm I invited her to see my aircraft. As far as I was concerned, although it was a big aircraft, I hoped it was just a stepping stone to greater things. So I took her to the plane and proudly showed her inside. Looking back I should have taken her to the cockpit first to show how complicated it was and clearly how clever I had to be to fly such a machine.

To my eternal regret (there's another footballer's cliché) and in my excitement, I took her into the aircraft via the freight door, through which the horses were taken to their boxes. I must admit that even to me, there was a slight farmyard smell about the plane. Sadly she went no further than sticking her head in and saying, "I meant a proper job on a proper aeroplane with a proper airline." Words that any married man would find easy to interpret.

I stuck it out for a year and to her credit, so did she. The plane was always unreliable, the horses were unreliable and so it seemed, was the weather most of the time. This combination of events meant that on the many occasions when I had to night stop unexpectedly, I learned to hold lucid and interesting telephone conversations without there being anyone at the other end of the line.

"Hi it's me, there's a bit of a problem with—" And at that point the telephone was hung up at the other end where my wife's tolerance and patience were, again, tested to breaking point. And so, I would explain to no-one what the problem was and how confident we were that it was going to be rectified and yes, I hoped she was well, and that we would still be able to take the baby to the park at the weekend and yes, it was interesting that Auntie Sue was coming to stay and yes, I was certainly looking forward to it... Good bye ... Miss you too"

There was always a lot to listen to when I did eventually get home. Most of it was advice. My goodness, how quickly children grow and take up their mother's viewpoint.

Despite my love of flying there were moments, flying this horse-filled piece of old junk, when I didn't feel entirely safe. A bloody-faced groom stumbling into the cockpit doesn't exactly set the scene for the aeronautical and job security I was after. And if the first response of the captain is to say, "Shoot the bloody thing!" then I suppose I was looking for the wrong sort of comfort.

Meanwhile the plane rocked and rolled as the horses, despite being in their boxes, broke into a gallop as if they'd just started the 3.15 at Newmarket. The going was definitely "heavy to firm." Subsequently, there was an informal agreement that we would leave the grooms to their jobs and they would leave us to ours.

Carrying horses in an unpressurised aircraft meant that we had to descend very gently, even though we weren't very high to start with. Apparently their ears do not equalise the pressure around their eardrums as easily as ours do. Descending slowly means that we'd always get caught up in turbulent clouds if there were any around. It was during that period of my career that I started collecting my lightning strikes.

Furthermore, the captains were inexperienced and the co-pilot even more so but for all of us it was a chance to get experience and move on to bigger, faster and higher things. It was during this hazardous apprenticeship that my view of gambling being a fool's game was confirmed. The grooms who accompanied the horses acquainted us with which of the horses were going for 'a day out at the racecourse' and those which had a 'chance' of winning. Therefore, they said if we were thinking of placing a bet that we should consult them first, presumably on the basis that they thought they were safer flying with pilots who didn't have big gambling debts and whose minds were on their jobs. If our plane had been fixed as efficiently as the horse races were then, the old piece of scrap that I was flying might have lasted longer.

Nevertheless, as a young man striving to find a place in aviation, I occasionally felt proud to be flying, what had been many years before, a very sophisticated passenger aircraft. During the long night hours of extreme cold, sitting there in the ancient cockpit it did cross my frozen mind that any of these horses was worth more than my aeroplane of choice. As it got colder I mused that even one leg was more valuable than my entire plane.

The plane felt like an aeronautical icebreaker, where only unprompted, random thoughts and hopes were enough to keep my brain cells connected, my blood temperature above freezing and my blood sugar still registering. Why there was no heating I never did discover. Maybe it was all the straw in the back of the aeroplane. We carried a maximum of six horses and therefore a maximum of six New Zealand rugs. Had they carried a spare, I would have got someone to tack me and tuck me up.

I'm gradually moving towards the reason for the title of this chapter but I don't want to rush to the climax because this cost me twelve months of my life and I want you to savour the fun as much as I did.

Talking of fun, there was an unexpected night stop in Paris. Finding accommodation was difficult, especially with the restricted budget available for human livestock. No respectable racehorse would have been prepared to stay in a stable as poorly furnished as our B&B in Paris. The crew consisted of one captain two first officers and one flight engineer. The captain and engineer enjoyed special status and had their own rooms. The other co-pilot and I had to share a room which, in itself, wasn't a great hardship. The one double-bed caused me some consternation. We chose sides according to our seniority.

Months prior to this night stop the co-pilot, who had come to flying late in life, had proudly mentioned to me that his sheltered upbringing in Derbyshire meant that he had not known what a homosexual was until he was twenty three. He was a pig farmer so I found his explanation hard to believe. Years later I thought that maybe he was telling me that for a reason that I didn't understand at the time but which concerns me now.

There was a lot that made a man of me during this stage of my career. However, this was an occasion when I'm pleased to say that a transferable skill didn't.

* * *

One sunny day the aircraft suffered a serious nose-wheel failure and was written off, and that was the end of what could have been a glittering, but dung-covered career as a horse freighting pilot.

But I'd hesitate to call it a bad situation, because it soon became a whole lot worse. While our chariot was about to make its final landing at Cambridge Airport, I was in Dublin, signing papers to take possession of my first house. A house I couldn't afford to furnish, let alone buy, on a salary which, unknown to me, was about to come to an end within the next thirty days.

We eventually moved back to England where we stayed with my generous in-laws. Meanwhile back in Ireland the solicitor dealing with my house had taken it upon himself to install a caretaker-tenant for me. Apparently so that the house would remain warm and secure while I was back home in the UK and, as he enthused, would provide me "with a small income." If he meant 'small' because it didn't represent the market rent, that was true. If he meant 'small' because the

one month's rent, which I *did* receive, had then to be spread out over a year while I removed the caretaker for *non-payment* of rent, then that was true as well.

None of this was life-threatening and I see it for what it was. At the time however, it was marriage-threatening, finance-threatening and career-threatening. Just as I believed there was a positive side emerging - I managed to evict the tenant I had never wanted, I had found a buyer for the house, the sale was progressing and it was likely that I would find another job - things actually got worse.

The Irish banking strike started at the very moment my money was between my Lawyer's bank account and my account. Accessibility to those funds would not occur for another ten, debt laden months, although I don't doubt for a moment that it was earning interest on the money market for someone in a financial district somewhere.

I blamed my wife because it was her suggestion in the beginning that I gave up the flying club and found a proper job.

The problem in writing this account for you is that I am reminded of things along the way and lose my thread... I was going to tell you about Captain Who Here?

Jerry was a lovely bloke. I only mention the lovely people I've met because they might read this. Jerry loved flying. He was generous, proud of what he had achieved and owned a sporty, red car. He was okay at flying. His first command after many many years as a first officer, was on the horse freighter.

After a day where everything had gone wrong he was most likely to rise above it all by saying, "At rend of day, we all here to make couple of quids and be happy."

Jerry was like my mate Fred, the hospital porter, always happy. Especially when he was making other people happy. I've mentioned that we were often delayed and that meant endless and constant communications between our operations centre, air traffic control, horse owners, engineers, re-fuelers and so on.

"I orrays must take call. Captain responsibilities," he would announce, proudly. Then he'd speak into the phone

"Hullo, Hu here. Who there? No. Hu here. So who there? No! Hu *here*, not who *there*. Who there?"

At the start of this chapter, I mentioned the Hollywood version of the radio communications between aircraft and ground stations. Let me give you a correct example.

“Preston Airways this is Speedbird One Two Three. Point Lynas three zero, flight level five zero, estimating Wallasey three seven, over.”

Which means.: *Preston Airways* (the ground station that I'm calling)

Speedbird One Two Three (who I am)

Point Lynas (where I am)

three zero (time at which I am at point Lynas)

flight level five zero (my altitude)

estimating Wallasey three seven, (my estimated arrival time at Wallasey, the next checkpoint on the route, at 37 minutes past the current hour)

over (I am expecting a reply from Preston Airways.)

The same position report from Jerry would be as follows.

“Arrr prestun hairweighs arr arrr ris is spleedbrurd arr arrr free one too, collection spleedbrurd wun toof free. Arr presentry at proosition arr, point rinus at time is free zeero fright revel six collection fife zero restimating rat we will be over Warrasee at free sevun! Do you read? Little bi’ of turburence at this level for your information, sir. Hova.”

“Thank you Speedbird. One Two Three report Wallasey. Met information acknowledged. Thank you”

There would follow a short period of radio silence and someone would transmit, “Hi Jerry how you doing?”

His round, handsome Chinese face would turn to me and with a look of utter incredulity ask.

“How re heck they know it me?”

That’s all I was going to say at the start of the chapter. Maybe the build up was too long?

Over and out.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Maybe I was just born curious. I love chatting to people about their jobs. I once spent over an hour chatting to a builder in Bath, about bricks, mortar, plumb lines, perps, fireplaces and chimneys. Each subject we covered, wised me up to the extent of my general ignorance about his work. If I hadn't stopped and chatted to a bloke repairing a pothole in the road, I'd never have realised that manhole covers are round for a good reason.

I chatted my way into the driver's compartment of a train from London Waterloo, to a town in Hampshire and learned about drivers' training, signals, track speed restrictions and rosters. One of the common questions visitors to the flight deck used to ask was, "What do you do when you get there?" Meaning what do you do after this flight? More often than not, within Europe the answer was "We go back again." This seemed to surprise them. They imagined that once at our destination we'd start The Grand Tour of Europe. Imagine my surprise (cliché 16) when the train driver gave me the same answer to a similar question. Why did I imagine that a train driver would do anything other than go back again? But I did. I thought their rosters would be more imaginative than ours. But they're not.

My retirement dream is to be engaged by a television producer who wants to commission a programme where I have idle but interesting conversations with people who are trying to get on with their work. Only this morning the man at the car bodyshop was explaining to me how those tiny little scratches occur on cars, and why black cars are more difficult to clean than white ones. It won't change my life very much but it will make parking at the supermarket a little more interesting. I wouldn't need to interview pilots because all the small stuff is revealed here.

If you're a fearful flyer reading this book, I hope that you enjoy hearing about the normality of a pilot's life, because it will help you to see flying in a different light and, more importantly, in the *right* light. Something I must do is to dispel one myth about flying planes. It's not a life or death struggle to keep a plane airborne. It doesn't require split-second decision making and staying as cool as a block of ice. The reality is that pilots, just like any other working person, get up, go to work, moan about the company and how awful the pay is, go home, cut the grass and fall asleep in front of the telly. The next day, they get up, go to work, moan about the company and the pay, go home, cut the grass and fall asleep in front of the telly. Then they retire. All jobs are

normal to the people doing them of course but they may actually be more normal than an outside observer believes.

Fearful flyers think that operating a modern airliner leaves a great deal to the judgement of the pilot. In fact, the rules are so prescriptive that a pilot has very little freedom in what he or she can choose to do. Comparing the possibility of an acting career, I realise that there are split second decisions to be made on the stage. If one player fluffs his or her lines the others have to quickly readjust their lines to keep the show going. If a telephone doesn't ring when it should, how long does the actor wait and change the lines to "I need to make a telephone call."?

The stage is a minefield for thing to go wrong. If I'm taking off and an engine malfunctions I know exactly what to do, and so does my co-pilot. I know which job I think exists on a knife edge! I hope I can persuade you that there are more nerve-racking moments in an actor's life than there ever were in mine as a pilot. I speak with, if not an intimate knowledge of the theatre, a certain amount of experience. Two short one-act dramas, and one three-act murder mystery debacle make up my limited but 'Good' acting C.V.

For the very short time I was involved in amateur dramatics my big moment was when I had to chase someone across the stage, out through a door and call out to him as he made his escape along the street. When I opened the door to call him he was standing on the other side reading his lines, ready to make his next entry. He didn't even pretend to be escaping... He just stood there looking as incompetent and as lost as I did. In my book that's when the split second decision making comes in, and I failed. I just shouted the lines at him and closed the door, what else could I do? But that's am-dram and not to be confused with the real thing. Or not often anyway.

The only bit of the actors' lives I'd like to see in aviation is an annual award ceremony.

"And the award for the best landing at London Gatwick is..."

I've even got my acceptance speech ready, "I want to thank the runway designer, and the truly wonderful air-traffic controller without whose permission to land, this (hold up and kiss model plane) award would not have been possible." I might spend a moment mocking the name of the airport and its proximity to London, just for some cynical applause.

"This years best supporting co-pilot goes to..." Summed up with, "I love you all... (sob sob)." Who knows, when reality TV hits rock-bottom it may happen.

In the days when we were allowed to have visitors to the flight deck, many people with private pilots licences would visit us and want to share their flying experiences. I know that a lot of the

captains I flew with were quite dismissive of amateur pilots but having been one, and taught so many others, I was always happy to chat and share my love of flying with them. It's really the only time I ever talked up the job, because I thought it would have been disrespectful to talk about the job as being ordinary when the person you're talking to would have given their right hand to be in your seat.

But visitors to the flight deck saw only the glamour both real and imagined. Just like we see the apparent glamour of the movie star at a film festival or in the finished film. We can't share the hundreds of retakes, the endless interviews and promo appearances that go with stardom, a visitor to the flight deck would not think about our sitting in a transit van at one a.m. waiting to be driven to a freezing plane miles from the terminal. Every job has a bit of glamour and lots of ordinariness.

But I have to be honest, for the sort of money a film star makes compared to a pilot...

"I want to be always in company with the sun, and sea, and earth. These and the stars by night are my natural companions." R.J.

ON AND OFF DAYS IN THE LIFE OF A PILOT

A day off to most people is a day when they're not at work and one that has little bearing on subsequent days back at work. Days off to a pilot are slightly different. There are things we may not do before we go flying, and of course these impinge upon our days off. Adequate rest is vital, recovering from time zone changes takes time and can't be ignored. High living the night before a duty is now off the agenda for airline crews. A day off to a pilot is a day, twenty four hours, without work. A pilot can have the *day* off but be working in the afternoon, evening or night of that same day. So if I say I've had *the* day off, I usually mean the day time period. If I say I've had *a* day off, I mean the entire twenty four hour period. This is important for neighbours and readers to understand. In reality the last day off in a block days off isn't available for parties or demanding activities because there's a legal obligation for pilots to be fit for duty.

There's an acronym now for pilots to check if they're fit to fly. It's called I'M SAFE. I stands for illness, M for medication, S is stress, A is alcohol, F is fatigue, and E is emotion. It's a good tool for anxious flyers too.

I was always diligent about getting proper rest so if I had an early start, I'd always be in bed by ten p.m. and if I ever needed to be up before six a.m. I'd go to bed even earlier. One hour's sleep before midnight is worth two after is something I remember from my childhood.

Even now after twenty years of retirement my days always start early. If the sun is up and I'm awake, I need to get up. Many years ago I learned to power nap between flights so now I can recharge my batteries as and when I need to, and all I need to do is sleep for a minute and I'm as good as new. Back when I was working, a late afternoon start was perfect for me, it meant I could watch the telly when I got up, have a power nap, wash the car, fiddle around in the garden or waste time some other way. Then have an easy lunch and fit in one or two more power naps before setting off for work, all with the benefit of missing the traffic on the way to the airport.

Life, for a pilot, is the same as anyone's, except that we do everything on different days and at odd times. The days of the week have no meaning to a pilot, nor do the weeks of the year, seasons or anniversaries. I lived from roster to roster, being more influenced by my report time and destination than if it were my mother in law's birthday.

What I won't be doing on my day off is mentally preparing for work the next day. I've had enough training and there's enough support at work to ensure that I can just turn up and get on

with things. Brand new co-pilots might prepare a few things the day before but that's probably true of any job. I know all my lines by now.

I suppose that the biggest difference between being an airline pilot and most other types of work, is that it's absolutely essential to arrive on time. This means that, in my personal life, one of my idiosyncrasies is that I need to be on time with an almost military discipline. If I'm not ten minutes early then I consider myself late. And the one weakness in my otherwise flawless character is that I have an obsessional loathing of lateness. Late people always have something more important to do than to meet you. Late people never accept responsibility. It's never their fault and they've always got someone else they can hold responsible.

My work schedule normally ran about six weeks ahead. So, in the middle of one block of work, I'd find out what I was doing for the twenty eight days following the current roster's end. That's when I'd realise that I'd forgotten to ask for a day off on the kid's sports day, swimming gala, outing, parents' evening, theatre, pop festival, visit to the in-laws, anniversary, birthday and that other things that I can't remember, but my wife always can.

*“the petty necessity of useless labour, useless because productive of nothing, chafe me
the year through.” R.J.*

On the day before my flight the one thing that I always knew was the next day's reporting time. On the day of my flight, I'd say goodbye to my family and, if they weren't too busy, they'd say goodbye to me. But for the kids it was just another day when Dad was going to work. Certainly not worth stopping what they were doing. It was of no interest to them whether I was going to Manchester or San Francisco... why should it be? They were normal kids. I doubt a builder's child would ask what sort of house their dad was building that day. Why should my kids be any different?

On long trips I'd need to get my stuff ready the day before: one uniform shirt plus one casual shirt for each day, clean underwear for each day and evening, razor blades, a jacket or jumper depending upon the destination, a book I'd forgotten I was reading, an out of date car magazine and lots of black uniform socks - some matching. The only other thing I needed was my licence and headset which I could squeeze in if I sat on my case.

Most, if not all, pilots carry one of those enormous and preposterous black square briefcases capable of carrying the full printed version of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. I don't know how I was regarded because as far as I know I was the only pilot of three thousand in the company who didn't have one. Bearing in mind that all you needed was a headset and a licence, what they carried will remain a mystery to me. I don't know if they carry spare underpants in case their suitcase gets lost, or if they carry the wife's jewellery to make sure she stayed until he got back or what... but I'm sure they're not needed. Maybe deep inside was some stinking, unwashed teddy bear they've had since they were three and were just giving it a safe Freudian home. I put my licence in my pocket and carried my headset, everything else I needed was on the plane. Then I could take off, fly the route, land, turn round do the same again and go home.

When I got home I would be asked why I was early or on time or why I was late. The reasons that I gave were exactly the reasons that *your* flights are early, on time or late. Headwinds, tailwinds, no winds, waiting for passengers, too many passengers, traffic delays, no traffic delays, congestion, no co-pilot, no plane, wrong plane, good weather, poor weather, no catering, wrong catering... never anything sinister.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Multi million dollar planes and the humble, but ubiquitous, Ford Transit Van would seem to be unconnected. I love multi million dollar planes and I loathe Transit vans, but it's nothing to do with the money involved. The Transit van is used by many airlines to move crews from reporting centres to planes and back again, from planes to hotels, hotels to planes, planes to planes, sometimes without the crew even getting off... They just drive around. Seen under a giant's microscope from space, Transit vans would look like mechanical ants darting here and there, stopping, starting, moving, waiting and, as we mock the seeming pointlessness of ants toiling away, so the Transit vans toils for us. Life indeed, but not as we know it.

“It would seem that the ant works its way tentatively, and, observing where it fails, tries another place and succeeds” RJ

There are many versions of the Transit van, in fact I had one of my own that I used for camping in Scotland. It was such a faithful servant that you might say rather catchily, that I was, a fan of the van. Unlike my own bespoke van, I don't feel any warmth to the crew carrying version. They can carry a payload of up to fifteen uniformed people, fifteen pieces of crew baggage, and six pilot brief cases. They have a range that is best described as too far, and an appalling comfort level that I am about to describe.

My guess is that they are deliberately designed and wind tunnel-tested to be noisy and uncomfortable. They rattle, they roll, they shake and they rock in the wrong order. They cause nausea, invite injury and encourage indifference to life, more than any device designed by man. The suspension is tuned to cause brain-wobble and backache even when the vehicle is stationary. The diesel versions are the world standard for irregular idling and their drivers seem incapable of turning them off for stops of less than three months. I'm surprised the earth isn't shaken off its axis when these things are left running.

When the doors are slammed they generate energy sufficient to send waves of gravity to the edge of the universe. The ill-fitting windows rattle and, unlike the driver's electrically operated windows, are operated by handles so ergonomically inefficient that you give up after two revolutions or face muscle rupture.

When they move or stop, they get worse. Regardless of the size of engine fitted they hardly accelerate. But curiously are fitted with brakes, so powerful that, however gently applied, you always feel as if you're stopping against a brick wall. Applied normally, it's like hitting two brick walls. However, this phenomenon affects only the passengers. The smiling drivers are oblivious to this simple law of dynamics. Despite all the evidence available, the drivers remain unaware of the effect this has on the passengers, even the ones that scream. Maybe this is why pilots and cabin crew don't take any notice of turbulence.

The designers no doubt thought that, to help pilots get their briefcases on and off more easily, they'd fit enormously wide, friction-free, sliding doors. What then would possess a normally intelligent person to slam that door so hard that it almost takes the side of the van off when they close it? Admittedly it's not quite so bad when closed from inside the vehicle because people can't get a run up to slam them, but even so it's always like an event in the World's Strongest Man competition. It did my head in then and it still does now. If I ever needed to be tested for signs of life then letting me hear the sound of a Transit van door being slammed shut would bring me back from the edge. Although, on the other hand, it might make me want to give up completely.

I hate Transit vans. I have spent more time going almost nowhere in Transit vans than in any other form of transport, assuming that you even describe Transit van travel as a form of transport.

* * *

When transiting from a car park to any 'where' but mainly from the crew check in to plane, there is a most important hierarchy that occurs when crews travel. On embarkation the first officer always defers to the captain who gets on and chooses the most convenient seat. If he's an awkward old grump he'll take the first available seat so that everyone else has to squeeze past him, his baggage and his enormous black flight bag. Otherwise more Socialist minded commanders would go towards the back to make it easier for others to alight. If the crew are undergoing a flight check, an additional captain travels with the crew. He or she is there to observe and assess the crew's day to day operational proficiency. The operating crew ingratiate themselves with this *Capo dei capi*, in the hope that they'll get a better report. Much obsequiousness is on display and although I didn't witness anyone laying a coat over a puddle for a superior pilot, it doesn't mean it wasn't done.

Sometimes another crew has to be picked up on the way to an aircraft. Sometimes a replacement pilot needs to get to a plane, sometimes a pilot who is not actually operating a flight but who is 'positioning' or 'dead heading' needs to be accommodated. These variations of travellers always throw the boarding hierarchy into chaos. The order of boarding is roughly this: Any extra first officer, other than the crew to whom the transport has been allocated, takes priority and, out of politeness is invited to get on immediately following the operating captain, never before him/her, but nevertheless before the rest of the operating crew. If the extra pilot is a captain, training captain or a friend of the operating captain or check pilot then they get on before anyone else. If a spare management pilot is in the mix then you can stand for hours as this Action Man game is played out. I suppose it's like poker where I believe a six, seven and eight, is better than a Jack, a Queen and nothing. Whereas an Ace can be what you want it to be.

I'm getting the feeling that I have made this too simple and will end up diluting the complexities of getting off. The thing to remember is that if you're ever on a flight that's late leaving, just look out of the window and see if there is a crowd of people in a Transit van who, inhabiting a parallel universe, are trying to work out who should get off first without demeaning themselves or offending someone more senior

Imagine how much valuable time this pointless precedence of place process has taken out of my life. Each and every time I've gone to a plane there's been a time-wasting hierarchical elbowing. If I wasted just one minute per flight, I've lost about four days of my life. But it's not just the trivialities of getting-ons and getting-offs that I've noticed, without realising it other people have wasted lots of time too.

For instance: When people gather, they establish their geographical territory which is like personal space but bigger. A simple example of that space and its vulnerability and importance is seen at a dinner table and witnessing a guest wanting to change places. Everyone gets involved

"If I go here why don't you go there and then so and so Allen can sit next to me."

"Actually if you squeeze in here, Lisa can go there and I'll go over there."

"Hang on if I swap with Julie, Allen can ... no that won't work."

