



## A NEAR ENCOUNTER WITH KILIMANJARO

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**I**N THE late 1950s, I was fortunate enough to be appointed as a first officer on the venerable Douglas DC-4 or “Skymaster” as it was known – my first four-engine experience.

I say fortunate because in those days of darkening political gloom, shortly before South Africans, at least white-skinned ones, were banned from just about the entire continent, the DC-4 fleet was used largely for charter work, having relinquished the main international routes to the infamous DC-7B.

Those charters afforded the crews an opportunity they might never otherwise have had of getting acquainted with some of the most exotic parts of Africa.

On one memorable trip we would be loaded both ways – having bade farewell to our north-bound passengers at Nice, we embarked another bunch a few days later and headed south for Nairobi where we were scheduled to spend yet another couple of days before heading back to the “City of Gold” via Salisbury (Harare).

### DEPARTURE

Despite the fact that the sun was still some way below the horizon and low stratus and drizzle lent an early morning chill to the tropical atmosphere in Nairobi, the crew were in jocular mood while boarding the bus at the hotel on the day of departure.

On arrival at Njili, the then airport of Nairobi, a pet theory or mine was born out – that wherever mankind chose a place to build an airport, that place would attract the foulest weather, the heaviest fog and the most capricious winds. In this case we had a blustery north-easter, visibility of not more than a couple of hundred yards and a cloud base so low it almost appeared to touch the top of the con-

trol tower. We nevertheless went through all the formalities working out a fuel flight plan according to the winds and temperatures supplied and forecast by the meteorological office, filing an air traffic flight plan, compiling load sheets and manifests and working out centre of gravity.

Most of this fell upon the navigator and myself for we did not carry a flight engineer but a licensed ground engineer who had come out earlier to run up the engines, check systems and supervise re-fuelling.

Having completed what I had to do and cleared customs, I walked across the wet apron to where the aircraft was parked. Approaching in the drizzle, I could not help but admire the lines of that big, beloved and reliable old DC-4. One of the first of the tricycle undercarriage generation, she squatted on her big single nose wheel, proudly disporting her immaculate blue and white paint above polished aluminium, gleaming despite the weather.

### AIRBORNE

By the time the passengers arrived, the cloud base had lifted to 300 feet and visibility had increased to half a mile.

Stan, our captain, a vastly experienced World War II veteran, decided to go, since the easterly wind dictated a take-off in that direction, away from the notorious Ngong Hills to the west; burial place of many a hapless aircraft.

Shortly after becoming airborne, we went into cloud so thick that we could hardly discern the wing tips, and began tracking away from the NDB beacon, our only navigational source of reference available at the time, on 165 degrees magnetic in accordance with the

slip of paper handed to me just prior to take-off by “Mac”, the navigator.

We settled into a steady climb to flight level 115 in accordance with the quadrantal separation system in force at the time, Stan flying and glued to his instruments while I tended the four Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp radials, growling comfortably at climb power.

I had little to do but monitor, occasionally adjusting one or other pitch lever to keep the engines synchronised while adding a touch of throttle to maintain the falling manifold pressure as we climbed.

Coffee and rusks were served by Jennie, our pretty and endearing air hostess who had skilfully parried my dishonourable intentions during the previous three weeks without ever losing her humour, and we all settled down to the routine of the long leg ahead of us.

### DISASTER LOOMS

Forty or so minutes out, having reached top of climb, set cruise power and established fuel feed, Stan, the captain, muttered an oath and, calling to Mac the navigator over his shoulder said: “Mac, what was that initial track you gave us for the climb? Let me see the chart.” Mac responded with alacrity, holding the folded Mercator between us.

Almost immediately Stan rasped to me: “John, check the magnetic track to Kilimanjaro on the Aerad chart.” I immediately grasped the gist of his thoughts, and with mounting anxiety measured the track and distance to the 19 000-foot mountain, the highest point in Africa. As the awful truth was confirmed I became aware of that rising, hollow feeling in the pit of my gut, so familiar as a kid when disaster loomed.

The chart revealed Kilimanjaro, bearing  
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165 degrees magnetic from Nairobi at range 128 nautical miles, precisely where we were at that time, and only half as high as the peak.

We had neither radar nor DME, so could not accurately determine our position. Turning would be pointless, for we might turn directly into the mountain. Stan had only one remaining option – climb like hell and hope!

When he called for full power, I already had those Twin Wasps roaring. He disengaged the autopilot and trimmed the nose up, gaining as much height as possible while allowing the airspeed to bleed off to maximum angle of climb speed. When she settled at that speed the VSI read a paltry, agonising 200 ft/min.

