

SPLIT SECOND TO DISASTER

The emergency landing of Trek Airways Douglas DC-4 Skymaster ZS-CIG c/n 42913 on 3 September 1960

By: Robin H. Anderson Captain retired.

"MAYDAY - MAYDAY - MAYDAY This is ZULU SIERRA CHARLIE INDIA GOLF - A DELTA CHARLIE FOUR - UNCONTROLLED FIRE NUMBER TWO ENGINE - POSITION....."

On the third day of a Trek Airways return flight from Dusseldorf, West Germany, with Captain Tom Meredith, MD. of the airline, commanding and Captain Ian Laatz in the left seat with myself as first officer and Vic Francis as flight engineer, while Inge' von Mellenthin and her daughter Gisela, (General von Mellenthin was Field Marshall Rommel's chief of staff in the Western Desert during WWII, and a director of the airline.) were the two air hostesses of a DC-4 Skymaster, ZS-CIG. Captain Meredith was returning from vacation in Europe hence having two captains on board.

We had departed very early from Cairo International on the morning of 3rd September 1960 on a direct flight to Entebbe on the northern shore of Lake Victoria, Uganda. This was necessitated by the high temperatures and large fuel load of 'Avgas' required for the ten hour trip, putting us close to maximum all-up-weight.

The previous afternoon and night had been enjoyably spent at the Nile Hilton Hotel on the bank of the Nile River and the passengers had been able to visit the Pyramids and the famous Egyptian Museum not far from the hotel, among other attractions.

Because of rising engine temperatures Vic was forced to combine with Ian in 'step-climbing' so as to cool down the motors and it took an hour to reach cruising altitude of flight level one,zero,zero. (10,000 ft.) As I had flown the shorter leg from Malta the day before, I was navigating and monitoring the High Frequency radio, bearing the brunt of lightning from all over Africa crashing in my ears.

There was no 'sellcall' in those days. Tom had meanwhile put on his baseball cap and removed his shirt; he had well developed 'abs' and was wont to display them to passengers visiting the cockpit! The sun was on the other side of the plane with us flying South, so it was not to improve his tan, which was good already!

With the aircraft 'on the step' and Vic happily reducing power for cruise I was about to contact Cairo with a position report when I heard just one 'ping' from the fire warning, instead of the expected, tring,tring,tring....

I jumped up from the little navigating table behind Tom's seat ahead of the crew door and dashed around the radio racks and saw that #2 motor fire warning red light was illuminated and immediately entered the cabin to get a good look out the port passenger windows. There were flames coming through the cowling behind the engine so I returned to stand behind the operating crew. They had completed feathering and firing the second CO2 bottle by this time so I reported to Tom that the fire had burned through the nacelle in the #2 accessory drive section, and that I was going to put out a 'Mayday call'. He immediately concurred and Ian, who was watching the number two engine rearwards from his sliding window said the fire was getting worse, and nodded. Inge' and Gisela then came rushing into the cockpit asking Tom what they should do? He said, "Get back to the rear and strap yourselves in!"

Telling Tom our position as just having passed East abeam Assiout on the Nile where there was an airfield, I handed him a map of the area and began our distress call on H.F. as above. Completing the call with our routing, position and height I was immediately answered by Misrair 264 on route frequency who said he had copied and would relay to Cairo and asked for our intentions. Quickly enquiring of Tom, I was able to advise that we were now heading 305 degrees for an emergency landing at Assiout and that we had been unable to extinguish the fire in a high speed dive and that our ETA was approximately 0545Z. Misrair 264 then said, "Roger, will relay and am standing by this frequency on 88' and 121,5." The time was 0525 Zulu.

Peering out the small round cockpit door window I could make out that the land below was exceedingly rough with myriad eroded deep valleys, so a landing there was out of the question.

Suddenly ZS-CIG plunged downwards and I staggered back again to behind the pilots shouting, "Take it easy - that wing could come off!" I saw we had just passed the edge of the escarpment and Assiout field was in sight just across the Nile River from a village which turned out to be Badary (26°59'47.70"N 31°24'45.88"E [click to open in Google Maps](#)).

Ian was looking out at what later we heard was the port oleo hanging free from the nacelle with burnt out tyres! He said, "I'm putting her down this side of the river!" (This turned out to be one of the best crucial decisions made that day - the airfield was only two miles distant. - The #2 engine with feathered blades, would have caused burning high octane fuel to run all over on the hard runway surface.) Immediately I advised Misrair 264 of this new development and he indicated that Assiout was aware of our situation and wished us Good Luck! - I never did learn if we had been in contact with Assiout Tower on the VHF radio!

Rushing back to look out through the windscreens I asked if they had "Briefed the 'Pax' " and Ian replied, "NO!"

Grabbing the PA 'mike' hanging behind his head, I only had time to say, "The first impact is coming up, now BRACE - BRACE!" as we settled smoothly towards the flat flood-water plain alongside the fields adjacent to the river. - We were lined up with Asyut's runway in the near distance and I could see that we had some port drift on, also that the speed was 115 knots, and told Ian the speed. He said, "I'll hold it off a little longer" and then told Vic to feather all four! (Another very crucial decision, as it would have been disastrous if the starboard fuel tanks were also ruptured by the fully feathered propellers tearing out engines three and four as well! – Note how #3 nacelle is already bent downwards by the partially feathered blades on that engine; just a matter of seconds before it too completed its feathering cycle!)

