

The Eye And The Storm

The dark blob has devoured our destination.

‘Tell me it’s a problem with the radar, Nav?’

‘Like to, Captain, but I’m pretty sure it’s not.’

So here we are, 20,000 feet above the South Atlantic, and the only airfield within a thousand miles seems to have vanished. I swallow hard and look to my right at the one-eyed Captain. He raises a shaggy eyebrow.

Is it over the good eye?

I can never tell. The glass one is such a good match. I often think he’s been born 500 years too late. That he should be a pirate rather than a pilot. And yet, even now, surrounded by all the technology on the flight deck, if he wore an eye patch...

‘I’m pretty sure it’s a storm,’ the Navigator continues.

The Captain takes a few moments to digest this, then waves a hand across the instrument panel and fills our headsets with his 60-a-day growl. ‘You have control, Co.’

‘I have control’, I say, accepting responsibility for monitoring the autopilot.

The Captain unstraps, eases through the gap between our seats, breezes past the Flight Engineer and Navigator and disappears down the steps into the back of the aircraft. The three of us sit in silence and wait for his return.

I look to either side at the wings flexing through the four hazy propeller discs. Sitting on the ground in the Falklands, watching its camouflaged fuselage gobble up 90 men and all their kit, our Hercules seemed huge. But now, 13 hours and 3,600 miles later, heading into bad weather over a seething ocean, it suddenly feels very small - and vulnerable.

My eyes are drawn to the radar screen, glowing orange among the jumble of other instruments. It should be displaying a little white speck at the top, 180 miles ahead. And the speck should be moving down the screen with our approach, growing until even I can recognise the shape of Ascension Island. But the top third of the screen is still black.

To our front, the late afternoon sky is beginning to darken - prematurely. If it does herald a storm, it’s a monster, capable of chewing us up and spitting us out of the bottom, minus our wings. I look back to the Navigator, sitting at his desk against the side wall of the flight deck.

‘They’ll send the duty tanker crew out won’t they, Nav?’

He adjusts his glasses and, as if gently letting down a child, says, ‘Should be flying alongside us already, Co.’

The realisation sinks in. If something’s prevented the tanker taking off, will we be able to land?

‘Ascot 4734, this is Ascension Island.’

Thank goodness. At least the island still exists.

Unable to keep the relief from my voice, I reply. ‘Ascension Island, this is Ascot 4734, good to hear you.’

The Air Traffic Controller sounds equally relieved. ‘Ascot 4734, good to hear you too. Ready to copy latest weather?’

I’m just about to respond when the Captain reappears, squeezes into his seat and puts on his headset.

‘Try Ascension, Co.’

By way of answer, I press the transmit button. ‘Go ahead, Ascension.’

I take in little of the resulting weather report, apart from the cloudbase - 500 feet above sea level - and the words, ‘heavy rain’.

Ascension never has heavy rain. And the cloud rarely descends below 2,000 feet, barely low enough to cover the highest volcanic peaks, let alone threaten the airfield down on the coast. But with cloud only 200 feet above a runway on the edge of a 300-foot sea cliff, and no instrument landing aids, things are looking grim.

If we'd known about the storm earlier, we'd have been able to divert to another airfield. But the coast of Brazil is over 1400 miles behind us now, and the nearest point in Africa is over a thousand miles further on. We can't reach either. And although we're carrying enough fuel to hold off for a brief storm, we all know the blackness at the heart of the radar screen is more than a brief storm – much more.

The Captain suddenly disconnects the autopilot and pushes the nose forward.

'Sorry folks, but no time to lose.' He smiles across apologetically. 'You have control again, Co. Maintain the descent.'

I'm not quite sure what I expect him to do next, but definitely something more dynamic than take out a cigarette, light up and breathe out a long stream of blue smoke. I'm all of a twitch, and he looks as if he hasn't a care in the world.

He's 50. Wouldn't have been accepted for RAF pilot training with one eye of course, but when the squash ball hit him, he was already one of the most experienced Hercules captains around. They cleared him to carry on flying, as long as he's with a two-eyed pilot – just in case he gets poked in the good eye!

