



FROM GIANT JUMBO TO PUNY PIPER

A new experience: Flying a Piper Aztec after nigh on ten years of flying nothing but 747s.

ON THE termination of my airline career, I found myself in the south-eastern lowveld of Zimbabwe, the sugar belt, flying a corporate twin-engine Piper Aztec in addition to various light singles.

After just short of ten years on the 747, during which time I had gone nowhere near a light aircraft much less flown one, I approached the transition to the comparatively miniscule piston-engined twin with the same caution as would a cat a coiled cobra.

In the air, the smooth, effortless and comforting rush of air in a 40 000 foot Mach 0,86 cruise was traded for the vibrating, clattering roar of two minute 250 hp Lycomings, seemingly bent on destroying themselves as they strove to paddle us through the 10 000 foot turbulence, straining to maintain 160 knots.

The superb instrumentation and avionics system became the six suction driven basic flying instruments backed by a solitary, antiquated ADF, which had to be manually tuned to each and every frequency. Even the luxurious fleece-lined seats, infinitely adjustable in every plane including lumbar support, became crude, plastic covered frames in which the normal human form could not be accommodated for longer than 15 minutes without an ache being induced somewhere.

The air conditioning was replaced by a socket vented to the elements and a heater which, if not allowed to either incinerate or asphyxiate its victims, would lapse into a sulk and refuse to work.

From my very first jet experience, way back in the 1950s in the era of the Vampire, I had come to the conclusion that piston engines belonged in trucks and tractors and not in the air. For all this, once I had overcome my mistrust of the piston engine and adapted myself to the little machine without expecting the reverse, it became quite endearing to me.

The almost obscenely thick wings would lift just about any load they were called upon to lift, the moveable stabiliser, activated by that ridiculous handle in the roof, could cater for a wide centre of gravity range and she was as tough as teak. I was later to have to take her through some astonishingly bad weather including hail, icing and severe turbulence with nary a murmur of complaint from either engines, fortunately fuel injected, or airframe.

Further, I rather enjoyed being a one man band – in the 747, the captain has either a first officer, a third pilot or a flight engineer to handle mundane items such as load sheets, filing of flight plans, re-fuelling and pre-flight inspections etc. I enjoyed doing the route planning and



research required when operating to off-beat places such as Paradise Island, Bazaruto, Kinshasa, Lubumbashi or Fothergill Island in Lake Kariba, revelling in the excitement of breaking unfamiliar territory.

I had, however, hitherto not been aware of the extent of anti-apartheid, anti-South African feeling in the 1980s which prevailed in many parts of southern Africa, even though Rhodesia had long since ceased to exist as such. During the airline days, although acutely aware that all white South Africans, regardless of affiliations, were regarded as perpetrators of apartheid and we were banned from overflying the continent anywhere north of the Zambezi, I had seldom been directly confronted save for one nasty moment.

This occurred when I was briefly held in Abidjan shortly after the national carrier began touching down there, for those who made such decisions ensured that their aircraft avoided places of contention like the plague and besides which, there was always the assurance that the aircraft was state-owned and one could rely on state backing in tight situations.

Now, however, I was flying a small privately-owned South African-registered aircraft and could expect no such backing – if slung into jail in any one of those territories I would be likely to rot there, a fact brought home to me not long after moving to Zimbabwe.

I had landed at Messina in order to clear customs due to the indisposition of the official at Buffalo Range where this formality was normally complied with. There I encountered a gaunt, dishevelled looking character surrounded by press people. It turned out that he was a charter pilot who had been arrested in Bulawayo some two years previously when an over zealous customs officer discovered a box of harmless, hand held signal pyrotechnics under his seat. He was slung into jail and his aircraft impounded, only to be released by accident when he was freed along with a bunch of politically held cellmates. By the time they

realised their mistake, he had somehow contrived to cross the border, by which time the poor fellow was a physical and mental wreck.

Thus it was with some trepidation that, shortly after this, I presented my licence and latest log book to the authorities in Harare after receiving an urgent telegram ordering me to do so. I suspected that it had something to do with a display I had been asked to do at the Lowveld show in Chiredzi in the company Cessna 150, unfortunately Zimbabwe registered. Although prior approval had been obtained from the Zimbabwean Civil Aviation Authority, including basic low level aerobatics, for the display, my licence had not been endorsed to fly Zimbabwean aircraft.

What was of greater concern, however, was the fact that I had continued to use SAAF log books, having remained on the reserve until quite recently. I debated acquiring a civilian log book and copying the last few pages into it, but for the life of me, despite combing every book shop on Harare, such an item was not to be found. I only learned later that the books were closely monitored and issued only by CAA.

I was summoned before the director himself after a lengthy wait in a dark corridor. My worst misgivings were confirmed when, on entering the office, I found myself confronted by a large, belligerent looking black man in a pin striped suit seated behind a large desk and flanked by two siblings. There was no formal greeting or introduction, the big man merely motioning me to a seat opposite him after which he held out his hand for the documents.

After a lengthy perusal of both log book and licence, he looked at me through hooded, bloodshot eyes without raising his head, wrinkling the skin on his forehead, reminiscent, I could not help thinking, of a Bloodhound on the trail, and rasped: "Why do you come to this country?"

"I came here to work and to fly. They need me because I have an instrument rating," I replied, beginning to twig that this interview had little to do with flying.

"You leave a rich country to come here when most of the whites have left?" If there was one thing I had quickly learned during my brief sojourn in Zimbabwe, it was not to antagonise black authority, much less display any semblance of arrogance.

"It is a beautiful country," I replied, "And I believe I can contribute to it. I am grateful to have this opportunity to work here."

"This log book – it is from the South African Air Force."

"Yes, I was in the air force, but that was 28 years ago. I just continue to use their log books because they are much better made than the civilian ones."

"What do you do when you are not flying?" he asked.

"I work on the company sugar farm, sometimes on the ranch."

"You, a professional pilot, know farming?"

I did the best thing I could possibly have done by breaking into Zulu, similar to Sindebele, replying: *"I grew up on a farm in Natal; it is in my blood. As a child, my friends were all Zulu boys my age. Sometimes on Sundays when the men were drunk we would fetch the cows and help with the milking."*

The transformation was electrifying, The director broke into a wide, gap-toothed grin as he replied in Zulu: *"So you are not of the Amabuno (Boers) and you speak Zulu."*

By this time they were all grinning. The Bloodhound had become an affable St. Bernard, and the director rose, extending his hand, *"Hamba gahle umfweto,"* he grinned, and then in English, "If you are going to stay in this country you will have to get a Zimbabwe licence. All you have to do is write the air law exam. The rest I am satisfied with."

I escaped, thanking my lucky stars for my knowledge of Zulu, for it was obvious that I had been regarded as some sort of South African agent!

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