Born in Yorkshire, Mike James has lived in West Sussex since 1960. He joined the army from school and later, the Merchant Navy, as a deckhand. Coming ashore, he worked for twenty-five years in civil aviation and twenty more as a train driver, before retiring. Mike James is a pseudonym.

For D and M and ground staff everywhere.

Mike James

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All of the events in this memoir are true to the best of the author's memory. The views expressed in this memoir are solely those of the author.

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“For most gulls, it is not flying that matters, but eating.”
Richard Bach, Jonathan Livingston Seagull

Prologue

Rain. Persistent. Drizzling. A cold the day could not shake off. There were times, plenty of them, when everything went according to plan. Today wasn't shaping up to be one of them, or so I thought. Turned out I was wrong. But for now, gazing out at the curtain of rain sweeping across the apron, it was a vision of Gino's renowned pork chop, rather than flying, that presented itself, evermore persistently, to my famished senses. Continued resistance was clearly futile: it was time for lunch.

Early autumn 1966. We had been dawdling in the Ramp office all morning waiting for the weather to clear. It hadn't and my ride, *Hotel Alpha,* the company's twin-engine Piper Apache, a recent addition to the fleet intended for crew taxi work and private charters, languished out there on the ramp, drooping like a stood-up date, the rain ricocheting from its olive drab paintwork.

Still relatively new to the airline business and working on the ground staff of the slightly shabby airline Spanavia, the novelty of work that was enjoyable enough to make it worth getting up for, had not yet worn off. Nevertheless, on that wet autumn morning, I was desperate to avoid the drive involved in a routine visit to Woodside, our maintenance airfield, an hour or so's drive away to the west. Actually, I was routinely anxious to avoid going anywhere in my travesty of a car, if it could possibly be avoided. An abomination that featured the aesthetics of a loaf of bread, the ride comfort of a cement mixer and represented much of what was wrong with the British motor industry. It was the sort of car that might get you from A to B, but if your destination was C, probably not. So, when Jimmy, *HA*'s skipper, offered me a lift, my hesitation in accepting was about equal to the life expectancy of a flashbulb at the BAFTAs.

That I'd hesitated even momentarily sprang from the uncomfortable recollection of my last ride with him. It had been in the company of Sid Bardwell, Jimmy's instructor for his conversion course on the Apache. Sid, in his normal capacity as line captain, was a sight to behold and hardly one to inspire great

confidence. His uniform looked like he'd worn it to fight a bear, the collars of his invariably-grey shirts curled like brandy snaps and his shoes would disgrace a gravedigger. On his right cheekbone, a livid purple scar testified to a motorcycle accident in his youth, and beneath its ever-present five o'clock shadow, his complexion was the texture and colour of a bowl of workhouse porridge. However, it was the spasms that really caught the attention; every minute or so his face would contort in the direction of the scar, and this would be accompanied by a writhing muscle spasm that passed Mexican-wave fashion across his shoulders. This affliction was particularly unfortunate as, ever the conscientious one, Sid had been in the practise of visiting the cabin during flights to chat to the passengers. That was until Fineman, the chief pilot, with exceedingly gentle diplomacy, asked him to please confine his contact with the customers to the public address, as his appearance was scaring the hell out of them.

But Sid was a fine pilot and the moment he sat at the controls of an aeroplane, he was at home, his afflictions evaporated and he became every inch the assured airman.

There had been four of us on that earlier flight, Jimmy and Sid up front, me and Brian, a positioning first officer, in the rear seats. What hadn't been made clear to us in the back was that this was to be a training flight, so there would be some "manoeuvres" on the way. These proved to be routine—except for the last one. First, Sid hauled *HA* up seven thousand feet, through scattered cloud, into clear air somewhere over Boscombe Down. Here, we skimmed low across a blanket of altostratus, so low that our prop tips whipped smoking strands from it; while above us, cirrocumulus dotted the deepening blue towards the boundary of the troposphere. Having "slipped the surly bonds" we found ourselves briefly in John McGee country. Sadly, his dance had proved a short one, as ours was to be today—albeit narrowly less tragically.

Now, Sid revealed his intention to demonstrate the Apache's admirable ability to recover from something he called 'an asymmetric power-on spin.' This involved enjoining Jimmy to place his hands in his lap and to keep them there. Sid then throttled back the port engine. The aircraft's starboard wing immediately reared up, the nose pitched down and the aircraft began a vicious spin to the left, tightened by the power being delivered from the right engine. In the back, we were still sorting out our disorientation when Jimmy, giving in to an atavistic desire for survival, grabbed the controls to initiate recovery.