No one in my social circle has a dining table so large that anyone would be excluded from the general conversation where ever they sit... If this weren't such a common occurrence, we'd think it was a scene from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Similarly in a classroom, at a company training session, you get your seat behind a desk and that's yours for the duration. If you leave a class-

room then re-assemble, you're compelled to take up the same position. Have a drink in a pub or bar, leave and when you return you take up the same place, even if you have to shoulder your way back in. The reason is that if you don't you'll offend the people you were with, or intrude on a hitherto private conversation and offend others.

It's vital to re-occupy your previous space. It's happening all over the world, everyone's trying to maintain their place. If you go on a sightseeing trip on holiday and spend the day climbing monuments and mountains, you get back to the bus and you go and sit in the same seat. You can't change seats without looking very odd and appearing to be awkward. Even the next day, on another tourist day out, you reclaim where you were. After that, the whole week is set unchangeably. The relevance of this, in the context of this book may seem unclear but here it is: Exactly the same psychological behaviours occur with an airline crew bus after they've been through airport security or any procedure that requires temporary disembarkation. First off are the people in the front seats. First back on are, of course, the people from the front seats who re-stake their claim. Subsequent off-ers and on-ers congest the bus until the last one off has to struggle back on, past every jackass who has returned to their original seat. The time it wastes is staggering, though I have not bothered to calculate it accurately. My message is when you get on shared transport, go as far back as you can. It may not do much for you immediately but you'll be part of a process that will change the world. Same with car parks... Just go to the top or as far from the entrance as you can. The world spends ages saving time, and we're wasting hours saving minutes.

Psychologists call this behaviour The Van Transit Syndrome, named after the Dutch psychologist, Derkje Van Transit. These vans upset me physically and psychologically. I don't even like talking about them.

“As I move about in the sunshine I feel in the midst of the supernatural: in the midst of immortal things. It is impossible to wrest the mind down to the same laws that rule pieces of timber, water, or earth. They do not control the soul, however rigidly they may bind matter.” R.J.

BEYOND BOMBAY

In 1977 I applied to fly the Lockheed Tri-Star which B.A. had been operating for a couple of years. Unsurprisingly I found the technical side demanding. The captains were a mixed bag. Some were brilliant and some were bullying horrors who got pleasure in making things as difficult as possible and being as awkward as they could to First Officers like me who had no jet plane experience. As you reached one of their personal objectives they'd change the standard again. When you eventually faltered, which was inevitable under their scheme, they'd tell you what a useless, little ***** you were and that you should try harder. We'll meet some of these idiots again in the simulator.

Their misconception was, that they believed they were brilliant pilots and imagined that everyone needed to be as good as they thought they were. You never could reach the standard they wanted. When they retired it was a blessing and when they popped their clogs you'd hope that their maker gave them more mercy than they ever gave to others. No doubt every organisation has got people like that. I feel sorry for their children.

The contrast for me, between flying short hops around Scotland and the ten hour flights to Bombay and then on to Singapore couldn't have been greater. Indeed most captains on the Tri-Star would regard a flight of less than an hour as a very short flight. To me every flight was like a long day out, compared with my ten minute flights in Scotland. Life may have been faster but it certainly wasn't harder. The Tri-Star autopilot system allowed us to land anywhere and in any weather. Everything was bigger higher, faster or longer but everything from a flying point of view was much easier.

Up to this point of my career I wasn't used to be flying in one direction for more than five minutes at a time, so the mental re-adjustment to long flights was brain changing. Mission creep on the airline's plans for this plane changed from only European destinations originally, to the Middle East, Bombay and Singapore within three years. Most pilots enjoyed flying a long way because I suspect they got a sense of achievement. I liked lots of take offs and landings which gave me a sense of accomplishment. But the plane wasn't there for us to enjoy. It was the latest in efficient, high-speed transport, with a navigation system claimed to reduce fuel consumption by ten percent and, in the late 70's, fuel was becoming very expensive so the savings were valuable.

Flying the Tri-Star was like flying a theatre, with so many seats and so many people and so much room! Of course, back then, not many people had been on a Jumbo so almost everyone was excited to be flying on it. There was unequalled service available on board with a large first class cabin and still hundred of seats down the back in economy.

Many rich, Middle Eastern dynasties bought all twenty seats in the sumptuous first class cabin, regardless of the number of people travelling. I can understand not wanting to be crowded but I wondered if they sometimes got lonely sitting there all by themselves. I almost cause an 'incident' when I refused to accept a Mont Blanc fountain pen from a member of a Royal family. It was only to get the plane away on time that I reluctantly accepted it, but I often think of them. I often wonder how they are getting on and if their oil fields are still spewing money.

For a boy from Beckenham, being in Bombay was a bewildering experience. My contemporaries seemed to take it all in their stride. Perhaps, for them, going from one culture to another in a time machine was just what they did. It was a job. Maybe some felt as I did but I never heard anyone say as much. To me, it was emotionally demanding. Firstly, that we had used a machine that normalised time travel in the broadest sense and taken us to from one time zone to another, geographically from one place to another, one culture to another, from conspicuous consumption to abject poverty. One value system to another. From the apparent value of life, to life without value. Surely that's worth a moment of reflection and contemplation? However, the disgraceful reality was that as soon as we'd disgorged the passengers, we were racing haphazardly in air-conditioned comfort through slums, filth and chaos to a five star hotel, where we moaned at the slow service around the pool.

It may be that life sets us the task of reconciling these extreme situations, but what I found, as a pilot and as a crew member, was that we were subjected to these circumstances so frequently that they became the 'norm.' Unfortunately, the only people who could change these norms were the people who, not only didn't suffer from them, but were ostentatiously benefiting from them.

"I verily believe that the earth in one year produces enough to last for thirty? Why do people die of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it? Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread?... even to mention such things, to say that they are possible, is criminal with many. Madness could hardly go farther." R.J.

DAYS AWAY FROM HOME

There are three jobs that involve working away from home, which we, the public generally believes are one long party. Firstly, airline crews. Secondly film stars on location and thirdly, being a member of a touring English sports team. Partying, in my experience as a pilot happens on very few night stops. Going out as a crew and having a meal and a drink or two happens probably a third of the time. Going out with just the other pilot happens often. And the rest of the time you would stay in, on your own. What I loved most of all was a hot destination, a twenty-four hour air-conditioned coffee shop that sold hamburgers and chips and being in possession of an interesting book. I had never been a reader of novels but I chanced upon John Steinbeck and his words caught my imagination with such strength that I was hooked. So, the last few years of my career were spent in coffee shops and with books, a habit that hasn't changed in twenty years of retirement.

Just to give you an insight into a pilot's roster. I'll write it out in prose rather than line by line. This way you'll get the feel for it. Although Transit van transportation wasn't actually listed on our rosters, I'm going to include because it played such an important part in my career.

Transit van to aircraft. Fly London to Bombay. One day off. Bombay to Singapore. Two days off. Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to Bombay. One day off. Bombay to Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. Two days off. Singapore to Bombay. Two days off. Bombay to Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. One day off. Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to Bombay. One day off. Bombay to London. Transit van to crew check in.

And all that packing and unpacking. It's hard to describe how demanding it could be at times.

On the face of it looks like a great life, and it would have been if we had started at 9 a.m. and finished at 5 p.m. each day, but the starting times varied. Some were night flights. Some were day flights. Some started very early and some very late. On some schedules the main hotel restaurant might be closed and one's dining opportunities would be limited to a twenty-four hour coffee shop, or a pizzeria, or an Oriental food hall, maybe an all-night diner, a the fish restaurant, a sandwich bar, Kentucky-fried or a steak bar. Failing that, but only as a last resort, we'd have to order on room service at our own expense rather than on the company's expense account. In days of old, some enterprising crew members would gather in one room, buy and share a couple of take away meals and make do. Years before that crews had been very resourceful and were able to

dine even more cheaply. They learned to fry bacon on light bulbs, and prepare soup in the kettles provided for coffee and tea. Eventually of course the hotels objected and crews had either to go hungry or spend money. I suspect these habits would have stopped anyway with these new, low-energy emitting bulbs that hotels have installed and tiny kettles that only boil a cupful of water at a time.

On some long haul flights we'd meet and socialise for "drinkies and bites" before going out to town for a meal. We'd usually meet in one of the cabin crew's room. Early in my long haul days, unfamiliar with room partying I made my way to the room. The door was open and I went in to what you'd think was a wedding celebration or a gangster's party celebrating a not-guilty verdict at the High Court. Fruit cake, sponge cake, cream cakes, fresh fruit, tinned fruit, cheese, sandwiches, bread, rolls, croissants, wine, soft drinks, fruit juice, cold meat, steaks, fish, more cold meat, crisps, ice cream, biscuits, fresh cream and more. I tucked into some food.

"Jeez where did all this come from?" I enquired, innocently.

"First Class Cabin," came the startled answer. "What will you drink? There's a nice Chateau Lafite, 1869 in that jug over there or would you prefer a Cola?" No wonder airlines ran out of money back then.

Do I miss the job? Not really. I can look back on my work and say I did everything I wanted to do - in fact I did more - and I was happy doing what I did and I lived every day to the full. I was happy and content with everything I had. So many people don't get half that chance regardless of their efforts and ambitions.

OTHER THINGS ABOUT FLYING

It seems unimaginable now but, when I first worked at Glasgow airport, we could park, walk across the tarmac, dump our cases on board the plane and then stroll to our briefing room. Almost anyone had access to the planes!

At the briefing we'd meet our captain and, if we hadn't met before, we'd spend a moment or two chatting socially before getting on with the flight briefing. There were important things to check, like the weather and the amount of fuel required but also items like airfield equipment serviceability and airspace restrictions. All this constituted our pre-flight briefing. In Scotland we knew the airports so well that it was all pretty routine. Nevertheless, despite the familiarity it was all done properly and professionally.

The great thing about becoming a captain is that the first officers usually turn up much earlier and get most of the paperwork done before you arrive. Alas, I was not that diligent when I was a first officer.

I was a first officer for seven years in Scotland. It wasn't unusual to board the aeroplane with the passengers and sometimes even after the passengers were on board. This may seem a bit unprofessional but sometimes it was more important to relax over a cup of tea. We flew a substantial number of routes, in diverse weather conditions and often with only ten minutes turnaround between. Flying around Scotland in the early 1970s had an atmosphere more like a flying club than a scheduled airline. Many of the passengers were well-known to us and would often sit in the cockpit with us when a third seat was fitted. Of course, modern aircraft have additional seats as standard but passengers are not allowed in the flight deck during flight these days.

Working at a modern international airport is somewhat different. Even before I retired the security procedures were so restrictive that sometimes I felt that I was lucky to get on my own plane... But of course that can only be a good thing for passengers.

So when the crew were ready we had all the romance of once again travelling to our plane in the infamous Ford Transit people carrier. As airports got bigger, planes became more and more remote from reporting centres, so we'd spend more and more time in the van but that meant more fun for those who actually enjoyed it! When I first started we could walk to the planes. By the time I retired some journeys could be as much as an hour. With an early start following a late fin-

ish it was almost worth staying on the van and camping down. Maybe pilots keep sleeping bags in those brief cases?

Enough of the glamour... Time to think about getting this book on track and taking an imaginary flight if you're going to finish this book before you land. Time keeping is one of the odder measures of air transport. Airlines are obsessed with departure times which seems strange to me. If I have an important business meeting, my arrival time is much more important to me than the time at which I depart. The industry doesn't measure arrival times because they say there are too many variables. I suppose changing the departure time to be sure of arriving on time would mean texting all the passengers to tell them their flight is leaving half an hour early because of headwinds.

While you and the other passengers are fretting and becoming anxious about getting on or missing your flight, my life on the flight deck is totally stress free.

On arriving at our plane the duties for the two pilots were clearly laid out. My responsibility, as the captain, was to check the exterior condition of the aircraft. Meanwhile, the co-pilot would be preparing the cockpit for the departure, the route and the destination. Once satisfied that all the checks have been completed in the cockpit I would wait for the engineer to bring the technical log to me for signing. The tech log contains information about the technical status of the aircraft and the fuel that has been loaded on board. When I was satisfied that everything was in order I signed it and the engineer took his copy and a copy for administration.

If everything was going to plan the next person into the cockpit would be the traffic dispatcher who would give me the aircraft load sheet to check and sign. This details the exact loading of the aircraft with regard to your baggage, our freight, my fuel on board and you, the passengers. Although standard weights are used for passengers, the weight of the aircraft is calculated to the nearest kilogram. As the captain, I would use this information to calculate the takeoff speed, the landing speed and the speeds at which I needed to extend or retract the flaps.

Usually, the last visitor to the flight deck before we taxi would be the cabin crew chief who would let me know how many passengers were on board and confirm that it agrees with the number on the load sheet. As you would expect, any discrepancies have to be reconciled before we can depart. He or she confirms everyone on board are all in their seats and that all the cabin checks have been completed. But it's not always that simple.

Sometimes the cabin is less well ordered. Often a passenger who is supposed to be sitting in 37K has mistaken his seat for one in first class. In the cockpit of my plane it was quite easy to hear conversations taking place just outside the cockpit door.

“This is the seat I booked,” proclaims the passenger.

“I’m sorry sir. 37K is at the other end of the aircraft.”

“Well it wasn’t there last time I flew, I’ve never been so badly treated in all my life this is the last time I shall fly on this airline.”

Amazingly, they all know the chief executive and my-oh-my will heads roll when s/he hears about this!

There’s often a very overweight man who doesn’t want to be stuck with “that crying baby” all the way to New York. It turns out that the only free seat they can find him is in the middle seat between two Sumo wrestlers, and by the time he decides that on reflection his previous seat was okay and that if he’d been a little tetchy it was because “of the traffic and so on ...”, it’s been filled.

Something I’ve noticed, when I’m a passenger, is the look of indignation that you get when you have the audacity to get into your allocated middle seat which means that a person occupying the aisle seat has to move. Curiously, the last bit of energy they have, having expended most of it on getting to and into their seat is reserved for getting out of it again with a very loud “humph.”

It’s curious that the person hellbent on getting on and finding his seat before anyone else doesn’t realise the consequences of getting there first. Maybe they’ll be first out of it when the seat belt signs go off? Some people just like to be first.

Finally, in this assault on the people who pay my pension, is the smiling face of the young dad who has “unfortunately” been separated from his family and been moved to a more comfortable seat in premium economy. How sad he feels to be apart from them. But he becomes much sadder when his wife comes to tell him that there’s another Manchester United fan right next to her (with the kids, in cattle class) and surely he’d like to spend the flight talking to him? There’s no discussion. They change places.

START UP, TAXI, GETTING READY TO FLY

I'm almost obsessive about a clean windscreen when I drive and so you'd expect me to want a clean screen when I go flying. To have the screens cleaned meant finding a spare engineer, lifting them up to the screen with a cherry picker (obtained from the maintenance base) to clean it with Type A screen cleaner, (obtained from the stores). So with their approval, and a well-used blind eye, we could avoid a delay and do it ourselves with a paper towel and something like sugar-riddled coke (the drink not the powder) or a similar product. What I found interesting was to see the number of passengers who then gather at the departure lounge window to see the pilot leaning out of the cockpit to clean the screen.

I wondered how many of them thought of what Laurel and Hardy, a couple of short ladders, a pianist and a few buckets of water might have made of the situation. Another fine mess missed!

It's a curious thing that within our own familiar bubble of life and work we do ordinary things while outsiders see them as 'different'. I've always thought it must be fun to be a bank cashier to see how much money people have compared with the way they live or to see which account a very rich person uses to pay for groceries or to buy a car. Maybe all bank staff do that for the first day and then don't bother. What about a rookie policeman? Is he curious about what a bank robber or gangster looks like?

I know it's wrong but I think people's private medical records is the stuff that would really interest me. Maybe I am just too curious... or sick.

Have you noticed your plane, more often than not, starts its journey by going backwards? We don't have a reverse gear on the plane so a tractor is connected to our front wheel and it's that that pushes us backwards, away from the boarding gate and to the taxiway. That's always struck me as being really strange, that a vehicle, capable of six hundred miles an hour in one direction, starts its journey by doing four miles an hour in the opposite one. Curiously, fearful flyers accept this peculiarity without question yet think that flying is the strange bit?

If you've read the safety leaflet and listened to the pre flight safety briefing you have done the right things. Never be too embarrassed to read the leaflet or ask questions about safety procedures. You expect me to fly according to the rules and so I don't think it's unreasonable of me to ask you to do your bit. If you don't do it for you, do it for children who may be sitting next to, or watching you. It sets a good example.

As soon as we are given our taxi clearance we can make our way to the runway in use. I know that from my own experience of sitting in the cabin as a passenger, and seeing other taxiing planes going this way and that, planes overtaking each other, must make the whole process seem very complicated to the untrained eye. In fact getting a plane to the take off point is quite simple.

What the passengers can't see, of course are the lines, markers and lights that guide pilots around airports. Neither can the passengers hear the explicit instructions given from air traffic control. The ground controller sets the route lighting for each aircraft and we "follow the greens" to the runway. At night, when you'd think it would be harder to find your way, it's actually much easier because the red, white, blue and green lights that show us which way to turn, when to stop and how far to go, are so much easier to see. So, please don't sit back there worrying about how we find our way... It's a case of following the line, or following the lights. I used to wonder if the controllers have train sets in their attics where they practice organising things. There must be a reason that they are so organised and disciplined.

As soon as we begin to taxi, we start the checks to set the plane for take off. Up in the cockpit we can't hear the noises of the flaps running into position. However, we can see the movement of a lever and a gauge showing if the flaps are moving and when they are set for take off. If there were anything wrong, we'd be given a warning so whatever sounds you hear when we taxi out are normal. The brakes are very powerful so don't be alarmed if the pilot misjudges, and applies them too harshly during this bit of your trip. They can also make what you might call 'funny noises', as do the hydraulic pumps and the air conditioning. Sometimes the lights will go on and off, as electrical power demands are met from different sources. There are all sorts of things to worry anxious flyers. But do you really believe that things could be unsafe without the pilots knowing? Flying is about routines, rules and procedures, not luck, chance or crossed fingers or fairies.

Sometimes a big airport will use different runways for taking off and for landing. The one chosen is always the most suitable and safest. Where an airport has residential areas nearby, the take off direction will avoid routings over them. Noise monitoring points will automatically report any violation and airlines will pay a heavy fine as a consequence.

Lots of fearful flyers think that the "bing-bong" sound before take off is a secret communication between members of the crew. In reality it's a message to tell them to take their seats for take off or landing, as the case may be. You'll notice that when in their seats they are not reading

books or magazines or doing a crossword puzzle. Their duties during the take off roll and landing are to be prepared to take action in case the pilots decide to discontinue the take off for safety reasons.

To me, the hum of those enormous engines running up to take off power was one of the most exciting parts of my life as a pilot. Everything is set and prepared for take off, all emergency procedures have been checked with my co-pilot and I know it's safe to go. In my mind I have absolutely no misgivings about taking off. If I had then I'd have stayed on the ground.

Every time I took off in my big jet I was never more than a moment away from the time I opened up the engine in the Tiger Moth for my very first solo flight. There is an excitement about taking off that is unequalled in any experience I have ever had. Even driving a supercar around a race track isn't as much fun.

Thousands of reliable horsepower get this beautiful machine into the sky. If there's a miracle at all in flying it's not the fact that planes fly but that humankind had the ingenuity to think of, and build, a machine that could do it. And that ability must put us head and shoulders above a tortoise for instance, or indeed any other animal in our kingdom. Had we not seen birds, what possible inspiration would have made us want to fly? Apart from cyclists needing to go over things of course.

Only the sight of birds could have given us the idea. From birds we were inspired to create kites and balloons. Next came the most basic and un-flyable planes. Then machines with wings that flapped like a bird's. Flapped and flapped until they collapsed with mechanical exhaustion. Undeterred, inventors went on designing wings and created curious devices that didn't stand a chance of ever flying. But the spirit was never dented ... unlike the machines. Then, slowly, came short, powerless flights until the Wright brothers managed to achieve, what we still call today, 'powered flight.'

I find it hard to believe that the plane I learned to fly in was built in only the third decade of air travel and now we have five hundred-seater planes capable of flying half the way around the world, non stop. "Wow" is a silly and overused word but when it comes to flying... what better word than WOW?

I understand why taking off is such a worrying part of the flight for anxious flyers. It's different from every other travel experience. When you get on a boat it's already floating. It doesn't have to do anything special to take you to your destination, it carries on doing what it's doing. A

car, a bus and a train do what they do and then move. But a plane? A plane does something completely different. It even teases you by first doing what every other form of transport does. It moves. But a plane keeps moving until it does something completely different... it flies!

If you're like me, you'd see it as completely natural and the thing you want it to do. In fact, if planes didn't have to speed along the ground to get airborne, I'd be very disappointed. That's why I think helicopter pilots are strange people... They don't need the speeding up bit. They're happy to go straight up and away. As for balloonists...? They just want to go straight up with the minimum of noise and fuss. All totally alien to me and missing the important bit of genuine excitement.

Some fearful flyers tell me they see taking off as a point of no return. They incorrectly see it as extremely risky. They confuse the noise and bumpiness with danger and in their very heightened state of awareness, it becomes an extreme experience. They have the impression that the engines won't be strong enough to get the plane up. They think the engines are straining and that it's all balanced on a knife-edge. Surely, they think, the pilots must be anxious at this stage and hoping that nothing goes wrong? All these things are seen as pre-cursors to an imagined tragedy.

I accept that these are genuinely-held feelings but, nevertheless, they are wrong in matters of fact. A fearful flyer could learn how to take off in a very short period of time. In fact, on several occasions in a flight simulator I have been able to teach someone to take off in less than an hour. This of course does not achieve the same standard as an airline pilot, but the basic procedure is very simple.

Fearful flyers often think the engines are straining on take off. But why would a manufacturer build an aeroplane which has to strain its engines to take off? Why would a pilot even think of taking off on a runway that was too short? Why would a pilot take off if the weather wasn't suitable? Would you make toast while sitting in the bath?

Why would pilots try to get airborne if they didn't know it was safe?

THE TAKE OFF

(There is sometimes confusion about take off terminology, so let me clear that up before I continue. During every take off as we accelerate along the runway we make a total aircraft systems check at eighty knots (95 mph). The 'point of no return' is not an expression that pilots use. The speed V1, is the speed at which a plane when taking off can, in the event of a malfunction, either stop successfully on the runway, or take off successfully. Before the speed of V1 a plane will stop on the runway. After the V1 speed, a plane will still take off, even though it might continue to gather speed along the runway before lifting off. Occasionally V1 is called the decision speed.)

While you are sitting in the back somewhat nervously, in the cockpit the mood is different and the procedures are simple, and clearly defined. Whoever is flying the aeroplane will ask for take off thrust to be set, which is done by making a simple push selection on a switch or lever. The pilot flying the plane will have his hands on the control stick (steering wheel) while the other pilot monitors the engine instruments. Pilots will bring the aircraft to a halt on the runway for *any* malfunction that occurs before reaching a speed of eighty knots. After that speed and up to V1, the pilots will reject the take off for only *defined* malfunctions. Airlines follow the aircraft manufacturer's recommended procedures. After reaching and exceeding the V1 speed the pilots will continue the take off. Only twice in my entire career have I had to reject a take off and these were both at low speed and for very minor malfunctions.

When you watch planes taking off you should remember that they all have different passenger loads and different amounts of fuel on board and therefore have different weights. The heavier an aeroplane is, the faster it has to travel before getting up to the speed required for take off. Once this speed has been reached all the pilot has to do is to raise the nose to the correct angle above the horizon and the plane will take off and fly safely. Even at this point, if an engine were to malfunction, controlling the aeroplane is not difficult. Once airborne, the monitoring pilot will confirm that the aeroplane is climbing safely whereupon the pilot flying the plane will ask for the wheels to be retracted. In the cockpit we have only to move a small switch to retract the wheels however, for you in the cabin there will be a big clonk as the wheels lock into the up position and as the various panels open and close around the wheels. Then the pilots will action the After Take Off Checklist.

