

Band Aid

‘Feed the world, let them know it’s Christmas time. Feed the world...’

A few years ago, you wouldn’t have heard it until December. But now, just days after firework night, the newsagent’s Christmas tape is already churning.

He must have seen me grimace.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘It’s on a loop. I’ll hear every one of the bloody things once an hour for the next six weeks. Noddy Holder shouts in my sleep.’

For me, it’s that Band Aid tune. Every time it leaks out of a shop doorway, it guarantees a flashback, and probably a nightmare.

Goes all the way back to late October 84, when Michael Buerk reported on the ‘biblical famine’ in northern Ethiopia. By early November, weeks before Bob Geldof and Midge Ure did their stuff, two RAF Hercules transport aircraft were flying food from Addis Ababa to the famine areas.

On their second day, as one touched down on a rough landing strip next to a feeding station, its rear left tyre exploded. The flying rubber wrecked the undercarriage, dented one of the four propellers and punctured the aircraft skin. Some of the holes were as big as your fist.

Dusk was falling, and the strip had no lighting, so it was too late for a recovery mission. Normally, they’d have waited for spare parts to be flown in the following day. But after dark, this strip fell into the hands of Eritrean rebels. The Hercules wouldn’t survive the night, never mind its five-man crew.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. They strapped up the damaged wheel, started the engines, taxied to the end of the strip, and, trusting to three mainwheels instead of four, carried out a flawless take off. After a short flight that revealed problems with more than just the undercarriage, they landed safely at Addis Ababa airport.

Two days later, I flew in, the 22-year old co-pilot on a replacement Hercules. My crew were to spend the night in Addis before flying the damaged aircraft back to the UK, via Cyprus.

While carrying out this seemingly simple mission, something happened, the memory of which still plagues me after 30 years.

RAF engineers had worked on the aircraft for nearly 48 hours, but it was still a mess, and going nowhere fast. So, we settled down for a longer than expected stay in one of several large tents in the grounds of the British Embassy.

Apart from the captain’s snoring, I had no complaints. The Embassy grounds were beautiful, with manicured lawns and landscaped gardens of colourful shrubs and flowers. And for meals, we were driven a few miles to another oasis, the International Livestock Centre for Africa, a research facility of white-fenced stockades, brimming with well-fed cows, sheep and goats.

The famine hadn’t reached Addis, but there was no doubting the dusty poverty of the areas we were driven through. And yet, the hardship wasn’t universal. We were also taken through the city centre, where well-maintained roads and modern buildings were festooned with banners and bunting, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the coup that had swept the Soviet-backed regime into power. With millions of their fellow citizens starving, they’d spent \$10,000,000 on Scotch whisky.

They’d also tried to discourage RAF involvement by saying there was no room at the airport. And it was true that several large Soviet aircraft and helicopters were taking up space. But that was all they were doing.

While the RAF Hercules’ flew three, four or five grain shuttles a day, the Soviet aircraft rarely moved. And when they did, they seemed to have a dramatically different mission.

On the afternoon of my second day, I was at the airport chatting to a tanned young RAF engineer, when one of the giant Soviet transports returned. It stopped a few hundred yards

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away, opened its cargo doors and disgorged hundreds of stick-like figures, many stumbling, and all clad in rags. Mainly men, they looked dazed, disorientated by both their journey, and their unfamiliar surroundings. But there was no sympathetic reception party, just armed guards who herded them towards a gap in the airport fence, beyond which lay the sprawling suburbs of the city.

One young man held back. Armed with nothing but his dignity, he faced up to the guards. It was an uneven contest, and they soon manhandled him after the others, but not before our eyes had met. For a fleeting moment, I shared his despair, and then he was gone.

‘Happens every day,’ the young engineer said. ‘No idea what happens to them.’

On our third day, we returned to the airport to fly the damaged aircraft to Cyprus, a flight of six hours over some of the most hostile terrain in the world.

We were met by the engineer I’d spoken to the previous day. He smiled and pointed at the dusty Hercules sitting on the pan. ‘We’ve patched the skin punctures, and we’re reasonably confident we’ve fixed the major snags.’