Today, at the age of 22, with less than six months experience as a co-pilot, I'm providing the two good eyes. I pray that he's careful with his cigarette, and any other sharp objects.

'Keep us below cloud, Co.'

I'm used to short, sharp, instructions that might seem rude in other circumstances. And I understand the reasoning. If the cloudbase stays at 500 feet, we might just be able to sneak up on the runway.

'Ascot 4734, cloudbase now four hundred feet, with visibility still reducing in heavy rain.'

So much for that idea.

'Okay, Ascension,' the Captain answers. Then he winks at me and transmits again, 'Any chance of a tanker?'

The resulting pause tells us all we need to know. I actually feel sorry for the Air Trafficker, working out what to say. When he comes back, it's short and sweet, but not very encouraging.

'Sorry, Ascot 4734, no sign of the standby crew as yet, will keep you informed.'

We're still exchanging knowing looks when the voice breaks through again.

'If it helps though, the MV Ascension is anchored three miles out on the extended runway centre line.'

That's good, isn't it? A few days ago, we had a boozy afternoon on a team-building visit to the supply ship. It's quite a big vessel. If we can track it down, we might be able to find the island, and the runway.

All the time, we're sliding under a huge overhang of dark cloud. It's obscured the sun and turned the sea from green to grey. Ahead is a wall of even darker cloud, sloping up towards us, making the blackest of black holes in the radar picture. I push into a steeper descent, flying down the leading edge of the storm. The turbulence is already rattling us in our seats, and I wonder how the soldiers are doing down the back.

They'd just done their stint discouraging the Argies from another invasion. Some might even have been there for the war. It had only been about seven months. They'd looked so excited, laughing and pushing as they'd climbed aboard. How they feel now, being bounced around in a flying metal tube, I dread to think. I hope the Loadmaster has a good supply of sick bags.

Still smoking, the Captain turns to put one knee over his armrest.

'Right. I've been going over our options.'

During the brief pause, I fancy I can hear my heart pounding above the crackling in my headset.

'We can ditch out here clear of the storm, take to the dinghies and wait to be picked up later – if they can find us. Or we can try and find Ascension and ditch alongside one of the beaches, maybe even try and run up onto one.'

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He looks from face to face. I resist the temptation to turn round, fearing the Nav and Eng will look as ashen as I feel. No-one attempts to speak, and the Captain continues.

‘Or we can ditch alongside the MV Ascension. If we can find it.’

Another pause, interrupted by nothing beyond radio static. We’re all waiting for better options. No Hercules has ever been put down successfully on water. Worse. Every attempt has led to the break up of the aircraft and the loss of everyone on board.

‘But we all know the stats,’ he continues, blowing another thin stream of smoke over the cockpit windows. ‘And while I might risk our little pink bodies, I’m not prepared to risk the Pongos down the back.’

So ditching is out, thank goodness. But what does that leave?

‘Landing on one of the beaches is another non-starter. I don’t think they’re long enough, and I don’t fancy the rocks at either end.’

We’re down to 1,000 feet in heavy rain by the time the Captain gives us his final option, and the chance to come up with something better. But there’s no real choice.

He’s still chain-smoking and I’m still flying the aircraft, being forced down over an increasingly angry sea by the lowering cloudbase. The fog on the flight deck’s almost as impenetrable as the mist and rain outside, but none of us has a mind to tell him to stop smoking, not if it helps him concentrate.

I follow the Nav’s directions and level at 500 feet, about five miles from where the island should be.

The Flight Engineer leans forward between us, pointing into the murk. ‘There!’

Straight ahead is the MV Ascension. It’s an amazing sight, a bloody great blue and white ship being tossed around like a toy in a bath, spending as much time under the water as above it.

Ditching alongside would be madness. Even if we landed on the water intact, we’d never make it into the dinghies or across to the ship. We’d all be swept to our deaths.

But at least finding it has given us a glimmer of hope. The runway should be only three miles further on.

