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The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

by Patrick Smith, author and pilot

(CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS ISSUE)

One of those survivors was Bob Bragg, the Pan Am first officer. I met him in Los Angeles, on the set of a documentary being made for the thirtieth anniversary of the accident. [Editor's note: Bob Bragg died in February 2017, after the original publication of this extract.] It was Bragg who had uttered, "And we're still taxiing down the runway" – seven easy words that should have saved the day, but instead were lost forever in the shriek and crackle of a blocked transmission. Just thinking about it gives me the chills.

But there's nothing dark about Bob Bragg – nothing that, on the surface, feels moored to the nightmare of '77. He's one of the most easy-going people you'll ever meet. Gray-haired, bespectacled, and articulate, he looks and sounds like what he is: a retired airline pilot.

God knows how many times he's recounted the collision to others. He speaks about the accident with a practiced ease, in a voice of modest detachment, as if he'd been a spectator watching from afar. You can read all the transcripts, pore over the findings, watch the documentaries a hundred times over. Not until you sit with Bob Bragg and hear the unedited account, with all of the strange and astounding details that are normally missing, do you get a full sense of what happened. The basic story is well known; it's the ancillaries that make it moving – and surreal:

Bragg describes the initial impact as little more than "a bump and some shaking." All five men in the cockpit, located at the forward end of the 747's distinctive upper-deck hump, saw the KLM jet coming and had ducked. Knowing they'd been hit, Bragg instinctively reached upward in an effort to pull the "fire handles"

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Please note - we have changed the access to the online newsletters so that you will need a password to access them. We're hoping this will help past members who haven't paid their dues to do so, in order to read the newsletter. This password will also give you access to the membership & phone list. GO TO OUR WEBSITE AT: www.clipperpioneers.com.

Click on the "Members Only" button on the righthand side. The password will be: captain.

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The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

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— a set of four overhead-mounted levers that cut off the supply of fuel, air, electricity, and hydraulics running to and from the engines. His arm groped helplessly. When he looked up, the roof was gone.

Turning around, he realized that the entire upper deck had been sheared off at a point just aft of his chair. He could see all the way aft to the tail, 200 feet behind him. The fuselage was shattered and burning. He and Captain Grubbs were alone in their seats, on a small, fully exposed perch 35 feet above the ground. Everything around them had been lifted away like a hat. The second officer and jumpseat stations, their occupants still strapped in, were hanging upside-down through what seconds earlier was the ceiling of the first class cabin.

There was no option other than to jump. Bragg stood up and hurled himself over the side. He landed in the grass three stories below, feet—first, and miraculously suffered little more than an injured ankle. Grubbs followed, and he too was mostly unharmed. The others from the cockpit would unfasten their belts and shimmy down the sidewalls to the main cabin floor before similarly leaping to safety.

Once on the ground, they faced a deafening roar. The plane had been pancaked into the grass, but because the cockpit control lines were severed, the engines were still running at full power. It took several moments before the motors began coming apart. Bragg remembers one of the engines' huge forward turbofans detaching from its shaft, falling forward onto the ground with a thud.

The fuselage was engulfed by fire. A number of passengers, most of them seated in forward portions of the cabin, had made it onto the craft's left wing, and were standing at the leading edge, about 20 feet off the ground. Bragg ran over, encouraging them to jump. A few minutes later, the plane's center fuel tank exploded, propelling a plume of flames and smoke a thousand feet into the sky.

The airport's ill-equipped rescue team, meanwhile, was over at the KLM site, the first wreckage they'd come to after learning there'd been an accident. They hadn't yet realized that two planes were involved, one of them with survivors. Eventually, authorities opened the airport perimeter gates, urging anybody with a vehicle to drive toward the crash scene to help. Bob Bragg tells the cracked story of standing there in fog, surrounded by stunned and bleeding survivors, watching his plane burn, when suddenly a taxicab pulls up out of nowhere.

Bragg returned to work a few months later. He eventually transferred to United when that carrier took over Pan Am's Pacific routes in the late 1980s, and retired from the company as a 747 captain. He lives in Virginia with his wife, Dorothy. (Captain Grubbs has since passed away, as has second officer George Wams).