Fearful flyers who are familiar with controlling their anxiety will be going through their breathing routine and should be feeling confident. Others, of course, may be very anxious. Some will be wondering when the first drink is going to be served.

The seat belt signs will go off automatically as the flaps are retracted. However, the pilot may choose to leave them on until later, possibly because of a layer of bumpy cloud. In all probability the cabin crew will start working long before the seat belt signs have gone off. It is not necessary for you to make a judgement as to whether the flight is now safer because the signs are off. The flight is always safe. When the seat belt signs are left on it is not a signal that you should be anxious. It is a precaution and is part of the duty of care that the airline has to its passengers and its staff.

That's the technical bit over and done with. I now want to tell you why I love the take off, what it's like for me as a pilot. What it feels like. Time for a flashback...

When I was fifteen my family moved to London, I stayed with an aunt and uncle to finish my school year and to complete my GCE examinations. Most evenings I would put my school books into my satchel, sling it over my shoulders and head off to watch the planes taking off and landing at the airfield that my friend Allen and I used to visit.

At the time I wasn't certain that my aunt and uncle were taken in by this subterfuge, and my abysmal results probably confirmed their withheld opinions.

With every take off I watched, I had an intense feeling of excitement. Later, in my professional life, when I was the one in the cockpit, I still had the boyish feeling that "all this is mine." The responsibility was hardly a concern. A pilot doesn't fly an empty aeroplane more casually than a full one, or a full one more carefully than an empty one. A pilot's selfish aim is to look after himself, and as a consequence look after everyone else. If anyone had been able to get inside my head when I was taking off, I think that they would be quite amazed that, after so many years flying, I still got an unbelievable buzz from it.

All take offs are different. On a bright and beautiful day there's the immediate freedom of all the sky ahead of you. To know that within a few moments you'll be travelling at hundreds of miles an hour with a view second-to-nothing, except perhaps the view from space... how do you deal with that? On a sunny day I'd sing "and she flies like a bird in the sky eye-e-eye" from the UK bread advertisement. Not every time... But most. Sometimes in tune... but mostly not.

And I would think, what a privileged life. And, on a cloudy day, when breaking out into the sunshine, I'd sing that *I could see clearly now*. Not every time... But most. Sometimes in tune... but mostly not.

"The heart looks into space to be away from earth." R.J.

Contemporaneously, I enjoyed the strict discipline of our procedures and the technical perfection of this fabulous machine climbing up through the increasingly rarefied atmosphere. Engine sensors measuring the air density. Fuel controllers feeding each engine with exactly the right amount of fuel. The air pumps working to maintain the pressure inside the cabin so that we can breathe. The heaters warming the incoming cold air. Electricity powering the systems and instruments. And, while all this mind-bending hi-tech stuff is going on, in the cabin the kettle is being boiled for "Tea or coffee?" Smile. "Tea or coffee?" Smile. "Tea or coffee?"

A world of its own, and it was all mine. On every flight my boyhood dream was being realised. Younger people would say, "How cool is that?" And I ask that too. Maybe they say something different now. Wicked?

The view from my front seat changes constantly. As we climb higher, the time changes, things that flashed by in a moment at take off now drift past with apparent leisure. Journeys that would take an age on the ground, pass in a moment. The sun and moon rise and set more quickly. The sky is darker. The sun is brighter. The clouds below, the sky still above us. We cross borders without interruption or delay. But, most importantly, the life giving sun. How many people see the sun nearly everyday they work?

"The sun has been up many hours, and the summer day is already far advanced. I feel that I have lost these hours, this light and beauty which has been pouring over the wheat and meadows, over the woods and sea , all this time..." RJ

It's just as exciting to take off in thick fog. Major airports have ground radar to watch aircraft movements but it's made even safer by slow taxiing aircraft, concentration and a keen lookout by the pilots. Matching the barely visible outside, to the information on the airfield chart inside is a task well shared by the pilots. One looking, one narrating and both confirming. Near the runway

there are markings to limit the progress of planes preparing to use the runway. This is to leave a safety margin from the runway and to prevent planes interfering with the transmissions from the landing guidance transmitters.

Before we take off there are planes ahead of us waiting their turn. One by one they line up and take off. On a foggy day we can see only the tail of the plane ahead of us. The radio calls tell us what's going on.

“Speed-bird 456 clear take off runway zero eight the wind zero seven zero ten knots.”

“ Roger Speed-bird 456, clear take off.”

Even above the noise of the air conditioning, inside the cockpit we can hear the engines of departing aircraft revving up and sometimes the heat of their exhausts clears the fog temporarily. It's an eerie view. Unlike the passengers, we in the front seats know when to look out to see things. You're sitting there just wondering where you are and what's going on.

Then it's our turn. You hear 'ding dong ding dong'. We get line up clearance, the last items of the take off check list are completed and the co-pilot reports that the check list is complete. We wait for clearance.

“Safe-air 123 clear take off runway zero eight the wind zero eight zero five knots.”

We acknowledge the call and confirm with each other that we're ready.

I check that I'm lining up on the centre line of the correct runway. The instruments and the co-pilot confirm that we are. I look along the runway into the fog. I can see less than you'd expect. It doesn't matter because I know the runway is clear, if required I count the lights ahead to make sure I've met the visibility limitations. Then I ask for take off thrust.

And off we go.

It's easy to keep the plane straight along the runway because as the plane gathers speed the runway lights begin to stream and soon, one by one, they're flashing past in a continuous flow. 'Eighty knots ... V1 Rotate'. When my co-pilot calls "Rotate" I look down at the instruments, confirm I'm at the correct speed and, on my plane, raise the nose to exactly fifteen degrees above level, we lift off and fly into the blankness of fog. At night the landing lights will be reflecting off the tiny water particles but, as the nose wheel retracts, the light directly ahead goes out. Just the wing lights are shining into the fog. But this is all peripheral, I'm looking at the instruments concentrating, watching the speed and height increase, checking and preparing for the first turn or

height restriction of my departure routing. I engage the autopilot and concentrate on flying the plane by the correct selection of buttons and switches.

In early morning fog, often within seconds of lifting off you burst out into the sunshine. I think most people would be amazed at how thin an apparently thick layer of fog can be. Solid sunshine from just a few feet above the ground until, much later... when we might meet another cloud.

“... this sunlight linked me to the past ages.” R.J.

Though astronauts would have a more exciting ride, their view is much more limited. I'd rather be an airline pilot than a spaceman.

If you ever watch the planes taking off from a major airfield you would be forgiven for thinking that they seem to go off in any direction, but the truth is that each departure is highly regulated. There are specific routes to fly according to their destination but they are grouped into four main directions: planes going north, planes going south, planes going west and planes going east. Then between six and ten thousand feet, each plane will join or be directed to the airway route towards their destination.

By the way, if you're seated near the front of the plane, during the take off you may hear a rhythmic bumping noise, this will be the nose wheel running over the raised runway centre line lights. You'll notice that it stops as soon as the plane gets airborne. If it doesn't, it'll be some kid kicking the back of your seat. Certainly nothing to worry about.

*“I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark nor even eagle flew” J.M.*

AFTER TAKE OFF

“Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue “ J.M.

I always loved the first part of the climb up to cruising altitude. All the preparation on the ground is bearing fruit. I have programmed the autopilot and I shall monitor it carefully during the flight. But there's no denying there's always time to look out of the window to check for other planes and to admire the view.

If you ever took the train into London from the south coast which is only fifty miles away you'd be amazed with how quickly it comes into view after taking off and turning south from Heathrow. It might take you three hours to travel from Brighton to London Heathrow but you're back over the same place within fifteen minutes of take off.

My childhood was spent in the county of Kent, for my foreign readers that's in the south eastern part of the UK. We normally holidayed in Kent, I went to school in Kent, and that was my world. From my front seat in the plane, I could see the whole of my geographic childhood in a glance. If we climbed quickly after take off and the weather was clear, I could see as far as Dover on the coast from overhead my old school in Beckenham. This was an extraordinary feeling. It was time travel in comfort. A lifetime in a moment.

In many ways it's a repetition of the excitement we've all had when we first travelled on a train and saw familiar places but from a different viewpoint. We could see our neighbour's gardens, we could see behind the High Street shops and connections that were familiar were suddenly disjointed. I remember the surprise of places seeming to be closer to each other from the train compared with a tortuous journey on foot or bus. I can't explain why I should have been so excited to see my school playing field from the train, but I was. I suppose the grown-up and modern version of this is doing it by plane and seeing countries, coast lines, mountains and meandering rivers.

Maybe I'm easily impressed but there has to be something special about flying over Wimbledon when the Championships are on, or flying over Wembley when England are playing an international match or to see a fast bowler run in at the Oval cricket ground during a Test match while flying above them at two hundred miles an hour. I often wondered if the cameras had ever

pointed up at my plane during a break in play or because of the tedium of a game, and speculated on our destination?

And the question for passengers is, how can you know who may be looking up at your plane? Children playing in a park, looking up and bragging that they know where that plane is going or identifying the airline or type of plane. Perhaps a child with an ambition to fly? A grounded fearful flying wanting the courage to do what you're doing. Someone miles away seeing your plane in the distance. Another even farther away wondering about the white trail across the sky. The noisy engines interrupting the silent thoughts of funeral mourners. Who knows who is watching? But someone will be. Disparate people separated by speed, height, distance or emotion but joined by a moment.

I loved the close remoteness that existed between me and anyone who saw my plane. There's a pub near the start of the south-westerly runway in Manchester. Quite often we'd have to wait there before take off while another plane was landing or clearing the runway and from my cockpit window I could see crowds of people enjoying a drink on a sunny day, packed tight up against the fence watching the planes.

Watching *my* plane perhaps? Watching what we were going to do. You can imagine the conversations and speculation about the flight. The enthusiasts who knew more about planes than I ever could. People who had no interest and others who envied the opportunity that I had. So, I used to open my window and give them a cheery wave and knowing that some of them would be tuned into the radio frequency I was using, I'd say, "Good afternoon," A non-standard call that would get you into trouble now but back then you could get away with it. And I'd know that they'd heard it because they'd wave harder!

If you were to judge me harshly you'd say I was showing off but, inside, I was going back to Kent and Biggin Hill airfield where I'd wondered how the pilots felt and what they were doing... and now I knew. You have to share that moment don't you? Who would I be, to keep it to myself? And how many excited kids could then say, "The pilot waved to me."

Momentarily, this part of the world was a stage and we were all playing our parts and, however far from Shakespeare's original meaning, we'd made our entrance were about to make a temporary exit. This just happened to be my part in the play, on that day.

A few paragraphs back we were flying over the south of England but a pilots life isn't restricted to one route although some people think it is. Bernadette did.

But before I tell you about Bernadette I want to tell you about a man whose name I never discovered but whose misfortune and forthright opinion has guided me in every sporting event I've subsequently known about. It was a harmless message to the passengers on a flight from Geneva to London and it went something like this (although I didn't sing it!):

"A very good morning everyone, I hope that you're comfortable and enjoying the flight. Right now, we're climbing up to our cruising level. For those of you interested in the Test Match score I'm pleased to say that England have scored three hundred and twenty two for the loss of two wickets and Mr Botham is not out on one hundred and forty two... Thank you for flying with us."

The poor man had been travelling for nearly twenty four hours from Darwin and had avoided every newspaper, radio, television set and conversation about sport so that he could go home, after a very hectic business trip, settle down in front of his telly and watch the highlights of the match. He's probably still in therapy.

Never tell anyone about the score or outcome of anything unless they specifically ask you. Then get them to sign a disclaimer, just in case. If by chance you're reading this and you were that traveller... I am genuinely sorry and I have never revealed a score since.

"I pray that I may have a deeper, broader, wider life. Do not let me be drawn down and destroyed in the despicable cares and ambitions of daily work." R.J.

OLD FRIENDS

Bernadette was a youngish girl, from Belfast, full of life, fun and laughter. One night I was operating a flight from Belfast to Las Palmas just sitting in the cockpit, waiting for things to happen, when the cockpit door opened and there was a cheery, “Hello” from someone.

“I’m Bernadette and I thought I’d come and say hello to the driver.”

“Thank you,” I said, “Come on in.”

The long and the short of it was that she was going on holiday and was hellbent on having a good time and, in her opinion, meeting the pilot was part of the plan. In those days you could and so, I did. I invited her to stay for the take off and said that as long as she didn’t drink too much during the flight she could come back and watch the landing. We had a good flight and she loved the landing. We chatted, and that was that. When she left the flight deck she said, “See you next year!” and I thought nothing of it.

Exactly a year later I was operating a flight from Belfast to Las Palmas. I was sitting in the flight deck, waiting for things to happen, and they did.

“Hi Keith. How are you? This is my friend, Mary. I told her you’d be flying us tonight... can we stay and watch again?” They stayed, and they watched the take off. They came back for the landing and, once again, Bernadette said that she’d see me next year. I said that I hoped we would but...

How lovely it would be to say that a year later the same thing happened but it didn’t, and I hope that Bernadette really did believe my explanation that my roster and meeting her twice, was a coincidence, a lovely one but just a coincidence. We really don’t do the same flights each year. I hope someone reading this book knows her and tells her that I often think about her. She was the only such coincidence that I knew of. (see later) Things obviously don’t happen in threes, despite what my mother used to claim.

Some of the younger co-pilots would get a girl’s telephone number using the navigation system.

The co-pilot would refer cockpit visitors to the flight navigation computer and say that it could calculate the distance to anywhere in the world, wait for a sign of amazement, and then give a short demonstration. We’d suggest finding the distance to the North Pole and other places until

we'd exhausted their amazement or bored them. Next we'd have a bit of a discussion about whether this was the updated nav system or not.

“You mean the one that can navigate on telephone numbers?”

We'd assure each other that this was a plane that could do that and so we'd then ask the girls if they'd like to know exactly how far it was to their house. The nav system had a simple scratch-pad for entering information and pressing the illuminated “execute” button would activate the entry. The system would put the entry into the route and calculate the time and distance to it. So it all looked above-board and professional. But the system couldn't recognise a telephone number anymore than it could recognise a bowl of cornflakes.

So unsurprisingly the location could never be found but the co pilot had a number to call. With mobile phones this puerile scam wouldn't work now, of course, which is probably a good thing for everyone. Also, security measures don't allow visits to the flight deck now which prevents this sort of stupidity. So it's a win-win situation.

We had a couple of visitors to the cockpit on a flight out of Spain one evening and, as we turned on to the runway, one of the guests asked how fast we'd be going so I said, “During the take off we'll be going faster than a Ferrari.” Then the first officer said, “And you should know, Skip.” I wondered what on earth he was on about until one of the guests said excitedly, “Ooooh, Captain, have you got a Ferrari?”. I had a diesel Golf, with over a hundred and thirteen thousands miles on the clock at the time. Pitiful behaviour, isn't it?

* * *

The great thing about writing a book or a diary is that you suddenly remember things that spoil what you've already written.

Years before I met Bernadette I *had* carried another passenger twice on the same route. It was after the Monaco Grand Prix race when Frank Williams asked if he could sit in the front with us for our return flight to London. The same thing happened the following year.

So that was twice I'd met the same person, although different people, twice on the same, although different flights in consecutive, but different years.

If during my career I had done that once more it means I could have claimed to have met the same (but different) person twice, in consecutive (but different) years on three (but different) oc-

casions. This would have proved my mother's rule of three, though I suspect that if I'd mentioned it to her she'd have told me to grow up and stop being so silly.

STRANGE FRIENDS

In the old days we were able to invite people to the flight deck on almost every flight. To me, it was a waste of a good seat not to allow an enthusiastic passenger to share our view. My welcome aboard announcement included this, "Nervous passengers, passengers new to this airline or children of any age who'd like to see the flight deck are welcome to come up at any time... just check with the cabin crew and they'll show you where we sit." We welcomed children of many ages.

Being a pilot is the closest thing to being Father Christmas. Kids would come into the cockpit and look sheepishly at the funny person in the captain's seat and find friendship more often in the younger face of the first officer. The most common question that children of all ages asked was, how many buttons and things are there and do you know what they all do? In a mischievous moment I would say that there are exactly one thousand, two hundred and eighteen buttons and things in the cockpit and they could choose one and I would tell them what it was for. They would find the most obscure thing in the cockpit and say, "What's this one do, Mister?"

With practised surprise I'd say that I'd never seen it before and I'd ask the first officer if he'd ever seen it. We'd act a bit puzzled and try to come up with an answer. I don't think I ever heard a kid say, "What an idiot!" as they left the cockpit but they really ought to have done. I also had fun teasing little kids about their homework. I'd pretend that their teacher had given me homework to pass on to them to do on their holiday. I didn't do that for long because they can turn very hostile when they find out what you're really like.

At this point I'd like to check that it's still the practice for youngsters to collect train, bus and aeroplane numbers or registrations? What I remember from my old school chums was that you'd have an Ian Allen book with the numbers or registration marks of trains, buses or planes listed and on seeing one for the first time you'd underline it in your book and loads of excitement followed. Some people take this hobby into adulthood it seems.

To my knowledge I only ever encountered really odd visitors on two occasions, and they both stand out in my mind more than thirty years later. The first, a government scientist, was high up in some sort of advanced, nuclear reactor technology or plumbing, I can't remember exactly. We held a perfectly ordinary conversation before starting engines and I was certain that, for all intents and purposes, he was just an ordinary passenger.

We taxied out, extended the flaps followed ATC instructions and completed the take off checks. He sat quietly watching what was going on and looking out of the window. The quiet of the cockpit was suddenly interrupted with an unexpected exclamation of excitement.

“Golf Alpha Bravo... that’s rare, what a spot!” our visitor revealed. Out came his Ian Allen book of plane registrations and a ceremonial underlining took place. We then got the history of where that plane had been, who operated it, what colour schemes it had been painted, who owned it, where it had flown and on and on and on. It takes about ten minutes to get to the take off runway at Heathrow and you’d think that you could only hear the complete histories of about two or three planes in that time. But you’d be very wrong.

Apart from the fact that I think the government should keep its scientists busier than they obviously did then, it’s also tragic that society offers so little that people end up doing things like collecting plane registrations at such an age and, once again, that others feel compelled to write about it.

The second visitor I want to tell you about was a very different kettle of fishy-ness. We were coming back to London from the Middle East and had been in the cruise for about two hours. One of the cabin crew came into the flight deck and asked me if, “A strangely quiet passenger” could visit the flight deck.

“Sure.” I said, thinking that a strangely quiet passenger would make something of a pleasant change. He came in a few minutes later, shook hands, wiped the third pilot’s seat with a clean handkerchief, sat down and looked, as we say in the trade, around, above and below. He was with us for about five minutes before he really engaged in, what you’d call, a conversation. We started with social pleasantries, got on to aeroplanes and submarines, drifting conversationally from here to there. He was particularly interested in our communications station and asked if he could listen in to our exchanges with ATC.

“Certainly,” I said, and I handed him the spare headset. I was about to show him how to use and connect it but by the time I had a chance he was already connected.

“We’re on VHF1,” I said. He selected VHF1 and then curiously, to me at least, he selected and adjusted the controls in a way that showed familiarity with communication systems in general, but not this one in particular.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll leave you to it. Just be sure that you don’t transmit anything, so don’t press—”

“It’s ok I won’t do that,” he interrupted. He obviously knew Morse code because he identified each navigational aid we were using and somewhat curiously, reported the fact to me.

Anyway he spent a lot of time nosing around all the communication and navigation selections. We just use them for identifying the navigational aids that we use in flight. It seemed an extraordinarily boring thing to show so much interest in.

We flew on and chatted about most things except what he’d been doing in the Middle East and what he did for a job. Most people like to chat about their jobs but not this guy. There was always a firm but polite change of subject each time it got close to coming up.

Suddenly, and without any prior indication he said he was going back to his seat. He undid his seat belt stood up, opened the flight deck door and without turning to face us asked if it would be at all possible to watch the landing.

“Certainly,” I said “Come up when you want. Just check with the cabin crew first...” We continued flying towards London. The first officer asked me what I was thinking because I was looking more puzzled and concerned than usual.

“ I not concerned but I am puzzled... that bloke was a bit odd. Normal most of the time and then a veil of polite secrecy. And he seemed oddly at home with the comms box, bearing in mind he said he didn’t know about planes.” We kicked things around and I came to the suspicious conclusion that he was some sort of intelligence agent or, as I said at the time, a spy. Now he’d be called “a spook.”

I said to the co-pilot that I was going to say something as we flew over London just to see his response. When I had been working at the hospital in 1961, a British government scandal known as the Profumo affair was in the news. Discussion of this was a significant part of the tittle-tattle of the porters’ room because of the woman involved. A senior government official named John Profumo, (to my knowledge he never came to the flight deck) was dating a young woman called Christine (nor did she). At the same time, she was fraternising with a Russian diplomat (definitely didn’t). This was considered to be a serious security risk and Profumo, the War Minister, subsequently resigned amidst much press gossip and speculation.

Our guest rejoined us over Paris and sat quietly but observantly, asking no more than a couple of questions for the rest of the flight.

It was a sunny day as we made our approach for a westerly landing at Heathrow. The view of the city was spectacular. I pointed out the sights. There was Tower bridge, Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace and so on. Along the Thames I identified the bridges for him.

At about the Battersea and Albert bridges I pointed to South Kensington and said, “And over there somewhere is the restaurant in Thurloe Street where Christine Keeler used to meet Profumo... can’t think of what it’s called.”

“Café Daquise,” came the correct answer.

What are the chances of meeting someone who could, thirty years after the event, actually name the meeting place of the two principle players of the biggest spy scandal since the second world war? Spooky! I winked at the first officer and felt very clever. This is another ordinary and unremarkable tale that would have been even better were I able to tell you that I was followed home by someone wearing dark glasses, a bowler hat and carrying a copy of the Times.

Maybe I was.

“NOT FOR THE LIKES OF US”

I want to tell you about a young boy and his Mum who came up to the flight deck on a flight home from one of our holiday destinations.

If I remember correctly it was a flight from Alicante to Manchester. In those days it was usual to run a lottery with the passengers and the winners could sit in the flight-deck for the landing, assuming that is, they were interested in doing so. The game was quite simple: passengers had to guess the length of the route that we were flying. It wasn't an answer they could get from the in-flight magazine. We were about twenty minutes from the start of the descent when a boy and his mum asked one of the cabin crew if they could see the flight deck. They realised it was a bit late but throughout the flight the boy had been pestering his Mum to see if he could meet the pilots.

She thought that we would be too busy to entertain any visitors despite the fact that throughout the flight there had been a procession of interested people to the flight deck. The boy was obviously very excited to be in the flight-deck and his mum was very excited for him too. They had hardly arrived when she insisted that they go back to their seats. Clearly the boy hadn't seen enough so I invited them to stay a little longer and we chatted about things that he found interesting. During the conversation I asked them if they had entered the competition to win a seat in the flight deck for the landing. The boy looked at his Mum as if to ask permission. She insisted that it was probably too late and that they should leave the pilots to get on with their work. I said that we were just about to make the draw and that they should have a go while they were with us. His request was answered with the statement, “We won't win. Anyway it's not for the likes of us.” “The likes of us” was a doom-laden statement familiar to me from my childhood. On this occasion it had more than the usual impact on me.

I explained that we were flying at a speed of five hundred miles per hour and that the flight time was two hours and six minutes. I explained that every hour we had travelled five hundred miles and therefore in two hours we would have travelled— and the boy answered, “One thousand miles.”

Then I told him that the hard bit was working out how far we travelled in six minutes. I asked him if he knew how much of an hour six minutes were. And I left him to his thoughts. I said that it was pretty likely that quite a few adults had got the correct answer but, despite that, he should

at least try. He'd need to put his answer and name in the first officer's hat and we could make the draw while they were waiting in the cockpit... just in case.

He wrote down his answer and gave it to the first officer. I turned away from them with the pretence of checking something and spoke to the first officer over our intercom.

The boy and his mum were the winners. When the first officer told me the name of the winner I repeated it loud enough for them to hear and said that I would announce it to the passengers.