“John,” Stan said calmly, not taking his eyes off the instruments, “keep those motors going, check flaps fully up and close the gills as much as you can.”

We both realised the futility of trying to out-climb the peak of the mountain, for at 200 feet per minute, even if we could maintain that rate, it would take some 37 minutes to climb the remaining 7 500 ft to reach 19 000 ft. Our hope lay in the fact that Kilimanjaro was shaped like a huge inverted cone, and obviously the higher we could get, the better were our chances of missing its slopes.

After five minutes, the engine limit for maximum power, Stan, looking extraordinarily calm for somebody who at any moment could be dashed against a wall of solid rock, said: “Ok, let's get those revs back a bit to max continuous before the engines blow and we go in anyway.”

Despite my own near panic, I had to admire this man who had survived countless bombing raids during World War II, flying through walls of 'flak' to release his lethal load, and then nursing his sometimes crippled aircraft back to land at some crude strip in the desert.

Save for the roaring Pratt & Whitneys, there was no sound in the cockpit as the old DC-4 clawed her way up past any altitude at which she was designed to fly. My hands were sweating as I adjusted the engine controls, more to keep occupied than out of any hope of coaxing more power out of them.

We must have found some orographic lift from the mountain for, as we climbed through 15 000 feet the VSI (vertical speed indicator) continued to register just under 200 feet per minute.

Five minutes later, passing 16 000 ft, I became aware of the coffee cups being whisked away and Mac saying something to one of the stewards.

Stan kept climbing, foot by agonising foot, for each one gained improved our chances of missing that mountain. After another 20 min-



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utes, by which time we were nearing 18 000 ft Mac said with undisguised relief in his voice: “Skipper, we have got to be past the beast by now.”

Stan replied, still looking as cool as ever: “Thanks Mac, but we'll keep her climbing for another ten minutes just to be sure.”

Then Jennie came into the cockpit, and tapping Stan on the shoulder, said: “Captain, some of the older ladies seem to be flaking out. Can we use the oxygen bottles?”

“Sure,” he replied, switching on the No Smoking sign.

And then; turning to me, he grinned for the first time in a long while. “Auto suggestion. I heard that steward ask Mac how high we were, and he must have told the passengers. We haven't been up here that long.”

The laden DC-4 must have been close to the stall when Stan eventually said, lowering the nose: “Ok John, give those engines a break and let's have cruise power. Thank heaven we didn't hit any serious icing.”

I set the power, inordinately relieved that those magnificent pieces of machinery seemed to settle contentedly back into cruise without displaying any untoward signs.

It will never be known just how close we may have come to that mountain. In the thick cloud either wing could well have scraped unnoticed past an outcrop, or the belly scared the rock rabbits off a ridge for all we knew.

A perusal of the slip of paper handed to me by Mac just prior to takeoff, revealed that the hastily written 165°M in the heading column should, in fact, have read 205°M. Both Stan and I had interpreted the 2 as a stylised 1, and the 0 as a six, for it displayed a tail at the top. Furthermore, we should have checked the initial heading on the Aerad chart, and Mac

should have noticed that we were tracking out on 165 degrees – but we did not, possibly due to involvement with the takeoff in that weather. But that is what accidents are all about.

#### **“SIT DOWN, YOU....”**

We all survived and learned from that experience, but at the next landing in Salisbury, one of our dowager passengers requested to film the approach and landing from the flight deck which was permitted with a little bending of the rules.

She duly braced herself between the seats, left arm around a vertical bar and holding her 35 mm movie camera (videos had yet to be conceived) with both hands, glued her right eye to the rubber viewfinder.

Being mid-afternoon and extremely hot, with a nasty wind gusting up to 25 knots, the approach was particularly turbulent causing the normally stable DC-4 to prance around like a skittish Clydesdale.

Stan, who was flying, had to use both hands on the heavy yoke while I set the power according to the manifold pressures he reeled out. On close final, we both forgot about the camera lady, concentrating on the task at hand. As Stan flared for what should have been a greaser of a landing, the machine ballooned, causing Stan to mutter, “*Sit down you bitch,*” as he eased her back to the runway again.

After touch-down, while I cleaned up, Stan, remembering the camera lady, turned to enquire how the filming had gone, only to find her prostrate on the floor clutching the base strut of his seat with both hands.

In response to his puzzled query she replied: “But skipper – they all called him Skipper – you told me to sit down!” →