Operation "Ompad"

WHILE BLITHELY winging their way over African territories boasting names of such romantic connotation as Senegal, Chad, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Uganda or Kenya, the South African aviator of this millennium will scarcely spare a thought for his less fortunate forebears of a less fortunate era.

I was still a first officer with South African Airways when, on October 15, 1963, we departed Rome Fiumicino Airport on the scheduled flight plan for Nairobi and thereafter Johannesburg. Little did we know as we climbed out, that prior to that, another SAA flight from London, likewise Johannesburg-bound via Nairobi, had been refused entry to Libyan air space.

From an operational point of view, this was not all that serious. The commander of that flight merely diverted westwards around Libyan air space to Las Palmas in the Canaries, invoking what had come to be known in the airline as *"Operation Ompad"*.

This was a procedure for which we had been well briefed and the airline well prepared, for the closure of various sectors of African air space to South African-registered aircraft on political grounds had long been anticipated. As a result, the powers that be had, for the previous year, been involved in negotiations with the Spanish authorities for landing rights at Las Palmas. Although eventually granted, this was with ill grace and restricted to refuelling rights only.

The Spaniards were wary of bucking the rising tide of world opinion against apartheid. In fact, this action by Libya triggered a chain reaction, being followed in quick succession by Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and just about every territory north of the Zambezi.

Consequently we never reached Nairobi on that ill-fated flight. Henceforth, the national carrier suffered huge penalties in time and fuel, being forced as it was to operate "around the bulge" to Europe.

My following trip happened to be my first to Las Palmas via Brazzaville, before that, too, closed and the airline was forced to operate via Luanda. Although crews had been warned regarding the less than adequate facilities on the island at that time, my first arrival there proved something of a revelation – the only navigational aid was an antediluvian NDB beacon mounted on high ground some 15 miles to the north of the field, appropriately coded *"Pappa"* and which was wont to lose interest in its primary function whenever most sorely needed.

However, the coastline just south of the field had several indentations which facilitated lining up on the extended centre line on weather radar. This was most fortunate for, hiding itself on dark nights not many miles to the west, lurked an enormous piece of volcanic real estate which rose to over 8 000 feet. The air traffic controller's knowledge of English was not even rudimentary while no such luxury as an electric flare path was in existence.

Following an approach with no glide slope indication, not even a GPI, the crews had to somehow put those big Boeing 707s down between two rows of paraffin fired "goose necks". So narrow was the single runway that the outboard engines overhung the goose necks, precluding the use of reverse thrust on them, not only for fear of dirt ingestion but also in an invariably vain attempt not to blow them out. However, reverse on the inboards did that anyway.

This resulted in a period of at least 40 minutes between jet arrivals to allow ground crews time to re-light the flarepath.

Having survived this harrowing arrival, particularly in crosswinds, the next trick was to manoeuvre the 707 alongside another on to an apron designed for not even one large jet. During this shoe-horning operation, a marshaller would run along at each wing-tip while a third, in front, would endeavour to lead the aircraft in running backwards, at his own peril, for many were the pitfalls on that cramped little apron and their antics often provided a bit of hilarity for jaded crews.

Thereafter, the steering lock which restricted nose wheel steering angle, would be unlatched and the machine pivoted on its inboard oleo using brake and outboard power.

REDISPATCH POLICY

Operation Ompad using either Las Palmas or later Ilha do Sal as en route refuelling and crew slipping points, also saw the introduction of a fuel policy, vilified and castigated by the crews, known as *"Redispatch"*.

Although widely employed by many American airlines, this was not popular among crews since it was simply a means of legitimately "cooking the books".

In compiling a normal flight plan, fuel is calculated sufficient to fly from A to destination B with a diversion to a suitable alternate C, plus 40 minutes holding plus six percent contingency allowance, based on forecast winds and temperatures. When implementing redispatch, however, the books were "cooked" in that a suitable en route redispatch point was chosen, meaning that although the intention was to fly from A to C, a flight plan was filed from A to redispatch point B and then when over B, if conditions at C were acceptable, the flight was diverted or redispatched to intended destination at C, arriving there with no further diversion capability.

For instance, during those dark days, in order to fly from Johannesburg to Lisbon, a flight plan would be filed from Johannesburg to Las Palmas from where, provided the Lisbon weather was suitable, the flight would be redispatched to Lisbon, arriving there with only holding and contingency fuel.

This resulted, one northern winter, when the Lisbon weather becomes more fickle than a mistress, my flight being forced to land in fog so dense that even taxiing was difficult – but that is another story. ✈