"It's me. It's me, Mum."

The boy jumped and I like to think that he went around in a complete circle while airborne but I don't suppose he did. Mum and boy hugged each other and she cried. I didn't join in then but on the odd occasion when I tell the story I find myself with moist eyes. It's probably just a cold coming on.

It was such a simple thing to arrange and I can't imagine many more deserving people to win the competition which, without encouragement, they wouldn't even have entered. From then on, every time the poor boy said something, he was told to, "Shush! The gentlemen are concentrating." I got the cabin crew to strap them into their seats and give them an abbreviated but appropriate briefing about "what to do in the event etc." I tried to make everything as exciting as I could.

I gave them each a headset to listen in to air traffic control instructions. I signalled to the boy who was sitting in the third pilot seat behind and above me that we were about to start the descent. He told his mum what was about to happen.

"Shush! The gentlemen are concentrating," she replied.

So far as his mum would let me, I described what would happen when we started our descent and got him to read the check lists at the appropriate times. I showed him the weather report for Manchester and explained the route we'd be taking. Normally, air traffic control try to arrange aircraft so that they make one continuous descent towards the runway from their cruising height. That is to say, aircraft aren't instructed to descend a bit and then level out before being cleared to descend further before having to level out again and so on. Fortunately, that evening, we didn't get a continuous descent so on each occasion that we levelled out I could explain why the engines would increase power as we maintained height and speed. Then of course, we needed to descend more steeply to lose the excess height. I don't know which of the two of us enjoyed it more.

The cabin crew chief came in, chatted to them and found them a couple of souvenirs. It wasn't a party, but it was something special for all of us.

The weather at Manchester was clear and calm and during the descent we could see Birmingham and as far away as Liverpool. There was so much to show them and so little time to explain it all. The time ran out too quickly. As we turned on to the final approach heading, the directional runway lights stood out, clearly contrasting with the dimmer lights of the airport. I gave a brief commentary when there was something interesting to see and when we took an action in the cockpit. I could almost feel their excitement when we extended the flaps and put down the wheels. I explained about the vibrations caused by the wheels and flaps. The bustle of the cockpit, the gentle hum of extra power would have been fun for anyone I think. As you get closer to a runway at night it's obvious where you're going to land and most visitors become fixed on looking at the runway so I pointed out other things that were visible; the lights of central Manchester, the terminal buildings and the flashing lights of taxiing planes. The darkness of unpopulated areas. I told the boy that we'd soon be getting clearance to land and that he should listen out for our number (call sign) and if he heard it to tap me on the shoulder. We got our clearance and I got a tap on the shoulder. I gave him a thumbs up Then the all too soon rush of the approach lights as we flew over them and then along the runway. This would have been their only obvious impression of our speed. I closed the thrust levers and said that we were about to touchdown. A gentle whistling sound as the engines slowed, a moment's anticipation and then down on to the runway. You could hear the silence of their awe. We taxied in, parked, put the brakes on and stopped the engines. Another ordinary day at work for us ...

I bet that mum still asks him to tell everyone they meet about, "What happened on the flight home? Go on, tell aunt Doris!" Now he probably hates everything about flying, especially pilots.

"The light is the first thing I see, and by the light I say: Give me the reality of the feeling, which comes into existence with life. I am awakened and I live, give me that fullness of existence which I have so long desired and the idea of which is given by the light and by every loveliness of the earth." R.J.

CRUISING

Someone said to me that, once the seat belt signs went off, she felt safe. I asked her if the opposite were true when they were turned on. And yes, she confirmed that the seat belt signs going on in-flight terrified her. What will take me just a sentence to explain now, took quite a while to convince her of at the time. Sometimes the cabin crew ask the captain to put the signs on so that the passengers *have* to return to their seats. Then they can get on with clearing up the cabin. I wonder how many other people will find that bit of information life-changing?

While I'm on life-changing statements, a woman I met was cripplingly claustrophobic. I spent a lot of time talking about the circulation of air in a plane. Her overriding and unfounded fear was that she wouldn't be able to get air into her lungs. In near but concealed desperation, I said that if it were really that bad she could ask the pilot to open his window. Like most people, she was unaware that the pilots can, on most planes, open a cockpit window. There are certain conditions to be met but the plane design allows for it. If only she'd known that all along, her life would have been so different, she said. Unable to change the past she set about changing her future and has now travelled to most continents of the world. That's one small fact for a woman, one giant leap for her life.

It takes about twenty five minutes to get up to cruising altitude. We fly high because the jet engines are more efficient at high altitude and the thin air means there's less resistance to the movement of the plane. It's the same reason that footballers can kick a ball further in Mexico than they can on Hackney Marshes.

For the passengers it has the advantage that it's above most of the weather and makes for a more comfortable ride. Incidentally at cruising altitude the outside temperature is about minus fifty six degrees centigrade. Your freezer works at about minus six degrees centigrade.

While you settle down to your meal, a movie or a snooze, the pilots are navigating the plane. The great thing about flying east or west in the morning and evening is that the sun rises and sets more quickly or more slowly. I find that the most amazing thing about flying a long way westwards, on some routings, is that the sun goes down a little then comes up again. This is because you're flying along a curve which very, very roughly means that you're flying a little bit north in the first half of the flight and then downhill towards the south on the second bit. (Allow me a little latitude with this explanation if you are an expert navigator.)

It is an utterly staggering thing to see... Knowing that you're flying around the surface of the earth... And the earth really is an oblate spheroid, not flat at all, despite all appearances and theories to the contrary. There are two other things that I've seen from the air which still astound me: The Pyramids and icebergs. The Pyramids were built thousands of years ago pointing to a star in some godly recognition and, though Egyptian civilisation was advanced, I doubt that a water mill could ever have powered a plane. Their civilisation was many things and most of it is to be admired, but to travel through the sky? And to travel through the sky at speeds that they could have understood only in terms of the rotation of the earth or its movement around the sun? Five hundred slaves at a time? It would be churlish not to recognise powered-flight as one of modern man's greatest technical achievements. Isn't it a pity though, that we haven't used some of the financial and technical investment in flight for helping people on the ground? While we eat our meals in flight, others on the ground beneath us starve. I always found it difficult to reconcile the privileged life I lived above the clouds with the circumstances of the countless impoverished and starving people I must have flown over.

“Seeing the sun thus day by day traverse the sky about the house, passing the fixed points corresponding to the compass, and changing her position with the seasons – so that the house, the garden, and the trees about it made one large sidereal dial – made the solar apparent motion and the phenomena of the heavens very real and almost tangible.

...” R.J.

DESCEND, LAND, GO AROUND, PARK

All modern planes have comprehensive in-flight entertainment so for passengers and fearful flyers there are lots of ‘things to do’. For instance they don’t have to worry about how long it is until landing or wonder about where they are geographically. In front of them they can select a moving map from the in flight entertainment system which shows them everything they need to know about the progress of their journey and a lot more besides. For us, in the flight deck, the start of the descent is the start of a period of higher workload. Unless there is a very strong tailwind or headwind, the point at which we start the descent from a particular height is roughly the same. On my plane we started to descend about one hundred and thirty miles from the destination. The navigation system actually calculates the precise point, taking into account the wind, the direction of landing and the runway in use. It calculates a lot of other things as well but they are way beyond my ability to understand and explain.

As we approach our destination, we receive information about the runway in use and the weather at the airfield. There are certain conditions to be met before we can attempt landing and as long as all of these criteria are met then we can go ahead and land. In poor weather, when the cloud base is low and the visibility is restricted, we will land using the autopilot. When the cloud base is higher and visibility good then we can land the aircraft manually. The pilots brief each other about the routing and the landing procedures. Included in this briefing, of course, is the possibility of not landing and having to execute a Go-Around. Most passengers see this as an action which is taken only under extreme circumstances. This is not true, and neither does it take us by surprise because we are fully aware of the weather and the likelihood of landing or going around. The actions we take during a Go-Around are similar to taking off but because we are airborne already we only have to lift the nose add some power retract the wheels and flaps to climb away normally, and prepare to make another approach.

The most unlikely reason that I had to do a Go-Around was at Stornaway in Scotland, where a cow was wandering across the runway. We reported it to the man in the control tower who said it had already happened once that day and that he’d get Fergus, the farmer who rented the grass on the airfield, to round up his cow and herd it back home.

Although I’m grateful for the recognition, I still wonder why passengers feel the need to applaud on landing especially if the approach has been a bit bumpy. They also applaud when we

land in low visibility and, bearing in mind that the pilots or passengers don't even see the runway at all on some landings, I wonder if the applause is some sort of psychological relief or religious thanksgiving. It would be nice to think that they are giving credit to the captain in particular, but there is little or no evidence to support this view, except misplaced hope on my part.

I spent a lot of time in small aeroplanes, teaching people to fly and, consequently, I've never found it difficult to handle a plane. My many years in Scotland meant that my instrument flying improved and handling an aeroplane in gusty conditions became commonplace. The only difference between the aircraft I flew in Scotland and the jet aircraft that I flew when I transferred to London was one of inertia. Inertia and kinetic energy and all that stuff is a function of the half the mass multiplied by square of the speed, but in all honesty I have to say that I never saw anyone working it out like that. My view was that because a passenger jet is faster and heavier, managing its energy requires more planning than in a lighter, slower aircraft.

Landing isn't a particularly difficult task either although many people see a smooth touchdown as an indicator of the pilot's skill level. In fact, a jet aeroplane has to be landed according to the manufacturer's recommendations and nowhere do they suggest that a smooth landing is the objective. If a first officer landed the plane at the correct speed, in the correct nose-up position on the runway markers (which show the correct landing point) then smoothness was neither here nor there to me.

There are many films now, on YouTube, showing aircraft landing in crosswinds and blustery conditions. A fearful flyer should ignore these films and remember that they are usually filmed with telephoto lenses which exaggerate perspective and adds much to the cinematographic drama. That and the unshielded microphones that make any wind sound like a hurricane. I should also mention that when a modern jet aeroplane lands, with the wind blowing across the runway, you can expect three bumps on landing. You'll be touching down on the wheel on the side from which the wind is blowing. Then the other main wheel will touch down and finally the third bump will be when the nose-wheel touches the runway. This is the normal and correct practice. Unfortunately fearful flyers will associate a bumpy approach and three impacts with the runway as a somewhat perilous adventure. If you once thought like that, it's no problem. But if you still do now that you know the truth, then it's time to re-consider the facts.

Part of the pilots' in-flight briefing is to discuss the routing from the runway to the parking stand. Although the routes become familiar we always check the assigned routing against the air-

field chart. I only ever got lost or went the wrong way once. I'm ashamed to admit it was at my home base of Heathrow.

Once we've parked we fill in the aircraft's technical log, do the shutdown checks and prepare to hand over to the next crew (usually waiting in the Transit van, arguing about getting off first or last) who should be ready to go out on another service immediately. Polite and thoughtful pilots always cleared the flight deck of their clutter, headsets, paperwork and, of course their enormous flight bag containing their personal jumble. Others didn't. I always thought it incongruous that we took such pains over keeping the cockpit clean and tidy having consumed, converted and deposited the remains of fifty tonnes of hydro carbon fuel into the atmosphere.

Then we're ready to enjoy another fun ride in the Ford cattle-wagon. Despite the previously mentioned hierarchy of boarding sometimes being the captain counts for nothing... especially if you just got lost taxiing in.

GOING HOME

If I arrived home during normal working hours you can be certain that someone would have spotted me. Away from airports and airplanes the last bit of my working day wasn't over until I'd run the gauntlet of neighbourly insults. Highly original comments from my neighbours like, "Hi Keith, I hear it was another half day's work yesterday?" My reply was well rehearsed. First a laugh, second a suggestion that I'd ring their doorbell when I next left home at four in the morning or when I next arrived home after midnight.

"Only kidding," they'd quip as they absorbed the venom in my reply. I'm glad about that. I'll put you down as the five hundredth person to kid me this month, I thought.

Sometimes, I'd have the courage to asked them what they were doing at the weekend while I was flying overnight to Crapsterburgh in a country so backward that it didn't even have a song for the Eurovision Song Contest.

When I had time to debate our working conditions, I'd throw in the bit about whether they'd be happy to have an unrested and overworked pilot at the controls of their next flight? Then you'd get the bit again about they were only joking. Well, I'll tell you what, when you've heard the same joke for twenty years you get tired and bored but, I'm pleased to say, never bitter.

Now that none of my neighbours talk to me, I wish I'd been able to stay in touch with the guys I'd worked with, at least they'd understand. It was either the unsocial hours that made me unsociable or *I am* unsociable and chose the hours of work that suited me. Frankly, I don't care one way or the other.

BY THE WAY

If you've been hoping to read stuff about the dangers of flying, I'm sorry to say there's nothing for you on that front. Flying a modern airliner is routine and governed by rules that are so strict that danger isn't something that we think about. We turn it on its head and think constantly about improving safety. However:

I have been involved in two hotel fires and one hotel bombing. The first incident occurred while I was sleeping late into the morning after a very delayed arrival the previous night and was hoping to enjoy a day off. I woke from a dream where I was involved in a car chase in a police vehicle with sirens blaring. I woke up and thought I was still dreaming because the sirens kept sounding, but that's what fire alarms are supposed to do. I dressed and had a quick look out of the window.

Imagine my surprise (I've always wanted to write that) when I saw the arrival of a fire engine on the main road, two floors down. Nearby was another fire engine slowly extending its ladder towards my floor a few rooms to my left. Being a quick-witted and well prepared sort of person I grabbed some clothes, my key and left the room. I immediately came face-to-face with a fireman wearing breathing apparatus. I asked him what I should do. The long version is, "Good morning. May I suggest, sir, that you go in the other direction and take the fire escape, you'll find it on your right, push the bar to open the door and make your way out of the building, and assemble at the designated rendez-vous point."

The short version was more like, "Just **** off down the fire escape and get out." Even taking into account that he had more important things to do than direct me I thought he was a little bit abrupt. Maybe it worked... I was at the rendez-vous point before I realised what I was doing. Fortunately, it was pretty mediocre as far as burning buildings go, in fact I've only mentioned it because it's as close as I ever got to danger in my flying career, and that was on a day when I was off duty.

* * *

On a more serious note, I always check the location of fire escapes in any hotel or building that I'm in. I don't party to the extent that a fire alarm wouldn't wake me. Later I learned that there

had been a fire beyond the door from which the fireman had appeared. The fire had been contained easily and within the room but, as the fireman explained later, there is no such thing as a small fire. It's all to do with time.

I try to do everything that helps the rescue services and the first things on my list of to-dos are to be alert, know the fire drill and take my room key with me in case I have to go back to my room. I always put my key on my bedside table so that I can retrieve it in the dark. I always read the fire instructions and I always check escape routes. Action is better than reaction. Having a plan isn't an invitation to the god of danger to test you. If you believe in such nonsense, you no doubt missed out page thirteen of this book?

* * *

On to the next fire which occurred years later in the middle of the night. Anything that happens after the first hour's sleep and an hour before scheduled waking time is, in my book, the middle of the night. This time I was again woken by the hotel fire alarm.

I dressed very very quickly. Trousers, shirt, shoes, all were ready, and left my room. Yes, I did have my key! I went to the fire escape and from my eighth floor room descended or, rather plummeted, as quickly as I could. About three floors lower I met a lone woman in a dressing gown standing on one of the landings of the escape.

"I feel so silly, there's no-one else around I'm thinking about going back to the room," she said. I suggested that now we were up, the sensible thing to do would be to keep going down and go to the rendez-vous point. We clattered on down the empty concrete stairway. Outside the hotel at the RDVP, we were greeted by the manager and a fireman. The fireman said "Thank you" to us and a little later the manager made us a cup of tea.

There was no one else up as far as we could see... if there were they'd all stayed in their rooms, probably making a complimentary cup of tea and ringing down to reception to see if the fire alarm was genuine or not. Unsurprisingly, the absence of guests enraged the fireman who was there to save and protect the lives of people who couldn't be bothered to save or protect their own.

When I checked out I was pleased to see that the manager hadn't charged for the tea. The only other useful thought I had that morning was, who'd be a fireman?

“It’s the hole in each ear that causes the fear ... and lets out the fluid called brain!”

Adapted by K.G.

* * *

In the escalating order of hotel incidents, next comes the bombing. It was the middle of a different night again. I was sleeping and woke about two feet above my bed, still horizontal, having reacted to the most almighty bang. I guess that to anyone who lives a life less indulged than mine, it may not have seemed so loud. Maybe it was the darkness that made it louder? Maybe it was because I was in a hotel in Northern Ireland and it was during the time of the troubles? Maybe I just scare easily? Whatever the reason, I still wonder how you can continue registering the sound that wakes you after it has stopped and you are fully awake. After all, it’s the bang that wakes you. Perhaps by the time you wake up the bang is over or maybe you actually hear the bang while you’re in some intermediate phase between sleep and wakefulness, I don’t know. But what I do know is that it was loud. It was terrifying. More accurately it terrified me. We discovered later that it was a small bomb.

If that was a small one then preserve me from a big one. And credit to soldiers and others who have to live with these things now. A garage and its contents to the side of the hotel had been turned to rubble in a matter of milliseconds. But that’s not the point of the story.

We gathered in the main foyer. Most of the guests were foreign to Northern Ireland, so bombings and discord were not a part of how most of us lived at the time, we were all pretty scared and we all looked anxious. Without make-up, or uniforms on, some of the men and women looked rough. The Manager invited us to a nice English Breakfast cup of tea with him without seeing the irony of his suggestion. He thought that we might want to pop back to our rooms to spruce up and then join him in ten minutes or so. For those unfamiliar with the troubles it was the fact that the Brits (British) “ruled” Northern Ireland that was the heart of the so-called ‘troubles.’ It might well have been just what the Doctor (Paisley) or others might have ordered.

Now it seemed to me that those of us who were there earlier looking rough now reappeared in a very wide range of “How I was dressed when it went off.” Am I right in thinking that in the ’sixties there were ‘come as you are’ parties, where you had to dress exactly as you were upon

reading the invitation? I never opened a card without being fully dressed and ready to go out to the theatre.

I remember one medium-aged lady who previously was in the “rough to very rough” category reappeared very nicely turned out and looking much younger, almost as if she’d been ready to go to the ball but a bomb had gone off and interrupted the final touches to her preparations. One collar was up at a jaunty angle, her hair tidy but glamorously dishevelled... almost. The heels just a little too high for a dressing gown, the dressing gown now from her wardrobe, not the flannel thing she’d found hanging on the back of the bathroom door that she’d used in her frantic escape earlier.

The men were recounting stories of or what they were doing at the time it went off or what they did in the aftermath. Many men of course “knew” what it was immediately and reassured those of us made of thinner mettle. A few others had “heard much worse” and I expect, just like me, even more are still telling this inconsequential story.

My remaining memory is that it was a very loud bang and given the choice to tell the truth or a better story, I’ll opt mostly for a truthful story. No doubt any British film star could usefully add this sort of thing to an autobiography by saying that they were having a late night drink with Sean Connery at the time and how he stayed as cool as the characters he played. “Shumthing has jusht been shaken *and* shtirred.” he quipped.

To be truthful I need to complete the story by saying that this bomb was a “warning” just a small thing about two pounds of Semtex or dynamite. For a soldier they probably use that much to open a cupboard door or light a cigarette. But that’s the difference between the life a soldier doing an important job and the cosseted existence of an airline pilot.

GETTING OFF (PART ONE)

Here's a curiosity of flight or at least the end of a flight. As the plane comes to a halt all those people who have been sitting patiently for hours on end suddenly need to get off at the same time. Why is it that as soon as it's time to get off people prefer to stand in a congested aisle than risk losing two places in a stationary queue to disembark? (see last chapter also)

A few people use the technique of blocking the gangway while their partner empties the overhead baggage compartments. They think this will give them the advantage of having a free run to the open door. In reality, it allows all the people from the seats ahead of them, who have been patiently waiting in their seats to make their way, un-pushed to the door. What ever move you make you will be frustrated so, my tip is expect to be stepping off the aeroplane about twenty minutes after the seat belt signs have gone off. Surprisingly, you'll find that this bit is better than the bit to come.

An enterprising airline could use this period of captivity to up-sell the remaining dry sandwiches and warm drinks while you're waiting to get off. And they might see if you'd like to take advantage of "our latest offer" of a bar of chocolate and Dan Brown's latest plotless, blockbusting verbiage.

When you have finally disembarked and you find yourself in a queue to be processed by immigration, don't be tempted to leave your place in the queue to see how far you are from the front. It will lead to disappointment and resentment. If you enjoy the sort of luck that I do when I travel, your flight will disembark moments after two other full, intercontinental flights. This means that you will be in position number three hundred and seventy six. This compares with the chances of having been in the low three hundred and sixties if you'd got up before the seat belt signs went off, blocked the aisle, emptied the lockers, trampled on children and not given way to anyone still seated. Travellers in the first class cabin do exactly the same thing, by the way, except that, with fewer passengers, they look more dignified.

On my last trip to America, we waited a long time at passport control. I was tempted to put the actual duration in this narrative but considering you may well be reading this book in-flight I don't want to make you more anxious than necessary. Have a book or magazine with you. Some airports will put on extra staff but not enough to make any significant difference. I know that, out of sheer relief at arriving at the kiosk to be processed, one tends to be a little delirious. One starts

saying all sorts of things of no interest to an immigration officer who, incidentally, also hates the queue and is thinking of emigrating on the flight you arrived on.

Try to remember that, as long as you have been in the queue, he or she has been processing people and has probably been having as much fun as you have. That's why they're so cheery when you tell them that it's great to be back or that you've heard such wonderful things about their country. Try to see it from where they are sitting. My advice is to stay hydrated, and stay quiet.

Some countries have taxi arrangements where armed police officers direct you to the next available taxi or to a drug dealer. If you're on holiday and have paid for a transfer bus you'll be mistakenly happy. Sitting in a great big, air-conditioned, luxurious people carrier fit for a king or queen will feel like paradise after your flight. But why the delay you wonder? That's so that the other twenty three people they're going to fit inside have time to get off the plane that arrived after yours, collect their baggage, go through customs, get through immigration, find the bus, find their children, find an ATM and then join you. Wow, you think, this hotel's popular, what a great choice. Not quite. The bus visits countless other hotels, on its ninety minute tour before finally dropping you off (first on - last off policy) at your resort. While other passengers from this bus tour are enjoying a second, beach-side drink you get checked in and start the wait for your room to be cleaned. When you finally settle down by the pool, you can see the airport terminal just beyond the adjacent private beach.

Perhaps I have painted an unrealistic picture and I should modify it by saying that people tell me that these things happen rarely. I fly about ten times a year, which must be rarely because it always happens to me.

MY CAREER: A SHORT CHAPTER

The young pilots that I meet nowadays have a very different introduction to the airline business from the one that my generation had. We were the first group of pilots, following the war, who had not been trained by the Royal Air Force or the Royal Navy but who had undergone specialist airline training or private flying club training. That meant there were three types of pilots into the industry in the late sixties. Firstly there were military pilots, secondly, cadets selected for training as airline pilots and thirdly, as you know, the group of pilots from which I came, confidently but erroneously, described as “self-improvers.” We were considered the lowest of the low, always enthusiastic, occasionally capable and certainly keen, but we came from a variety of backgrounds and our training was inconsistent compared with the other groups. Understandably the airlines were reluctant to recruit people of uncertain genetic quality.

Those of us fortunate enough to get into what became British Airways, (BA was formed from the amalgamation of British European Airways and British Overseas Airways Corporation.) enjoyed a status above those who joined regional airlines and for many years it was the ambition of most self-improving pilots to join the big boys. In reality, there were many, very capable pilots from the mongrel group. Despite rigorous selection, there were some less capable ones from the pedigree-bred, selected, elitist, self righteous and indulged lot. Not that I have strong feelings one way or another.

