



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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Three belly landings in my Air Force days - pretty much run-of-the-mill stuff in a war situation. The aircraft involved were a Blenheim Mark IV, Baltimore Mk III and a Beaufighter. However, there was another accident which is forever etched in my mind. Let me tell you about it.

1ST SEPTEMBER 1941

Piloting a Blenheim Mk I, carrying three crew, two passengers and a lot of equipment, I was to fly out of Aden to an up-country landing ground near Makulla in Arabia.

On our take-off run, we were about to become airborne when an engine stopped, and so did my heart momentarily. I yanked the beast off the ground but it fell straight back. The wheels hit the sea wall and the plane nosedived into the water.

On impact the Navigator, who was sitting on the bomb-aiming seat, was catapulted straight through the perspex. While he was flying solo, the aircraft flipped longitudinally onto its back, and the Nav was left behind in the water which was about five feet deep.

The passenger sitting next to me escaped through the hole left by the Nav. I was trapped inside the cockpit for about three minutes and I thought I was going to drown! To my great and everlasting relief, I felt hands groping at my clothing as my passenger pulled me out through the same escape route.

Passenger number two, who had been sitting in the fuselage, commented later that he felt a heavy bump, and water appeared in the fuselage in great quantities. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he thought it was rather unusual to be transporting so much water in the areoplane. All five persons suffered only minor cuts and abrasions.

From the above date to the telling of this tale (11th October 1999), I have counted 21 223 bonus days, and I'm still counting.

A VIP FLIGHT

In October 1942, I was still based in Aden when a rumour circulated that a special trip to Addis Abbaba was in the offing. My crew and I were all NCOs at the time, so I wasn't

even slightly excited or hopeful about the trip. It was an officer's plum for sure. On being called to the Wing Commander's office, I couldn't believe my ears when he told me to collect my crew and report for a briefing.

'You are going to Addis Abbaba to deliver a VIP back to Aden' he said.

I stood open-mouthed. My jaw must have been around my toes as I left the office. My next difficulty was to convince my crew that I wasn't having them on.

We didn't get airborne until about 1600 hours, and as night facilities at the destination were non-existent, we overnighted at Jig Jiga in Abyssinia, near the border of Somalia.

Departing early next morning, we arrived at Addis about breakfast time. We were flying a Blenheim IV, and this was the first time that an aircraft with any significant wing loading (the ratio of the gross weight of the aircraft to the wing area) was to land at Addis.

During the briefing, there was scant information about the airfield, apart from the fact that it was over 7 000 feet above sea level and that the runway fell away sharply at each end.

Leaving the aircraft after a satisfactory landing, I was wearing a sweater and no cap, so there were no indications of my rank. My crew, who were exhibiting their NCO chevrons, were eased to the side, and a French Army captain threw me the snappiest salute you ever did see. Naturally, I kept my sweater on until he had disappeared from the scene.

We were driven in a convoy of cars to meet our VIP, A.W. Besse, at his residence. He introduced me to his wife who was also to travel with us, and set up a breakfast such as we had't seen for years.

Mr. Besse requested that his personal native servant of many years standing accompany us on our trip back to Aden. The rules were that indigenous civilians were not to be carried in service aircraft without proper documentation, so I informed Mr Besse of that regulation.

I remember his reply vividly. He placed his hand on my shoulder, and said 'My boy, if anyone tried to make trouble for you, I will personally see Mr. Hards'. Because "Mr. Hards" was Air Vice Marshal Hards, Flight Sergeant Edwards immediately agreed to his request.

The reason for the flight was related to Mr. Besse's health. He wanted treatment from his doctor in Aden. He travelled in the cockpit. His wife (a charming lady) and the servant travelled in the fuselage. Although we made her as comfortable as possible, the flight of about four hours must have been arduous for her. A couple of weeks later she sent me a present. What a present it was – a case of oranges! Where on earth could they have come from for delivery in wartime Aden??

About a year later, when (Vichy French) Djibouti capitulated, the Royal Navy transported Mr. Besse to the province in a destroyer. He certainly had plenty of 'clout.

NAME POWER

I'm sure you'll like this story of an incident involving a friend of mine. Post World War 2, I flew with Trans-Australia Airlines (TAA). This account was told to me by a fellow TAA captain, Reg Eisenhower.

At the time, Reg was an RAAF Flying Officer based at Ismailia on the Suez Canal.

Reg wanted to spend a couple of days in Cairo, so he firstly shopped around for an available aircraft. The only plane he could get was a B24, and no other starters were free over the same period of time. Nothing daunted, Reg flew it solo to Heliopolis.

When taxiing in after landing, he noticed several black limousines sporting pennants, so somebody of importance was not too far away.

On leaving the plane he was confronted by an irate RAF Group Captain.

'What is your excuse Flying Officer, for disobeying signals from the Control Tower and forcing that DC3 to overfly from his approach? Do you know who is in that DC3'?

'No I don't Sir'.

'Air Marshal Tedder. You just sent Air Marshal Tedder around again! What is your name'?

'Eisenhauer, Sir'.

The Group Captain paused in thought for a few seconds, and as he walked away, he was heard to remark 'Well, if anybody can send Tedder around again, I guess Eisenhower can'!