



Art Juntunen

The Most Exciting Flight I Ever Took, And How I Learned To Live With It

GOOD AFTERNOON
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...
WELCOME ABOARD OUR
NON STOP FLIGHT TO
DETROIT...WE WILL BE...



BY ART JUNTUNEN
Free Press Travel Editor

Evil - looking orange - red flame was streaming past my window from the outside starboard engine and if I said I wasn't scared it would be the most colossal lie of all time.

I pointed to the gigantic blow torch spouting quivering flame eight feet long and nudged Marty gently. I tried to speak but nothing came.

Marty didn't say anything either, but her eyes grew wide and her lips twitched the way they usually do when we run into a "situation."

It happened - or almost happened - on the last leg of what had been a delightful week-long sojourn in Spain with a charter group. The Super DC-8 jetliner, with 210 passengers and baggage, had landed at the Santa Maria Island international airport in the Azores for refueling and had just taken off again for the nonstop flight to Detroit which, the stewardess has promised over the intercom, would take seven hours and one minute.

The first hint that anything had gone wrong came when we heard a sharp bang and then another beneath us as the giant jet - an elongated version of the popular DC-8 - thundered down the runway. The plane shuddered slightly, but we dismissed it with an exchange of "so what, it's nothing" looks. I thought we might have hit a plank - or two planks.

In effect, those two "explosions" had begun a series of freak occurrences that, within the space of a half hour, created all the elements necessary for a complete disaster. In 30 tense minutes we were exposed to seven different forms of potential instant death, all of which we escaped miraculously. Most accidents, you see, never really happen.

The sun was setting over the Atlantic horizon. About two-thirds down the runway the huge jet seemed to zig if not zag and you would guess it got off the pavement and onto the rough. We seemed to make a small swing to the right as we got off the ground.

Beyond the end of the runway was the edge of a 900-foot cliff dropping into the sea. We lumbered, straining for elevation, over the brink at an altitude of no more than 50 feet where normally jets zoom skyward 2,000 feet before going over water.

There were things we didn't know, which was just as well.

Cloud cover was still around us, some light fluff, and we were buckled in the seat belts when I turned my head to look out and there was this ugly flame, licking and spouting and not going away.

The glare of the fire lit up the inside of the cabin, dancing along the walls. The laughing and joking stopped abruptly.

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Pretty sure he is referring to Ben

It and there was profound silence.

A guy across the aisle who had been preening a moment before now sat stiffly, hands gripping the arms of his seat, seared eyes staring beseechingly back toward the stewardess' quarters. He had been counting the seconds of takeoff and fear overwhelmed him when the count went past 40 — and up to 60.

A stewardess dashed down the aisle and over the P.A. came a girl's voice:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are having trouble with one engine. Please do not panic."

It struck me suddenly that we had lost one engine out of only four, that it was on fire — and that we were not gaining altitude and could even be losing some. Two hundred and ten passengers, the luggage and a full, fresh load of fuel—10 minutes, by now, out of the Ansons, over a lot of water. I pressed my head against the window, craning to see whether land was still in sight. It wasn't, at least I couldn't see it.

Mary was watching me, and I could see she got the idea.

"It's bad, isn't it?" she half-whispered.

"Now, nothing unusual," I said with little reassurance. "Happens all the time. Nothing."

Up front, at the controls, sat big Bill Burke, 45 of Houston, Tex., once of Detroit, captain and pilot and veteran of 30 flying years — a man Grampa would have said he'd like to have alongside in any Saturday night copper miners' brawl in an Upper Peninsula beer garden.

At least 250 six feet-something, Burke has hands like hams, short-cropped dark hair, keen blue eyes that twinkle with rare wit and an extra portion of guts.

Now Burke's voice came to us, almost drawing.

"Folks, I gotta tell ya this — besides the one engine we also blew two tires on takeoff, but we'll get you back. We'll put out the fire, too . . ."

He was going back on the radio to talk to the tower, he said, and in a few minutes was back to us:

"We're turning back to the Ansons. We'll dump the fuel — that'll take about 20 minutes. Don't anticipate any trouble, but we're going to give you all emergency landing instructions . . ."