During the documentary shoot, I travelled with Bob Bragg and the producers to the aircraft storage yards at Mojave, California, where he was interviewed alongside a mothballed 747, describing that incredible leap from the upper-deck.

A day earlier, using a flight deck mock-up, director Phil Desjardins filmed a reenactment of the Tenerife collision, with a trio of actors sitting in as the KLM crew. To provide the actors with a helpful demo, it was suggested that Bob Bragg and I get inside the mock-up and run through a practice takeoff.

Bragg took the captain's seat, and I took the first officer's seat. We read through a makeshift checklist and went through the motions of a simulated takeoff. That's when I looked across, and all of a sudden it hit me: Here's Bob Bragg, lone surviving pilot of Tenerife, sitting in a cockpit, pretending to be Jacob Van Zanten, whose error made the whole thing happen.

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The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

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Surely Bragg wanted no part of this dreary karma, and I hadn't the courage to make note of it out loud – assuming it hadn't already dawned on him. But I could barely keep the astonishment to myself. One more creepy irony in a story so full of them.

Closing note: On the thirtieth anniversary of the crash, a memorial was dedicated overlooking the Tenerife airport, honoring those who perished there. The sculpture is in the shape of a helix. "A spiral staircase," the builders describe it. "[...] a symbol of infinity." Maybe, but I'm disappointed that the more obvious physical symbolism is ignored: early model 747s, including both of those in the crash, were well known for the set of spiral stairs connecting their main and upper decks. In the minds of millions of international travelers, that stairway is something of a civil aviation icon. How evocative and poetically appropriate for the memorial – even if the designers weren't thinking that way.

Try these tips to protect the brain

The latest Alzheimer's research has a clear theme: Change your lifestyle to protect your brain. It will take several years for scientists to prove whether some experimental drugs could at least delay Alzheimer's disease. Whatever happens on the drug front, there are generally healthy everyday steps people can take - from better sleep to handling stress to hitting the books - that research suggests that it might just lower the risk of Alzheimer's.

Here are five tips to help guard your brain against memory loss:

Get better shut-eye: Studies of more than 6,000 people linked poor sleep quality - and especially sleep apnea - to early memory problems called mild cognitive impairment, which in turn can raise the risk of later Alzheimer's. Other research showed poor sleep can spur a brain-clogging protein named amyloid that's a hallmark of Alzheimer's. Talk to your doctor if you're having sleep problems, advises Dr. Kristine Yaffe of UC-San Francisco: "Sleep disorders are so common, and we think many are quite treatable."

Exercise gray matter: Seniors often are advised to work crossword puzzles, take music lessons or learn a new language to keep the brain engaged. The protective effects of learning may start decades earlier in life. Learning and complex thinking strengthen connections between nerve cells, building up "cognitive reserve" so that as Alzheimer's brews, the brain can withstand more damage before symptoms become apparent.

Get moving: What's good for the heart is good for the brain, too, and physical activity counters a list of damaging problems - high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol - that can increase the risk of memory impairment later in life.

Don't forget mental health: Late-life depression is a risk factor for Alzheimer's. Harvard researchers found loneliness is, too, accelerating cognitive decline in a study that tracked more than 8,000 seniors for over a decade.

Eat healthy: Diets high in fruits and vegetables and lower in fat and sugar are good for the arteries that keep blood flowing to the brain. Type 2 diabetes, the kind that is linked to excess weight, raises the chances of developing dementia later in life. *(From May 2017 RUPA News)*

“Woops!”

By Gordon Young

Those of us who have been around aviation for a time have encountered situations or incidents which might have gone two ways: if south, then we may have left the planet; if north, we were still standing and smelling like a rose. I will not delve into military experiences nor those during my time in the Canadian High Arctic as a bush pilot. This is about my Pan Am flying experiences, specifically my ten years with the IGS operation in Berlin, Germany. From 1975 to 1980, I flew out of Tempelhof and Tegel to all the European capitals, including Russia. It was a hub-and-spoke operation; with 727s we often did more takeoffs and landings in a day than the deepwater division did in a month.

Little did I know then, I was joining a private flying club that was a reincarnation of the WWII squadron, the “Black Sheep”. We flew safe and hard and we “got ‘er done”. We played hard, too. In Europe, we had our “rules.” Unofficially, we had “look see”, which meant we always got in, regardless of weather. More than once, this caused some chagrin on behalf of “die andere Piloten.” During negotiations in the Pan Am Headquarters, we found out that those thirteen little 727s in the IGS accounted for over 60% of the bottom line of the company at the time.