The Air Trafficker darkens the mood again. ‘Sorry, Ascot 4734, still nothing from the standby crew, and the cloudbase now three hundred and fifty feet.’

That’s only 50 above the runway.

The Captain must sense our heads dropping. He begins issuing instructions.

‘Co, do the landing checks, fly where the Nav says and stay below cloud. Nav, set us up over the ship heading for the runway. Eng, run the engines as lean as you can. And, Loadie, prepare for the worst down the back, without frightening the horses.’

Once again, the Loadmaster seems to be holding the short straw. How can he keep 90 soldiers calm when they can see the towering waves all too clearly through the passenger windows?

My sympathy is short-lived. I have enough on my plate, trying to stay clear of cloud, putting the landing gear and flaps down, and circling to fly straight over the MV Ascension on the Nav’s heading; all with the aircraft dancing about like a cork under a waterfall.

We’re going to try a split approach, me flying, while the Captain peers ahead with his good eye to spot the runway, at which point he’ll take control and land. I can’t help thinking it might be better if I was the lookout, but deep down, I suspect the landing will take more skill than I possess.

As we pass over the MV Ascension, cloud forces me down to 300 feet. Even if we see the runway, we’ll be just about level with it, and the cliff tops.

I fly straight towards the island, staring into the mist, until I for one suspect it really has been eaten. Suddenly, breakers crash against a rocky shore, then cliffs, dotted with puffs of grey cloud. But stare as I might, I can’t see the cliff tops, let alone the runway and the volcanic cones to either side.

Long after I think we’ve left it too late, the Captain lets me turn back out to sea. As we lumber round, the right wing almost scrapes the cliffs. The soldiers must be terrified. I am.

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We make another three abortive approaches before the Eng announces that we have fuel for only two more goes.

The Captain takes yet another cigarette from a seemingly bottomless packet and looks across at me. 'If we don't spot the runway this time or next, Co, I want you to turn out and set us up to ditch running up onto the beach to our left.'

While my mind whirrs at the enormity of the words, he tells the Loadmaster to make final preparations for ditching. I can sense the fear down the back, almost smell it. And given that the Captain hasn't held the controls since he started smoking nearly an hour ago, I wonder if I'll end up flying the final manoeuvre, even an attempted ditching.

Flying over the MV Ascension on our penultimate attempt, the seas are worse than ever, swamping the ship under huge, white-capped, waves. On the run in, I glance left, mentally rehearsing what I might have to do if we fail to sight the runway on this or the next approach. There are no areas of flat, dark water, only boiling sea and great mountains of grey and white crashing into one another.

I draw my eyes away to peer ahead. Is that a glimpse of cliff-top? I lean forward. There! Out to the right. A string of bright pearls. Runway lights.

'I have control.'

I've been hoping to hear those words for the last hour. But now they've finally been uttered, I find myself reluctant to relinquish my grip. There are lights alright, but there's still cloud between them and us. To attempt a landing seems suicidal. I decide to turn out to sea. But before I can move the control column, it's wrenched from my hands.

The one-eyed Captain has taken control.

We bank hard right. Screams down the back. I look up. Runway. Directly over me. We're falling into the lights.

I raise my hands in front of my face. The aircraft rolls hard left. I'm forced into my seat. The left wingtip arcs down towards the volcanic clinker. I flinch in terror, waiting for the inevitable. The crash. The tearing flesh.

And then, there's a bump. A tiny bump.

I'm not sure how, but the troops realise before me. It's their cheers that rouse me, totally drained, close to tears. The light bump isn't going to be followed by a catastrophic crash. It's a landing. A perfectly respectable landing.

People still say I was hard done by, that I'd done all the flying and he got the medal. But that's rubbish. It was the one-eyed Captain that kept us from going to pieces, that pulled off that incredible landing. I couldn't have done it, not in a million years.

And when they ask if it's had any long term effect on me, I say, 'Yes. Whenever I see or hear the message, "Smoking Kills," a rasping voice in my head says, "Not always, Co, not always."' "