

A Passage to Africa

On May 4th 1964, both aged 27 and the month before our seventh wedding anniversary, Patricia and I left England bound for South Africa. We had said our goodbyes to our families and friends who, amid all the tears, wished us every happiness and success.

Arriving at Southend Airport after four hours travelling by bus and train from Grimsby, we joined other immigrants leaving their homeland to settle in South Africa. The flight across the English Channel to Basel in Switzerland was the first leg of the journey, and this was the first time either of Patricia or I had been on an airplane.

I gazed around the airplane and wondered how what was basically a huge metal box could possibly hold safely some eighty or so passengers and a mountain of luggage. The Channel Airways plane was old, by all accounts, and didn't look to be in good fettle, according to a nearby adjacent passenger. My tummy squirmed. Was my first ever flight going to be as exciting as I imagined it might be?

Settled in our allotted seats we strapped ourselves in as the flight attendant continued with his pre-flight safety demonstration. 'If we lose air pressure, oxygen masks like these will drop down, hold it over your mouth and breathe normally.' What concerned me most was his instruction concerning the inflatable lifejacket under our seats. What good is that if you're tumbling to earth? My neighbour across the aisle was fidgeting with his rosary beads as the flight attendant lifted the lifejacket over his head and secured the tapes around his waist. Then he

pretended to pull a cord that would automatically inflate the lifejacket and indicated the light and whistle for signalling your whereabouts.

"Whatever you do," he advised, "don't panic or inflate the lifejacket until you're out of the aircraft."

Another flight attendant was handing out boiled sweets.

"Suck one to help relieve the pressure on your eardrums. At cruising height it also helps to swallow several times, pinch your nose and blow. Don't panic if your ears pop; it's a normal reaction."

Don't panic? I already was.

The plane slowly taxied to the far end of the runway and paused as if to take aim. Then the engines revved at an alarming rate and the plane vibrated and shook like a dog shaking water off its back. Another bout of panic, what was I doing here?

Before I could answer we hurtled down the runway and, like a stone hurled from a catapult, were airborne. I braced my knees and, white-knuckled, gripped the armrests. Within minutes, we had swiftly left behind England's green and pleasant land, patchwork fields, country lanes and quaint cottages. Below the grey English Channel glistened and swelled. There could be no turning back.

I gently squeezed Patricia's hand.

"A penny for your thoughts, love," I whispered.

"Oh, nothing really." She smiled, and squeezed back. "I'm just admiring the view."

Nevertheless, I am sure that, like me, she was thinking of our families and friends.

No sooner had we landed at Basel in Switzerland than a delay was announced over the airport tannoy system, a delay that lasted a tiring and boring seven hours, especially hard on fellow passengers coping with young families. Eventually we boarded

our plane to Johannesburg, South Africa. The aircraft was a DC4, a handsome craft with Swissair boldly painted along its fuselage. The red-painted tailfin sported the same white cross as on my Swiss penknife.

I asked the flight attendant if I could retrieve our hand luggage, which held our change of clothes and toiletries set aside for this journey.

"Sorry, sir, all luggages has been stowed in the hold until we reach South Africa."

"How long will that be?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure, sir."

We boarded the plane and found our seats overlooking the port wing. Like the Channel Airways plane, the Swissair seating wasn't designed either for the six-foot tall and I found them equally uncomfortable. The pilot's gravelly voice came over the plane's intercom.

"Welcome aboard Swissair to Johannesburg South Africa. First, I would like to extend my apologies for the delay and any inconvenience caused. After crossing the Mediterranean Sea our first refueling stop will be in Libya on the North African Coast. I hope you all enjoy a pleasant flight."

My brother James was stationed at that time with RAF in Tripoli. Knowing we were to land there, he had wanted to meet us at Tripoli International Air Terminal. He explained why he couldn't in a letter to me later. At the time South Africa-bound planes were not allowed to land at Tripoli International Airport due to their apartheid policies, nor was he allowed to visit the refueling airstrip.