In 1980 I went to New York on the 747. Five years later, I went back to Berlin. After 20 years as a navigator and copilot, I was a bona fide captain in the left seat of the 737. I was one happy pilot. The 737 flew like all Boeing aircraft: rugged, resilient, and responsive. After the 707 and 747, it was almost like a motorcycle on amphetamines.

One VFR day, we were taxiing the 737 down the parallel taxiway behind two aircraft on the east/west runway, leaving from Brussels, headed to Tegel. I made my usual announcement in German, ‘letzt gehts los!’ (“Here we go!”).

The departure was a sharp right turn at the runway end. My copilot switched the radio to departure control. Then came a small voice, “Clipper, could you switch back to the tower frequency? He would like to talk to you.”

Okay...

The conversation with the tower started like this, “Clipper, I don’t think I gave you takeoff clearance.”

Woops.

My grandfather always said, “Don’t argue with a guy with a big stick.” I also knew it doesn’t pay to argue with a European- they start wars! The bottom line was that I ate a lot of crow on the radio for the next few minutes.

We then proceeded to Tegel. At that time, Howard Ashcroft or Jack Ditzel was the Chief Pilot in Berlin. I never heard a thing about my “woops” in Brussels. Business as usual.

Another, more lighthearted anecdote: The unwritten rule in the IGS was “Never leave a co-employee behind.” One flight, at last count, I had nine Pan Am people and a basset hound in the cockpit of a 727 from Frankfurt to Tegel. And I never did find out how many commuting flight service were in the aft lavs. More business as usual.

All of us were lucky participants in a special time in history. And now all the “woops” have faded away into mere memories. I’m glad to have shared those memories with you all.

Pan Am Cruise Reunion set for 2018 - Royal Caribbean's Navigator

Mark your calendars for April 22 - May 6, 2018 for the next Pan Am Cruise Reunion. Once again we prepare for our next and much welcomed Pan Am reunion cruise. Our last TransAtlantic cruise was such a success, we are honoring the many requests for a repeat with new and wonderful ports of call. The Navigator of the Seas departs from Miami to Southampton, England. We begin with six relaxing days at sea where you can melt away land-based stress with a spa massage, build a scrapbook of memories, or simply relax poolside. Reach out to old friends, participate in shipboard activities, galley tours, wine tasting and much, much more. Expect no less than a great time! Call to reserve now: a deposit of \$450 per person will lock in the current price which may increase in the future. Inside from \$799; Outside from \$1099; Balcony from \$1859.. Contact Stu Archer, former Pan Am pilot and cruise consultant at 305-238-0911, or email: stunjune@aol.com. Watch future issues of the Clipper Pioneers for more information.

Pan Am Reunion scheduled for Foynes, May 2018

I have been asked by so many to organise another Pan Am Reunion in Foynes & Limerick that I have now decided, let's do it. We had such an amazing time when you all visited that I want to experience that again - so I am selfish. So I now need to know who and how many are interested in coming back.

We have chosen dates to suit the Pan Am Cruise which will arrive in Southampton on May 6th so that you can fly or cruise to Ireland. So friends, if you have any interest in joining us, can you PLEASE just let us know. At this time we do not need deposits, etc., just names. Our dates and contacts are attached plus details of the Pan Am Cruise being organised by Stuart Archer so it's make your mind up time. Spread the word and I look forward to hearing from you all. Regards from Ireland ~ Margaret O'Shaughnessy (For more information, contact Stu at stunjune@aol.com or Margaret O'Shaughnessy at margaret@flyingboatmuseum.com.)

Pan Am Philadelphia Area Pilots (PAPAP)

We meet the second Tuesday of every quarter at the Continental Inn in Yardley, PA at 1200 for a bit of BS before going to our private conference room upstairs for lunch.

Been going on since 1992 and it's a great way to stay together. Contact: Chris Blaydon [215 757 6229](tel:2157576229) or cblayd@aol.com

Come Join the Santa Rosa Breakfast Group!