It was a natural enough reflex, and one I wholeheartedly shared, but Sid was having none of it. We climbed back up to seven thousand feet and the procedure was repeated, only Jimmy was ordered *on no account* to intervene. This time the spin was allowed to develop fully: *HA* winged over and plunged back towards the clouds in a sickeningly-tight spiral, a disorientating grey mist descending before my eyes. Then, as Sid controlled the spin and just as I began to regain my senses, he initiated recovery, the effect of which was nearly as bad as the spin had been. Emerging just below the cloud base, having arrested the aircraft's rotation, he began to haul *AH* out of the dive, the G-force crushing us instantly down in our seats and back into semi-consciousness. Then, as we levelled out, sentience returning, a flash of silver to port caught my eye. For an instant, I registered the image of an RAF Lightening with the masked face of its pilot turned towards us. Then it was gone, rocketing silently past on a reciprocal course, a few scant feet from our wingtip. A second or so later the sound hit us. The Apache bucked in the slipstream and a distinct smell of kerosene pervaded the cabin, as we sat open-mouthed and silent.

Sid said, 'Oops.'

There would be nothing like that on today's trip however, a sedate cruise was promised.

Jimmy had given up a job in the Cairngorms after his crop-dusting Piper Pawnee suffered a scary low-altitude engine failure. Vowing never to fly single-engine aircraft ever again, he had joined our outfit, flying the twin-engine Apache, in the hope of eventual promotion to the big stuff. That day, he and his co-pilot Chris, a teacher who flew part-time with us, were to take *AH* on a round trip to Woodside and there would be a seat for me. But the weather was lousy: warm front conditions overhead had drawn the cloud base down to 400 feet and left it there while it went for a cup of tea.

As Jimmy knew only too well, this was instrument flying weather. But he was reluctant to fly in cloud today—no doubt a hangover from his barnstorming, crop-dusting days. After all, you don't get much cloud at the height of a field of barley. But a couple of hours later, with no sign of a break in the overcast, I finally gave in to my ravening appetite and, after asking Jimmy to call me on the canteen telephone should the weather clear and they decide to go, I legged it out it into the rain to what was to prove the most important lunch of my life.

Captain Lightfoot

In Ops, I am sitting in Bernie's office getting a lugubrious optical going-over. To his left, Jed is flying wingman, doing the questions. Bernie, or Captain Lightfoot as he likes to be addressed when important visitors are in the building, used to fly, but a dodgy ticker cost him his ticket. So now he only uses the captain title to add gravitas to his business meetings. He is HCA's operations manager, and Jed his assistant. They're cronies from the outfit's beginnings back in Manchester; they share the same flat vowel sounds and gruff mateyness. Today, despite a CV that looks like a Job Centre training aid for difficult-to-place sociopaths, I have managed to wangle an interview for one of the operations duty officer vacancies. At this point the jury's still out, though I see from his expression that Bernie is already metaphorically fingering the black cap.

I have been out of the ops game for some time, slogging away of late on the nightshift of an airline catering company. I love it like you'd love finding a smudge on your chest X-ray, which is a distinct possibility given the working conditions. Just one of the job's legion disadvantages is that every morning a dozen trucks back up to the loading dock, their filthy diesel engines pumping carcinogens in to the frosty air as we wrestle to load the catering carts. Add to that the utter tedium of the job and you also have the level of my engagement with it. I am not above losing my *sangfroid* in a tight spot, but a dropped tray of mille-feuille or a short-shipped box of plastic cutlery really doesn't trigger it. They've probably noticed that. Basically, I just want out; to get back behind a desk with all the comforts of a warm office and air that hasn't been flossed through a dozen twelve-cylinder diesel engines before I get to breath it. At the very least, HCA represents a golden opportunity for several more years of useful life and possibly the resumption of what in my lighter-headed moments I like to call my career. It is now more than twenty-five years since that rainy day in the ramp office, so I probably have a great future behind me.

Jed is relaxed, sitting back, giving his paunch room to breathe, scratching at the stubble he cultivates to disguise that weak chin. He's asking most of the questions. It's easy stuff, not much above the level of, which end of the aeroplane do the pilots sit in? What letter does Quebec represent in the phonetic alphabet? He's probably thinking it's pretty close to lunchtime—his borborygmi sound like a tube train with failed brakes—so he just wants to get this done. It's Bernie who cuts in, sharpening the relevance of the questioning.

'What do you know about CAP371?'

'Er…' seems like a good place to begin.

'The crew duty regulations?'

'Ah…' CAP371 is the document number for the Civil Aviation Authority's rules on crew duty hours. I didn't recognise that number, but since he's already told me what it represents, I manage to waffle on about what I do know about the regulations. But just when I begin to think I've blagged that one, Bernie drops his head, hunches his shoulders, his expression morphing into something Churchillian, the rheumy eyes regarding me with scant enthusiasm from beneath a furrowed brow.

'What can you tell me about TAFs and METARs?'