Our silver-haired captain thrust out his square jaw, and, in a booming baritone that spoke for all of us, queried, ‘*Reasonably* confident?’

Skewered by the older man’s piercing blue eyes, the engineer’s smile faded, and he adopted a more sombre tone. ‘Yes, sorry about that, not ideal is it? We’ve arranged diplomatic clearance for Saudi Arabia, though. Just in case you have any problems.’

He seemed genuinely hurt by our lack of gratitude. But, despite the doubts over its airworthiness, there was no way the aircraft could remain in Addis, so we settled down to our flight planning.

Shortly before take off, we were given a passenger: the defence correspondent of The Sun. Most of us were surprised The Sun had a defence correspondent, but if it did, the man before us certainly looked the part. Short, dark-haired and pasty, he wore a shabby fawn raincoat and had the demeanour of a rodent in an owl enclosure. We sat him, still in the raincoat, at the back of the flight deck, behind the navigator and air engineer.

During take off, the loadmaster watched the left undercarriage through a small, grease-streaked, glass panel in the cargo hold. All seemed well as the large wheels retracted and the bay doors closed around them.

We climbed to the north, following the line of the Great Rift Valley towards Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden. All around us, jagged peaks thrust up through 10,000 feet. Spectacular terrain, but very inhospitable should anything go wrong. No matter, though, we’d soon be flying high above it.

Except...

‘The pressurisation’s failed, Captain.’

The air engineer’s words didn’t come as a complete surprise. But without pressurisation, we couldn’t climb above 11,000 feet, at which height we’d burn so much more fuel than planned that we’d be unable to get anywhere near Cyprus. I turned to my left and shot the captain a worried glance.

‘Good job we’ve got that diplomatic clearance, then,’ he said cheerily. ‘Looks like a quiet night in Jeddah.’

His upbeat response went some way to easing my concern. But the new destination, halfway up the west coast of Saudi Arabia, was still 2 hours away. I couldn’t help thinking a lot could happen before we reached it.

The captain left no time for brooding, though. He turned to me. ‘At this height, Co, it won’t be long before we lose contact with air traffic control, so tell Addis what’s happening, will you?’

And Nav,’ he continued, looking over his shoulder, ‘the same goes for your radio aids. ‘Fraid you’re going to have to get your maps out and guide us through the mountains.’

These now looked very close, and very intimidating.

‘And although the wheels came up as advertised,’ he went on, ‘I’m still not convinced they’ll lower again, Eng. But we’ll save that little drama for later, shall we?’

He seemed to be enjoying himself.

While I told Ethiopian air traffic control what had happened and what we planned, the navigator moved forward to stand at my shoulder, scanning the countryside, map in hand.

As long as we could see where we were going, the rugged terrain offered little threat. But soon, we began to notice large thunderstorms ahead and to either side of our flight path. The bases of the dark clouds sat on the higher plateaus, and the mountains either thrust into them, or were shrouded by silver curtains of torrential rain, turned gold by frequent flashes of lightning. To make matters worse, the light was fading.

The captain spoke again. ‘Right everyone, eyes peeled. If we’re going to avoid lightning strikes, and clouds with hard, rocky, centres, we need to steer well clear of these showers.’

Even the Sun reporter moved forward, adding another pair of eyes to those already searching for storms, and mountains. He looked very unhappy.

After 20 fraught minutes and some extravagant detours that wasted precious fuel, we cleared the worst of the weather, and the high ground.

We were still flying too low to raise Saudi air traffic control, and an American Airlines crew 25,000 feet above offered to relay our messages. This was fairly routine in places like this. But the Saudi response, relayed a few seconds later, was far from routine, and far from helpful.

‘They say you’re denied entry to their airspace.’

While we digested the unexpected rebuff, the Americans sought clarification. After a lengthy, sombre, pause, the captain spoke, his voice more earnest now.

‘Okay, it’s very nearly dark, so we can’t get back to Addis at low level, weaving through storms and mountains we can’t see. And even if we go onto emergency oxygen and climb, we’ll still have to dodge the tops of the storms, wasting more fuel we can’t spare.’

‘But we can’t just blunder into Saudi airspace, either. At best, we’ll be arrested. At worst, they’ll shoot us down.’