Instead we landed at mid-day at what appeared to be a desert airfield with only military aircraft there. The heat struck me as if through an open furnace door as we walked across the runway to a converted World War 2 corrugated iron Nissan hut. Inside it was

even more oppressive without the luxury of any air-conditioning. The only furniture was a disorderly scattering of grubby metal tables and chairs. We formed a queue with our fellow passengers and were served refreshments by three bearded and scrawny old Arabs dressed in long white robes with white skullcaps and sandals. All they could offer was tepid orange Fanta, Coca-Cola and hot sweet tea and biscuits. At the entrance armed militia kept us company as if to prevent us from escaping. This scenario with its background of wailing Arabic music brought home the fact that I was indeed in a foreign land.

We were glad to be back in the scented coolness of the plane's air-conditioning. We endured four hours of turbulent flight over the Sahara desert and mountains, as air pockets sucked the plane into emptiness. Besides my own private fears, I had to listen to the cries of, "Oh, my God! What's happening?" or the excited screams of silly teenagers as if they were riding a big dipper.

Apologetically our captain warned us to remain seated with seat belts fastened. Occasionally he updated us on air speed altitude and outside temperatures. I wasn't sure how many of the passengers wanted to know.

We had been travelling twenty-six hours since leaving England when the plane landed at Kano International Airport in Nigeria. A tropical rainstorm was in progress, and silver streaks of lightning slashed across the night sky. A substantial dinner in the airport's restaurant laid on by Swiss Air was my first real meal since leaving England.

Pat was suffering badly from airsickness and like many other passengers could not be bothered to get off the plane. I was worried, as she lay up under a blanket, which was not like her at all.

After three hours in Kano, we took off for Brazzaville in the Belgian Congo, our final refueling call before Johannesburg South Africa. By then Pat looked better and was eager to disembark.

“Good morning, everyone. I hope you all had a good night’s sleep. We shall soon be over the west coast of Africa and landing shortly at Brazzaville. Please stay seated with your seat belts fastened until the aircraft stops. For your own safety the cabin crew will guide you to the terminal building.”

As we lost altitude I saw through a break in the darkness a glistening silver ribbon, which an air steward informed me was the River Congo. We landed in the pink hue of dawn and I descended from the plane in a deathly quiet. The air was languid and humid with a low-lying mist swirling across the airfield as we traipsed to the terminal building. My first thoughts were of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* that a friend lent me when he knew I was going to Africa. I shared in Marlow’s thoughts: “No sounds, bird, animals or drums, chants or howls.”

At Brazzaville’s airport, as in Tripoli, heavily armed guards dressed in army fatigues showed not a glimmer of welcome at our presence. Their faces were expressionless and their eyes missed nothing. The Congo was not the best of countries to be in during this period of coup d’état - a disorder spreading through Africa that Britain’s Prime Minister Harold Macmillan once famously called “the winds of change.”

The airport building seemed deserted except for the soldiers. The cafeteria in the transit lounge was closed and, as far as I was concerned, it could stay shut forever. Annoying and persistent flies droned in the air and insolent amber-coloured cockroaches scuttled along counters and floors. Now I realised why we had had to undergo a multitude of inoculations: typhoid, hepatitis B, tetanus, polio and yellow fever.

After a brief stop to refuel we flew swiftly out of Conrad's 'dark and unearthly Congolese forest.' Minutes later the blood-red orb of the rising sun spread its fire over the Southern African horizon. My fellow passengers came to life as its brilliance filtered through cabin windows. Not long after the 'Fasten Your Seat Belt' sign lit up as the plane made a slow banking curve. The engine changed tune abruptly followed by the familiar whirr of hydraulics and the final clunk as the undercarriage dropped. With a screech of the plane's wheels, we came smoothly to ground.

Whatever doubts had been creeping in about this bold venture of ours were dispelled as I glanced up at Jan Smuts International Airport, Johannesburg. After a grueling 35 hours: by bus, train and plane across 6,000 miles we had finally arrived in South Africa. What began as an idea had become a burning obsession, something that finally we had to do. Our £10 passage to Africa had come to an exhausting but truly successful conclusion.

