

Reviewer's Guide

The following has been prepared to help reviewers quickly assess *The Starship Diaries*. In a hurry? This gives you everything you need to get a flavor of the book.

How to Characterize This Book

This book is both an aviation and travel adventure. While it's obviously intended to appeal to pilots and aviation enthusiasts, it's also intended to interest those interested in travel literature—standing up as a legitimate travel and adventure story even for readers without an aviation background.

Why would pilots and virtual aviators buy this book? Pilots love adventure stories with technical details, and there's no shortage of adventure and aviation-related lore in this story.

Why would travel readers buy this book? A quick thumb through reveals extensive and accessibly-written geographic, political and social detail, stories of exploration and revelation, and interesting conversations with people in exotic locations all around the world.

Finally, this book also stands as a memorial of sorts to the Beechcraft Starship aircraft itself at the center of the story. The Starship line has just been retired, and the unfortunate circumstances of this futuristic aircraft's demise make this book particularly compelling to those who either worked on or followed this remarkable aircraft. (Details of the Starship's current status are related in the epilogue of *The Starship Diaries*, page 397.)

Differentiation

Aviation stories tend to be written by and for pilots—and as a result, tend to be dry and technical with limited appeal to broader audiences. The analytical, dispassionate sort of personality that makes a successful pilot usually doesn't make a good storyteller.

At the same time, travel stories usually lack any meaty technical information and often feel lightweight. Rare is the book that does a good job at both. This is an attempt to.

This book is differentiated by:

- ❑ **Descriptive detail of places visited, and adventures.** Historic, economic, social, geological and other detail is included in descriptions of each destination, far beyond what would be expected in a conventional aviation book. Likewise, in this story, drama doesn't just happen in the air—interesting adventures on land are shared. Real-world events are woven into the narrative and shape the journey (e.g. the impact of the Sept. 11th influenced a planned route through the Middle East.)

- ❑ **Accessibility of travel prose.** No assumption has been made about the reader's knowledge of the places and cultures visited; introductory-level detail is offered for each destination. Readers are not made to feel uneducated for not knowing where the Democratic Republic of the Congo is, for instance, or what's happening in country today. The book is not highfalutin travel writing—it's intentionally styled as accessible travel prose.

- ❑ **Extensive footnotes through the body of the book with optional technical detail for non-pilots.** Explanations of aviation-related details, written in plain English to explain concepts, define acronyms and demystify the flying process for non-pilot readers, have been included in 150+ footnotes separate from the main narrative so as not to distract from the larger story. Pilots, and those interested in the technical aspects of flying, can savor geeky details in some five technical footnotes per chapter. Those not interested in such things need not be distracted by them.

- ❑ **Graphics in the body of the story illustrating route.** Graphics detailing the route that incorporate real-world clouds and weather from satellite photos are included for each leg of the two-year, 38-flight journey.

¹ FBO, or Fixed Base Operator, is the American civil aviation community's fancy name for a private company at an airport that services general aviation planes. FBOs can fuel you up, check oil, sometimes perform maintenance, take out the trash, empty toilets, etc. Most even provide a pilot's lounge and/or flight planning room with weather-checking facilities, etc. There's usually one, sometimes more, at any airport in North America with runways long enough to handle large aircraft like the Starship.



Date: January 3rd, 2001
 Departure: Lihue, USA (PHLI)
 Arrival: Palmyra (PLPA), USA
 Distance: 978 nm

How Readers Can Buy the Book

The Starship Diaries is available from the publisher's web site www.starshipdiaries.com. Other channels may be available in the future.

Books are shipped worldwide. A nominal shipping and handling fee is charged.

Questions or Interviews

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Outline and Selections of Note

The Purchase..... 1
 □ Why the Starship?