B.A. operated a large number of aircraft types in the late sixties. Some were flown with two pilots, some with three and some with two pilots and an engineer. Sometimes, a pilot took the role of engineer. The guys (and it was only men in those times) who had undergone specialist airline training, but were inexperienced in flying generally, were allocated to the modern three-crew jet aircraft where they could build their flying experience.

The military were unable to supply a sufficient number of experienced pilots for the two crew Viscount aircraft which left an opening for the third group of pilots of which I was one. However pilots needed a lot of experience to make up for the perceived lack of quality existing in that group. The long and short of it was that I probably got in by luck, a severe pilot shortage, lots of hours as an instructor, a bit of experience on the horse freighter and a successful interview where hat throwing wasn't involved.

To add to the indignity of being a low-reputation pilot I had the so-called luck to be posted to Scotland. This apparent misfortune turned out to be one of the best things that happened in my flying career. Scotland was cold and unpopular but offered the best flying and gave me the opportunity to learn about flying a bigger aeroplane, to operate with four engines rather than two and carry seventy clean and polite passengers rather than six irritable and smelly horses.

The Vickers Viscount for which I was recruited was a four-engined turboprop aircraft. It entered service with B.E.A. in the 1950's and was the first turbo-prop aircraft to enter service anywhere in the world. It was very popular with passengers because of its large windows giving the best view from any aircraft, until the modern Boeing Dreamliner. It flew higher and faster than all previous commercial planes before it because of its turbo-prop jet engines. Anyone who remembers the Viscount will tell you about the shrill, high-pitched whistling sound the engines made. (A turbo prop plane has jet engines but, instead of the large enclosed induction fan at the front, it has a propeller and is just as safe and reliable as any other type of aircraft and engine combination.) I spent my whole airline time flying on Rolls Royce engines. Never had one stop without my permission, and I never gave permission.

I'd looked inside one when a friend of mine had a job flying them for an independent airline and, compared to the horse freighter, it was pure luxury. BEA, the company I worked for, had operated them from new. In 1969, when I joined the company they were old, but still the mainstay of the internal routes.

When the Viscount was first introduced it was considered to be too difficult for pilots of average skill to be able to fly and so only the very best pilots were posted to it. It was soon discovered that it wasn't difficult to fly. It was just unfamiliar to the industry. Years later and by the time it was my turn, the kudos had gone sour. In many respects it was like the attitude of the Concorde fleet. They had confused novelty with difficulty.

I suspect also that some of the pilots who made rulings about its difficulty were victims of their own incompetence. It was easy to fly and everything about it was as it should be. The instrument system was quite old but very effective. The auto pilot would fly you down to two hundred feet and it handled like a light plane so that short journeys between the islands could be hand flown at wave height, sometimes lower if the tide was out, and the weather was good.

By contrast, of course, the weather could be ‘on limits’ or below for days on end. Delays built up. Crews were out of position. Some pilots wouldn’t get home for days. But some pilots didn’t go home for days, regardless of the weather.

There were Viscount bases in Jersey, Birmingham and in Scotland. When pilots were promoted from first officer to captain they were posted to Scotland because the Viscount was the most junior aircraft in the company. Glasgow was wet and cold in the winter and cold and wet in the summer so it was only blind ambition or the pursuit of money that persuaded any pilot to be ‘promoted’ there. Most senior co-pilots lived in the south of England so there was a regular flow of newly promoted captains in and out of the Glasgow base as they moved up the seniority list.

Jersey, in the Channel Islands, went to the pushiest people because of the very low personal tax rates and many allowable expenses, it attracted avaricious pilots like sugar-starved honeybees to a honeypot. Birmingham was okay if you lived in the south of England because the commute to work was easy.

In Scotland, the flying was spectacular. When the weather was good we could fly from Glasgow to Stornoway, Aberdeen or Inverness at very low altitude and enjoy the most fabulous views of the scenery. Within a few hours, or sometimes minutes, we could be grounded by fog drifting in from the North Sea. A new captain receiving the weather forecast from the Scottish destinations would sometimes question the strength of the wind in the hope that they had misheard.

“Did you say sixty five knots?”

And back would come the reply, “ Yes, it’s dropped right off now.”

While some of the new captains winced in disbelief, the co-pilots had a moment of superior contentment.

There are two sets of rules that govern how pilots operate a plane, the first are called visual flying conditions, that is looking out of the window to see where you are and to stay away from other planes and the ground, and instrument flying conditions where you need instruments to fly and navigate by, and where the aircraft are usually under some form of air-traffic control. Flying in Scotland meant that we spent a lot of time flying visually then switching quickly to flying on instruments, which was the airline’s procedure when the weather deteriorated. A perfect combination for anyone who loved flying.

I spent seven happy, but very cold years, in Glasgow. The social life was fun and the countryside was the best you can find. But the sun ... Where was the sun? In seven years there I was able

to sunbathe twice - one Sunday morning and one Wednesday afternoon - and that was it. It made a man of me but unfortunately it made men out of a lot of women and the women made men from the London base, into boys. Many a fresh faced young captain would do a stint up in Scotland to return home to London and his family very much wiser than when he left.

Apart from the excellent flying opportunities there was a lot of socialising during the days away from home. During one hotel night stop, in Aberdeen, a group of would-be-management pilots built a stack of armchairs up to the high ceiling of the main lounge area. With an unsurprising lack of forward-thinking, they made no plan for deconstruction. However, as at Jericho and with a similar amount of noise, the problem resolved itself. The manager of the hotel was held responsible and was eventually sacked.

No-one else owned up... Which just goes to show that management types are prepared to stab each other in the chest when someone else's back is turned.

There were things done then, and I'm talking about flying and 'socialising,' that would be frowned on today, and rightly so. Back then it was okay-ish to bend rules as long as you flew safely and sensibly. We had a boss who was a clever disciplinarian. He saw what he needed to see, and suffered from occasional bouts of deafness.

CHANGING PLANES

But all good things, even in Scotland, must come to an end and so, after seven years, I took the opportunity to change base move to London Heathrow and fly the Lockheed Tri-Star. This would be my first pure jet-engined plane, my first wide-body plane and my first long haul experience. I was anxious that I could manage the ground school. I struggled with the technical ground school and I decided to pay an instructor (not the examiner) for extra lessons to make sure I passed. But I loved the plane. The first time I looked inside it I thought that I had gone into a cinema. There were three hundred and fifty seats in two large cabins - small by modern standards but, in the mid 70's, this was the biggest three engined aircraft in production. It seemed massive. It was massive.

The Douglas DC10 was its competitor and those that flew one type praised their plane, and condemned the other. This was perfectly normal in the pilot fraternity. The Tri-Star, however, was the first jumbo aircraft to be able to land automatically in fog where the visibility requirement was to be able to see just one runway light immediately before landing. During a Go Around from very low altitude it had the peculiarity of touching down and accelerating along the runway. The reason it touched the runway was that the Go Around could be started at such a low altitude (twelve feet above the runway) that the aircraft would continue descending onto the runway while the nose was coming up and while the engines were still increasing power. It would be too complicated to explain here how the aircraft did this in complete safety, but there were very good reasons. Safe reasons. It was an extraordinary thing to experience, surreal emotionally, more advanced technically than a moon-landing, and very rewarding professionally. What more could you get from any job?

Flying the Tri-Star meant that I had to move from Glasgow because commuting to London wouldn't have been convenient. However leaving the open air of Scotland for the asphyxiation of the south of England wasn't something I could manage. So we kept going south to the Channel Islands from where I commuted for ten years. Once again, I was in that curious position of spending several hours getting to the airport and then, within twenty minutes of takeoff from London, I could be five miles above my home and travelling past it at six hundred miles an hour. It's lovely to be able to look down on where you live and, of course, being an island it was easy to spot. On the other hand I was sad to see my home and not be able to go there until my tour of duty was finished six or more days later.

“This sunlight linked me through the ages to that past consciousness.” R.J.

It so happened that during my time on the Tri-Star there was a downturn in the aviation business and I was able to take time off from flying. I spent six months working for a gardener in Alderney, cutting grass, clearing driveways and odd-jobbing.

I learned many useful things as a gardener. If, for instance, we had spent in the morning clearing weeds from someone's drive, our boss said that it wasn't what we had done that counted rather it was what the customer could see that hadn't been done. Summed up with the phrases, “It's not what you do do, its what you don't do,” and “It's not how much you get right, it's the bit you get wrong that you're judged by.” Little social aphorisms that wrecked the lives of countless children during their time at school.

Another useful tip I learned was that if the boss turned up while you were taking an unofficial break, don't jump up and start working because it makes you look guilty. Much better to stay where you are and create the impression that you have been working so hard that you need a rest. I often do that at home now.

If gardening had paid as much as flying I might have been a gardener. At last, transferrable skills that could be transferred!

CAPTAIN AND TRAINING PILOT

I was just over halfway through my airline career when I was promoted to captain. By then I was flying the Boeing 757, the world's most advanced aeroplane, which had the first ever, electronic flight displays. Instead of analogue instrument indications, flight information was digitally produced by computers and presented on screens. We enjoyed the benefits of everything that goes with digitalisation, and, in my experience, they were totally reliable from the day of introduction. I never suffered a significant failure of instrumentation, engines or equipment in the fourteen or so years I flew it.

The Boeing 757 weighed a hundred tonnes, carried a hundred and thirty people and was a delight to fly. Its automatic pilot could fly the plane to the touchdown point without any forward visibility, and control it along the runway. Although standard now, the brakes were applied automatically. On my third trip in command I flew from Aberdeen to London and landed at night, in fog so thick that I had to get a ground escort vehicle to show me the way from the end of the runway to my parking gate. The passengers clapped when we landed, and well they might, what a mind-bending bit of gear! In the aero-mechanical sense not the other one!

I had enjoyed the benefit of being a co-pilot on the 757 before I was promoted which made the whole business of changing seats and role a lot easier. I didn't have any pesky exams to take so the learning was limited to 'being a captain.' I've never had a problem about being decisive and difficult decisions were never hard for me to make. I put this down to running a large flying club at the tender (cliché four) age of twenty-one. I had learned not to be intimidated by conditions, people or misplaced authority.

My first trip in command was from London to Manchester and now, thirty-six years later, I've just realised that my last flight as a British Airways pilot was from Manchester to London.

You might say I didn't get very far as a captain.

I had a very good boss who signed off my promotion. Although he was a very senior management pilot, it was his practice to wear first officer's stripes when he was 'checking out' a potential captain. It meant that the ground crew deferred to the trainee rather than to him. It was only when documentation had to be signed that he'd step in. He was known as a fiery individual but I always found him to be fair and encouraging. He couldn't stand fools and didn't deal in unimportant matters.

He had a big influence on the way that I came to train others. I treated people as if they already had the role they were training for. This gave them the confidence to really achieve their best.

My outspokenness and long hair denied me a training role for a couple of years or so until I realised that I was never going to beat the system and so I started to conform sartorially. It wasn't as painful as I expected and nor was my first proper haircut in many years. Because seniority had a big part to play in the selection procedure I eventually got a job as a training pilot anyway. It's nice to think you've realised an ambition on the basis of something as worthwhile as seniority and a decent haircut.

I used to have a contract with my student pilots. I'd say that during the days we were flying I would be asking them questions and, of course, hoping for the right answers from them. But if the answer was wrong, the trainee could ask me two questions to see how smart I really was. My reasoning was that only an instructor who was ready for the madhouse would ask questions to which he himself did not know the answer, and so it put me, the instructor into a position where I would never be seen as being wrong. Such superiority is not conducive to effective learning. Questions only show a part what the trainee *knows or doesn't know*. How do you discover what important things he *doesn't know ... but hasn't been asked about?* This might, in the long run, be more important. From an Instructor's point of view you learn more about a student's knowledge from the questions s/he asks rather than the questions they answer.

However, if I suspected that I was being given an incorrect answer deliberately, to test my generosity, I would ask three questions, none of which qualified for the "getting one wrong" clause. It was a very good system based on mutual distrust and suspicion. But it always worked. Socrates was right when he said that people learn from inside and I bet he's glad that I've endorsed him again.

I have never agreed with a master and servant relationship in training and have always advocated the process of learning being more important than teaching. When problems occur in learning the first port of call is the quality of the teaching. "If the class falls asleep, wake the teacher," is a useful adage for anyone who wants his students to learn effectively.

Many years ago I saw on the bridge of a Royal Navy fishery protection vessel a small placard which listed the objectives of the fleet, a message from someone of Admiral rank. His last point was that he wanted to promote a spirit of fun within his fleet because it was his belief that fun went hand-in-hand with safety and efficiency. Now, before I start any class I get to the room be-

fore the lessons start and write a multi-coloured message on the board, stating that the objective for the day, days or weeks ahead is to have fun! A note before my signature adds, “And to learn a little.”

Then I tell a story about Professor Richard Feynman, a Bongo drum player, safe cracker, Nobel Laureate and particle physicist. Feynman apparently would introduce himself to his students with the following demonstration. Suspended from the high ceiling of his lecture theatre was a large brass sphere which, when swinging from an almost friction-free bearing, would show the rotation of the earth. An hour long lecture would see the ball change its apparent direction by fifteen degrees.

He would get into a position on one side of the theatre where he would hold the ball to his head, then release it and let it swing across the room. Without moving his head he would allow the ball to swing across and return to him. His claim was that some students would have a momentary thought that the ball would hit him and have to fight the idea with their knowledge of physics. Others would be engaged by the technique. But, most importantly, when he took his normal place in the lecture theatre, they all would trust him when he'd say, “I believe in the laws of physics, let's start learning.”

One of my jobs in retirement is to train captains to become training pilots. I start my courses with this question “Of all the teachers you have had during your education from play-school through secondary school, college, university, flying training and any sports coach, please name the top twenty who have been inspirational.” I am usually met with blank faces. After a pause, I say “Top fifteen? Ten? Five?” It's only when we get to five that that any teachers are ever named. That is a shocking indictment of teaching, training and education in general. We're not a species that puts the ability to teach very high up the list of human skills. If a skill doesn't make you rich, famous or fatuous in life it doesn't count

But that's not good enough for me. “Good enough” teachers are not good enough. They should inspire even with the simplest of tasks. How many parents are good teachers? How much instruction and guidance are we given in helping others to learn? The awful truth is that we teach using the most basic educational process: trial and error. This isn't confined to aviation, it's in everything. We just don't bother to communicate clearly, concisely, appropriately and unambiguously.

In fact, the second task I set my trainee captains is to ask them to *describe* how to draw a square. Then I ask the next person to *explain* how to draw a square. The next I ask to *demonstrate*

how to draw a square and then to *show* me how to draw a square. Finally I ask someone to *teach* me how to draw a square. This is a much more difficult task than it first appears... Try it yourself. Describe, explain, demonstrate, show, how to make a cup of tea or teach a child to use a table knife.

It takes only a little extra effort to use the right words at the right time, and if you get it right most of the time we'll be forgiven on the occasions we get it wrong.

I'm glad that when I was flying I didn't go off track as much as I have done in this book. But the idea is to tell you about all sorts of things in small chunks so that you don't ever have to concentrate too hard.

FLIGHT SIMULATORS

The purpose of flight simulators is to train pilots to fly on instruments, to learn procedures and to practice and be tested in all flight situations. But simulators fascinate people outside as well as within the aviation industry. They figure in television challenges, aptitude and selection tests and you can even buy flight experiences so that you can look inside a pilot's job for a few minutes, such is their appeal.

The history of "sims" as they're called in the trade, is similar to flying itself, but it's only in the last forty years that they have become genuinely realistic. So realistic, in fact, that when experienced pilots change aircraft now they can do all their conversion training in a flight simulator and the first time they fly the real plane is on a passenger flight with a training pilot. Terms and conditions apply of course, and they're a whole lot stricter than anything you'd find on an Apple or a mobile phone contract.

In the very beginning sims didn't move at all, but nothing in aviation stands still and usually things move quickly. The first one that could be described as moving was the D4 Link Trainer. It was a seat inside a box with flight instruments that responded roughly to the pilot's inputs, but had no simulated outside visual system (see soon) at all. Externally it looked like a large toy aeroplane. It certainly wasn't representative of any particular aircraft and, some might go as far as to say that, it didn't even represent aircraft in general. This is hardly surprising, bearing in mind that they were built by a firm that made pianos and organs. But at the time, and in their way, you could say that they made a noteworthy contribution to flying.

You could often see out through the badly fitting door which, in reality, reduced its usefulness as an instrument flying trainer. It moved up and down very slightly, tilted a bit and went round and round, although it literally ran out of puff if you did them together. It moved through the action of bellows at the front, back and sides. These were useful because if you forgot to pay attention to your height, you'd be reminded by a sound of hissing and puffing like a steam train leaving Kings Cross for Edinburgh.

The flight's progress was transferred to the instructors console via a thing called a crab which received inputs from the "sim" which controlled its movements along whatever route you flew despite what the instructor might have wanted. You could run the crab off the table by taking a sneaky view through the gap in the door, and deliberately flying in the wrong direction.

It was very basic but was as much as I and many other pilots could manage and afford at the time. Private hire of this simulator with an instructor cost fifty pence an hour. It was probably worth less than that. Airline simulators were not available for private hire at that time.

Then, in later years, visuals or what the pilots could see out of their windows, were added. Pictures representing the outside world were supplied by a tiny television camera moving over a model of the ground, sea or airports. The standard of the black and white visuals was unimpressive, even for the time, but for most pilots it was cutting edge technology, albeit a blunt one. Even though Sims became relatively realistic the pilot's secret ambition was to run the camera to the end of the table into oblivion, motionlessness and an unscheduled tea break. This also diverted the examiner's attention away from ones flying skills ... or at least that was the plan. Most people off the street would believe that they were in a real plane if they were blindfolded and taken into a modern simulator.

The visuals are so real as to be unrealistic, you can even see virtual people doing virtual things around the airport. Trucks move around, passengers wander around inside the lounges. Without them (Sims) there is no possibility that proficiency and safety standards in aviation would be as high as they now are. And, of course, every manoeuvre can be 'flown' in complete safety. Automatic landings in fog can be practised on a bright sunny day. Pilots can learn about flying at night, at any time of day. You can set winter conditions in summer and summer conditions in mid-winter. You can bring Hong Kong or Hawaii to London. Landing in crosswinds, landing or taking off on snowy runways. Engine malfunctions, pilot incapacitation. Every aspect of flying a particular aircraft can be faithfully reproduced including its weight, fuel, passenger load and centre of gravity. It is as good as the real thing.

Emergency situations can be trained and tested in complete safety over and over again until the required level of competency and understanding is reached. But there's fun to be had too. You can fly the simulator upside down or you can fly along the runway at very low level and exceed all the aircraft limitations without doing any damage except perhaps to your personal reputation as a 'stunt pilot'. The flight envelope of a plane lays down the limits of the things that it's allowed to do and the things the pilots are allowed to do with it. There are differences between what the plane is capable of doing and what it is allowed to do in airline service, with passengers on board. The great thing about simulators is that they can be 'flown' outside those normal limitations

without harm. However the simulators have limits imposed on them too, because anything, however sophisticated has mechanical and electrical limitations.

Because we frequently flew it too far outside its 'simulator' flight envelope, it would sometimes freeze. All the instruments would stop, the simulator would stop moving and the visuals would show the last incriminating snapshot of the sky or ground. Then the trouble really started because the engineers would have to get on board to reset everything and inevitably would ask what had happened. With a very red face and with the complicity of the other pilots you'd swear that you were just flying along normally and it went funny and suddenly froze. As if ...

Amazingly, the engineers would take our word and just reset everything for us. No doubt they checked the flight recorder readouts to see what we'd really been doing during our fun time at the end of training. Commendably they never lost their patience with us.

In the old days the training pilots could be as inadequate as the visuals on the first simulators. Looking back, I was lucky and didn't suffer more than a few examples of bad training. Nevertheless it was trial by ordeal, masquerading as training. But like so many things in aviation at that time almost all our training was carried out the way it had been done during the war (carrot and stick — and carrots were in short supply). Now I think we have the highest levels of training in any safety critical industry. No training is perfect, but 100% safety is still our goal.

Simulators are exciting, good fun and generally harmless. It's when some authoritarian megalomaniac gets in them that the real fun starts. Although most bad trainers have been weeded out as the years have passed, there are enough of us around who suffered at the hands and minds of these power-crazed idiots to remember. It's hard to imagine that it hasn't left a mark, even if it's only the occasional night terror. I don't think it was just a question of their needing to be better than everyone else. They actually enjoyed everyone being in fear of them.

When senior people in an airline have nicknames like "Trapper Jack," "The Smiling Assassin" and "Chopper Smith," you can get a taste of the mood. At least there was no one called "Captain Borgia." Well, if there was he must have been in a different fleet. Maybe he was with Alitalia.

Freudian analysis may have revealed physiological shortcomings, rather than psychological ones. It would be normal to see standards change during a test, and as you achieved one thing the bar would be raised to another level until some pointless personal objective was reached. Again it was only when you failed to reach their standard that they would pass you as competent. Play-

ground bullies: nothing more and nothing less. What they needed to mend their ways was a good punch on the nose. But, personally I'm not keen on airline pilots brawling, even in private.

The finest example of trainer insecurity and cunning was displayed by a trainer who always rushed out of the simulator before the trainees had even unbuckled their harnesses. He'd hide in one of the cubicles in the lavatories and sit there waiting and listening for the unsuspecting trainees to pop in for a comfort break. Inevitably they would chat about how the simulator check was going and moan about the trainer, questioning his competence, challenging his knowledge and doubting his fertility. Armed with this information the trainer would set appropriate traps in the next session and mark the trainees accordingly. Until that was, word got around about his technique. Thereafter, rather than be critical, trainees would lavish so much praise upon the instructor that passing the rest of the check became a formality. One way or another it was all about paperwork and multi-tasking.

In reality, much good work is achieved in the simulators although for every pilot the bi-annual fear of losing their livelihood was never something that you could get used to. Between the mandatory competency checks there were routine checks on proficiency involving engine failures, depressurisation, electrical or hydraulic failures and all sorts of fun things. Simulator training sessions are a bit like a cocktail party where you start by being polite, degenerate into polite suspicion and eventually leave each other as pretend friends.

The whole world of simulator flying could be summed up cynically in a simple exercise in aborting take off that took place many years ago. The simulator was set for an ordinary take off in a three-crew, three-engined aircraft. During the take off run there was a simulated engine failure and a loud bang. One pilot closed a throttle, another pilot opened one engine up to full power and the other pilot did nothing and left one engine running normally. A somewhat bemused instructor commented that since all three possible actions had been taken it was now just a question of discussing which was the correct one. In this sort of situation the guy that gets it right feels very superior.

I spent many years as a simulator instructor and the best thing about it was that you'd inevitably know what was in the tests and see the common mistakes that crews made. Avoiding common mistakes kept you out of the crowd but in my case not necessarily far above it.

FIRST SOLO AND TWENTY-FIVE YEARS SERVICE

From the start of my flying lessons, my only thought was to fly on my own. It was a great moment when my instructor (Derek) in the front seat undid his harness and got out to let me fly solo. In those days getting out was a somewhat lengthy procedure because the instructor needed to remove the cushions he had been sitting on and secure his straps so that they wouldn't interfere with the controls. This meant that you'd be sitting there for some minutes contemplating taking to the sky without him. It was a mixture of hope, excitement and trepidation. Not unlike getting married when I look back on it.

Then he walked away, turned to face the plane gave me a thumbs up sign, indicating that he wanted me to fly just one circuit then he turned his back again and walked away. There was no reason to think that I couldn't fly around the airfield successfully but, nevertheless, it was an important stage in learning to fly. Any subsequent visit to the flying club would never be the same. It meant that I had the confidence and skill to take one of these machines into the sky without assistance from my instructor.

In subsequent lessons when the instructor told me to go to the plane and get it ready for our flight I could walk to it as an equal. The suspicion that the plane was my master had gone. For most purposes, it was at my command if I wanted to go up, I could do so. If I wanted to go to the left or right, I could do that as well. It was an unfamiliar but very pleasant feeling. It was the same feeling I had upon becoming a Captain, and the feeling I had on the very last flight of my career.

