



BY ART JUNTUNEN

Free Press Travel Editor

Evil looking wangs - red flame was streaming past my window and 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 black torch spouting a red flame eight feet long and nudged Marty gently. I tried to speak but nothing came.

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

It happened so suddenly - on the way to what had been a delightful week-long sojourn in Spain with a charter group. The Super DC-8 jet liner, with 210 passengers and luggage, had been en route to the San Juan 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 indication of trouble came when we heard a sharp bang and then another beneath us as the giant jet - an elongated version of the popular DC-8 - staggered down the runway. The plane shuddered slightly as we exchanged it with an exclamation of "so what, it's nothing" looks. I thought we might have hit a plank - or two planks.

In effect that 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 those minutes we were exposed to seven different forms of potential instant death, all of which we escaped miraculously. Most accidents you see never last half an hour.

The sun was setting over the Atlantic horizon. About two-thirds down the runway the giant jet seemed to zig if not zig-zag. One wing came in got off the pavement and onto the road. We seemed to make a small swing to the right as we got off the runway.

Beyond the end of the runway is 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.

Clouds were 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 spitting at the side of the plane.

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 had been joshing a moment before now sat stiffly, hands clasped in his lap, his dark, cered eyes staring beseechingly back toward the stewardess' quarters. He had been nursing the seconds of terror and fear overwhelmed him. "The count went past 40 and up to 60.

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

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

It was a moment of silence and but one engine out of our four, that it was on fire - and that we were not gaining altitude and could even be losing some. Two hundred and fifty passengers, the steward and a lone fresh-faced girl, had 10 minutes, by now, out of the Azores, over a lot of water. I pressed my head against the glass, craning to see whether land was still in sight. It wasn't; at least I couldn't see it.

Marty was watching me, and I could see she was afraid.

"It's bad, just like she half-whispered. "Naw, nothing unusual," I said with little reassurance. "Happens all the time. Nothing."

Up front, at the controls, sat big Ed Burke, 38, a tall, burly man from Detroit, captain and pilot and veteran of 30 flying years. A man Grampa would have liked to have belonged to in any Saturday night crewroom brawl in an Upper Peninsula beer garden.

At least 220, six feet something, Burke has brown hair, short-cropped dark hair, keen blue eyes, the twinkle with rare wit and an extra portion of guts.

Now Burke's voice came to us, almost drawling:

"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 a new tire, 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 Azores. We'll drop down to 10,000 feet and fly for 20 minutes. Don't anticipate any trouble, but we're going to give you all emergency landing gear 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 blown out, and it had cut the engine air intake, choking it and setting it afire. (A one-in-a-million thing, Burke said later, and that's why he 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."

Continued

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 didn't seem possible.

Marty gripped my arm. "Your nitro? Do you have your nitro?" (I've a cardiac case and get angina. We both carry nitroglycerine, which relieves emergencies, but Marty worries most.)

I nodded, patting my pocket.

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

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

The lifejackets were in the aisle, 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 many times I had worried this would happen thinking how serious it could get to be.

The copilot came back to explain and direct us to the exits and describe the use of life vests in case of an emergency evacuation. Life vests went on the children and old folks fasten. We had ours on the ready.

Bill Burke's voice was back on the P.A.: "Well's making our final approach for landing. We are about to land when the streets 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. Goodbye and good luck." Click.

There was a commotion 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 when I did I held my breath and waited for the thumper and the crash).

I was ready.

Then suddenly the plane had stopped

and Capt. Burke's voice was back on the P.A.: "Please, audience, at first, over the deafening, howling, clapping and cheering within the cabin:

"Well, how about that, folks — here we are again, right back where we started. Thank you, Capt. Burke, for this here inconvenience and — know something? — you're all going to have to walk from here 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, not ran, to those emergencies, but Marty worries most.

The bar was open, all drinks free, and villagers who had been attracted by the screaming sirens of the airport fire department, were there to help us. 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 fill the gap.

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, the water and the sunburn.

"And the surprise," said Capt. Burke, "was a radio tower a half-mile beyond the end of the runway which we seldom noticed 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 match. Those towers look big — close up."

Lacking sufficient power to go over it, he had gone around, missing by feet, maybe, but we didn't know it. The metal wheels of the blown tires had been worn down to the hubs.)

Burke's back must be hunched from the Thompson gun he held from the winging. He's been thanked and praised and blessed, but not hardly enough.

Did he panic, even a little?

"Panic, hell no, he didn't have time to panic, as you know." With the fire, he had lost his hydraulic system and brought the big jet in manually, fighting — no hydraulic brakes — every inch.

"I had to talk to the tower and I even had to holler at my help," he said ruefully. "Sorry about that."

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