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## The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

*by Patrick Smith, author and pilot*

27 March 2017 - Exactly 40 years ago, at Tenerife-North Airport (formerly Los Rodeos), two Boeing 747s - one belonging to KLM, the other to Pan Am - collided on a foggy runway. Five hundred and eighty-three people were killed in what remains the biggest air disaster in history. In this extract from [Cockpit Confidential](#), the pilot Patrick Smith outlines what went wrong:

The magnitude of the accident speaks for itself, but what makes it particularly unforgettable is the startling set of ironies and coincidences that preceded it. Indeed, most airplane crashes result not from a single error or failure, but from a chain of improbable errors and failures, together with a stroke or two of really bad luck. Never was this illustrated more calamitously - almost to the point of absurdity - than on that Sunday afternoon 40 years ago.

In 1977, in only its eighth year of service, the Boeing 747 was already the biggest, the most influential, and possibly the most glamorous commercial jetliner ever built. For just those reasons, it was hard not to imagine what a story it would be - and how much carnage might result - should two of these behemoths ever hit each other. Really, though, what were the chances of that: a Hollywood script if ever there was one.

Both of the 747s at Tenerife are charters. Pan Am has come from Los Angeles, after a stopover in New York, KLM from its home base in Amsterdam. As it happens, neither plane is supposed to be on Tenerife.

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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](http://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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They were scheduled to land at Las Palmas, on the nearby island of Gran Canaria, where many of the passengers were on their way to meet cruise ships. After a bomb planted by Canary Island separatists exploded in the Las Palmas airport flower shop, they diverted to Los Rodeos, along with several other flights, arriving around 2:00 p.m.

The Pan Am aircraft, registered N736PA, is no stranger to notoriety. In January 1970, this very same plane completed the inaugural commercial voyage of a 747, between New York's Kennedy airport and London Heathrow. Somewhere on its nose is the dent from a champagne bottle. White with a blue window stripe, it wears the name Clipper Victor along the forward fuselage. The KLM 747, also blue and white, is named the Rhine.

Let's not forget the airlines themselves: Pan Am, the most storied franchise in the history of aviation, requires little introduction. KLM, for its part, is the oldest continuously operating airline in the world, founded in 1919 and highly regarded for its safety and punctuality.

The KLM captain, Jacob Van Zanten, whose errant takeoff roll will soon kill nearly 600 people, including himself, is the airline's top 747 instructor pilot and a KLM celebrity. If passengers recognize him, it's because his confident, square-jawed visage stares out from KLM's magazine ads. Later, when KLM executives first get word of the crash, they will attempt to contact Van Zanten in hopes of sending him to Tenerife to aid the investigation team.

The normally lazy Los Rodeos is packed with diverted flights. The Rhine and Clipper Victor sit adjacent to each other at the southeast corner of the apron, their wingtips almost touching. Finally at around four o'clock, Las Palmas begins accepting traffic again. Pan Am is quickly ready for departure, but the lack of room and the angle at which the jets face each other requires that KLM begin to taxi first.

The weather is fine until just before the accident, and if not for KLM requesting extra fuel at the last minute, both would be on their way sooner. During the delay, a heavy blanket of fog swoops down from the hills and envelopes the airport. That fuel also means extra weight, affecting how quickly the 747 is able to become airborne. For reasons you'll see in a moment, that will be critical.

Because of the tarmac congestion, the normal route to runway 30 is blocked. Departing planes will need to taxi down on the runway itself. Reaching the end, they'll make a 180-degree turn before taking off in the opposite direction. This procedure, rare at commercial airports, is called a "back-taxi." At Tenerife in '77, it will put two 747s on the same runway at the same time, invisible not only to each other, but also to the control tower. The airport has no ground tracking radar.

KLM taxis ahead and onto the runway, with the Pan Am Clipper ambling several hundred yards behind. Captain Van Zanten will steer to the end, turn around, then hold in position until authorized for takeoff. Pan Am's instructions are to turn clear along a left-side taxiway to allow the other plane's departure. Once safely off the runway, Pan Am will report so to the tower.

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## The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

*(continued from previous page)*

Unable to differentiate the taxiways in the low visibility, the Pan Am pilots miss their assigned turnoff. Continuing to the next one is no big problem, but now they're on the runway for several additional seconds.

At the same time, having wheeled into position at the end, Van Zanten comes to a stop. His first officer, Klaas Meurs, takes the radio and receives the ATC route clearance. This is not a takeoff clearance, but rather a procedure outlining turns, altitudes, and frequencies for use once airborne. Normally it is received well prior to an aircraft taking the runway, but the pilots have been too busy with checklists and taxi instructions until now. They are tired, annoyed, and anxious to get going. The irritability in the pilots' voices, Van Zanten's in particular, has been duly noted by the control tower and other pilots.