Dramatic as this sounded, we all knew it was a very real possibility.

We were mulling over the bleak assessment when the Americans relayed a further message.

‘They say you’ve declared six persons on board, when your diplomatic clearance is for five.’

All eyes turned to the rear of the flight deck.

The Sun defence correspondent had been on the flight plan, but not the diplomatic clearance, sought days before.

He wasn’t on headset, so he didn’t hear the captain discount the option of throwing him overboard - for the time being - but he knew he’d become the centre of interest. He looked even more rodent-like, and even less happy, if that were possible.

The American Airlines jet flew out of range, and the Red Sea and Saudi Arabian airspace were fast approaching when I finally managed to contact their air traffic control. Sweat prickling my upper lip, I began to negotiate.

‘We’re part of an international humanitarian mission, flying an aircraft with problems that make a return to Addis Ababa hazardous, not least, because it would leave us short of fuel.’

With a curt, ‘Stand by,’ the Saudi controller left us on tenterhooks.

After what seemed an age listening to nothing but radio static, we were preparing to turn back, when the Saudis relented. With a collective sigh you could almost hear above the beat of the engines, we trundled on, all except the newspaperman, much happier.

No-one had voiced the thought that he, at least, might still be arrested on landing.

Approaching Jeddah, the tension rose again. The captain despatched the loadmaster to the cargo bay to watch the undercarriage through the inspection panel. At 2,500 feet, with 11 miles to run, we started the landing checks.

A few seconds later, the captain said, 'Now, Loadie,' then turned to me.

'Landing gear down, Co.'

I lowered the handle and looked out of my side window, listening to the familiar rumble of the undercarriage beginning to move.

'Fuck me!'

'What is it, Loadie?'

'Not sure, Captain. Something just dropped out of the undercarriage bay.'

'A wheel?'

'Don't think so, Captain. That's still attached. But something big fell out as the gear went down.'

'Okay, Loadie. Keep us posted.'

I'd seen the object all too clearly, dimming the lights of the Jeddah suburbs as it fell away and was lost to view.

I looked across at the captain. He turned from his window, brow furrowed, like a man struggling to make sense of what he's seen.

If the Sun man had been on headset, he might have guessed what two of us knew, and the rest suspected.

The landing was uneventful, and after a delay in the airport while our paperwork was checked and double-checked, we were all, reporter included, driven to our hotel. Here, I spent a restless night, unable to close my eyes without seeing the falling man.

The next morning, we left Jeddah for Cyprus, where the aircraft spent another three days on the ground before we flew it home.

The Captain said nothing could be gained from telling what we'd seen; while in Saudi Arabia, much could have been lost, including our freedom. In any case, nothing could be done for the poor unfortunate who'd dropped to his death in the Jeddah suburbs.

All very sensible. But, even after all these years, my guilt... no, my shame at our silence, is betrayed by the frequent flashbacks and nightmares, especially on hearing that song.

Desperate to be reunited with my family, I scale the fence, sneak across the darkened airbase and climb above the wheels of one of the planes that land next to our camp several times a day.

I shimmy to the top of the small space and hide, wedged for many more hours than expected, surrounded by voices, and the noise of other planes coming and going. Why is mine not among them? But I dare not risk climbing down.

Finally, it moves. I cling on as it jolts round the airbase and takes off. The wheels rise and doors close beneath them.

Weakened by hunger, I flop down, draping myself over one of the huge rubber tyres. Small gaps in the doors let in hints of daylight, but also the freezing wind, which howls all around me. My rags offer no protection.

Time is hard to measure, but, as the daylight fades, I realise I've flown way beyond reach of my starving wife and children. I cling on, drifting on the edge of frozen sleep, unable to wipe away my tears.

Then, a glimmer of hope. The doors below me open, and small orange lights drift past. I scramble to regain my perch in the bay roof. But, before I can do so, the tyre dips into the airflow - and then, rotates...

The harrowing narrative jolts me into wakefulness several times a night in the run-up to Christmas. Has done for years. I'm not sure what produces the deeper wounds, imagining the pain and despair of the stowaway's frozen journey, or the horror of his tumbling fall.

But one thing I do know; the wounds he and I bear can't be healed by Band Aid.