

## CHAPTER 14 – POSITIONING

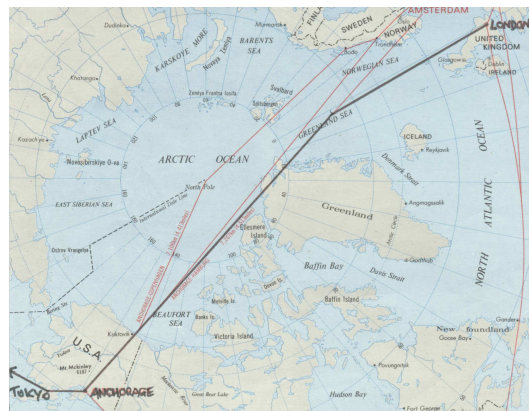
Sorry if I disappoint the reader – this chapter has nothing to do with the Kama Sutra, only with flying around the world as a passenger. Every now and again it would be necessary to fly to some place or other to replace another pilot who had to return to base for some reason – sickness, leave or whatever. Sometimes this ‘positioning’ was done on a company aircraft and sometimes as a regular passenger.



My first experience of positioning is mentioned briefly in chapter 10 when I flew to Tokyo to spend a month operating between there and Manila. This trip was by courtesy of BOAC or ‘Better On A Camel’ as they were known throughout the world of aviation, in a Boeing 707 like the one on the left.

Incidentally a lot of airlines have pet names and here are just a few that I can remember. Danair = Dandare; Pan American Airways = Pandemonium Scareways; Pakistan International Airways (PIA) = Perhaps It’ll Arrive; Sabena = Such A Bloody Experience Never Again; Air France = Air Chance; British Airways = British Aeroflop; TWA = Teeny Weeny Airlines; Aer Lingus = Air Fungus; Lufthansa = Let Us Fornicate The Hostesses And Not Say Anything; Qantas = Queers And Nymphomaniacs Travelling As Stewards. (Not very PC, but then what the hell!)

But to get back to my trip across the Arctic regions which was more or less along the route shown in black on the map. All this was very exciting as I had not previously flown over the pole and looking down on the ice sheets made me realise what epic journeys have been undertaken by the explorers of the last century.



I spent some of the trip on the flight deck talking to the crew, whose conversation was centred around the forthcoming introduction into service with BOAC of the new Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet. At the time BALPA, the pilot’s trade union, was in dispute with management over various aspects of the pay and conditions for the crews who were to operate the new fleet. I was absolutely amazed, having only recently left the RAF, at the attitude of these very highly paid pilots, who it seemed were not going to agree to fly the 747 until they got the rate of pay they thought they deserved. Personally I would have given my right arm to be able to fly the aircraft and I found it very hard to understand their attitude.

I’ve often heard people discussing the relative merits of flying with different airlines, but what they don’t seem to realise is that the quality of a particular flight is usually due to the crew who are operating it. For instance, I had reason to fly with Pan American on two occasions. The first, in a 747, was absolutely diabolical. The service was dreadful, the food inedible and the whole experience one that I would like to forget. On the other hand, the second was one of the nicest flights I’ve ever made as a passenger. The difference between the two was entirely due to the cabin attendants, who in the first instance was insufficiently motivated to look after their passengers,

while in the second they could not do enough for their customers. Standards should be the same, but human nature being what it is makes it almost impossible to ensure the same high standards are universally employed.

I found another instance of the difference a really good crew can make on a flight with Air Canada from London to Gander. As usual we were booked in economy, but as soon as the chief hostess discovered that we were aircrew she upgraded the three of us into first class. Here the service was second to none and the food out of this world with a piece of hake that just melted in the mouth. When asked what I would like to drink with it I said I would have a glass of white wine, whereupon I was presented with a whole bottle! When we arrived at Gander the hostess came along with about half a dozen bottles of wine that had had their corks pulled ready for use and then partly replaced, and asked us if we would take them off the aircraft with us as she couldn't use them for the next set of passengers. Needless to say we were only too happy to oblige and as we had a couple of days to wait at Gander for our own aircraft, we managed to put them to very good use!

On another occasion I had to fly down to Nairobi to replace one of our captains who had to return home to be at his wife's side at the birth of their first baby. I flew British Airways, as it had just become, in a B747 from Heathrow and I was in mufti as was our custom when positioning by means other than the company aircraft. Departure time came and went without any sign of engines being started and shortly thereafter the captain announced over the PA system that they were having trouble closing one of the underbelly cargo doors. This was a fairly common fault with doors on most aircraft and is usually caused by dirt getting in the door runners during the loading and unloading of cargo.

