

A NEAR-MISS, I WOULD NOT LIKE TO REPEAT!

By Robin Anderson Capt. ret. 17 January 2016.

It was one of those many pleasant flights that Captain Corneels (Corny) Balt, myself and Vic Francis routinely flew for Trek Airways on DC-4s on a three night stopover to Europe, that fate conspired to put us very close to, "Buying the Farm", as the Americans call it.

Our routing was direct to Entebbe in Uganda on the North shore of Lake Victoria, for the first day's travel and all went well. Mostly everyone was delighted to change into swim costumes upon arrival at the spacious Victoria Lake Hotel due to the high humidity, and enjoyed drinks at the palm-tree-surrounded pool before later joining the Captain at his table for a leisurely and well catered dinner.

There were 64 passengers and 6 crew on board so Ozzie Seager, our representative Manager had a long trestle table covered with bed sheets set up for this repast. The view from the dining room was out over a wide stoep towards the crocodile infested Lake and all the wide doors and windows were open, to catch any breeze. Corneels, Vic and Ozzie kept the passengers regaled with humorous stories and a very pleasant evening was had with free drinks plentiful, as they were on the flight.

For myself, I only drank Coca-Cola or fruit drinks, and as it was my turn at the controls for the ten hour trip to Cairo plus doing the flight planning and navigation, I did not stay the course, but turned in soon after dinner.

An early start after an abundant English breakfast enabled us to avoid that cloying humidity, though most of the 'Pax' would have liked to snooze on. It was Trek's practise to follow the Nile after departing Entebbe and flying low there was so much wild game to be seen, that some waited until the barren desert appeared after Malakal. The huge elephant, black from being in the clear waters of the river and Crocodiles to be seen basking on sand spits were also of tremendous size and plentiful. We crew knew that the river was blessed with big fish from having lunch at Khartoum when we operated the twin-engined Viking, which did not have the vast range of the four-engined Skymaster, and had to refuel more often. The firm and tasty colossal Nile Perch was a delight to look forward to in the dry heat of this part of the Sudan.

As the day progressed we had climbed to avoid the heat and turbulence and I was obliged to tell 'Corny' that by my fuel usage chart we may have to refuel en route at Luxor, due to head winds. He cogitated for some minutes after checking the fuel gauges and groundspeed I had calculated, then said, "No way, we will make it!"

He had been a Mathematics teacher before flying in Burma during the War, I knew, but I felt it would be a close thing and the headwinds could increase the further North we flew!

After Khartoum I ran another check and again put him in the picture as we would pass over Luxor, anyway.

Looking over at me with his favourite Cheshire cat grin, he insisted all would be well and so we continued with all eyes on the fuel tank gauges. We were some hundred nautical miles – 1,15 Statute Miles each – from Cairo International at ten thousand feet when he conferred with Vic. Francis. The flight engineer then rolled up some folded newspaper as small wedges and reduced the mixtures on all four levers to keep the cylinder head temperatures in a safe operating range and I asked for a slow descent from Control. The paper wedges were to keep the levers from dropping into the cut-off position and shutting down an engine!

Our Skymasters had eight fuel tanks and Vic now began running two paired engines at a time until the wing tanks were run empty, without starving the motors. In this way we could eventually see the airport and Corny instructed Vic to be sure and keep the two inboard engines, 2 and 3, running at all costs, as they had the hydraulic pumps for operating the landing gear, flaps and brakes. All tanks' gauges were on empty except for a little showing on the mains!

As we lined up for a Northerly touchdown I saw a long ladder lying across the runway and had to extend my flair to clear it!

Calling tower about this hazard I then became aware of a TWA Super Constellation coming towards us in red and white colours. Tower had not warned us but he too had been given clearance for landing on the other end of the same runway!

All four of our engines were still performing normally so having touched down I kept the power on to get clear so that the scheduled American TWA aircraft could land over us and made him aware of the ladder in front of him !

If it had not been for the fuel problem we would have broken away and given the scheduled TWA preference, as was the ruling!

Quite a unique sight seeing this big machine so close over us as we passed each other.

In the event we parked with all motors turning over and Vic shut them down to climb out onto the wing to dipstick all tanks. The sum total was 110 U.S. Gallons with a considerable volume of this un-useable!

The DC-4 averages about 200 gallons an hour.

'Corny' had done it, again!