We went through the formality of immigration control and baggage collection. Mrs. Van Reardon introduced herself as the Samorgan representative and welcomed us all to South Africa, checking our names before we boarded the coach to Johannesburg. I glanced up at the clear blue sky and around the airport buildings, enhanced by the perfume from blossoming gardens where jacaranda trees, scarlet hibiscus and flourishing bougainvillea stretched up from the rich ochre soil. This first glance of South Africa was exactly as I had imagined it to be: colourful, bright and sunny.

Once clear of the airport the landscape changed dramatically to a red-brown open landscape, or veldt in Afrikaans. Sprawling farm dwellings and corrugated iron-roofed bungalows. This was a different scene from the verdant quilted fields of England. Groups of natives queued to board overloaded buses and barefoot children played football with a bundle of rags by the dusty

roadside. They waved joyously as we sped by engulfing them in a cloud of red dust.

Young women in ankle-length dresses moved as gracefully as fashion models with bundles balanced on their heads. Others of all shapes and sizes carried babies across their backs wrapped hammock-style in shawls. Around their arms, ankles and necks were colourfully beaded necklaces and bangles. My limited travelling experience was around England, Scotland and Wales. Nothing had prepared me for scenes only previously known from films and picture books.

Mrs Van Reardon saw the interest we took in our first glimpse of the real Africa.

"Most African women carry their infants like that," she told us. "I was brought up with a nanny who carried me like that as she did my mother's housework."

Little did I realise then that one day our own child would be carried in this manner by her nanny Elizabeth of the Xhosa tribe. Africa had finally become a reality.

As the coach approached the city suburbs, houses were grander in style with red-tiled roofs, manicured lawns, exotic palms, rhododendrons and rampant white and crimson bougainvillea. To remind us this is South Africa those upmarket dwellings were fenced in with two-metre high railings.

Our first glimpse of Johannesburg was its mountainous backdrop of sand-yellow mine dumps, an unkindly landscape for such a modern city. The mine dumps, Mrs Van Reardon explained, were formed by the product waste after gold was extracted that was known as 'tailings.' She shared other facts about South Africa, its history and currency, the rand.

"May is the start of our winter and Johannesburg at 6,000ft 1753 metres elevation is known as the Highveld. Our winters here can be extremely cold, with temperatures falling below freezing.

Jo'burg as most people call it is the largest populated city in South Africa and relatively young. Less than a hundred years old, the city grew with the discovery of gold in 1886 by the Australian geologist George Harrison. In fact, this very street we are driving down now is named after him."

Johannesburg was modern in its architecture, unlike London's claustrophobic dark buildings and narrow grey streets. The roads and pavements were designed to be wide enough for ox wagons to turn around in and the street names were unfamiliar: Louis Botha, Bree, Jeppe, Bok, and Eloff and Harrison Street. Traffic lights are called robots throughout South Africa.

Our coach stopped outside the Welgelegen Hotel in Primrose Terrace in the city's hilly suburb Berea. Our room was clean and tidy and smelled heavily of DDT and floor polish. In one corner was a small washbasin and the only window was permanently locked with fancy scroll steel 'burglar bars,' something we learned to live with in South Africa. Taking up most of the floor space were two metal-framed single beds with neatly folded blankets, pillows and towels. On the floor were two rattan scatter rugs and the only other furniture was a single wardrobe and matching dressing table. It was all so different from what we had left behind in England. Travel worn, neither of us was in any mood to criticise these humble surroundings. Although it was mid-afternoon, all we wanted was a hot cup of tea, a bath and a good sleep.

We both surfaced the next day at 7am hungry and ready for a good breakfast. The hotel was almost empty, as the other immigrants had left for their allotted locations: the gold mines or steelworks at Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark, South Africa's massive steel-making complexes around Johannesburg.

Knowing I had a job, I was eager to explore Johannesburg. First, I adjusted my Swiss Omega, which was still on British time. That brought thoughts of my father.