I resist the temptation to make some daft remark about Welshmen, electing instead to bumble through an explanation of the difference between a Terminal Area Forecast and a Meteorological Weather Report. Judging by Bernie's look of mild surprise, I'm in the ballpark with that one. But he's not done yet. Jed is scribbling notes now. I don't like the look of that, it's beginning to seem a bit professional, something I've never been that comfortable with. I'm more inclined to a jazz-orientated, improvisational approach to aviation—not something that has always appealed as much to my previous employers. I'm right to be worried, for now Bernie leans his elbows on the desk to deliver the killer question.

'Flight planning, how much of that have you done?'

Aargh, my *bête très noir*. Though, as it happens, I have done a bit, a while ago now and quite badly as I recall, though nobody actually died—as far as I know. I just hate flight planning; I bemoan its arcane routings, loath its incomprehensible ICAO addresses, detest its recalcitrant flight levels and bewail its cryptic waypoints. I hate it like the McDonalds hate the Campbells, like Tom hates Jerry…you get the picture.

Bernie cuts through the floundering answer I've embarked upon: 'We use the Phoenix automated planning system.' '*Do we? Christ on a bike, that's a break. I know how to press buttons*.' 'You would be trained on its use, of course.' '*Another result. This is getting better.'*

No, it's not. Suddenly, the *coup de gras*: 'IF…' (I note the heavy emphasis. It's generally a bad sign when people address you in capital letters) '…we were to offer you a position, what references can you supply?'

Oh shite. It's not that there's anything particularly terrible about the many jobs I've done—it's just that, taken together and written down, the overall effect is terrible; the rap sheet of a failed Walter Mitty. At least there has been no actual criminality, unlike the shift manager at my current workplace; the one who'd picked me up on my missed entry in the flight programme and patronised me to death with a lecture on the importance of attention to detail; only for it to be discovered, shortly thereafter, that he was paying a little too much attention to whole sides of beef, which were mysteriously levitating out through the back door into his mate's van. One had to admit to a certain quiet *schadenfreude* when he was taken away for a serving of porridge to compliment the beef.

But there is no time for further conjecture; to employ a flying metaphor, Bernie's eyebrows are past V1, approaching rotation, in the silence following his question. Quickly cobbling together a web of disingenuity and promises to supply the required at a later date, I divert attention from references by asking about pay and conditions. It works; Bernie sketches out the details and the interview shambles to a close with him promising to let me know the result in a few days. Dishearteningly, there are other applicants to be seen. Anybody with a decent haircut and a couple of hours' recent flight watch experience is going to look better than me. But, nothing ventured, etc.

A couple of days later, the letter arrives: 'Dear Mr James, I am pleased to inform you that, blah blah blah…' Well thrash me granny with a five iron if I didn't get it. How? I'm not quite sure, but I don't care. I do get a nasty twinge halfway down the next paragraph when I stumble upon the bit about the offer being "subject to satisfactory references". However, if I have one attribute in spades, it is imagination, and I have all the imagination I need to imagine three decent references with semi-legible signatures, from defunct airlines. They won't of course be complete works of fiction but, like a Daily Mail headline, there will be a grain of unrecognisably-distorted truth buried somewhere in each one of them.

There followed a couple of weeks of refresher training and shadowing too tedious to recount, until the morning finally arrived when I took the duty officer's chair alone and unsupported for the first time in…nope, don't remember…the King of Ops for the next twelve hours. A quiet day ensued, where everything went according to schedule, or close to it. It was a mercifully quiet start but one rarely to be repeated, at least not during the high season of charter work, the summer months.

Pilots may strut their stuff at the very top of the aviation heap, where captains are virtual demigods, masters of all they convey. But no airline is run from a cockpit. That business, the day-to-day administration, is overseen from an operations room. Here large Perspex flight watch boards (now replaced by computer monitors and flat screens), display the day's programme. Each flight's times—schedule departure, actual departure, estimated arrival and actual arrival—are monitored and the figures entered on the board, along with load details and other aircraft information. The room is furnished with teleprinters (computer terminals now), air and ground radios, telephones and lots of paper—even today, forests of paper. Depending on the size of the airline, an ops room may be staffed by just one person, or dozens of staff. But, in ultimate charge of the whole of day's business, is the operations duty officer. He or she must monitor everything that every other department—passenger-handling, engineering, crewing, catering, the list is endless—does, to fulfil the ops duty officer's raison d'être, to keep the show going, no matter what.

It's basically stress on toast, with a frustration garnish and a side order of aggro, with seconds if you want it.

So, I had arrived—did I but know it—in the best and nearly the last job of my ramshackle career in aviation. What made HCA unique was the camaraderie that pervaded the company. In Ops, it was undoubtedly the influence of Bernie, and more so Jed, which set the informal, not to say louche tone and fostered that camaraderie. It was also the first company I had worked for where everybody, from Harry Tailor the managing director down to "Trotsky" our oik Nav Department clerk, was known by his or her first name, or nickname, a fact that appealed to my bolshy egalitarianism. We also had a good crowd of experienced pilots and cabin crew, already quite a cohesive bunch since many of them were drawn from a former pioneering airline I had worked with when I'd first started in aviation.