That evening the Nile Hilton hotel provided us with a delicious filet steak with all the trimmings and the 'Pax' visited the nearby Museum and some went out to the Pyramids and night clubs, to ride camels and see belly-dancing young women perform. The local market for copperware and bronze trays etc., called the Mouski was another favourite port of call for many. Here you saw very young children hammering out the designs on these objects to produce gorgeous items, of which I have some, still at home. Vic and I used to bring in stock which my elder brother would try and sell from a small shop in a passageway opposite the Johannesburg City Hall. (When I lost my briefcase in the burning Skymaster on the Nile, Vic said, "If I had paid you last night as you asked, you would have lost it this morning anyway, so I don't owe you anything!", and we both laughed heartily!) Needless to say he never did settle what he owed!

Corneels flew the third leg of our journey to Nice on the French Riviera, and as it was a short day we mostly visited the Monte Carlo Casino in groups that night, or went to local nightclubs.

The following morning our required routing took us along the coast towards Marseille so we could miss the military flying area to the North stretching close to Paris. We then would have proceeded up the Rhone Valley to Lyon and even further West to a NDB beacon called Paris East, before being allowed to continue our IFR plan due East to Luxembourg, where buses would be meeting the passengers from various neighbouring countries.

Corny was obviously in a hurry to get to the Golf Hotel at the airport, in which Trek Airways had a financial share, as he suddenly piped up speaking to Control and cancelled our IFR Flight plan!

I interjected saying with emphasis. "You can't do that! We don't have maps or radio charts to transit a military flying area and those jets are a real hazard as they bank vertically because of their speed and pull the stick back to turn! With their momentum they are turning blind and we could have a collision!"

But 'our Corny' was already out of the right hand seat and putting on his jacket and cap to visit with his passengers. Again the Cheshire cat grin and he said, "I'm sure you will cope!", and disappeared into the cabin.

He had lowered our altitude with the Automatic pilot beforehand so we were at 2000 feet with no current QNH (Local millibar altimeter setting) and heading straight for Luxembourg as unwelcome intruders in General Charles de Gaulle's Atomic fighter/bomber training area, which he called his, 'Force de Frappe'! (Many years later I was to fly the DC-3s (Dakotas) given to the French President for his personal use, which had later been donated to the Government of Burundi, on the Northern shores of Lake Tanganyika.)

Leaving the aircraft on automatic pilot to concentrate on searching for 'targets' I got Vic into the seat Corny had just vacated and showed him how to scan the luckily clear sky in sections, from the centre of the windscreen towards the side facing windows and up and down. I did the same on my side.

It was but twenty minutes when I fortuitously, with peripheral vision, picked up the bellies of two jets tucked in close, blocking out the view on Vic's side, moving in a downward motion towards us!

In a flash I had pulled up the centre knob of the autopilot on the floor to disengage the elevator and whipped the control column back into my stomach! I could see the rivets on their undercarriage doors as we zoomed up at about 30 degrees and they disappeared from view, underneath us!

I was still easing the nose down when Corny came barging into the cockpit and looked out the windscreen. I leaned forward and pointed out the two Etendard nuclear bombers curving around below and in front of us, moving to the right, and he went white in the face and took up the chair Vic was now leaving.

I believe those military pilots never knew how close they had been to a mid-air as their concentration was elsewhere; downward and forward!

Once again in my 12,000 ultimate flying hours, there was a deathly silence in the cockpit and I often wondered since if his bus had left late or on time! There were no injuries in the cabin, fortunately.

This infraction was never reported to anyone, as far as I know.

Another, 'should never have happened', lapse with Corneels was when flying on a three pilot Boeing 707 crew from Luxembourg via Libreville at night, as we approached the airport under the overcast. I had gone to the toilet before landing and as I re-entered the cockpit quickly, so as not to have the cabin lights distracting, I took note of the way everyone was looking out the windows. This alarmed me and I checked the instruments and shouted out one word, "BANK!"

Corneels had inexplicably let the bank angle increase and we were past 85 degrees, with the IVSI – Instant Vertical Speed Indicator - beyond what I had ever seen on the B707 and the Altimeter rotating like a propeller, downwards!

Of course, like the highly accomplished pilot that he was, he recovered in an instant, but we had lost some 1500 feet with all looking for the runway lights towards the left on this dark early morning with no ground horizon, because of the high jungle vegetation blocking out all earthbound illumination. I noticed we now climbed to get back to 2000 feet to intercept the glide slope on the ILS before reaching the outer marker beacon!

Because of his smooth manipulation of the controls I had not felt the entry into a corkscrew power-dive, even whilst walking!

He was to retire eventually with over 32 thousand flying hours, mostly on heavy transports.