There are still a couple dominoes yet to fall, but now the final act is in motion – literally. Because the route clearance comes where and when it does, it is mistaken for a takeoff clearance as well. First officer Meurs, sitting to Van Zanten's right, acknowledges the altitudes, headings, and fixes, then finishes off with an unusual, somewhat hesitant phrase, back-dropped by the sound of accelerating engines, "We are now, uh, at takeoff."

Van Zanten releases the brakes. "We gaan," he is heard saying on the cockpit voice recorder. "Let's go." And with that, his mammoth machine begins barreling down the fog-shrouded runway, completely without permission.

"At takeoff" is not standard phraseology among pilots. But it's explicit enough to grab the attention of the Pan Am crew and the control tower. It's hard for either party to believe KLM is actually moving, but both reach for their microphones to make sure.

"And we're still taxiing down the runway," relays Bob Bragg, the Pan Am first officer.

At the same instant, the tower radios a message to KLM. "Okay," says the controller. "Stand by for takeoff. I will call you."

There is no reply. This silence is taken as a tacit, if not exactly proper, acknowledgment.

Either of these transmissions would be, should be, enough to stop Van Zanten cold in his tracks. He still has time to discontinue the roll. The problem is, because they occur simultaneously, they overlap.

Pilots and controllers communicate via two-way VHF radios. The process is similar to speaking over a walkie-talkie: a person activates a microphone, speaks, then releases the button and waits for an acknowledgment. It differs from using a telephone, for example, as only one party can speak at a time, and has no idea what his message actually sounds like over the air. If two or more microphones are clicked at the same instant, the transmissions cancel each other out, delivering a noisy occlusion of static or a high-pitched squeal called a heterodyne. Rarely are heterodynes dangerous. But at Tenerife this is the last straw.

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

# The true story behind the deadliest air disaster of all time

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Van Zanten hears only the word “okay,” followed by a five-second squeal. He keeps going.

Ten seconds later there is one final exchange, clearly and maddeningly audible on the post-crash tapes. “Report when runway clear,” the tower says to Pan Am.

“We’ll report when we’re clear,” acknowledges Bob Bragg.

Focused on the takeoff, Van Zanten and his first officer apparently miss this. But the second officer, sitting behind them, does not. Alarmed, with their plane now racing forward at a hundred knots, he leans forward. “Is he not clear?” he asks. “That Pan American?”

“Oh, yes,” Van Zanten answers emphatically

In the Pan Am cockpit, nose-to-nose with the still unseen, rapidly approaching interloper, there’s a growing sense that something isn’t right. “Let’s get the f\*\*\* out of here,” Captain Victor Grubbs says nervously.

A few moments later, the lights of the KLM 747 emerge out of the grayness, dead ahead, 2,000 feet away and closing fast.

“There he is!” cries Grubbs, shoving the thrust levers to full power. “Look at him! Goddamn, that son of a bitch is coming!” He yanks the plane’s steering tiller, turning left as hard as he can, toward the grass at the edge of the runway.

“Get off! Get off! Get off!” shouts Bob Bragg.

Van Zanten sees them, but it’s too late. Attempting to leapfrog, he pulls back on the elevators, dragging his tail along the pavement for 70 feet in a hail of sparks. He almost makes it, but just as his plane breaks ground, its undercarriage and engines slice into the ceiling of the Victor, instantly demolishing its midsection and setting off a series of explosions.

Badly damaged, the Rhine settles back to the runway, skids hard on its belly for another thousand feet, and is consumed by fire before a single one of its 248 occupants can escape. Remarkably, of 396 passengers and crew aboard the Pan Am jumbo, 61 of them survived, including all five people in the cockpit: the three-man crew and two off-duty employees riding in the jumpseats.

Over the past few years, I’ve been fortunate enough to meet two of those Pan Am survivors and hear their stories firsthand. I say that nonchalantly, but this is probably the closest I’ve ever come to meeting, for lack of a better term, a hero. Romanticizing the fiery deaths of 583 people is akin to romanticizing war, but there’s a certain mystique to the Tenerife disaster, a gravity so strong that shaking these survivors’ hands produced a feeling akin to that of a little kid meeting his favorite baseball player. These men were there, emerging from the wreckage of what, for some of us, stands as an event of mythic proportions.

**TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE**

## **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](mailto:stunjune@aol.com). Watch future issues of the Clipper Pioneers for more information.

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## **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 lets 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 its 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](mailto:stunjune@aol.com) or Margaret O'Shaughnessy at [margaret@flyingboatmuseum.com](mailto:margaret@flyingboatmuseum.com).)