It sounded grim and it was real. I felt hot, cold, then clammy. What we didn't know yet was that in a rare, weird occurrence, a large chunk of rubber tire had flown out and lodged in the jet engine air intake, choking it and setting it afire. (A one-in-a-million thing, Burke said later, and something that had brought him "closer to it" than ever before.)

There were 20,000 gallons of fuel in the tanks, 18,000 of which Burke intended

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The Laughing Stopped Abruptly And a Profound Silence Ensued

"Burke foamed the flaming engine and gradually the fire diminished and fluttered out, removing one visible threat to our existence. But there still remained the problem of dumping the fuel without setting it off in midair and blowing us all to Kingdom Come. And landing safely, which didn't seem possible."

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to jetison. That would give us about 30 minutes, in all, to get ready to die while hoping to live.

Burke foamed the flaming engine and gradually the fire diminished and fluttered out, removing one visible threat to our existence. But there still remained the problem of dumping the fuel without a spark setting it off in midair and blowing us all to Kingdom Come. And landing safely, which to me didn't seem possible.

Matty gripped my arm. "Your nitro! Do you have your nitro?" (It's a cardiac case and get angina. We both carry nitroglycerine for those emergencies, but Matty worries most.)

I nodded, patting my pocket.

"Take some now," she whispered, "before anything happens. Take four . . . take six, now."

I took six and felt a loosening up in my chest.

The stewardesses were in the aisles, demonstrating the use of face masks for oxygen and the life vests in case we should land in the water. There were solemn drills and I recall thinking how in many times we'd watched this routine without thinking how serious it could get to be.

The co-pilot came back to explain and direct us to the exits and describe the use of the life chutes to be used in speedy emergency evacuation. Life vests went on the children and old folks post haste. We had ours on the ready.

Bill Burke's voice was back on the P.A.: "We'll be making our final approach for the landing in a few minutes. When the stewardess blow her whistle you must put your head into the pillow as instructed."

"This may be a hard landing but we will do our best. Good-bye and good luck." Click.

There was nothing unusual in the gradual descent and we came in gliding like a seagull, but I wasn't convinced. My head buried in the pillow (I glanced up only once to see if everyone else was doing it and they were), I held my breathe and waited for the tipover and the crash.

I was ready.

Then suddenly the plane had stopped

and Capt. Burke's voice was back on the P.A., hardly audible, at first, over the deafening hurras, clapping and cheers within the cabin:

"Well, how about that, folks — here we are again, right back where we started. 'Til have to 'ologue for this here inconvenience and — know something? — you're all going to have to walk from here on in . . ."

He had brought the plane to a halt in shorter than usual time to avoid further danger and evacuated us quickly. The terminal was a half-mile away, but we walked, merrily.

The bar was open, all drinks free, and villagers who had been attracted by the screaming sirens of the airport fire department joined in the merrymaking. We slept in a motel that once was a U.S. naval barracks and the airline "dead-headed" a substitute jetliner in from the U.S. to take us back.

The "seven ways to die?" Two blown tires, the conked engine, the rough at the end of the runway, the cliff, the fire, possible explosion in the air or on landing . . . and the "surprise."

"And the surprise," said Capt. Burke, "was a radio tower a half-mile beyond the end of the runway which we seldom notice because by the time we get over it we're so high it looks like a matchstick."

"This time, coming straight at it at 50 feet it looked like a monster. Those towers sure look big — close up."

Lacking sufficient power to go over it, he had gone around, missing by feet, maybe inches, who knows? (The metal wheels of the blown tires had been worn down to the hubs.)

Burke's back must be bruised from the thumping, his hand sore from the wringing. He's been thanked and praised and blessed, but not hardly enough.

Did he panic, even a little?

"Panic, hell!" he snorted. "I didn't have time — I was too busy." When the tires blew, he had lost his hydraulic system and brought the big jet in manually, fighting — no hydraulic brakes — every inch.

"I couldn't talk to the tower and I even had to holler at my help," he said ruefully. "Sorry about that."

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