The Santa Rosa Breakfast group meets about every six weeks. They have 17 pilots, FA's and FEO's that get together to discuss the old days. Anyone in the Sonoma, Napa, and Marin county areas north of San Francisco who would like to join them should email Dave Criley at davecriley@comcast.net, and send your email contact. They started out with 5 and have grown to 17. ~from Dave Criley

**REMINDER: CLIPPER PIONEERS NEWSLETTER'S
LAST PRINT EDITION WILL BE DEC. 2018**

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Email or write to Jerry Holmes - 192 Foursome Drive, Sequim, WA 98382
or email to: jerryholmes747@gmail.com***

After the fall.....

By Harold Lawrence

Even though we knew it was coming, the news of Pan Am's demise was like hearing of the death of a loved one. My last pattern was scheduled Miami San Juan Los Angeles Miami. Our crew met for dinner in our layover hotel in Santa Monica. The conversation naturally turned to the future of the company, and I offered my opinion that we would share the fate of Midway Airlines, which had declared bankruptcy a few days earlier.

At home a couple of days later, I heard the news on Paul Harvey's morning broadcast that Pan Am had closed down. I had been scouting jobs in the engineering field and had an offer to be a sales rep for a small firm, but before starting, I learned that a Los Angeles company, IASCO, was looking for 747 captains for an Asian airline. Said they were looking for captains with a little grey at the temples to give their first officers a little seasoning. I hitched a jump seat ride to LA for an interview and was hired, contingent on a physical exam and simulator and aircraft checks, with (Taiwanese) China Airlines. All went well and the Chinese were very cordial and hospitable, very westernized. The ten of us were treated to a dinner with top management, and soon we had our fam rides and uniforms. We were to be based in Anchorage, Alaska.

All in all it was not a bad experience. The airplanes were fairly new and well maintained. Flight engineers were very competent, copilots somewhat shy, all very welcoming and friendly. Some were ex military, some fresh from training in North Dakota. The airline copied ops procedures and manuals from Continental and SwissAir. We were paid a flat monthly salary and seldom flew more than sixty hours a month.

Living in Anchorage was a great experience. My wife and I had a neat little apartment right at the base of the Chugach Mountains. We could step out the door and join a cross-country ski trail at the edge of the parking lot. We made friends in town, and had plenty to keep us occupied. There were beautiful drives to Homer, along Turnagain Arm, to Denali, into the forests to view bears and to watch the salmon run upstream.

Sometimes I had seven-day layovers in New York and my wife came along for shopping and shows. Layovers were in the Pan American Motor Inn—slightly above fleabag status at that time. Also had good layovers in Los Angeles and San Francisco at times.

But, in the end, it just wasn't Pan Am. It wasn't family. I didn't renew my contract.

Thanks to the guys who have sent us stories!

You are a part of this wonderful "family". Are there memories you've written down that you'd like to share with us in this newsletter - short or long? Have you come across an interesting article that you'd like to share with us? Would you share pieces from a book you've written? Please send them along, so others can enjoy! We'd love to hear from you! Please send them to Jerry or Sue by email to: sue@clipperpioneers.com.

Pan Am was the airline that practically invented aviation. It pioneered air navigation and communications, and its list of "firsts" in the industry is awe-inspiring. Known as the "Queen of the Skies," it was the benchmark by which all other airlines were judged. ~*Helen Davey*.

Pan Am Historical Society has a Facebook page. You can view it here:
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pan-Am-Historical-Foundation/226994925218>

*...and God will lift you up on Eagle's Wings, bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of His hand.*

IN MEMORIAM

Larry Keith Baker of Mokelumne Hill, Calif., age 76, passed away surrounded by his family Saturday, June 10, 2017. Born on July 13, 1940 to Malcolm "Griffin" and Hazel Baker in Putnam County, Ind. At the age of 10 they moved to Tucson, Ariz. where he graduated from Flowing Wells High School in 1958. He married the love of his life, Judith Green, on Nov. 23, 1960. Larry attended U of A, where he received his Bachelors of Science in Aerospace Mechanical Engineering in 1963 and his Masters in Civil Sanitary Engineering in 1972. After graduation, he joined the U.S. Air Force and served from 1963 to 1968. He was stationed in Saigon from April 1966 to April 1967. Larry worked as a pilot for Pan Am and Delta airlines as well as a sanitary engineer for Weatherby Association in Jackson, Calif.