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## **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](mailto: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](mailto:davecriley@comcast.net), and send your email contact. They started out with 5 and have grown to 17. ~from Dave Criley

### **Share Your Memories**

Please send your stories to Jerry or Sue by email to: [sue@clipperpioneers.com](mailto:sue@clipperpioneers.com).

***Please update your email address and phone number if it's been changed!  
Email or write to Jerry Holmes - 192 Foursome Drive, Sequim, WA 98382  
or email to: [jerryholmes747@gmail.com](mailto:jerryholmes747@gmail.com)***

## EMERGENCY AT 35,000 FEET - A 747 Flight Anything But Routine

by Stu Apte

*A chapter from my memoir, "Of Wind and Tides", which I published in 2009.  
- continued from previous issue.*

Still working extra hard to plant this big bird on the center of the runway, I slowly eased the pressure off my now-shaking right foot, releasing most of the rudder pedal pressure, as I brought the throttles into idle power. I quickly slid my feet onto the upper portion of the rudder pedals, applying the brakes on all 18 wheels, and brought the Number 3 engine throttle up into idle reverse. We are hydroplaning down the runway because of all the rainwater, and if I applied more reverse thrust from my two operating engines, we would have been torqued off the runway by the asymmetrical thrust.

Actually, I was surprised at how well we stopped, still having a few thousand feet of runway ahead of us. After being in a hushed quiet during the approach and landing, the cockpit came alive with everyone at the same time shouting out "yahoos".

Turning off the duty runway onto a taxiway, I looked back over my right shoulder at Dennis, the Flight Engineer, who first noted the wing overheat light. I said with a chuckle, "You weren't kidding a few hours ago when you said, "Oh Shit!"

I saw Leon Chandler in Customs, while we are waiting to retrieve our bags. He was all smiles with his right hand out, saying, "Great flight, fantastic landing, we didn't even feel it touchdown. Did you hear everybody in the whole airplane applauding? But, my friend, you said that you were going to come back and visit with me before we got to Tokyo. What happened?"

Putting my arm around his shoulder, I slowly walked him toward a slit window where you can see our airplane, parked facing us. Giving him a slight pat on his back I said, "Leon, old buddy, I was not able to get out of my seat to even go to the toilet for the last four half hours of the flight. We had two engines on the left wing inoperative, one because of a major engine fire and the other because of a ruptured high-temperature pressure duct. You might say that I was a little busy."

Looking out the window, he was rapidly turning pale. Slowly, as my words sank in, he replied, "Stu, nobody told us anything."

I explained that as long as I'm still taking the airplane to its original destination, there is no reason to create unneeded anxieties among the passengers or crew. None of the flight attendants even had knowledge of our problems

"We don't get paid the big bucks for just getting the airplane from point A to point B," I joked with him, trying to stem his anxiety even though he was safely on the ground. "It's for getting the passengers safely to their destination when things have turned into a can of worms."

The special crew bus that was taking us to the Kino Plaza Hotel was buzzing with Pan Am flight 801's 20 crewmembers talking about not knowing of the engine problems. I asked John, the in-flight service director, to see if he could get everyone to quiet down for a moment; I wanted to make an announcement.

After the buzz stopped, I said, "You are an outstanding crew and after we check into the hotel and get cleaned up, I would like to buy everyone a cocktail, say six o'clock local time." The bus was silent for a moment and then the buzz of conversation started again. They'd never heard of a captain buying drinks or anything else for the whole crew.

That was one of the most satisfying rounds of drinks I've ever plunked down for in my life. We had been tested, and we had not failed.

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*...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

**Captain John "Johnny" W. Minor Jr.** passed away May 6, 2017 at age 97 ½, after several years of declining health. He was born on Nov. 5, 1919. At age 8 he saw Charles Lindbergh at a parade in Oklahoma City and fell in love with flying, a love he never lost. After several years at the University of Oklahoma with an aeronautical engineering major he joined the Army Air Corps in May 1940 and had flight training at Randolph Field, San Antonio. In December 1940 he was one of 24 in his flight class that were transferred from the Army Air Corps to Pan American World Airways to allow Pan Am to expand as the U.S. readied for World War II. His first flight for Pan Am was as co-pilot on a Sikorsky S-42 flying boat from Miami to Havana in March, 1941, with 32 passengers. In addition he flew two other flying boats: the Consolidated Commodore and the PB2Y3. He served as president of the Clipper Pioneers. Because of his piloting skills, as well as his warmth and social skills with the junior crewmembers, he served as a "check-pilot" for many years, rating experienced crewmembers on their performance on both familiar and unfamiliar planes. His favorite plane was of course the 747 which he flew over the Pacific for almost a decade until he hit mandatory retirement in 1979. READ MORE at [www.clipperpioneers.com](http://www.clipperpioneers.com)

