AIR MISS - CLOSER TO DEATH

ON ONE particular flight during which certain dangers were destined to be graphically illustrated, my log book reflects a start-up time of 0045 hours Zulu on October 11, 1982, at Ilha do Sal in the Cabo Verde archipelago, some 300 nautical miles west of Dakar, the westernmost city in Africa.

We were bound for Frankfurt's Rhine/Main airport, in the then West Germany.

Since the international airline pilot's lot consists largely of trying to sleep when the metabolism cries otherwise, or of trying to stay awake when that same metabolism appears bent on sleeping, I had spent a fitful late afternoon and early evening tossing in my bed at Ilha do Sal in anticipation of the loud knock on the door followed by a Portuguese accented voice claiming, "*Calling Timesh".*

This usually occurs just as one falls into a deep slumber, in preparation for taking over the flight from Johannesburg. Little did I realise as I showered and dressed that all of us on board that aircraft were within hours of being closer to death than any of us were ever likely to be again before being claimed by Father Time!

At that time, the aviation world, and indeed the world in general, was still reeling in the aftermath of the horrendous collision on the ground at Tenerife a short while previously, between two almost fully-laden 747s in fog. This was due to a complete misunderstanding between the control tower and the two aircraft.

This was possibly precipitated by the ATC's lack of knowledge of the English language, the one universal language of the aviation industry. Since one of these aircraft was in the process of becoming airborne, the resultant impact destroyed both aircraft with a staggering number of 583 fatalities.

Climbing away from the desert island in the pitch blackness of that night, I was overcome by that particular sense of peace and wellbeing that I invariably felt when flying that giant of a machine, the Boeing 747.

Securely cocooned in the cockpit, tiny by comparison with the rest of the aircraft, I felt pleasantly removed from the rest of the world, assuaged by a sense of belonging, of "I belong here, am happy here, and right now would not want to be anywhere else but right where I am sitting at this time."

Soothed by the rush of air past the windows a mere couple of feet away, I contentedly monitored the instruments glowing in the darkened cockpit as we maintained the mandatory 250 knots to 10 000 feet, whereafter, switching off the landing lights, we accelerated to 320 knots for the climb to flight level 330 or 33 000 feet.

The only real noise at this time was the odd chatter of the radio in my left ear, for I habitually kept the right one clear of the headphones in order to communicate with the crew.

During the climb, the comely senior air hostess silently entered this domain bearing most welcome cups of coffee. Holding a Private Pilot's flying licence, she said: "Captain, this gentleman would very much like to come and chat to you people."

For security reasons this was frowned upon, but I believed that if a passenger was genuinely interested in the "sharp end", it was good public relations practice to bend the rules a little.

In any case, an organised, well informed hijacker would scarcely be deterred by not being able to visit the flight deck officially. This passenger, squatting on the floor between the two front seats, watched with interest as I levelled off at flight level 330, quoting the semi-circular rule which ensured that there were 2 000 feet separating aircraft travelling in opposite directions.

A while later, I tuned in the Tenerife visual omni range or VOR beacon on the island, used to both verify and up-date the inertial navigation systems.

Naturally, throughout the transition of the Canary Islands or Canarias control air space, we were in radio contact with those controllers, and had flight planned to fly over Tenerife and thereafter on the "airway" to the north-east at whatever flight level was assigned to us.

Approaching Tenerife, I spotted the flashing strobe lights of another aircraft in the distance, which I duly pointed out to the passenger beside me. Taking a long look at this, he eventually exclaimed: "Hell, I'm positive he's at the same altitude as we are!"

I hastened to assure him otherwise, stating that at night, at that altitude, distances and heights were almost impossible to judge and besides which we were flying in accordance with the semi-circular separation rule, so that the other aircraft had to be either above or below us by at least 2 000 feet.

I nevertheless flashed my landing lights a few times to which he eventually responded. He was obviously heading in our direction since by then I could clear-

ly discern his navigation lights – red on our right and green on the left, indicating that he was heading towards us.

Surprisingly, I had not heard him on the radio, and assumed that he must have been on a different frequency. So I broadcast our call sign, position, altitude and estimated time over Tenerife on an international frequency reserved for communication between individual aircraft, but there was no acknowledgement.

As he approached, I was becoming decidedly uneasy, for at a closing speed of not far short of 1 000 knots, we were closing at a bewildering rate. A microsecond later, both the first officer and I instinctively reached for our autopilot disengage buttons in order to take evasive action, but too late – in a flash he was past, the big yellow orb on its blue background, the logo of Lufthansa, seeming to fill the side window as he flashed past.

So close was he that I was sure that he had taken part of the right wing off, but the aircraft remained on an even keel, displaying no tendency to roll as it must have if that had happened.

I disengaged the autopilot to the cacophony of aural warnings and flashing lights, but she answered to the controls quite normally.

Re-engaging the autopilot I switched on the wing illumination lights and sent the flight engineer back to check the wing from the cabin. He returned to report that everything was still where it should be, and since all other indicators remained normal, I had to conclude that we were two 747 loads of extremely lucky people for I do not think he could have come any closer.

I called Canarias Control but he was silent – presumably in shock after realising that two aircraft had passed over the same point at the same time and altitude.

I then heard the Lufthansa aircraft calling on my frequency and asked him to submit an ICAO "Near Miss" report as soon as possible, as I would on landing, to which he readily agreed.

As we taxied in after landing at Frankfurt's Rhine-Maine, I asked the first officer to try and judge by the size in his window of the logo's of other 747s we passed, how close we had been to disaster. Eventually we parked right alongside one and he nodded saying: "That's about it. We couldn't have missed by more than a couple of feet!"

One upshot of that incident was that a lot of Canarias controllers were sent to the United Kingdom for further training, and radar was installed at Tenerife, but it took a near disaster to motivate that.

As for the passenger who, squatting next to me, had witnessed the whole thing, I found, when I had time to turn my attention to him, that he had disappeared back to the cabin.

The flight engineer informed me that the second time I flashed the landing lights, the poor guy lit out of that cockpit like a jackrabbit, and I never saw him again! ✈

MILESTONE IPANEMA CROP DUSTER DELIVERED

THE 1 000th Ipanema agricultural aircraft manufactured by Indústria Aeronáutica Neiva, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Embraer, was delivered recently at a ceremony held in Botucatu, São Paulo, where the company is based.

The milestone aircraft is also the first ethanol-powered crop duster ever delivered to a customer by Neiva. The company's alcohol-powered Ipanema received type certification to fly with this type of fuel, which is extracted from sugar cane, in October 2004 from the Brazilian certification authority, CTA.

The choice for developing a crop duster fueled by ethanol stems from the fact that Brazil is a major producer of this type of fuel which has been used in motor cars in the country for 20 years.

Ethanol is about four times cheaper than aviation gasoline and also a cleaner source of energy capable of improving the aircraft's overall performance. The new Ipanema engine also brings other advantages such as lower maintenance and operating costs. ✈