Hans Joachim Bernick, beloved husband, father, grandfather, and friend to all, passed away peacefully on June 17, 2017 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was born on the 13th of November, 1930, in Harbin, China. Eventually his passion for flying resulted with his dream career as a pilot for Pan American World Airways. After being stationed in New York, Hong Kong, and West Berlin, and travelling the world over, Hans was honored to pilot the final IGS flight into Berlin, which also marked his retirement as Captain.

For more information about each of these friends who will be missed, click on "In Memory Of..." at our website: www.clipperpioneers.com. Know of someone from Pan Am who has passed? Email the obit to Jerry Holmes at jerryholmes747@gmail.com

Flying Boat Reunion clip now available for viewing

A 15-minute special that aired April 27, 2016 on Ireland's popular RTE TV show "Nationwide" is now available for viewing. China Clipper First Officer Robert Hicks (94); Merry Barton, daughter of Folger Athearn (Pan Am's station manager in Noumea, New Caledonia in 1941); Director of the Foynes Flying Boat Museum Margaret O'Shaughnessy; Ed Trippe and Mary Lou Bigelow were interviewed during the Foynes Flying Boat reunion. <http://www.rte.ie/player/us/show/nationwide-21/10566026/>

Layovers for Pan Am

Check out Pan American layovers at www.paacrewlayover.com, where some 81 cities and over 161 hotels are shown in photos.

Having trouble viewing the membership list online? When you open the list, go to the top of your screen - you should see that it is set at a percentage. Click on that to make it larger.

Share Your Memories

Please send your stories to Jerry or Sue by email to: sue@clipperpioneers.com.

Don't forget to check out our website at: www.clipperpioneers.com

We Are The Silent Generation

Born in the 1930s and '40s, we exist as a very special age cohort. We are the Silent Generation. We are the smallest number of children born since the early 1900s. We are the "last ones."

We are the last generation, climbing out of the depression, who can remember the winds of war and the impact of a world at war which rattled the structure of our daily lives for years.

We are the last to remember ration books for everything from gas to sugar, to shoes to meat from the butcher. We saved tin foil and poured fat into tin cans to be used to make ammunition. We hand mixed white stuff with yellow stuff to make fake butter. We stood in line at the grocery store when it was learned a tub of real butter had just arrived, and as kids holding a place in line to await a mother in trail, we learned, after being pushed aside by an adult stranger who was also in line, to push ourselves back in line. We saw cars up on blocks because tires weren't available. We can remember milk being delivered to our house early in the morning and placed in the milk box on the porch.

We are the last to hear Roosevelt's radio assurances and to see gold stars in the front windows of our grieving neighbors. We can also remember the parades on August 15, 1945, VJ Day. We saw the "boys" home from the war build their Cape Cod style houses, pouring the cellar, tar papering it over and living there until they could afford the time and money to build it out.

We are the last generation who spent childhood without television. Instead we imagined what we heard on the radio. As we all like to brag, with no TV, we spent our childhood "playing outside until the street lights came on." We did play outside and we did play on our own. There was no Little League. Ball games were "pick-up" and played on vacant lots sharing baseball mitts because only the few had them. No kid had a two-wheeler bike until about 1946 when "Victory Bikes" were sold (no chrome, flimsy frame, very thin wheels).

The lack of television in our early years meant, for most of us, that we had little real understanding of what the world was like. Our Saturday afternoons, if at the movies, gave us newsreels of the war and the Holocaust, sandwiched in between westerns and cartoons.

Telephones were one to a house, often shared and hung on the wall.

Computers were called calculators and were hand cranked. Typewriters were driven by pounding fingers, throwing the carriage, and changing the ribbon.

The Internet and Google were words that didn't exist. Newspapers and magazines were written for adults. We are the last group who had to find out for ourselves.

As we grew up, the country was exploding with growth. The G.I. Bill gave returning veterans the means to get an education and spurred colleges to grow. VA loans fanned a housing boom. Pent-up demand coupled with new installment payment plans put factories to work.

New highways would bring jobs and mobility. The veterans joined civic clubs and became active in politics. In the late '40s and early '50s, the country seemed to lie in the embrace of brisk but quiet order as it gave birth to its new middle class (which became known as Baby Boomers).