

Santurce Farewell

Gordon checked the fuel gauges for the 40th time in as many minutes but they told him nothing he didn't already know. The left and right needles deserted their respective pegs from time to time, offering a moment's false hope, but for the most part they had found their home at the bottom of the scale. He reckoned there were around 30 gallons left, enough for a half-hour's flight at most.

Dead ahead, still well over the nose, Gordon sensed rather than saw an evanescence of light he assumed marked the location of Oranjestad, capitol city of Aruba, his reluctant destination. He might make it, he thought, not quite sure whether he wished for it to happen or not. Half-a-dozen times he had switched off the autopilot, intending to ditch the aircraft in the path of some tanker plowing the sea lane between the oilfields at Lake Maricaibo and the Antillian refineries. A half-dozen times he had scanned the surface for tell-tale signs of whitecapped danger and reached to retard the power levers. But each time he saw streamlined shapes gliding effortless through the darkening depths and had reassessed the risk of an open water landing even in such a sea calm as this and reengaged the control coupler. "You'll wish you'd had the balls," he told himself each time, and though he continued to be assailed by the temptation, he knew that he'd elected to roll the dice with the runway. Let the future take care of itself.

Things had looked different an hour before as he let down over the coast of Venezuela and made the first blind call to Santurce Base. His interim destination and refueling spot was a small landing strip carved out of a hillside 30 miles inland from Punta Gorda 10 miles East of the Colombian border. Gordon had been there twice before, enough to recognize the general area but not enough to pick up the runway until he was right on top of it. The surface was well compacted, sporting a stand of heavy grass trimmed to a foot along the centerline before feathering to full height along the edges. He wondered on his last visit whether a crew attended to things with machetes or whether the aircraft did the scything. Either way it was spooky watching the wingtips disappear from view.

There were no buildings on the site nor the sign of access trails or roads in any direction. The nearest highway ran along the coastline but even there, no signs of civilization were in evidence save an occasional ship enroute to or from the port at Barranquilla. It was a mystery to Gordon how men, fuel, and equipment got to and from the site, but it was one he felt under no compulsion to solve.

"Tiburón, Tiburón, Tiburón," he spoke rapidly into the microphone, trying to blend himself into the backdrop of dope-hauler radio traffic that filled the airwaves throughout the Caribbean basin. He listened carefully for the answering call, but unlike his earlier visits in which the reply had been so instantaneous as to shock him, this time there was nothing but the feint hiss of static overlying an immense void.

"Tiburón, Tiburón, Tiburón," he rapped out again but with the same result as before. By the third call, his flightpath had led him into the first range of foothills, well within eye and earshot of those on the ground. He redialled and double-checked the radio frequency again, fearing for an instant that he had forgotten something from the preflight briefing. But then he was sure he hadn't.

The crisis he had feared when he had received the short load of fuel in Panama now came to the fore. "That's all we've got until tomorrow, sir," the freckled crew chief had told him, explaining why less than half the allotted fuel was available. "I've got to save 500 gallons for a company Learjet heading back to the States this evening." He waited patiently for an answer which should have been, "I'll wait until tomorrow, then," but those weren't Gordons orders. They were, "be at Santurce at 1545 and pick up two passengers." It was top priority. Period

Ordinarily, orders or no orders, the lack of contact would have been enough for him to reverse course and make his way back to Panama or Caicos -- his choice based on weather -- and call it a day. Now those were out. Either he landed and refueled or he resorted to the unthinkable Plan B ... divert to Aruba and the uncertainty of his reception there.

"Of course Aruba is your last resort," Major Townley had told him at his initial briefing, though Major Townley wasn't Major Townley, but Señor Gonzalez even though the embroidered emblem on his crisply pleated khaki uniform said he was Major Townley. "None of our people has ever had to divert there," he continued, making his point indelibly without actually forbidding the possibility, "but since you'll be in an unmarked aircraft without any papers, there's not much we can do to help you if you show up there." The State Department people were inclined to be even less helpful, resenting what they felt to be the intrusion of "mercenaries" as they were fond of calling the armed forces types recruited to an ill-defined project. "For God's sake don't get stuck on the ground in Venezuela whatever you do. You've got a 50 minute window to get down, fuel, pick up your passengers, and get the hell out. If you can't make it, abort the mission." He slammed the desk to reinforce the

importance of this. The “window” was defined by the absence of Soviet satellite coverage of the area for that brief period of time.

"If the plane has mechanical problems on the ground," he again beat the desk for emphasis, "get it airborne somehow--- I don't care what it takes -- and ditch it somewhere else." The strip was not to be compromised, that was certain.