We're all too young to be getting old and there used to be distinct division between a captain and co-pilot by virtue of age. It's only when I was promoted that I even thought about the end of my career. There were more big occasions on the way I hoped. Some hope as it turned out!

Most companies celebrate a twenty-fifth anniversary of an employee. The first I got to hear of this treat was when I got a phone call, from the senior pilot's admin's assistant's assistant secretary's office. They had changed offices as the result of another management coup and said they'd been cleaning out a cupboard and found my twenty-fifth anniversary certificate, and asked if I would like it?

“Sure I would, if it's taking up space... send it on.”

“Actually it would be easier for us if you picked it up when you’re next in.” Bearing in mind they’d found the thing by chance almost two years after the due date, I didn’t bother. The saving in postage didn’t show in the annual company accounts either.

It’s probably in another cupboard now, along with the signed photograph of the Boeing 757 apparently given to training captains on their appointment. I had a very uneventful and unspectacular, professional airline career lasting twenty-seven years, the majority of which clearly went unnoticed and unrecognised by most of my caring managers.

And that feeling of unimportance to the company is exactly how I felt on my very last commercial flight. Most pilots choose a romantic flight from say, New York to London to celebrate their retirement. To me a flight is a flight and I allowed the rostering department to determine what my last flight was to be. As you know already, it turned out to be a shuttle flight from Manchester to London. It is the captain’s responsibility to check the outside of the aircraft prior to flight. I walked around slowly on this last occasion taking in as much as I could because I knew it would have to last me forever. This was to be my last flight. There was no plan to have my own plane. No plan to go back to the flying club to instruct. Just one more flight and that was that, and this was it.

I smiled as I walked round, knowing that it was at my command if I wanted to go up, I could do so. If I wanted to go to the left or right, I could do that as well. By now it was a familiar, but still very pleasant feeling. Within the limits of what air traffic-control would allow of course. It would take off when I opened the thrust levers, it would stop when I put on the brakes, it would do everything I asked of it. As I approached the steps for the last time I thought about all the times that I had checked the outside of my plane. I asked myself whether I had enjoyed it every time as much as I had just enjoyed doing it for the last time. The answer was, yes. I had enjoyed every walk round, every take off, every landing, every cloud, every sight of the sun, everything. I was happy to board for the last time. It was only at this point that I mentioned to the first officer that this was my very last flight and would he mind if I flew it home?

When we arrived at Heathrow the crew had found a card from somewhere to wish me a happy retirement. This was the only gesture from anyone in the company regarding my retirement. Because I chose to retire a year early, my retirement wasn’t flagged up on my “we see you as people, not pilots” manager’s computer screen. Had it done so I would have been treated to a cere-

monial time-wasting and insincere 'send off experience'. At least at that time there wasn't a Facebook page for retirees that one might have been directed to.

The 'send-off experience' usually involves rostering a junior management pilot to meet a retiring pilot on his last arrival whereupon there'd be a sentimental conversation and playful back-slapping. How we'd "all miss each other" and how we'd "make sure to stay in contact," along with well-worn and pitiful jokes such as "if the company ever runs out of pilots and wanted to keep an old man off the streets." In my case meeting a management pilot wouldn't have involved the usual lecture about wearing a hat and getting my haircut, nevertheless it was an occasion I was happy to have missed out on at the time.

No one really cared then, no-one really cares now. That's how life at work is. The only people that show any caring are the blokes on the retired pilots forum and that's mainly about themselves. However the generous, silver drinks tray, for which the retired pilots society collected fifty pence a month, was delivered more than two years after I retired. But that's not a problem. After all, I don't involve myself in delivering other people's retirement gifts so to have been critical would be very mean spirited. Anyway, I can re-gift it because the name was wrong.

Prior to retirement pilots were usually invited to a slap up dinner with the boss apparently. Unfortunately, my boss was busy and said that because of my premature retirement I could treat myself and my partner and send him the bill. As that's a bit like buying your own surprise birthday present and getting the money back later... I didn't bother. We were having a stir fry that evening anyway.

So, there it was, my flight was over. It was a cold, winter night, I collected my headset signed the technical log, thanked the engineers for keeping me safe, wished them all well and got out of my seat for the last time. Out of the seat, out of the cockpit and down the steps on to the tarmac. Off the stage and into retirement.

This was to be my last trip in my beloved Transit van and I was planning to try and enjoy it. As a favour on this special day I asked the driver if he would drop me off at the car park rather than at the crew check-in. He said that he couldn't. I said that this was the last day of twenty-seven years in the company and I really didn't need to go to the check-in and that may be he could help me with one final act of childish defiance by dropping me off at the car park. No, he insisted, he was not allowed to drop me at the car park. Company rules regulations, health and safety at work, due-diligence, duty of care and a partridge in a pear tree. I said that it was a pity so literally took

another back seat. I couldn't even say that I got pleasure knowing it was my last trip in the Transit van. That was quite a psychological loss.

On arriving at the crew centre thirty five minutes later, I was greeted by the duty transport manager who 'reached out to me' about the difficulties and misunderstandings that had occurred between me and the driver and "would I like to talk it through" with him.

"No I wouldn't, there were no misunderstandings, no difficulties, nothing to talk through, I'm finished, retired, I'm going home and you can **** **."

On the way home I reflected, but only briefly, on how a company could lose touch with one of its senior staff so easily. Even the most junior, whatever that means, of employees might get a bit of a send off ... not a rollicking by the duty transport manager defending an indefensible stance by one of his unconsciously brain washed drivers. In reality I didn't blame either of them, we'd all become 'company men' one way or another.

Later that night when I thought about my pension rights and summary dismissal and all that, I panicked and I phoned him from home and explained that I was feeling very emotional and that I hope he could accept my apology and that I hadn't meant to be rude, nor had I meant to be dismissive or abrupt. The driver was quite right, if we all went around breaking important rules where would we be? I should have known better as a pilot but ... it was all, well it was all ... all very ... emotional. He accepted my apology and wished me well for my retirement and I wished him well. Perhaps one day we would meet under better circumstances?

Despite my perverse nature I still felt that I'd been cheated when no-one was there to meet me after all those years of flying safely, no-one that is apart from an ambitious transport manager.

It was a sad way to turn out the lights on a long career and, despite my indifference to most of the company's social niceties, it still hurts a bit when I think about it. Not only were the lights out but I walked out of the stage door into a dark, damp and deserted street. It would have made a good ending to a black and white film except that a uniform hat doesn't have the same look as a tilted trilby and it wasn't raining much, if at all.

"I feel so outside the general feeling. I have nothing in common with them, nor have they anything in sympathy with me. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live... These are the only hours that are not wasted " R.J.

ENGINES

Modern engines give every plane sufficient power to meet the requirements of anything the pilots need the plane to do.

The manufacturer determines the amount of power available for take off or climbing. The pilots can't override the power levers and exceed the correct amount for the stage of flight. Very strict warranty contracts ensure that engines aren't misused and so the manufacturer can offer guarantees about power and reliability, but sufficient emergency power is always available.

Plane engines are different from car engines. The most important difference is that the bits that generate the power in car engines go up and down, which cause stresses and strains. The working parts of a jet engine just go round. To help you understand the differences between a jet engine and a car engine I want you to come to a swing park with me. When you use a swing first you go one way, stop, then swing back the other way, stop and swing back and so on so it's a back and forth movement. Now, if you've ever been a small boy, one of the great things to do in life is to test things... Not for any reason, but just because that's what boys do. How much will something bend? How high will something go when you throw it? How many boys can stand on it at the same time? And so on. These are important things that boys need to experience.

The swing: how far can you get it to swing? The harder you push the higher it goes. Can you get it all the way over? If not how far? You already know what happens when it goes a long way up, it sort of falls down and then jerks the supporting chains or ropes and then it wiggles all over the place, you can hear the strain that it puts on the supporting frame and the chains or ropes. A car engine is similar, the bits inside move one way, stop and then move the opposite way. This puts a strain on the engine like the boys put on the chains of a swing. This doesn't make car engines particularly vulnerable to failure because a normal engine can do this a hundred times a second without distress.

Put these same destructive boys on a roundabout and all they can do is make it go faster and faster. They can't switch direction suddenly or do anything else with it. It just goes round and keeps going round. And that is the difference between a car engine and a jet engine. One where the parts have to change direction and undergo stress and strain and the other that just goes around and around with far, far less strain or stress. And that's why jets are so reliable, they don't undergo frequent and wearing internal movements. That's why you should have no doubts about

their safety. Engines that revolve are much more reliable than other types. If you think of your washing machine or your vacuum cleaner their motors rarely break down despite the misuse they are subjected to. When they do falter, it's because it's been overloaded or the filters haven't been cleaned in ages. Their electrical motor engines go round. Aircraft engines that cost upwards of fifteen million pounds, just go round and round. And they have regular oil changes and maintenance so rarely have a problem.

When we need more power from a jet we just spin it faster. Simple, and the same for Boeing and for Airbus. The engines on my 757 and 767 are as good as automatic. For take off, I just had to press a button. All the rest of the time I just had to press a different switch or selected a different number on a panel somewhere. If you didn't press switches or dial a different speed, the engines would keep doing what you asked it to do previously.

When approaching for landing in gusty conditions the speed controller would calculate out how much extra speed was needed to ride the gusts and then tell the engines how much extra power to apply. When landing automatically it would reduce the power setting to achieve a perfect touch down. It was the thinking man's (woman's) plane.

But, as you know I did have to travel in a Transit van to and from almost every flight in my career and even though these had the up and down engines I didn't ever experience one of them failing. So, I guess you could say jet engines are very safe and very, very reliable.

WHY PLANES FLY AND HOW TO FLY ONE

In about 1920 Albert Einstein said “Make everything as simple as possible ... but no simpler”

In about 1700 and something, the scientist Daniel Bernoulli, who obviously had nothing better to do at the time, said that when a mass of air (or any other fluid) accelerates, there is a corresponding decrease of either its pressure or its potential energy.

In 2018 I said that science isn't everyone's favourite subject and Daniel Bernoulli's theory is enough to put off anyone from understanding how things fly, and considering that he thought this up before planes had even been invented it was a bad start. And little did he know that, three hundred years later he'd leave me to clear up the mess and to simplify it for fearful flyers.

When a plane picks up speed on the runway the air passing over the top of the wing has to go faster (because it travels further) than a bit of air that passes under the wing. Why these bits of air have to get to the back of the wing at the same time is beyond me but someone said it should, Daniel said that it does and I'm saying because of that there's a suction caused on the top of the wing. If the force is measured in tonnes of force, (although it can be measured in anythings) then it's easy to understand that if the suction on the wing is greater than the weight then anything attached to the wing, will fly.

The physics of invisible things isn't an easy subject, but unlike quarks and quantum theory at least you can feel the air when it's moving.

To me, it's a bit like your hat blowing off your head on a windy day. You can't see the wind but it sure has an effect on your hat. Well, you say, it just blows away like bits of paper do, and like a kid's balloon. But just because it does, doesn't mean that there isn't a scientific reason behind it. Try opening an umbrella in a strong wind for instance. No one would say nothing happens, sometimes it blows the thing inside out and makes it perfect for collecting rain rather than diverting it. So the wind gets under the umbrella and gets trapped until there's so much pressure under it that in effect it bursts. Just like half a balloon would if you popped it. As Daniel (if he'd known about planes and wings), would have explained, the increased pressure under a wing helps to support it while a reduced pressure above it causes a suction. These invisible, but real forces lift a plane into the air and keep it there.

Air is invisible, but we live in a world where seeing is believing. What I'm saying is just because you can't see something, it doesn't mean it can't affect what happens to you. Take radioactivity for instance.

So you might wonder how all this invisible stuff persuades a plane to fly. Put simply, a plane has no choice. If it's got wings and it's moving, Daniel Bernoulli's theory is right. If a wing is going fast enough its weight will have nothing to do with it. If the suction force on the wing (and anything connected to it) outweighs the weight it'll fly. Why, for instance, doesn't a racing car take off when it's going faster than a jumbo jet at take off? The answer is that it doesn't have wings. (Racing car enthusiasts will know that a racing car does have wings, but they are put on upside down so that they force the car on to the ground.)

If Dan Bernoulli's suction force is greater than the weight, the wing will go up, if it's less it'll go down and if it's the same... guess what? It'll fly level. If we build something with wings and you can move it through the air quickly enough, it will fly. If you could tow a jumbo jet fast enough it would fly, even without the engines running. If you towed it up to say five thousand feet and unhitched it, it would glide like a glider because it would be, a glider. It'll keep enough speed to glide if the pilot puts the nose down and allows gravity to take it down an invisible slope. If physics allows a cyclist to roll downhill, then a plane can as well. Fair's fair in science. If you stick engines on this enormous glider it'll be like a cyclist peddling on flat ground and not needing a downhill slope to move.

This is a great explanation, not only of why a plane flies but how it can't do otherwise, and of course why other things don't fly. Fearful flyers often say they don't understand how something as big as a jumbo *does* fly but don't seem to have any trouble understanding why something as small as a garden shed *doesn't* fly. Which is a bit odd really, because most people realise that one is actually designed to fly and the other isn't. So why the curiosity?

Try explaining how a bicycle can stay upright when it's travelling, but fall over when it's stationary. It's only because you're familiar with it that it seems normal but in truth it's weird, isn't it?

The wind at six hundred miles per hour is as solid as a piece of concrete. Try sticking your head out of the window when you're flying and you'll soon discover what invisible force is keeping you up. Controlling a plane is a variation of what I've just described. Give the wings more lift and your plane will go up. You can do that by moving the steering 'wheel' backwards. You want

to go down? Move it the other way. But you'll have to remember to give it more power going up or you'll slow down too much. Power back a bit when you're descending or you'll go too fast.

Lower the flaps and the plane will be able to fly slower (because the wings are bigger). Give one wing more lift than the other and the plane will bank and then turn. Why does it turn a corner when it banks? Imagine that a model plane is pointing towards you. Imagine a fixed line going vertically upwards indicating the lift, and another line going vertically downwards representing the weight. When the plane banks the previously straight up line will be inclined to one side pulling the plane in that direction. Can't be simpler than that.

Don't be overawed by the skill needed to fly a plane. You'd need much more skill to fly a garden shed.

To take off: as long as you're pointing along a sufficiently long piece of concrete (about a mile and a half) you just increase the power and keep the plane straight with the rudder pedals. (They work just like the steering on a simple soap box where your feet move a bar to the left or right.) When you are going fast enough, raise the nose up about fifteen degrees and you'll fly. To me, that's a whole lot easier than steering an ocean-going liner out of its berth.

To land: choose another long bit of concrete. For your first go, a *very* long bit (ten miles). Steer the plane towards it and slow down as you get nearer. As you get nearer, get lower. So it's nearer, slower, lower. And then, when you're very low and very slow you'll find that, at the moment the wings run out of lift to support the plane (if you time it correctly), the ground gets in the way to stop it falling any further. Also remember that for every mile away you need to be three hundred feet up. Ten miles away: Three thousand feet. Nine miles away: two thousand seven hundred feet. Eight miles away: Two thousand four hundred feet. And so on. Really makes you wonder what a pilot gets paid for doesn't it?

BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF?

Most fearful flyers have an endless list of “what if” questions about things going wrong. But it’s easier to understand the relevance and consequences of things going wrong if you start by knowing what needs to be going right. And it’s even easier to understand when you know how simple it is for a pilot to correct things that do go wrong. The right knowledge will bring you peace of mind.

A plane is a vehicle for transporting people. It needs certain things to be successful, like speed. Speed isn’t important until you don’t have enough of it and if a plane flies too slowly a warning system informs the pilots. If the pilots fail to act on that information the plane will correct itself automatically. A plane flies at high altitude because it’s more efficient and can fly faster. High altitude means that it’s cold and that there’s insufficient air pressure and oxygen to maintain consciousness, so all commercial planes need a heating and pressurisation system. A plane needs controls to steer it, to raise the wheels and flaps and to do the things a plane has to do. So a plane needs a hydraulic system, (which is the same sort of system that controls the brakes and the power steering on a car).

A plane needs a navigation system so that it takes the correct route, which is like the sat-nav system fitted to new cars. But a plane’s flight system not only shows if you’re in the right place but shows the pilots if they’re at the correct height and speed as well. The computer calculates fuel consumption and works out all the required navigational information.

Planes are designed with at least two or more of every essential system. Planes also have less important things, and things that don’t matter if they go wrong like, in-flight entertainment systems, galleys and bathrooms but I won’t talk about those because people never ask about them.

The engines look after the speed although the plane will fly without engine power just like a bike will roll downhill without the need to peddle. A plane can fly with an engine not working because the engines are more powerful than needed. After a certain speed a plane can continue to take off even if an engine stops during the take off.

Because the temperature outside the plane is about minus fifty-six centigrade at cruising altitude we need to keep the passengers warm. So there’s a blower/heater on each of the engines, a more sophisticated one than you get in a car and able to pressurise the plane and keep the occupants warm under any circumstances. If you’ve ever pumped up a bicycle tyre with a hand pump

you'll recall that the pump gets hot. This is because pumping, squeezes the air and forces it into the tyre. Squeezing air into a smaller space heats it up. On a plane it wouldn't heat it up sufficiently to keep the occupants warm so we heat it up via the engines before it's pumped into the cabin. If an engine malfunctions a plane will descend to maintain the cabin pressure but only a matter of a few thousand feet. In the event of total pressurisation failure the plane will descend very rapidly to about ten thousand feet.

That's the basic needs of the crew and passengers satisfied but they'll want hot food and entertainment during the flight so we'll need electrical power too, and we use that to power the flight instruments. These systems (electrical, hydraulic and pneumatics) are supplied firstly from the engines and additionally from other pumps connected to other systems. A hydraulic pump, for instance, can make electricity (like a hydro electric power station at a dam). And electricity can power pumps to supply hydraulic power, as it does in an electric car.

Individually, each engine can supply everything a plane needs: hydraulics, electricity and air. Therefore two engines will supply two of everything the plane needs. Just think, your car has only one engine and one of everything else and when did that last break down? There's also a small engine (auxiliary power unit or APU) at the back of the plane to supply these things on the ground when the normal engines aren't running, which can be used in the air as well so now you've got another two back up supplies. And there's a fan that can be dropped into the airflow to power the hydraulic system, and there's a spare battery.

A plane is equipped with fire extinguishers in the engines (two in each engine) and freight holds (two in each hold) and several portable extinguishers in the cabin and a couple in the flight deck. Talking of fire it's important to understand what is meant by that term. When a fire warning occurs on a plane it means that there is an overheating component or that there is hot air in a place it shouldn't be. So we get a very early warning of potential trouble. Flames from an engine aren't as big a problem as most passengers would think. After all, there's the world of difference between your gas cooker being described as 'on fire' when you're boiling some potatoes, which is normal ... and a chip pan fire which isn't. So reports of fire and fire warnings on a plane don't mean quite the same to the pilots as to the passengers.

* * *

A malfunction or a “Non normal” as we’d call it can only involve the things, or a combination of the equipment I’ve mentioned. Here are some common questions, complete with correct, useful and re-assuring answers.

Q. What if an engine stops?

A. We fly on the remaining engines and start the APU.

Q. What if there’s a depressurisation?

A. We descend quickly into thicker, warmer air and start the APU.

Q. What if we run out of electricity?

A. Even if all the generators failed there’s a battery.

Q. What if a plane does a Go Around?

A. Go Around is not a non-normal situation.

Q. What if an engine has a fire warning indication?

A. We stop the engine from running, turn off the fuel and operate the fire extinguisher.

Q. What if there’s a fire on board?

A. The cabin crew are trained to deal with cabin fires.

Q. What if there’s no radio contact?

A. Use number two back up radio set, mobile phone or internet.

Q. What if you run out of questions?

A. Just enjoy your flight!

* * *

As I've said so often, a plane doesn't need a pilot with lightning-quick reactions. There is always time to deal with any problem on board a plane. Aircraft design is so good that, on modern planes, failures of any kind are extremely rare and have minimal effect on the plane if they do occur. A plane is not balanced on a knife-edge, and lots of things would need to go wrong before it would be in any type of danger. The back up systems mean that diversions because of technical problems are very unusual. In my career I never diverted for technical issues and only once did I divert because of poor weather at a major airport.

Fearful flyers worry that safety standards aren't high enough. They feel that their concerns would be eased if they could set more stringent standards. But in fact, when I discuss matters of safety with them, their standards and requirements fall far short of what is in place already. For instance if I ever ask a fearful flyer what sort of fuel reserves they would like me to carry, their 'safer requirement' is sometimes half the fuel I would actually carry. If I ask them the sorts of margins of safety they would like to have in respect of air traffic control, they are astounded at the distances aircraft are apart when cruising. When they ask about crew training and pilot standards they rarely have any understanding of the depth, quality and frequency of testing and training. I often joke with them that if the standards of safety were dependent upon the fears of anxious flyers, then I wouldn't be prepared to fly. I would not accept the low standards that fearful flyers want in the hope of safety. Hard to believe but true.

If you're a fearful flyer stop worrying about safety standards and thank your stars that they haven't been set by other fearful flyers!

SEEING IS BELIEVING

I don't know why, but, in the world of aviation, have to constantly compare everything that happens to a plane to things that happen to boats. Perhaps its because we can see the water but we cannot see the air. Though I'd love to find another way of describing flying I have to admit there's nothing better than water. However, I'd find it a whole lot easier if water were invisible.

I wonder how differently boats or swimming would be viewed if you couldn't see the water. Imagine, for a moment, if I changed the laws of physics and were able to make water invisible and simultaneously turn the air into a thin, blue-coloured jelly. If a plane flew past, you'd see the thick supporting dark blue air underneath and the thin pale blue air above the wing providing suction. And that would show you why planes fly. If a policeman saw you stop your car to look up at a plane or to watch one take off he'd say, "Move along. There's nothing special to see here."

Meanwhile, at the local boating pond, at swimming pools, at the Niagara Falls, at San Francisco harbour, and on the River Nile everyone would be entranced by the mystery of invisible water. They'd wonder what was keeping everything up. It would look like magic. Unless they lived on a river or by the sea, people would come from far and wide to see the miracle of invisible 'floating.' And any Olympic diver preparing to plunge ten metres into what looks like an empty pool would need more than a gold medal as a reward for that sort of courage.

Imagine watching whitewater rafting with invisible water. It would be even more sensational. Everyone would say, "This is something special." But I wonder, would it cause them, and fearful flyers in particular, as much anxiety that not being able to see the air does?

In future I'm going to ask people, "See that boat over there... How does that float? And if you can explain that to me, what about those fish?"

People often say to me that they're nervous about being so high up in the sky. But what about being on a boat? Do people get on and ask each other "How does this thing float?" Do people get more nervous being in deep water rather than shallow water? Do they say, "I'm really nervous ... it's such a long way to the bottom of the sea." If not, why not? Because I'd rather be in a plane that's descending than in a boat that's sinking. In a plane, the higher you are up in the sky the more time the pilot has to fix a problem, with a boat the more time you spend sinking the worse it gets.

NAVIGATION

If you understand how a boat gets moved by the tide, you'll understand how a plane gets moved by the air. It's the same principle, it's just that we can't see the air moving as easily as you can see a tide or a current. If my plane or boat is drifted sideways by ten degrees then if I steer ten degrees towards the wind or into the current I'll go in the direction and to the place I want to go. It's that simple!

Cyclists know that, for the same effort going with the wind means going faster. Cycling into the wind means more effort and slower progress. An aeroplane cruises at a fixed speed through the air because it always uses a fixed amount of power, (like a cyclist, using the same amount of effort). The same effort, or power means that the amount of fuel used every hour is the same. So its progress over the ground will depend upon whether it's flying with or against the wind. The cyclist's effort is his 'fuel consumption' but the speed he (or a plane) is able to achieve is affected by whether the wind is behind or against him. This is important because a plane has to carry enough fuel to fly for a certain amount of time, not a certain distance. A car always needs the same amount of fuel to get to Uncle Fred's house... unless he moves of course!

