



HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

AT THE time of my introduction to four-engined flying as a first officer on the DC-4, or Skymaster as it was known, back in the 1950s, airline flying was far less regulated than it was later to become in the jet era.

For instance, on the coastal flights from Durban to Cape Town via East London and Port Elizabeth and *vice versa*, it was common practice, weather permitting, to file a VFR flight plan and head down the coast at a comfortable 500 feet or so, since, unlike the jet engine which guzzles fuel at a prohibitive rate at low level, the piston engine becomes more efficient. This practice afforded the passengers a fascinating, ever-changing vista of land and seascapes, as opposed to the boredom of air travel at altitude.

Now one of the captains with whom I used to fly at that time had relatives resident at the Bashee River mouth, then a remote area which had never seen a postman, much less a newspaper delivery service. Consequently, the relatives were starved of current news, a situation which "Captain Larry" resolved to alleviate. This he would achieve whenever flying that route by positioning the first officer over the flare chute, simply a capped pipe mounted in the floor at the rear of the flight deck, designed for releasing flares, presumably installed during the aircraft's war service.

Adjacent to the chute was a gadget I had never encountered before and have never seen since. It was a drift sight, basically a vertical telescope mounted in the floor with a huge lens bearing parallel lines across it. The operator would peer into the eye piece and align the parallel lines with objects as they passed below, thus being able to read the drift on a graduated scale on the housing.

Before taking up his station at the chute, the first officer would take a drift sighting which

he passed up front before arming himself with a tightly rolled and taped bunch of newspapers which exactly fitted the chute, and a length of sawn off broomstick with which to launch the roll down it when signaled.

Approaching the "target", the first officer would load the chute and then crouch over it, stick at the ready while watching the captain's raised right arm, held aloft as he made his final low level "bombing run". The moment that arm was drawn smartly down, the broomstick was thrust equally smartly down the chute after which Captain Larry would orbit to the left, having positioned the radio operator at the rear of the cabin to verify the accuracy of the drop as the aircraft passed over the target a second time.

There was much disgust if the roll did not end up on the lawn a few metres from the porch, the distance from the porch often being the subject of heavy wagers among the crew.

Misfortune, however, struck after one such run when, in the jubilation of scoring a "coke" (air force slang for a bombing bull's eye), a fisherman's expensive box kite out over the sea went undetected and was carried away by the DC-4 together, literally, with hook, line and sinker. The ensuing rumpus was featured prominently in the press and curtailed the newspaper drops until, I learned later, the livid owner of the kite was reimbursed for his loss by the recipients of the newspapers.

When the drops eventually resumed, Captain Larry took the precaution of keeping the first officer in his seat to keep watch for kites while the radio operator manned the flare chute.

UNIQUE SENSATION

At that stage, besides coping with internal services, the DC-4s were also utilised for charters to Europe, mainly to the Costa Brava and Costa Do Sol where the passengers would

rejoin their cruise ships which they had left in Cape Town.

En route, there would be lengthy stops in such fascinating places as Victoria Falls, Nairobi, Khartoum or Usumbura (Bujumbura) and Cairo, for those passengers had two weeks in which to explore Africa while the ship made its way to the Mediterranean via either Suez or Gibraltar.

However, a few short years later, South Africans and their aircraft were barred from virtually the entire African continent.

Nevertheless, cruising up the western shore of Lake Tanganyika (Tanzania) on one of those charters after spending several delightful days at Victoria falls, I was blissfully unaware of this as we headed for Usumbura, Ruanda Urundi (Burundi) on the northern shore of the vast lake. I had been given the leg and instructed to maintain in the region of 500 feet above water level and parallel the shoreline, while the captain weaved his not inconsiderable charm on the ladies in the cabin, for the passengers were predominately American widows spending hubby's insurance payouts on a world cruise.

Watching this scenario unfold to my left and below while keeping a wary eye on the autopilot and altimeter, I was very aware that few experiences can match that of flying over the surface of the earth when within close proximity to it. A feeling of exhilarating timelessness is engendered, of total freedom from "the surly bonds of earth" as the surface glides below.

It is a unique sensation, akin to an euphoric drug and one has to take care not to fall into that old trap of flying ever lower – the death knell of many a promising aviator for at a low level the earth appears to weave a spell over the unwary to which none is immune.