Some ten minutes later, during which time I could hear the ground crew making noises under where I was sitting, the captain apologised for the delay and said that he was sending the flight engineer down to assist in closing the door. I remarked to the man sitting next to me that shortly we would hear a bang under us, caused by the F/E hitting the door in a certain place with the fire axe, and all would be well. Sure enough, there was the bang; shortly followed by the captain's announcement that all was well and that we would now be leaving. My fellow traveller looked at me as though I was psychic until I explained that I too was an airline captain and that hitting these cargo doors with the fire axe was standard practice for closing recalcitrant ones. Known in the trade as a 'technical tap'!

The next tale of positioning illustrates a couple of points. Firstly that management have a naïve belief that all airlines around the world operate to the same high standards as those in Europe, and secondly that if you look official and act as though you own the place you can get away with murder!

I had to get to Lagos to replace one of our captains who was sick. There was a company aircraft going to Kano, so operations put me on that and told me to make my own way from Kano to Lagos (both in Nigeria). What our operations staff chose to ignore, even if they actually knew, was that all internal flights in Nigeria are greatly oversubscribed and that even though one might have a ticket it was necessary to bribe the right person in order to obtain a boarding card and even the possession of a boarding card doesn't guarantee you a seat. I have witnessed flights in Nigeria that were overloaded to the point where some passengers were standing in the aisles. With previous experience of trying to get from Kano to Lagos I could see that my flight was bound to be an adventure!

When we arrived in Kano there was a Nigerian Airways Boeing 707 standing on the tarmac next to where we were parked. I made my way over to it and asked the

Nigerian ground staff standing at the bottom of the steps what their destination was. Lagos. Wonderful, I thought, I'll see if I can cadge a lift with them, so with this in mind I went up to the flight deck to speak to the captain. I assumed the Nigerian pilot in the left seat was the captain, but it turned out that the Indian sitting in the jump seat was the commander. I asked if I could possibly have a lift with them as I had to get to Lagos quickly, but my request was met with a lot of humming and harring and sucking of teeth. After some minutes of this indecision I was told by the commander that, "We will not be knowing if you are on board!" (Said in that 'goodness gracious me' type of voice.)

I took this as a yes and immediately fetched my luggage from our CL44 in which I had come from Gatwick, climbed the steps and marched into the first class section of the plane, threw my suitcase onto one seat and sat in the one next to it. Almost immediately a very, very large Nigerian airhostess came up and I thought that I was about to get asked for my ticket. Since I had none, and although I was in my captain's uniform she didn't know me from Adam, so I fully expected to get chucked off. But no – all she wanted to know was whether I would like tea or coffee with my breakfast. Somewhat relieved, we took off for Lagos with me enjoying my breakfast, but there was still a major problem to overcome.

Having arrived in Kano and not gone through immigration or customs I was in the country illegally so I had to decide what to do when I arrived in Lagos. I felt the best plan of action was to leave the aircraft by the steps provided for the crew and depart the airport through the crew facility, marching smartly past the bevy of customs officers wishing them, "Good Morning!" Amazingly this worked a treat and within ten minutes of arriving on the stand I was in a taxi bound for the Hilton hotel in the city where we normally stayed - quite definitely the quickest entry into Nigeria I ever made. Aha, you ask, how did I leave the country without anything in my passport to say I had entered? No problem as it happened, because our Station Manager, a Nigerian Chief, always drove us straight to the plane in the crew bus without going through the official channels.

Speaking of station managers, when Tradewinds started 'slipping' crews down the route they appointed a station manager and deputy to look after our interests in Cairo. When I was first told the manager's name I thought somebody must have been pulling my leg. Mustapha Kamel was a very tall Egyptian who had previously been with BOAC and although I had been assured his name was genuine I had difficulty in not laughing the first time I met him. He was indeed a gentleman and on one occasion he invited the Chief Pilot and myself to his palatial house for a meal and to meet his wife. On arrival we were greeted most hospitably and plied with delicious food and drink. By the time dinner was served both Ted and I had indulged ourselves much too heartily on the 'nibbles', thinking that this was *the* meal, that we had to make a real effort to do the excellent dinner justice. YCNSTWLEM!

My final tale of positioning took place when I had to get back from Larnaca to London in a hurry. I arranged a lift on a B707 of Cyprus Airways that was flying empty to Heathrow to collect a charter group. Being the only 'passenger' on board I was looked after right royally and had the run of the whole aircraft to myself. This gave me an opportunity to do something I had always wanted to do, namely use the public address system. As I normally only flew cargo and one doesn't usually bother with, "Good Morning Oil Drums, this is your captain speaking!" I seized the opportunity for a bit of innocent fun. So when the hostesses were all looking the other way I got hold of their PA microphone and announced, "Good Morning Crew, this is

your passenger speaking.” Quite puerile really, but it got a good laugh and anything remotely funny helps to pass the time!