So, if I fly at ninety miles per hour into a thirty miles per hour wind I'll travel over the ground at sixty miles per hour. Or to make it simpler if a boat travels at ninety miles per hour, into an on-coming current of thirty miles per hour it'll go past a point on the shore at sixty miles per hour.

In a plane, if I fly at ninety miles per hour and have to travel ninety miles with no wind, it'll take me an hour to fly to my destination. On the return journey with no wind it would take me an hour again. Flying the same journey, on a different day, with a thirty mph wind blowing against me (a headwind) I would have a speed over the ground of sixty miles per hour, so that same ninety miles outbound journey will take me an hour and a half.

If I return that same day, with the same wind conditions, the wind will increase my speed over the ground going back. So I'll fly at ninety miles per hour *and* the wind will add another thirty miles per hour to my speed, making my speed one hundred and twenty miles per hour, over the ground. So it would take me only forty-five minutes to come back.

The difference in time for the two journeys is forty five minutes. If the cost of fuel is a pound per minute, it would cost you £90 going and £45 returning. In other words, in this example you'd have to carry twice as much fuel on the outbound flight than on the return flight. Just like my

friend Angus discovered, navigating is so much easier to understand when you think about spending money.

* * *

Here's a bit of confusion related to navigation.

The speed of a plane is measured by the amount of airflow going into a tube on the side of the plane, the more air going down the tube, the higher the speed indication. However, because the air becomes thinner as you go higher, the speed of the plane showing on the instruments is lower than the actual speed. That indicated speed is known officially as the Indicated Airspeed (IAS). However the real speed it's flying at, the pilots call the True Airspeed (TAS) but curiously we don't have an instrument in the cockpit to show us that speed! The speed of sound gets lower as you get higher, so for a fixed Indicated Airspeed speed the plane gets faster in terms of Mach number (where M1.00 equals the local speed of sound). The Mach number (important because we don't want the speed of the air over the wings to be supersonic) is usually shown on the airspeed indicator. Although during the climb to cruising height the Indicated Airspeed might remain constant, both the True Airspeed (not indicated) and Mach number (indicated) increase. At high altitude the plane is flown at a constant Mach number, but decreasing IAS and increasing TAS. Apply the wind effect to the TAS and you'll get the (G/S) groundspeed as well (but we don't have an instrument as such to show that either). So there we have it, an Indicated Airspeed which doesn't show the true speed. The True Airspeed which isn't shown anywhere, and the groundspeed which changes, even if the others remain constant. Not even Einstein could make that simpler. (see somewhere)

IN THE MIDST OF ETERNITY

“To the soul, there is no past and no future; all is, and will be ever, in now. For artificial purposes time is mutually agreed on, but there is really no such thing.” R.J.

Pilots and crew often travel to an airport to pick up an aeroplane or to operate a service when there has been disruption or a crew shortage. That’s why you quite often see crew on board in a passenger seat, and that’s why I was on this particular flight. The furthest that I have ever been positioned was to Paris. Some lucky pilots position to New York, Rome, Singapore and as far as Australia. On this day I was positioning to Manchester.

The aircraft was empty apart from the cabin crew and the operating pilots. I was sitting over the wings, which was unusual for me because I quite like to see the ground but I was feeling tired so the view wasn’t important and, by the time we were airborne, I was asleep.

I woke a few minutes later as the plane started to descend. I looked out of the window and ... I cannot find another way to describe this experience ... there is only the following feeble explanation. That moment’s observation meant nothing to me, I had no understanding of what I saw nor my circumstances. My conscious mind, the mind that lives with me now, had no connection to that moment. I had been transported into a past time and into a different ‘now’, I was not consciously in any past or any present. I was in the now. Not a now that flows into another now, or into the past. A permanent now.

I was experiencing ancient feelings and thoughts but struggling to recognise any of it.

“My soul has never been, and never can be, dipped in time. Time has never existed, and never will; it is a purely artificial arrangement. It is eternity now, it always was eternity, and always will be. R.J.

Through the years I have tried, in my diaries, to write more accurately and more fully about this strange experience but have never been anyway near capturing the moment. It always sounds contrived, too simple or too descriptive and so I leave it at this inadequate description of a moment where I felt at-one with time.

I drifted from the experience and had to let go of my ancient thoughts, and a little later the plane landed. It was a moment in my eternity, made harder to accept by the unusual circumstances. We're led to believe that special moments come to us, alone in the peace of the countryside, in a wilderness or on a mountain top. Mine didn't.

In his book *The Story of My Heart* Jefferies describes laying on the sward contemplating the life of a man buried inside the tumulus next to which he lay. He felt that there was no difference between his thoughts and feelings and those of the dead body in the ground.

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist, in his autobiography, describes sitting on a rock and pondering the thought, "Am I it, or is it me?"

I'm sure everyone gets a feeling or feelings like this during their lives. For many I suppose the moment is too fleeting. For others, too worrying. But it cannot be confined to just some.

Each time I flew I remembered the caveman inside me and wondered what influence or what purpose it was meant to have.

Weird.

"I stand this moment at the mouth of the ancient cave, face to face with nature, face to face with the supernatural, with myself. My naked mind confronts the unknown." R.J.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO PASS THE TIME

Socrates said that people learn by asking and answering their own questions, but I suspect he wouldn't have been so certain if he'd heard these questions from a fearful flyer.

“Could a plane land on trees if it had to?”

I said, “If a plane really had to land that urgently then, like a F1 car could drive over a field... yes. It could land on trees but—”

“Deciduous or evergreen?”

I had to think hard, “Either.”

“Could a plane land on water?”

“Yes it could.”

“Would that be true if it landed on saltwater, freshwater, inland lakes, canals, tidal water, brackish water, rivers?”

I'm surprised that s/he didn't include large swimming pools and waterfalls.

It's all very well being a Greek philosopher but some ancient skills, like hospital portering and patience, aren't always transferable.

Transfer your worried thoughts into more helpful ones by answering these useful, and relevant questions. The answers are not necessarily in this book, but are designed to prompt you into thinking about answers... and of course to pass the time

* * *

What is the maximum wind speed a plane can fly in?

Is it safe to land when the wind is blowing across the runway?

Why does fog usually clear as the day gets warmer?

Does rain affect a plane in flight?

Why do planes have their landing lights on during the day?

If you shine a light at a bird what will it do?

How often can a pilot get an updated weather forecast?

What happens if lightning strikes a plane?

What does “over and out” mean ?

What is the difference between fog and mist?
Do planes fly because of the laws of science or because of magic?
When flying should passengers keep their fingers crossed?
Should you always carry a lucky charm?
Should the pilots carry lucky charms?
When landing should the pilot take a deep breath and hope?

* * *

Here are some important questions on safety:

Do you check the conditions of your tyres when you drive?
When did you last have your driving assessed?
Do you check your fitness to drive before each journey?
What does I'M SAFE mean to you?
What's your stopping distance from 70 mph?
When did you last have the electrics checked in your house?
Which of your fire extinguishers is suitable for electrical fires?
Do you use any eye protection when doing DIY projects?
Do your raspberry canes have toppers to protect your eyes?
Do you think flying is more risky than other things you do?

* * *

Given that a brick is lighter than a boat and lighter than a plane.

Why don't bricks float?
Why don't bricks fly?
Why are bricks good for building walls?

* * *

Some thoughts on statistics:

One in a million means it won't happen on nine hundred and ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine occasions.

One in ten million means it won't happen on nine million nine hundred and ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine occasions.

Just because it can, doesn't mean that it will.

Just because it has, doesn't mean that it will again.

Just because it hasn't, doesn't mean that it will.

* * *

Some navigation questions:

A plane consumes five tonnes of fuel each hour. It takes off at a weight of three hundred and fifty tonnes of which fifty tonnes is fuel. It can only climb higher than its first cruising height when its weight is three hundred and twenty tonnes. How long into the flight will the plane be able to climb to another cruising height?

* * *

If a plane flies at six hundred miles per hour how far does it fly in:

One minute ?

Five minutes ?

Ten minutes ?

How long will it take for the same plane to fly six hundred miles?

One thousand, eight hundred miles ?

Three thousand, six hundred miles ?

Seven hundred and sixty miles ?

* * *

A plane flies a journey from A to B distance, three thousand miles, along the equator. It flies at six hundred miles per hour.

At what time will it be halfway if it takes off at 12 noon, if there is no wind ?

At what time will it be geographically halfway if there is a wind of one hundred and fifty miles per hour directly behind it?

At what time will it be exactly halfway (geographically) if there is a wind of one hundred and fifty miles per hour blowing directly against it?

In both the above cases, at what time is it quicker to return to A or continue to B?

* * *

An irritated traveller is on the above flight and has to answer four questions, each question takes one hour and two minutes to solve. Is there sufficient time to answer if there is a headwind, tailwind or no wind?

* * *

An airfield is built across the International Date line. Aircraft take off from the eastern side of the field and land on the western side. It takes twenty minutes to taxi from one side of the field to the other i.e. to be the other side of the date line. A plane takes off on February 29th and flies west all the way around the world which takes twenty three hours and forty two minutes. It lands on the western side then taxis back to its starting point. The pilot's birthday is on 29th February (a leaper!) He was twenty-nine years old at the start of the flight. The pilot has a twin sister who was born two minutes earlier on 28th February. The mother was twenty nine on the 28th February when the first twin was born. At the time of the second twin's birth, the mother was three years younger than the older twin will be in two years. The question is in three parts.

1. Why did you continue to read the question after the fifth sentence?
2. Are you really this bored?

3. Who thinks like this?

The answer is in one part. Get help soon.

THE DRIVING QUESTION

With the exception of those who have suffered a traumatic life event, the fear of flying is a learned fear, and so it can be unlearned. Learning to overcome a fear of flying involves unlearning wrong ‘facts’, and replacing them with ‘correct’ facts. The most effective way to learn is by having our questions answered because they challenge and change old beliefs and strengthen new ones. The Socratic learning process, involves questions, answers and more questions until the student learns from inside and is able to take ownership of the new knowledge. I try to help people by using that method.

That was serious and true. The next bit is light hearted but nevertheless still true.

Many, if not most, if not all fearful flyers ask me at least one question that is very hard for me to answer. Not hard because it is complicated or that I don’t know the answer, but because the question is so simple. So simple that I have to think really hard to answer them in a way that isn’t condescending, inaccurate or misleading. This example is to show the gap between a fearful flyer’s understandable view of commercial flying and my reality.

Suppose that you were teaching someone to drive. You’re a good teacher so you say at the start of the lessons that if your student wants to ask you a question, however simple or however complicated, they can do so at any time.

After twenty lessons your student asks if s/he can ask a question.

“Sure,” you say. They take a bit of a breath hesitate and say, “It’s really simple but it’s been worrying me.”

“Go ahead just ask me.”

“It’s so simple that—”

“Ask me!”

“Suppose we were driving from one city to another and after a couple of hundred miles you discovered you were in reverse gear... What would you do?”

I’m sure that however patient you are, you’d find it hard to resist thinking, “How on earth can you ask such a dumb question? Have you just been let out or did you escape?”

But you wouldn’t. You’d control yourself and say... well what *could* you say? The question reveals such a disparity between something that is so normal, so ordinary, so everyday to you, and

someone whose understanding is so far removed that it's almost impossible to answer it at all, let alone helpfully.

That's how I am with lots of questions. The questions are perfectly normal to someone who doesn't know. That's why they ask them. But what it shows is the gulf of knowledge between us that has to be bridged. To me, flying is simple, normal, everyday, routine, ordinary.

Just because it isn't simple to you doesn't mean that you should think that flying is risky or unsafe. Because it's simple to me doesn't mean that I don't take it very seriously, I most certainly do. Neither is it governed by forces unknown in the universe.

BOEING AND AIRBUS

Boeing planes are often compared with the Airbus family of aircraft. Pilots who have flown both often favour the Airbus. But that doesn't make them right. My preference is Boeing, and having flown an Airbus simulator I know that I'm right. The public are inclined to think that airbus are exclusively FBW (fly by wire). In fact both types are fly by wire. Long gone are the days when a mechanical linkage connected the pilots control wheel to the control surfaces on the wings and tail. All planes have computerised, integrated navigation and flight management systems, but for pilots the real difference is in how the planes 'feel' and how aircraft systems work.

From a pilot's point of view, the two Boeing planes that I flew were almost identical, but were very different planes to the passengers and anyone else. This doesn't mean that the pilots couldn't tell the difference, but that the planes were flown with the same procedures despite having very different passenger loads and ranges. The smaller 757 I've already described. The larger 767 carried more passengers and was much heavier. Externally it wasn't a problem for the pilots to tell the difference. One was slim and sleek and the other was fat and ugly.

The very clever thing about these planes was that, for the first time ever, pilots were licensed to fly both planes notwithstanding the enormous differences in weight and range. Normally a pilot would be qualified on one type of plane only. Hitherto, when a pilot gained a license to fly a different type of aircraft, their previous Type Rating was suspended and the new one was validated. The 757 and 767, uniquely, counted as one type.

What Boeing had managed to do was to design two planes with almost identical cockpits but with very different airframes. When you set the flaps for take off for one plane they went to fifteen degrees displacement and on the other you'd set the handle to the same position but the flaps would go to say thirteen or seventeen degrees. It didn't matter to the pilots as long as the setting was correct for take off. It had the same switches for the same functions in the same positions on both planes. So systems operation worked and looked identical to the crew. Pilots seemed to prefer the bigger 767 but I suspect that, once again it was because the plane flew to more exotic destinations rather than the actual handling qualities of the plane.

Both the 757 and the 767 were beautiful machines to operate, like a well-designed lawn mower or washing machine, they did what you wanted them to do without fuss or complication. Things like levers and selectors were positioned in exactly the right place. In my opinion, these

planes were ergonomically perfect. The programmes you needed to use were user friendly. The rinse and spin programmes were at the end of the wash sequence and not in-between coloured wash and delicates. You could climb aboard and use it for flying. Perfect.

Now, if you are a very nervous passenger, I want to re-assure you that no plane, regardless of the manufacturer, is safer than another. Both Boeing and Airbus have amazing safety records, wonderful passenger appeal and are equally as good to fly. I retired after flying beautiful Boeing planes for fourteen very happy and very safe years. In all those years I didn't have a single technical problem. However I have to add that since my retirement the only planes I have wanted to fly are the Airbus 380 and the Boeing Dreamliner so perhaps I'm still open to changing or confirming my mind.

DIFFICULT AIRPORTS, SHORT RUNWAYS AND WINTER

What some people would call a short runway or a difficult airport is not what I'd call a short runway or difficult airport. Every runway I've ever landed on has been suitable for my plane. It's been long enough, the approach path to it has been checked and certified as safe, the width is sufficient, the turn off intersections are useable and the Go Around procedure is approved.

Everyone knows that all major, and many municipal airports have runways long enough for Jumbo jets. But what about those holiday destinations where you've heard that the runways are too short and the pilot struggles to get the plane down or can only just manage to get airborne?

A plane can either fly from an airport or it can't and it doesn't matter how much nonsense you've heard. It's a fact of flying. It can or it can't... It's all laid down in the manuals. No pilot is allowed to "have a go" because he or she is in a good mood, has won the lottery or placed a bet.

A plane that is heavy because it has lots of passengers and fuel will have to fly faster than a similar plane with less fuel and fewer passengers. We learnt that from the section on Daniel Bernoulli's theory. The amount of suction (lift) that the wings have to generate has to be the same as, more than or less than the weight of the plane. I also said that the faster a wing travels the more suction (lift) it can make and so it must follow that a heavy plane will approach a runway at a higher speed than a lighter example of the same plane. With a 'short' runway even a normally big and heavy plane could be so light that it could approach slowly enough to land and stop on it, or light enough to take off from it.

You can't see how heavy a plane is by looking at it or even being inside it, and neither do you know the speed it's flying at so you can never know how much room it needs to stop. Stop worrying so much, leave it to the designers, engineers, test pilots and crew to do their jobs... Sit back, relax, take a stroll or have another snooze. Flying is simple.

Fearful flyers always compare flying in the winter with driving a car under similar conditions. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's much simpler to fly in winter conditions than it is to drive but once again a detailed explanation is outside this book's scope.

But winter conditions could cause issues on the runway, just as they do on our roads, but we only use the runway if it's been cleared to a minimum condition. All the pilots using the runway are trained, we take turns in using the runways (unlike a road we're not all on the runway at the same time), procedures are in place regarding everything that's happening in, on and around the

runway and on the airfield. It's nothing like the ignorant chaos that's allowed on the roads. The performance manual of each aircraft will show exactly the limitations to the take off weight if the runway is contaminated. The pilots will refer to this when required. One of the things it allows for is the reduced acceleration on take off due to snow or slush on the runway. The thicker the slush the more impact it has on the plane as it gathers speed. Maximum depth limits are imposed, so a plane can't always take off on every occasion when there is snow on the ground. Another important factor is the braking effectiveness on the runway, so you'll be pleased to know that measurements are made and broadcast to planes using the runway. If I've raised your anxiety levels remember that the safety margins are enormous and there's nothing to concern yourself with. At least there are rules about flying in adverse weather and if there were a tenth as many when we drive then we'd all be a lot safer on the roads.

Just for a moment you might like to think back to a Christmas when you were a child and didn't get all the presents that you were hoping for. You have to realise that, despite all the magic of Father Christmas, even he has a restricted take off weight on snow covered roofs, and maybe that was the reason your present wasn't delivered.

Remember there are no difficult airports and no difficult roof tops.

A FEW MYTHS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND SOME FACTS

It's time to explain some misunderstood words about planes and aviation. But rather than just make this a list of things, I thought first of all I'd tell you of the time that my great mate Leonardo DiCaprio called me up and wondered if I could put his mind at rest about a couple of things, because he was flying to Cannes for the film festival and had suddenly become a bit nervous about flying.

"Lennie," I said, "Why don't I talk you through some of our terminology." He laughed and said that it would be a great idea and maybe I could help with some method acting stuff for a part he was going to play in *The Aviator*.

"Lennie," I said, "Anything I can do to help you is fine by me ... Just make sure I'm not on the credits at the end." He laughed, and said he wouldn't dream of doing anything to upset me after all the support I'd given him.

* * *

Here are some more myths and misunderstandings about flying, and some facts.

Fuselage: This is the bit where you, the crew and freight or horses are located, although not always in the same compartments.

Tailplane: This is the bit at the back which has small wings on each side and has a small vertical wing.

Cockpit: This is the old fashioned term for flight deck.

Dispatcher: This is the person responsible for the loading of the aircraft and ensuring that everything is stowed in the correct compartments.

Engineer: Known affectionately as the "ginger beer," the engineer is a hard working person who delights in fixing things, getting dirty and doesn't mind getting cold. On retirement most pilots put a note in the plane's Technical Log thanking the engineers for keeping them safe. Curiously, I have never seen any money pinned to the page where this kind message is written.

Holding pattern: This is the part of the flight when an aircraft is waiting its turn to land and circles in an oblong shape over waypoints located about thirty miles from the airport of

landing. Air traffic control then directs a plane from the bottom of the holding pattern to the runway. Then each plane higher up descends in turn to the next lower level. It is very orderly and very safe. The highest altitude I've been "stacked" was at twenty thousand feet over Watford, north west London. And if you know Watford like I do you'll realise that's the best place to be. No, that's a cheap joke that is unworthy in a book of this quality. There are much worse parts of London... take the financial district for example.

Seat belt signs: Are not related in any way to danger, they do not signify safe or less safe parts of the flight. It is a legal requirement for everyone on board to be seated in the appropriate seats for take off and landing and at any other time the captain thinks is necessary.

Air pockets: These do not exist. If there were such things then the chances are that at some time in your life you'd have been in one on the ground and have been unable to breathe.

Tail Spin: No aircraft that I know of is capable of flying with just the tail spinning. Either the whole plane spins or none of it does.

Wings: These are things that can't fall off planes because they're made as one piece. The body of the plane is built on to the wings so wings have nothing to fall off.

Pilots and stewardesses: They don't always marry each other but they often get divorced because of each other.

Plummeting: In fifty years of teaching people to fly I have never taught plummeting, Descending? Yes. Descending quickly, slowly, with power and without power but I have NEVER taught anyone how to plummet! I can't even spell plummeting consistently. There is no aviation activity connected with plummeting. Forget it! Descending isn't plummeting.

Feeling the speed: Passengers who feel that a plane is going too fast, too slow or too high are talking nonsense. There is no way in which anyone other than the pilot can know these things. You might get a feeling that you're at the wrong speed or height but that's all it is, a feeling. Would an astronaut in orbit be able to say s/he's going too fast? S/he feels no movement at all and is probably circling the planet at seventeen thousand miles per hour. You can't measure speed without instruments.

Air traffic control: Don't "talk planes down" or at least they don't anymore. They provide directional guidance, heights and enforce speed restrictions but they can't land the plane from the control tower. The pilots' union is insistent on this.

Behaviour: No captain has ever inadvertently transmitted the message to the cabin that he “needed a hot woman and a cup of tea.”

Passenger: No passenger has ever stopped a stewardess rushing to the cockpit to inform the Captain that he was inadvertently ‘speaking’ to the passengers. And no passenger has ever mentioned to her that the Captain wanted a cup of tea as well.

Pilots: Are not overpaid, they’re underworked. Pilots lose their car keys as often as any other person. Pilots can’t increase the power of the engines by having good looks and determination.

Expressions No 1: “Squeezing the last ounce of power out of the engines” are words from a film script. Anyway power isn’t measured in ounces.

Expressions No 2: “Trying everything in the book” is a farcical statement. We try what is in the book for the prevailing circumstances. Why would we waste time doing everything else? Which book anyway? We call it a check list.

Myth: A pilot doesn’t have to work harder or more skilfully to get a heavy plane airborne compared with a light one.

Myth: A plane doesn’t know if it’s over the sea or flying at night. It doesn’t care and it doesn’t get more nervous under those conditions. It’s a lump of metal that is devoid of, and incapable of feeling anything. It’s *you* who feels. Planes don’t get tired. Planes just fly, they’re useless for everything else.

Fact: It is true that pilots have to eat different meals. If I eat this, the co-pilot has to eat that. Neither of us may eat mayonnaise, shell fish or stuff that’s likely to cause tummy upsets. Traditionally the captain would normally have the first choice of food in-flight unless s/he has invited the co-pilot to ask the captain to have the first choice.

Fact; There were times when the remaining food from the first class cabin was offered to the pilots but that was in the days when people ate from plates rather than out of buckets, used cutlery rather than fingers and used cotton napkins rather than their sleeves or hands. There were even better times, when captains could choose anything from the first class cabin, before the passengers. Such fine dining that not even a pilot could complain. Tempted though they were.

Finally: Remember that flying is much safer than driving and that driving is much safer than most people believe. Leave everything to me and remember how safe your flight is. That's a fact, not a myth and neither do I want it to remain a misunderstanding.

“DANCED THE SKY ON LAUGHTER SILVERED WINGS”

I've spent most of this story looking, I admit, a little cynically, at an industry and a career that is admired and envied by so many people, and that has given me a very satisfying working life. As a pilot, I bump into people who confessed to always having wanted to fly and others who have a private pilot's licence and want to chat about our common interest. And of course there were people I met who never thought they were even in the running to be a pilot. One recognises the esteem in which one is held, or used to be held. When people introduce themselves as being in the business they say, "I was in the Air Force... only on the ground. I wasn't a pilot." Those who have worked for an airline will mention the airline name then quickly add, "I didn't fly, I was an engineer." Or, "I worked in traffic."

But all those people make aviation what it is, if aviation depended solely upon pilots there would be no industry. Aviation is a huge family of people who love planes and flying in all its forms. Not everyone wants to be a pilot, why should they? But it doesn't seem to be enough to be in another department. Sadly being *something* or *anything* in flying is synonymous with being a pilot. That's not fair because it's not representative of the industry and all the talent in it.