**William Robert Wilson** of Dover, Delaware, went home to be with the Lord, Thursday, June 1, 2017, in Kent General Hospital. He was 84. Bill was born Oct. 20, 1932, in Brooksville, to the late Rufus and Bessie (Huddleston) Wilson. He received a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Science from the University of Kentucky in 1954; and served proudly in the United States Air Force for eight years. William then embarked on a career as a pilot for Pan American Airlines, flying for over 16 years, before retiring in 1982. READ MORE at [www.clipperpioneers.com](http://www.clipperpioneers.com)

**Robert J Huettl** 93, died on May 20, 2017. Bob was born on June 2, 1923 to Charles Leo Huettl and Helen Mary Huettl in Mankato, Minnesota. He was a resident of Cupertino, CA. He became an Aviation Machinists Mate First Class. From bases in Alameda and Pearl Harbor, he saw combat while supplying the island-by-island fighting as the allied forces advanced on Tokyo. After the military, he enjoyed a long and happy career with Pan American World Airways, where he became the Chief Flight Engineer at San Francisco International Airport. READ MORE at [www.clipperpioneers.com](http://www.clipperpioneers.com)

**Jim Hogan** passed away recently at age 87. He was at East Ridge Nursing Home. More information to follow.

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

## Layovers for Pan Am

Check out Pan American layovers at [www.paacrewlayover.com](http://www.paacrewlayover.com), where some 81 cities and over 161 hotels are shown in photos.

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***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.

***Don't forget to check out our website at: [www.clipperpioneers.com](http://www.clipperpioneers.com)***

## Warning of possible aneurism from wearing G-suits

*Posted by Bob Beavis on RETUP (Retired UAL Pilots ) Forum*

On January 3, 2002, as I just turned age 67, I underwent a critical surgery for a popliteal aneurysm behind my left knee. My popliteal artery behind my left knee had blown up the size of tennis ball. The vascular surgeon had performed the by-pass surgery replacing the artery behind the knee with a vein just in time before I either died or lost my left leg. The same surgeon then performed the same by-pass operation on January 17, 2002 on the right leg.

After both surgeries and discussions with one of the three vascular surgeons involved, who happens to have been a Flight Surgeon, we discussed the following:

- \* The Commanding Officer of VM0-2 (OV-10A Bronco Squadron) in which I flew combat missions in Vietnam in 1969 died in retirement at an early age of about 65 from associated problems that I just had a very, very close call with.
- \* The Commanding Officer of VM0-2 who flew combat missions in the Bronco during 1971 was reported to have died from a vascular problem at about the age of 64.
- \* My own Executive Officer of VMO-2, when I had been the Commanding Officer, died in retirement at about the age of 62 from an apparent vascular problem.
- \* And, a friend of mine who is currently the Lockheed Martin consultant/rep to the Spanish Navy called me after my recent two vascular operations telling me that a close friend of his, an Admiral in the Spanish Navy and first Harrier pilot in the Spanish Navy just underwent the very same popliteal aneurysm surgery on one leg and he stated to my friend he thinks it was due to weakening damage to his artery behind his knee years ago where there is no G-suit protection.
- \* I reported this to my vascular surgeon who was a Flight Surgeon. He said he is looking into this since there is no protection in G-suits behind the knees.

The specific G-suit I wore in and out of combat was the: Coverall, Anti-G Cutaway Type Mark 2A, Mil Spec C-23955.

I mention this seemingly far-out theory to all fellow military pilots that I come across only to warn them that: If you have a bulge, particularly a pulsating bulge behind one or two of your knees get right in to see a Vascular Surgeon to have it checked out.

My first visit to my internal medicine doctor with that symptom resulted in him saying I had a Baker's Cyst that needed removing. Upon my getting an MRI and seeing an Orthopedic Surgeon three weeks later, resulted in the Orthopedic Surgeon telling me I had a severe aneurysm and he sent me immediately to a Vascular Surgeon who said it was the biggest he ever saw. He promptly sent me to the Naval Medical Center (Balboa) San Diego, where two vascular surgeons performed by-pass surgery of the popliteal artery on both legs...and, due to loss of time, I almost lost my life or left leg.

So please pass the above info on to any of your fine feathered flying friends you have contact with...it may save their lives, if they have any such symptom behind their knee or knees...whether caused by G-suits' design, extensive roller coaster riding, or maybe even simply flying as a commercial pilot for a lifetime, after a military flying period.

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