Cruising along that shoreline idyllically, with the engines growling contentedly in long

range cruise, I was enjoying every minute of it. The odd herd of hippo would submerge at our approach and the occasional, enormous crocodile sunning itself on a sandy promontory would scurry into the water.

A passenger, one of the few males among the women tourists, was in the right hand seat, the better to be able to film, for judging by the equipment slung around his neck and torso, he was more than just another avid amateur photographer. Quite suddenly we came across a flotilla of frail looking dug-out canoes, each bearing one or two equally frail looking spear fishermen, miraculously standing upright as they gazed aloft, agape at our approach, probably having heard the engines miles away.

As we passed overhead, some of them waved, in acknowledgement of which I rocked the wings, but then the passenger alongside me uttered an oath, exclaiming, "Dammit! I missed that. Could you go around again?" I duly obliged, informing the passengers of what we were doing, but the man on my right, glued to the eye piece of his movie camera, kept muttering: "Too far, too far," for that was before the age of the zoom lense. I tightened the turn and the man muttered, "Too high, too high," despite the fact that at that time I had descended and the starboard wing tip was not that many metres above the water.

Eventually, while the camera whirred without respite, I levelled out and flew over the flotilla at next to nothing feet, aware as we flashed overhead of terrified faces peering at us, thin arms gesticulating and dug-outs rocking precariously. I climbed to 200 feet and orbited again while the man on my right chuckled gleefully, "Atta boy, that was beautiful, I got the lot."

But I noted with dismay that at least half of the flotilla had overturned, my dismay turning to consternation when I recalled the gigantic crocodiles we had seen earlier!

There was nothing I could do but continue and the incident preyed on my mind until the manager of the hotel at Usumbura, hearing about it, laughed the whole thing off saying: "Those things capsize all the time. They simply roll them over, climb on board and bale them out, and the crocs, they never venture into deep water!"

NO BRAKES

That, however, was not the only scare I received on that trip.

Before relating what transpired next, it is necessary to explain that when the hydraulic system of the DC-4 was designed, variable displacement pumps were unheard of, consequently the system was fitted with a manual

by-pass valve to relieve pressure during cruise and prevent overheating when the hydraulics were not required. This was achieved by lifting a flap on the cockpit floor adjacent the right hand seat, which opened the valve.

Thus, a few days later, going into Nice, I was again in the left hand seat, the captain having done the previous leg to Cairo. The Nice control tower allocated a shortish cross runway, the main runway having been blocked by a Constellation after putting two main wheels into the soft verge.

We later learned that it had skidded on, of all things, hundreds of snails which for some reason had invaded a section of the runway – no wonder the French are so fond of escargot!

I landed short and as the nose wheel touched, stood on the brakes, but to my utter consternation, the pedals went flat against the stops.

Fleetingly, I thought we were skidding on another snail invasion, but reason returned because those pedals were flat indicating hydraulic failure, and so yelled: "No brakes!"

It is quite amazing that when a vehicle, be it a car, bicycle or aeroplane loses its brakes it appears to actually accelerate at that moment, this being no exception, for in fractions of a second I relived that hollow feeling in my gut when as a young boy, my bicycle brakes failed on a very long, very steep hill.

With the end of the runway appearing to rocket up ever faster, I was easing to the side of the runway to give myself the best possible line and at least try to make the turn off at the end, but my yell of "No brakes," prompted the captain to look down where he beheld the hydraulic by-pass valve standing up in all its glory.

He slammed it down and I could immediately feel the return of pressure on the pedals. We screeched to a halt at the end, tyres smoking, – the tower informed us – but miraculously not one of them blew.

It subsequently emerged that one of the stewards, having forgotten to clear away empty cups from the floor of the flight deck at top of descent, remembering this on final approach, had hastily cleared them away, but in so doing noticed that the by-pass valve was not up as he had always seen it.

Thinking that he had inadvertently pushed it down, he raised it without saying a word! There had been sufficient accumulator pressure to lower final flaps and that was it.

Had the captain not had the presence of mind to think of the by-pass valve, without nose wheel steering or differential braking we would not have had a hope in hell of turning off at the end of that runway anyway! →

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