Some people need to be up in a plane to appreciate the thing we call flight. Some think that being airborne is the most important part of flying. Even as a spectator at an air show, I'm sure most people want to be in the plane they're watching. But that's not the only way to 'be flying'. To watch a plane sweep along the runway and pull up into a steep climb or even go upside down is far more impressive from the ground than being in the plane itself. Doing it is very different from watching it, and not necessarily better!

In the plane you get a feeling of movement of course, it is you who goes upside down but all you see from inside is the sky and the ground moving around you. It's as if you're stationary and the world goes around you. It's still enormous fun, but the grace and movement from inside is far less spectacular than an observer would believe.

To be in an airliner approaching a runway is very different from watching it from the ground. Seeing it moving in relation to you, watching it follow another plane to land and then another following it in turn is something that, from the inside, we don't see and can't fully appreciate.

We inside are just flying our plane, watching the instruments looking at the runway touchdown point, adjusting the thrust levers, monitoring the speed... we don't get the awe-inspiring spectacle

of a great machine that a spectator enjoys. An observer can imagine the passengers in the cabin because you can see the cabin, at night you can see the illumination inside the plane and the plane's part in this procession. You see it come and you see it go. Another comes and goes. A procession of planes. You can see its purpose. But we're inside the time capsule. We are not moving. Like an aerobatic pilot we only see the earth moving, in the cockpit we don't and we can't see it as you do. The experiences may be different but the love or appreciation of flight is the same.

Having your photograph taken is much less exciting than seeing the photograph... The picture is the reason for having the photograph taken. Without making a picture, there's no point in taking the photograph. Actors in a film aren't the film, they don't experience the story. Although personally wouldn't want to do anything else but fly the plane, being the pilot is only being a pilot.

Just as I could to wave to the spectators at Manchester I'd love to have been able to connect with all the people watching my plane take off or land. I'd like to have shared their view and their feelings of awe and excitement and majesty of this mechanical sparrow (does a sparrow fly less well than an eagle or swan?). At least you're in company on the ground you can look at each other and share and enjoy the sight, the sound and the spectacle of plane after plane flying past you.

I think I was lucky to be able to appreciate being inside and at the same time understand what it was like outside as well, because I could remember watching those planes go around and around at Biggin Hill when I was with my friend Allen.

"and flown my eager craft through footless halls of air..."

TIME TO FLY

There is something utterly absorbing to watch a big plane at the departure gate, to watch the gantry pull away and leave the plane stranded. The scurry of vehicles that gave vital support for the plane a moment ago, have vanished without notice. Then you see the rotating red lights flashing and a man with an electronic umbilical connection to the plane. You can see things happening but you don't know exactly what, why or under whose direction. And then the plane starts to move and you share the excitement or trepidation of all the passengers. You wonder how far are they flying? A small plane can cross the Atlantic or take you on a hundred mile hop. You wonder how many are sad to be leaving, how many are happy. Leaving a family or loved one, or on their way to be reunited with another? Many are on a lonely business trip concerned only with being on time and getting food enough to last them until their meeting is over. Some are setting off on an adventure. Youngsters who start their gap year by flying thousands of miles rather than waiting at the side of the road and hitching a lift. Some are going to see friends or family... for the first time or, knowingly, the last time.

A hundred or more passengers with a hundred stories, about to travel faster and farther than mankind ever travelled in thousands of years but now without the time, encouragement or opportunity to share the moment completely. All rushing to leave the now or return from somewhere else.

Is it the ultimate luxurious, high-speed madhouse or a humdrum odyssey?

*The plane takes off at zero three
flies high past houses, hills and fields
Passin' lower planes that don't have names ... K.G.*

To us, the inmates running this moving madhouse, life seems normal. This is what we do. This is the procedure. This is our world... The world of commercial aviation.

There's an air of anticipation with every departure, regardless of the destination. Every staff member from check-in, baggage drop and security is working to a timetable where each minute of the plane's down-time is a cost allocated to someone or something in the departure process. Everything is working simultaneously, independently, collectively, remotely and reliant on things

going as scheduled. A simple request from the captain for additional fuel because of expected air-field or arrival delays will have significant repercussions down the line.

The poor old freight manager who has been trying to get some important plastic extrusions to Geneva to meet a freighter scheduled to leave at midnight, has his case relegated by the captain's request for extra fuel, or by extra passengers, baggage or a positioning crew. An angry passenger who missed an earlier flight because of a delay at security demands a nonexistent seat. Unknown to everyone on board, even to the dispatcher, there's an anxious family (who rushed off to change the baby's nappy) who are now heading for the wrong gate. Every flight has its problems. Every passenger, for every flight, at every airport, at every moment of every day, throughout the world is a potential delay. How on earth do we manage to ever get any flight away on time? The answer of course is that the industry does get most flights away on time, but at what cost to the passengers' feelings and treatment? Recording an 'on-time departure' is paramount. The cold cost of expediency is paid by the traveller. But we pay in the hope of something warmer next time.

The dispatcher has to account for every minute's delay and allocate it to one of their 'reasons for delay'. The fall guy used to be air traffic control but now of course, they keep records of when planes call for start up clearance. Everyone is doing their best to keep their own record clean. Looking back, I wish that I'd been more understanding of the efforts of all those people.

In the summer the dispatcher can be working in stifling conditions, or the rain, snow and cold of winter. They're indoors, outdoors, chasing lost passengers, supervising unaccompanied children, organising special meals and telling people where east is or where the nearest lavatories are. Meanwhile, I sat in air-conditioned luxury having a cuppa or reading the paper.

The pilots are the luckiest people in the whole procedure. We just sit there, checks completed waiting for each part of the process to click into place. I don't have to think too hard to recall the look of relief on the many red-faced dispatchers or freezing engineers who have been hanging on to sanity by their fingertips, when I eventually signal an on-time and give them a happy thumbs-up sign.

How pampered we must have looked. No wonder so many became prima donnas.

* * *

Well done to all those extras in this play but, unfortunately the Captain won't have time to mention you in the credits. If you're a regular traveller you'll notice that the air-conditioning stops just before the pilot is ...

CLEARED TO START ENGINES

“Start Number One,” the captain says to the co-pilot, and everything around takes on a new life. You can feel relief, struggling with the tension in the cabin. The lights go on and off. You’d think that at least the lights would stay on during this crucial phase of the flight, after all we’re still on the ground... but cabin lights are the lowest priority when the engines start. The engine starters devour so much energy that everything that’s not essential is disconnected. The ground power can supply enough air and electricity to start the engines and do other things but there’s no need to strain it.

And then the lights flash again as each engine starts. Something, somewhere makes a grinding, pumping noise. That can’t be right. No-one would design something so sophisticated and have noises like that filling the air and our ears. Or would they? It seems to happen every time? Not so soon after, everything stabilises. The grinding noise has ceased, the lights stay on, the air-conditioning cools us and the engines maintain a constant note. The cabin crew smile a genuine but regularly practised, plastic smile.

“Ground, Safe-air, 123. Permission to push”

“Safe-air 123. Clear to push.”

“Flight deck to engineer, we’re clear to push.”

“Release park brake.”

“Park brake released.”

The tractor driver, below the nose, engages the lowest gear he’s got and on the engineer’s signal he pushes the aluminium eagle backwards to the centre of the taxiway. When parked, the brakes go on and there’s another bang as the tug releases its grip. The engineer speaks, “Steering pin removed. Clearance from the left.” The engineer positions himself so the captain can see him. He looks around and sees there is no other traffic. He shows the connecting pin to the captain and gives a thumbs-up and a cheery wave. They used to salute but perhaps we should salute him?

Up in the control tower, a slip of paper or a digital note moves from one controller’s station to another.

“Safe-air 123. Contact Ground One Twenty-one. Seven Five. G’day.”

“ Ground One Twenty-One. Seven Five. Safe-air. 123.”

The cabin crew check the special meals against their passenger request list while the engines speed up to take us to the runway. In the main galley, the chief runs through the passenger list for the first class cabin. Some are regulars, some are experiencing first class for the first, and perhaps, the only time... After years of saving and waiting they're on a trip of a lifetime, trying to take everything in because... it has to last forever.

All that saving, all that expectation, years of devotion and now the realisation. Whatever happens, they'll take it in their stride and look back on it, without rancour or regret.

Hot towels; pre-flight drinks; large, comfortable, fully reclining seats; endless attention... who wouldn't want to fly like this every time? Some do, but dress like tramps. They slob and demean because they sold a million records or were a short-lived reality star.

CATTLE AND FIRST CLASS LAND AT THE SAME TIME!

I've developed a new attitude to cattle class travel. If I'm flying to America, it'll take about seven hours. If I'm cramped, I think about being lucky to travel at all. If I've got magazines and I'm warm, the prospect of seven hours in a relatively cramped seat is not a problem. After all, there's been many a rainy day when I've sat in an armchair for as long and longer. On election night, I can sit glued to the telly throughout the evening, through the night and most of the analysis the next morning. So, what's the problem? I didn't always feel like this but since I won't be flying first class again I have, as they say now, a 'work around.'

Unlike the Biz and first class cabins, we don't get any fussing before take off and for a long while after, but, if the view is good and I've got a window seat I'm happy.

Some people have, as my mum would have said, "ants in their pants." As soon as the seat belt signs are off they're up, going somewhere, nowhere, anywhere, standing up or stretching as if they've been confined to one position for the last two days. I know there's a human need to see what's on the other side of the mountain, but this is a plane and, in truth, there's not much to discover. What do these strange people expect to find as they wander around the plane? A waterfall or lost village? I'm content to sit, to look and to fiddle with my papers and magazines.

There's another type of person who needs to stand around ready to strike up a conversation with anyone who's innocently seeking a cup of water or visiting the loos. It's what travelling Alpha-men do and what women don't do. Women sit contentedly, happy to smile at passers by and happy to carry on reading, maybe make a new friend. For the man it's an uncontrollable, primordial state of mind which turns him into the imagined leader of an imaginary expedition. He appoints himself to help you. He's the sort of friend who, without invitation, reorganises everything from your barbecue to your bathroom and any other business you have. The sort of person who knows the best beer in North America, the South of England, East Timor and the Wild West too. He's a serial, tedious conversationalist which would be fine if you could get a word in but it's a one-way conversation and soon he's persuaded you that your carefully-planned, holiday itinerary is in urgent need of review. Avoid him. Avoid eye contact or pretend you speak a different language. Even the most nervous passenger would be happy to encounter a little turbulence and see the seat belt signs go on just to get away from him. Fortunately, he tries the same thing with the customs officials at your destination. You glide past his opened cases as a surly dog sniffs him,

the contents of his cases and his embarrassed wife. I doubt that he stops talking or giving advice even in custody.

If you've ever done any of this team-building stuff on a corporate day you'll know all about normin', stormin' and mournin'. And you can see it in action on board a plane. There's always someone who sees himself as the figurehead. He's a natural rival to Alpha-man. This one endlessly walks the aisles in a variety of poses and postures. He talks from a standing position, leaning over the back of his seat directly into the faces of his disinterested relatives. Give this guy the slightest acknowledgement, and you're caught for the rest of the flight. He won't give you advice, instead he'll give you his life story. He probably designed and test flew the very plane you're on. Success has not eluded him, as you'll find out.

Why is it that grumpy people take the aisle seat? One's first effort to get out to the loos is met with an unnecessary rearrangement of everything around them just to let you know that this is not an easy thing to do... It's not easy to let you go by... I was sitting comfortably! Yet, despite their obvious inconvenience, they'll wilfully repack their seat, their stuff and settle down again so that they can go through the same rigmarole when you return. Done effectively, this class action will deter you in future and you'll learn to sit and suffer in bladder and bowel tensioned silence.

If you travel in first class you'll be asked when you'd like to eat. In cattle class you'll know that it's time to eat when the cabin crew block the aisles, impede the movement of passengers and maroon anyone who was out of their seat when the relief operation began. Bearing in mind that they have restricted storage and galley equipment, the provision of so many meals is pretty clever. So credit where it's due.

Typically you're offered a simple choice of chicken or beef though sometimes you feel that, if you give the wrong answer, you could be in trouble. The crew ply you with so much drink that you'd imagine they weren't paying for it. But the motive behind is simple ... three hundred and fifty people can be put to sleep legally so that the crew can get on with the business of doing less.

The meal is like the bit before the curtain comes down on the first act. You've had the story outlined. "Welcome aboard this flight to Shangri-La" You know the players... "I'm Captain Jack Sparrow, looking after you in the cabin today is..." You've had the hook: "We expect to arrive early." And you've had the cliffhanger: "There may be some turbulence." Now in this aeronautical drama however, you're no longer the audience ...you've become the cast. Meanwhile, the crew transform from cast to audience as they watch the effects of the Hemlock they just adminis-

tered. They turn down the lights and move around slowly and mysteriously. The lack of light soothes you. Everything slows down and you feel still. The gentle whine of the engines soothes you into a state of somnolence and soon you drift off. It could be night time.

Once in a while you stir as someone opens a window blind and startles you with a dose of sunshine... It's midday outside but inside there's no time. Your eyes are heavy, and slowly - very slowly - you start to snooze again. The soft glow of one hundred and eighty seven screens of in-flight entertainment soothes you to sleep, perchance to dream.

It's one thing to be gently nudged by your partner when you've fallen asleep in front of the telly. It's disconcerting, unnecessary and annoying but you don't actually have to move. You can sleep downstairs.

"I'll be up in a minute," we say.

But like the sudden gunshot in a murder play, when the lights come on in-flight you wake up! When it's time for tea or breakfast, you wake. You pull yourself together because you realise that the crew are now on an important mission. Food has to be delivered, other meals are served politely but the last one before landing is delivered with military precision. The dispatcher of food parcels is followed immediately by the person trained to make "Tea or Coffee?" sound as intimidating as possible. As an experienced traveller, I've always answered correctly but, by the time I'm over the shock, I realise I've forgotten to ask for milk. I saw someone ask for milk once, though I doubt he has done it again. I find that the occasional black coffee is manageable now that I've had lots of it.

After the meal, there's an armistice, passengers stop demanding and at last the cabin crew oblige. The captain says that soon we'll be descending and what wonderful passengers you have been and what an absolute delight it was to have you on board. You can almost hear his knees scraping the floor while grovelling his assurance that his life will be on hold until you meet again. And, as if his career depends upon it, he assures you that the wind and rain that has battered your destination for the last month and a half, will abate upon your arrival or soon after. This rehearsed obsequiousness will ensure that, despite everything about this experience so far, your most recent memory will be how lovely the pilot was. You felt safe in his hands. You'll be back.

Soon we start our descent. There's a holiday atmosphere on board, friendships have been struck up and now, people acknowledge each other more warmly. Some are even happy to move from the aisle seats to let you through. We've all made it. Our destination seemed so far away a

short nine hours ago and now it's just an hour away. Six hundred miles isn't far in the grand scheme.

The question on everyone's mind is, "Do I need to visit the loo now or can I wait?" Where's Alpha-man and his rival when you need advice? The announcement that the seat belt sign will be going on in fifteen minutes makes up everyone's mind. The occasional politenesses which were developing during the flight are suddenly withdrawn in a collective flight to the toilets. This is fight and flight in the true psychological, physiological, biological, emotional and literal meanings.

Soon, you realise that you're in the queue where everyone ahead of you needs not only to freshen up, but to have a change of clothes, wash their hair, clean their teeth, put on make up, remove nasal hair, pick unreachable spots and do whatever else. The other queue moves more quickly you think, but this illusion is as true in-flight as it is at your local supermarket. It's not moving more quickly, it just seems like it. Or is it? Someone needs to write a thesis. Maybe the supermarket system of tickets would work? "Ticket number seven to cubicle four please."

Who designed the toilets anyway? A contortionist? It's only pride that prevents me from backing out of these claustrophobic cupboards. Can you imagine what it feels like to be in uniform and catch your hat as you leave? It's very undignified.

All good queues have to come to an end when the seat belt signs go on, and usually that happens just as you get to position one in the queue. My advice is to stay where you are, they won't land with you in the loo and there's a bit of slack in the threat anyway. Eventually we take our allocated seat refreshed, relieved, and revived.

Another quiet falls over the cabin as the plane descends and manoeuvres for landing. One or two seasoned flyers know that it's okay to talk in a loud voice about their holiday home in the hills. Babies don't know that crying will upset some people so they cry anyway. The cabin crew march efficiently up and down the cabin preparing and briefing for their commando-style evacuation of the aircraft as soon as their three hundred and fifty charges charge the doors. (How is it they get off last but get to customs before you? And by the time you're at the hotel they've got all the best places around the pool?)

The changing whine of the engines and the grinding noise of the flap motors tell you it's ten minutes or so before you land. Clonk go the wheels. Five minutes to landing. People chatter about what they can identify on the ground. You get bits of conversation, it mixes with your hardly-con-

tainable excitement or relief of nearly being there. The smell from the air-conditioning changes. Sometimes you can smell the city or the sea or get a slight hint of oranges or whatever's grown on the slopes of nearby hills. The relief that comes with the excitement of nearly being there now outweighs the problems that started months ago when you decided to come here rather than drive somewhere else that you've forgotten about anyway. It's all been worth it. The plane vibrates as the wheels and flaps are extended.

The trees get bigger. You pass a dried up river, an old farm house, a flurry of features flash by. The cars on the highways get closer and, for a moment, you wonder where they're going. In the distance you can see the terminal. Almost there. The wings waggle and silence falls... The engines go quiet and ... and... Bump, you're on the ground. The lockers creak and start to shake. A slight hesitation is followed by the roar of the of the engines using their power to slow you down. You feel the brakes go on, a little too harshly at first, then released and back on again. A hundred miles an hour! It seems like a walking pace now as your plane gets ready to turn off the runway. It wasn't so bad after all.

The cabin crew are up and out of their seats to keep you down and in yours. They're soon stopping keen passengers from retrieving their baggage from the overhead lockers.

"Please remain seated until the aircraft comes to a complete standstill," a stern voice warns. The plane makes it last turn on to the parking gate and we wait as the engines stop. We wait until we're almost bursting. A few passengers break ranks and they're up, the lockers are open. There's no time for another warning.

As the "doors to manual" call is made we 'get set', like runners at the starting blocks. The signs are off, we unbuckle our belts and stand, going nowhere. But like a scientist trying to write the Bible on a pin head, there's a curious need to do something because something should be done at a time like this. After nine hours of just sitting there we need to do something else, don't we? It's time to stand. Having travelled at six hundred miles an hour while sitting the obvious antidote is to stand and not move at all. So every passenger takes to the nearest aisle simultaneously, staking their claim for an un-denied and undignified feeling of freedom. Some face forward, some sideways. Some are wedged awkwardly, facing a stranger, a head arched under a baggage locker, a leg here and an arm there, a child lost amid adult legs, a raised arm without room to be lowered, a smart phone somewhere relaying an intimate message unable to be suppressed, every third person with a seat back digging into their twisted side. And for ten minutes we stand mo-

tionless like grotesque statues of the ridiculous, happy to be back in the safe land of normality.
The seat belt signs go off with a ding.

EPILOGUE

I know that my actor friend whose email started this literary journey would agree that all the world's a stage. But as an ex-fearful flyer I wonder how he'd see 'the play' of which we've just been a part? How would our fellow passengers regard this aeronautical play? Not as a tragedy because we're here safely at our destination. Not a comedy because too many of us are anxious. A mystery perhaps? To some but not to the crew. Sometimes I'd say it's been a theatre of the absurd. In reality our stage-flight was a variety show. We've had everything: tension; amusement; deep thought; relaxation; contemplation and more. And though not everyone enjoyed the story, no-one will say they didn't like the ending.

Many of you started the show months ago when you courageously made your booking. You chose the play. You met and became the players as the story unfolded. We liked the protagonist, we admired the heroes and, as far as we could, avoided the villains. We certainly wrote the lines.

But here's a thought. We've flown and, like millions before us we have arrived safely. But I think that only fearful flyers can fully appreciate this particular flight because they have lived doubting that it *can* happen to them, they doubted that it *should*, they even doubt that it *has*. But it has, and safely.

So the question is: ... Those *surly bonds of earth*, how many of us, despite the opportunity, really do slip them?

I know that I did.

* * *

Answer this question for an unsigned copy. Did you enjoy this?

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

To save some readers from wondering if I ever really did have a serious life in flying here's some stuff about what I did.

I learned to fly a glider when I was sixteen, I flew solo the day after my 16th birthday. I learned to fly on a Tiger Moth at the Fair Oaks aero club in Surrey. I went solo after eight hours which was slightly better than average. I flew a variety of light aircraft, including a sea plane on my way to joining the exclusive Tiger Club, for which there was a minimum of 100 hours solo flying experience. The club operated a number of higher performance planes notably single seater Tiger Moths which could be flown upside down for long periods. I left the club under a cloud for low flying in places where I should have been much higher.

I was a flying instructor for five years and flew over a hundred types of light planes. I became the Chief Flying Instructor of the Club at the tender age of 24. (There's no reason that the cliches should stop now). I met and flew with war time pilots of distinction and bravery whose flying skills left one breathless. I met people of such talent that whatever they chose to do they would be at the top of the tree. I met famous people and I met many impecunious enthusiasts. It was a spectrum of people whose infectious love of flying uplifted and inspired me daily.

The first big plane I flew was The Airspeed Ambassador, renamed the Elizabethan by B.E.A. It was characterised by the masses of blue smoke from the engines when they started. More often than not air traffic control would ask if we were OK? It was a very luxurious plane for its time and had large and comfortable passenger seats.

After the Ambassador I flew the Vickers Viscount 800 aircraft for seven years. The routes were mainly around Scotland but included UK domestic routes and internal German services from Berlin along the corridors to Bremen and Hanover.

The Tri-Star was operated by both BEA and BOAC and the fleets were amalgamated when British Airways was formed. Internecine feuds raged for ages to establish a single operating procedure. High performance version called the 500 were used by long haul which once again fuelling notions of bigger faster or noisier requiring extra expertise. I flew it on short haul routes notably Paris which meant that when fuel was cheap we'd often carry so much that we could stay airborne for hours. When the fuel crisis hit, the sophisticated navigational system and the auto-land capability meant that it could be used very fuel efficiently.

After the Tri-Star I flew the 757 and the 767 which were mainly operated around Europe and the Middle East. British Airways introduced The Extended Range Operations or Extended Twin Operations (EROPS and ETOPS) meaning that they could be used for Atlantic crossings to North America. This was the first time that two engined aircraft could be used for such flights and involved all sorts of extra rules regarding diversion airfields and routings.

While I was on this fleet I became a training pilot and check pilot. British Airways had a policy of separating training and checking. Their view was that if training pilots checked trainees they would test to the standards they set. Independently, check pilots would test to the standard set by the chief pilot. I thought it was the most effective way to maintain high standards and so was delighted when the training department had a surplus and some of us had the opportunity to do 'checking'. The two aircraft were a delight and simple to fly, they handled like big Tiger Moths. The shortest trips were to Manchester and the longest to Seattle. In the searing heat of the Middle East they performed superbly.

In retirement I am involved in a lot of Human Factors training. In the early years of aviation safety was often compromised by a crews inability to communicate effectively or where experienced captains refused to accept information from junior crew members. Human factors training helps crews to build effective working relationships, to use systems for decision making and organising cockpit duties to avoid excessive workloads. It's a fascinating subject that the medical profession have adopted and in which many pilots are involved.

Perhaps the most fun bit in retirement is teaching pilots to become trainers. The highlight is at the end of the course is when we 'fly' the simulator and I take the role of a student and where *my* students have to spot, analyse and correct my mistakes. It must be one of the few jobs where you're paid for doing things badly without realising it and helping people to learn at the same time!

Happy Landings. Keith

"Do you always do as you would like to do were it in your power? I find that circumstances force me often to act in a manner quite opposite to what I should prefer; I am, of

course, judged by my acts, but do they really afford a true key to my character? I think not." R.J.

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