Yet this was different. The chain of events bringing him to this position -- alone, low on fuel, above a seemingly deserted landing field, without a suitable alternative -- was so absurd that Gordon, who didn't believe in such things, felt a sinister foreboding. "Maybe the radio's out," he temporized, knowing that to be among the remotest of possibilities.

"They could be late but on their way," he considered with slightly more enthusiasm. But it was the vision of 55-gallon fuel drums and gas-engined pump stashed at the South end of the strip where the grass gave way to dense undergrowth, that tipped the balance in favor of landing.

"I'm at the front end of the satellite window," he thought, adding to the preponderance.

Lightly loaded, the Beechcraft King Air was as nimble and responsive as the single-seaters Gordon had flown for most of his adult life, and it was here, at just such a strip as Santurce, he was able to bring the more esoteric of his skills to work. Tucked into a small finger of valley between the first and second folds of coastal hills, the runway was better suited to smaller, single-engined planes than the turboprop executive twin that now decelerated toward gear-down speed on its downwind approach. Gordon had dragged the field at low altitude along its Western periphery, looking for signs of activity and checking the condition of the runway. Noting nothing out of the ordinary -- if a clandestine airfield on foreign soil can be considered ordinary Gordon smiled at the thought -- he pitched the plane into a steep nose-high, left-wing-down climbing turn and began the litany of the landing checklist.

"Fuel," he said aloud as was his long-standing habit. "Joke" his mind responded, but he checked to make sure he was on the main tanks.

"Gear." His hand located the tiny wheel-shaped switch and moved it carefully to its "down" detent. So different, he reminisced, from the rugged gear handles of the fighters to which he was accustomed. Clearly a concession to gorillas in distress, there the drill was to physically slam the slab of iron to the stop as if the violence would translate itself as a measure of your concern that the system perform as it was supposed to. The airspeed swiftly bled to 150 knots and he reached up and flicked the flap switch into its first detent. "130," he said aloud, sticking a little flag in his memory for the target speed of the second notch.

Pilots employ characteristic approaches to their tasks ... particularly landing. For Gordon whose carrier experience allowed him to work confidently at low speeds, safety was a function of precision, and precision lay as close to the minimum control airspeed margin as possible. Jenkins, an ex-air force transport pilot who flew in the right seat the last time Gordon was here, became upset when Gordon trimmed the aircraft 15 knots below recommended approach speed, replacing aerodynamic lift with engine power to hold the aircraft on glide slope. It's called "hanging it on the props." Unlike the more typical decelerating high-speed glide -- "an extra five knots for the wife and each of the kiddies" approach -- his touchdown point could be precisely established well before the threshold, and once on the ground the aircraft was firmly planted and ready to accept heavy braking.

"What happens if you lose an engine?" Jenkins had asked bitterly when they had come to a stop. "Don't," was his reply, and then to ease the ex-Air Force cargo-pilot's anxiety he added, "When was the last time you ever heard of a turbine losing power in the landing pattern?"

Rounding the turn to the final approach course, 300 feet above the rising landscape of bramble and reed, he placed the flap switch in its full-down position and spun in a heavy handful of nose-up trim against his forward pressure on the yoke. If his feel was right, the forces would neutralize at his target speed of 85 knots ... seven knots above stall at the reduced-fuel landing weight

"Gear down ... flaps down ... ready to land," he chanted aloud as he checked the appropriate gauges for confirmation. His anticipation, bordering on the miraculous to many who flew with him these days but in truth nothing more magic than constant honing during carrier ops, showed itself particularly sharp today as the aircraft assumed its final descent rate, airspeed, and glideslope as it came wings-level on the runway centerline without adjustment in power or trim.

Twelve seconds later, the Beechcraft plunged through the thick carpet and thumped decisively onto hardpan beneath. Fluidly, Gordon rocked forward on the rudder-top toe brakes while slipping both throttles into the prop-reverser detents and applying full braking torque. The airplane bit firmly on its uphill deceleration, slowing to a fast walking pace by mid field. Gordon scanned the scene for signs of life but he was greeted by a disturbing lack of activity. It was as he was about to de-select reverse-prop that he sensed rather than saw the impending disaster and he brought the aircraft to a violent halt.