Suddenly ZS-CIG lurched and my right leg was thrown forward onto an oxygen bottle. For support I had been holding on to a vertical stanchion which I was standing behind; and of course the 'mike'! Engines numbers one and two had been wrenched from their mounts by the feathered propellers and rolled under the port wing, rupturing the very nearly full fuel tanks! Soon after, we slid to a stop and I dashed to open the cockpit door and jumped out onto the soft sand and clambered onto the starboard wing.

The passengers had already opened the small fuselage over wing emergency exit on my arrival and I began assisting them out and off the sloping trailing edge of the wing. I noticed Ian outside the crew door helping with those coming through that way and Tom in the cockpit doorway, was handing them down.

Later I had to run to the rear emergency exit which was above my outstretched arms to help a young man down. Telling him to stay there and help any other passengers, I quickly returned to the over wing exit and continued my work there. I must admit that I was non-too-gentle with bulky people slowing down the process and there must have been quite a few scrapes and scratches inflicted from the framework, as I hauled on arms and legs to extricate bodies! You guessed it, I next had to run back to the rear exit as there was no one there and another man was about to fall headfirst from that quite considerable height!

On returning to the wing Vic had put in an appearance alongside Ian on the ground and that helped considerably as the drop was at least a meter to the sand. (Later it was learned that he had clambered over the seatbacks to reach and open the main port cabin door - fortuitously he could not do so and actually broke the handle off trying! The fire soon spread along the fuselage to that point and passengers eager to exit could have been badly burned, despite the quartering wind blowing the flames from the heavily Avgas-saturated sand away from the aircraft on that side!)

Finally no more 'pax' presented themselves and I leant head and shoulders into the empty cabin and shouted, "Is there anyone still inside - Is daar enige mense nog binne?"

Seeing no one, I straightened up and made for the crew door to retrieve my flight case - which had my logbook and money in it from changing Egyptian currency for the passengers Northbound at a fixed rate - in and out - so that they would not be lumbered with notes unusable back home! (We bought the local currency in Europe at a discount and the little extra profit made this way came in useful as our pay was very low.) Tom stopped me by shouting from beyond the starboard wingtip, "Andy get the hell out of there - she's going to blow!" Now realising that the passengers were spread willy-nilly all over, I ran towards the other crew members shouting, "ROLLCALL - ROLLCALL." Getting to where Tom was I checked with Inge' that there were 64 on board including a young baby and told her to begin counting along with me. Tom then said it would not be necessary for her to count as well and I exploded with, "What if I'm wrong? " – further incensed at the unnecessary loss of my valuables!

The count tallied between us and we turned to see that the fuselage had collapsed from the cockpit back to the tail empennage! It was found later that the young mother had left her newborn baby behind but another passenger had taken it to safety! A passenger told me that from when the aircraft stopped it had taken under three minutes to evacuate the aircraft!

We could see a truckload of troops/firemen arriving on the nearby road and Tom, who had been given a white shirt by a man with an overnight bag, to replace his left on his seat, and Ian, walked back to view the trail of debris including the two engines, propellers and the port oleo behind the Skymaster. Vic and I carried a stout lady who had injured an ankle exiting the cockpit door in a fireman's lift - hands holding each others' wrists - towards them. Not long after and a crowd of villagers came rushing through our group past the soldiers, grabbing at anything of value including my watch now underneath my burden's bottom! Vic and I lashed out with our feet and they left us to hurry to the wreck to salvage what they could, even climbing onto the remaining wing full of fuel!

Transported by truck to a nearby school the passengers soon began complaining about not being given safety instructions, but when they saw the gaping hole in my trouser leg and I told them that we had been very lucky to have survived what could easily have been a catastrophic inferno, they calmed down. In assessing those hurt, Inge', Gisela and I found that a seat had come adrift and there was a broken finger as well as the ankle to be attended to.

Accompanied on my request by a medical doctor who was on board to oversee our treatment at a church hospital, we were very well taken care of by the Sisters there. My knee received some six stitches and I was amazed to see that it

had not bled! Returning to the school we were then conveyed to the airfield where we learnt that two DC-3s of Misrair would be arriving to fly all but 13 of us back to Cairo. I was to escort the volunteers by train and Ian gave us money for tickets and food and drink. He had judiciously given his flight case to a passenger saying, "Here, carry this," whilst still in the aircraft!

Needless to say once on the train we were soon pretty inebriated from local Egyptian beer; even myself, who am a teetotaler! Mrs. Charles Fortune - whose husband of cricket commentary fame, was on one of the DC-3s - was very entertaining with her comments. She said that when I stopped speaking on the P.A. system I had 'frozen' on the mike button and my laboured breathing and "Ouch" had been heard in the cabin! This was cause for much ribbing and laughter by Vic and others and the time passed quickly, with Vic telling us amusing stories of his night-time escapades at the Muskey (Bazaar quarter) in Cairo.

Arriving back at the Hilton after dark we had been preceded by the Dakota passengers who had been met by the press and photographers. Inge' had seen to it that we had new toothbrushes and paste in our rooms and after a shower and delicious filet steak room-service dinner, I slept soundly.



c/n 42913, ZS-CIG. Trek Airways / Trek Lugdiens Piet Retief.

Burnt out after forced landing in the desert near Assiout, Egypt due to an engine fire on 3 September 1960
Photograph: Robin Anderson



Newspaper article. Robin Anderson collection.