“It’s the best watch I’ve ever had, Pete, but you’ll have to keep a check on it as these days it loses four minutes a week.”

Dad gave it to me for my 21st birthday before he went on his last sea voyage before he retired. Fifty odd years have gone by and I still have the Omega although it isn’t working now. Yet I didn’t have the heart to throw it away; the watch is the only thing I have left of my father’s.

For Patricia and I this was a new beginning, and in a foreign country - so-called ‘darkest Africa.’ At first sight, Johannesburg was an over-powering city forest of tall glass buildings. Surprisingly, few black Africans were to be seen except for those cleaning the streets, digging trenches or laying cables while a white man supervised them in his bakkie (or pick-up truck.)

The clear morning air was cool, warming up as we stepped out of the shadows of the high-rise marble and glass buildings owned by De Beers, the Anglo American or Rand and Reef Mining’s head offices. By lunchtime, it was warmer than an English summer’s day as we strolled hand in hand through the city streets, browsing in shop windows. I found a bank to exchange our traveller’s cheques for South African currency. The twenty and ten rand notes and coins bore the image of Jan Van Riebeeck, deemed the founding father of their nation by the majority of the Afrikaner population. I was to find his image on postage stamps as well as currency and 6th April is Van Riebeeck’s Day, a public holiday.

Eventually I splashed out, daring to order tea and cream cakes from a pavement café. I paid the bill with a R5 note and got in return a pocketful of coins. Fifteen minutes after leaving the cafe we had to retrace our steps as Pat had left her handbag there. The smiling Greek owner handed it back to her, untouched. That was fortunate as it contained all our money, our passports and many other personal and valuable items. I could hardly imagine such honesty in the UK.

The pain in my ears from flying had almost gone, but my throat was dry, swollen and sore. This resulted in a sleepless night. The following morning I was due at Baker Perkins to let them know I had arrived safely. As I could hardly make myself heard, I headed for the nearest drugstore. The pharmacist poked a spatula down my throat, inspected my ears and felt the glands on both sides of my neck.

"It certainly looks like you have laryngitis," he said, "and that could be due to the altitude."

He suggested I gargle with salt water frequently and gave me a dozen capsules to take three times a day, and off I set for the workplace.

Before we emigrated, Baker Perkins in Peterborough, England had offered me a job with guaranteed accommodation in Johannesburg. Now Mr Du Pree, Baker Perkins Johannesburg's general manager, told me something different in his guttural Afrikaans English.

"We had to let your accommodation go as we thought you weren't coming. It is most unfortunate, meneer (Mister) Pratt that you have arrived a week later than originally planned."

"What about this letter from your head office in England stating that you will provide accommodation along with the job?"

"The job is still yours, but now you will have to find your own accommodation, I am very sorry; we have none available at present."

Realising I was let-down I was furious, and in a husky but strong Grimsby style told him what he could do with his f*****g job.

I returned to the Welgelegen Hotel and explained my plight to the manager, who let me use his phone to contact Samorgan, our immigration agent. We took a taxi to their office where Mrs Van Reardon, who remembered me and read up on my work

qualifications. After a phone call, she fixed me up with a job with Benoni Engineering.

“You will like Benoni,” she said. “Many of the people there originated from Britain – the town hall was even built by an Englishman. Besides, you will find the town is a much better place to settle in. I grew up there and still live nearby. I will arrange for our driver to take you to Benoni in the morning. Until your company accommodation is ready, you will be staying at the Benoni Hotel at the company’s expense.”

Mrs Van Reardon gave me two letters of introduction, one for Mr Jubert, the manager of Benoni Engineering for Monday morning and the other for the manager of the Benoni Hotel.

Afterwards we sat in Joubert Park amid the beautiful city gardens. Our first noticeable sign of apartheid had been at the bus stops, now it was seats and toilets labelled in Afrikaans Slegs Blankes (Europeans Only.) As it was late afternoon, we took Mrs Van Reardon’s advice not to walk the city during darkness. We had an early dinner in an Italian restaurant near our hotel and spent the evening afterwards writing post cards to our family.