



FOG IN THE TOWER

ALTHOUGH SOMEWHAT unsophisticated by later standards, flying the DC-3 in the 1950s was not without its lighter moments.

An example of this was on a particular flight from Oudtshoorn to George. We were advised that George, as so often was the case, was enshrouded in fog, and forecast to remain so for the following 12 hours. The two small towns, although only some 40 km apart as the crow flies, were the absolute antithesis of one another.

Separated by the Outeniqua range, George is blessed with high, year-round rainfall evidenced by its verdant gardens, magnificent trees and lush green grass, while its climatologically poor neighbour across the mountains receives virtually nothing.

The epitome of a small Karoo town, Oudtshoorn is dry and dusty with water a precious commodity, although it had once known considerable wealth through ostriches, which thrived in the very dry climate.

On this occasion, to confirm that George was indeed fog-bound, we maintained altitude to just about past Oudtshoorn in order to establish VHF contact with George, that type of transmission being limited to line of sight since the waves travelled in straight lines.

From that altitude, we could see the blanket of low cloud stretching from the base of the mountain to well out to sea and along the coast to the very limit of our visibility.

George tower confirmed that visibility on the field was right down, and that it was not worth our while to even attempt an instrument approach, so we duly landed back in the dry dust of Oudtshoorn.

The captain was all for pressing on to Cape Town, our final destination for the day, since the passengers for George were to be bussed through the mountain pass to their destination, but a frantic call from the George office begged the captain to wait until the fog cleared, for they had a passenger in need of urgent medical attention, available only in Cape Town.

And so, after an afternoon and night in that dusty little town, we presented ourselves at the airport shack before sunrise. In the 1950s, direct telephone dialling was unheard in that part of the world and since the local operator closed up shop after working hours, we were temporarily without weather information.

However, after start-up, while waiting for the oil temperatures to rise, the radio operator proved his worth by obtaining a weather report to the effect that although George was still fog-bound, this was expected to clear shortly after sunrise.

Accordingly, we took off as the sun rose to reveal a beautiful day with nary a cloud in sight. It was general practice when flying between the two towns to climb only high enough to fly through the beautiful scenic pass weather permitting.

This was a practice not only enjoyed immensely by passengers and crew alike, but which also saved the long climb up over the mountain and subsequent lengthy descent down the other side, rendered so because being unpressurised, the rate of descent was limited to 500 feet per minute.

On this occasion, however, since we had no communication with George and could not verify that the other end of the

pass was clear, we proceeded to climb above the field in order to gain sufficient height to clear the mountain. During the climb, George came into VHF range and advised that he was still fog-bound with visibility well below limits, but as we crested the mountain, there was George in all her verdant glory with the beautiful coastline clearly visible as far as the eye could see.

On requesting descent clearance, the controller cleared us to call over the beacon at 6 000 feet and proceed outbound in the pattern, whereupon we requested a time saving visual approach since the field was in sight. He replied something to the effect that we had better verify our position, for we were certainly not at George which was still fog-bound.

We looked at one another, thinking that the man had gone off his rocker, and proceeded with a visual approach anyway. At 1 000 feet, turning final, we requested clearance to land, which was duly granted by the controller but not without a certain degree of sheepishness.

After landing it transpired that when he had arrived at the field in darkness early that morning, the field had indeed been swathed in dense fog, so dense that he could hardly see beyond the confines of the control tower windows.

He had then become engrossed in whatever he was studying, and only on receiving our initial call did he glance up, but still could see nothing but greyness despite it being daylight. Only after receiving our third call did the awful truth dawn in his study-bemused brain.

Opening the door, he stepped out on to the balcony to behold a beautiful clear day. After sunrise, the fog may have been burned off, but probably due to the temperature of the glass, the windows remained fogged up! →