Then the fragments of danger coalesced. His nosewheel stood less than a dozen feet from a four-foot deep trench covered by freshly-cut foliage ... impossible to spot from the air but unmistakable at close range. Ahead at the south end of the runway, the lean-to service shed and fueling pad area were in shambles with bits and pieces of wood and equipment strewn about like toys smashed by a huge hand. In the center of the blast-formed clearing lay an ominous pile that took Gordon several seconds to decipher. It was a stack of khaki-clad bodies -- obviously the people he was to meet -- but before the recognition took full root Gordon reapplied reverse torque, stomped right brake to bring the nose around in a dizzying left arc, selected forward thrust on first the right and then the left engine, and without waiting to dress off the 180 degree turnabout, slammed the levers to their full-forward emergency power positions. Clawing the humid air, the props bit, setting the nose wheel skittering through the viscous grass. Light on fuel and aided by the downhill plunge, the Beechcraft gained flying speed, vaulted skyward, and crossed the threshold already 100 feet in the air. Even as he flicked up the gear and flap switches and transitioned into a high-speed climb, Gordon's mind picked through the grisly litter and the snare he had so nearly fell victim to. If there were witnesses to his escape, what must they have thought, he wondered.

"Luck," he shouted at the instrument panel. "Pure blind-assed luck," though it delighted him to think that others might have chalked it up to skill.

What had been merely a smudge gained definition with each passing minute and soon Gordon was able to discern the perimeter of the city, its water's edge frontage, and the outline of the 8,000 foot runway along the East flank of the bay. As he drew nearer, he watched vague shapes take on definition and color lending a carnival-like tone to the scene in stark contrast to his own feelings.

"What should I say?" he wondered, wrestling with the enormity of a situation for which he was not prepared. "Wait and play it by ear," his higher senses told him. "Just fly the airplane and let the future take care of the future." Sound advice, but no sooner heeded than forgotten. "What should I say? What can I do?"

At 20 miles out he thumbed the control wheel mike and announced, "Aruba Tower, Foxtrot Mike Zero-Niner-Five at twenty miles for landing." Without delay the tower replied, "Aircraft at 20 miles say again intentions?"

"Zero-Niner-Five request landing instructions, over."

"Zero-Niner-Five, what was your point of departure? We hold no flight plan."

"Zero-Niner-Five departed Grand Exuma filed for Curacao," Gordon lied smoothly, hoping the tower crew might buy into it. "I'm at minimum fuel and request landing to top off before proceeding."

"The field is closed to unauthorized flights, Zero-Niner-Five. Are you declaring an emergency." Gordon's hopes took a nose-dive.

"Affirmative, Aruba. I'm declaring an emergency."

Roger, Zero-Niner-Five. You're cleared to land runway zero-three. The winds are Northeast at six knots."

"Keep it high and fast until short final," he told himself as he neared 10 miles from the runway at 5,000 feet. "Made in the shade," he said to the long-buried fuel gauges. Almost time to ... " He got no further as both engines lost torque at exactly the same time throwing him hard forward into his shoulder straps and he knew in that instant his euphoria had come about a minute too soon.

"Aruba tower, Zero-Niner-Five has experienced a flameout. I'll be landing two miles short ... in the water," he reported, mortified by the inanity of the added comment. "Dumb!" he chastised himself. "What do you think they thought, Dilbert?" he spat. "That you'd land in front of city hall."

"Say again, Zero-Niner-Five?" came the surprised reply. "Did you say flameout?"

"Affirmative, Aruba." Under control once again after the self-inflicted ass-chewing, he trotted out his best "Smilin' Jack" voice. "Passing two-thousand at six miles. I'll be splashing down at a mile-and-three-quarters."

The area ahead appeared clear of boats and obvious hazards which Gordon realized could be good or bad depending on whether their absence signaled less obvious dangers. There was no telling until he was there, he realized so it wasn't worth worrying about. Better concentrate on the flying, he decided, impressed with how calmly he was dealing with things.

As he passed through 100 feet, he picked up the motion of the waves and turned to run parallel to their crests. Wings level again, Gordon deployed the flaps and set the elevator trim to full nose-up. At the last possible moment he jettisoned the overhead hatch, caught a quick whiff of salt spray, heard a soft slap beneath his feet, and then felt the belly slide gently onto the inky surface. It was all so slow and easy ... a greased glide on a waxed floor ... a slight shudder ... a left-wing-down roll inducing a lazy yaw to the left ... a solid thud ... another ... and then the nose pitched violently down, dug in and Gordon watched amazed as the airplane flipped ass-over-tea-kettle, pitched backwards nose-high and slammed to a stop on its back.

Immediately, Gordon found himself free of his seat straps plunging down through the hatch and pushing off from the windshield to gain separation from the fast-sinking aircraft. Again almost immediately he found

himself on the surface, airplane completely gone from view watching the red and green lights of a powerboat bearing quickly down on him. Before it reached him, Gordon needed to shuck his shoes and trousers, removing evidence of his lack of identification papers. As he did so, a bright light split the night air, flicking left, right, and then directly toward him, pinning him against the inky chop while the boat ran down the last 100 yards, reversing to a stop barely an arms-length away.

"Swim over to the ladder and keep both hands in sight," the gravelly voice in the bullhorn commanded. "You're under arrest."