The Preparation 7
 □ Supplies, emergency equipment
 □ Domestic arrangements for extended departure

A Single Step

San Jose, California to Honolulu, Hawaii 14
 □ Checklists
 □ Description of flight over water
 □ Playing tricks with your ears

Because there are two engines in the Starship, they occasionally get very slightly out of alignment, or out of phase. It’s not that common in a jet, but if you’ve ever flown in a multi-propeller plane before, you’ve likely experienced this. The two propellers work best when they run at the same speed and put out the same thrust. However, like all things mechanical, they’re not perfect, and sometimes get slightly out of sync. Now, there’s a syncrophaser system in the Starship that’s designed to keep both propellers spinning at the same rate, but the two still create “beat” effects—little sonic rhythms and sometimes melodies that sing themselves to you. Get one of these little beats or melodies stuck in your head, and you sometimes find yourself chanting or singing along to the propellers. Like right then.

Wub, wub, wub wub wub.
Wub, wub, wub wub wub.
Wub, wub, wub wub wub.

Once you notice the patter, it insidiously creeps into and takes over your mind. Everything you think becomes a chant. You try listening for other sounds, and find them, but always against the ostinato undercurrent of that sinister rhythm. How to escape!?! You stay stuck in the reverie until jolted out by something. Or until you change the engine power setting or mess with the syncrophaser, both of which I ultimately did for my sanity.

Argentinean writer Jorge Louis Borges wrote famously of an object he called the Zahir that eventually consumed the minds of all who gazed upon it, taking over all thought. The Zahir, an Arabic concept for that which is “notorious” and “visible”, signifies “beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drives one mad.” The beat pattern had become my Zahir.

The Province of Flight

Honolulu, Hawaii to Lihue, Hawaii..... 32
 □ Similarities between diving and flying
 □ The magic of sunlight

Midway though the flight, the controller temporarily vectored the plane to the left to avoid oncoming traffic. As the plane turned, the sun slowly rotated over the instrument panel. Shadows turned and twisted across the console. The heading bug knob of the HSI cast a long, slow, shadow as the sun caught it at an angle. The shadow swept like the hand of a sundial, a delightfully primitive image as it crossed the phosphorescing digital panel.

This gentle repainting of the cockpit with light, every turn, is one of the prettiest parts of flying. Unlike the black cocoon of night, the slow play of light inside the cabin by day is a real reminder that hurtling through the sky in our aluminum, plastic and glass capsules, we’re still intimately connected, in a super fast-forward way, with the everyday world, the same sunlit world on the surface of the planet, and ultimately the same world of the ancients. Even when it’s tempting to feel like we’re living in the future, blithely hurtling through space as we do in our amazing machines.

- Relativism of being in the air vs. being on the ground
- Origin of the phrase "cockpit"
- Visualizing the magnitude of a Pacific crossing

Of Shipwrecks, Sharks and Sickness

Lihue, Hawaii to Palmyra Atoll, Kiribati 41

- Negotiations to land at a haunted island
- Situational awareness in the air
- Spending a month with scientific researchers
- Stories of grisly dismemberings and shark maulings
- Two months ill

Out of Fuel

Palmyra, Kiribati to Nadi, Fiji 56

- Fuel as lifeblood; plane as catalyst
- How fast is a knot?
- A weaseley base operator in Pago Pago
- Details of a hideous instance of almost running out of fuel

The Korean Spy

Nadi, Fiji to Invercargill, New Zealand 72

- Hiking and meeting a local Fijian family with fellow travelers
- Getting the nerve to fly again after a close call
- Clear air turbulence
- The thrill of flying over New Zealand
- A mysterious Korean woman

Kim continued with more and more facts about New Zealand over the balance of dinner and dessert. She pointed out how sheep outnumber people twenty to one, and how New Zealand is one of the world's largest exporters of wool and frozen lamb. And while much of it seemed textbook-type stuff, she managed to make it interesting, even sexy, as the night wore on. She drilled me about my trip and plans for heading to Australia, Indonesia and other points Asian. All the while, her cheeks only reddened slightly from the single glass of white wine she'd been working all night. She seemed enchanted by the prospect of a round the world flight, and begged for me to take her up for a flight before I left, clutching at my hand girlishly as she did so.

The check came and went. She insisted on paying. Then I casually asked something that'd been percolating in my mind all dinner, innocent to the entendre.

"You know, I've always wanted to know: does water going down the bathtub drain in fact swirl the opposite way here, down south, to what it does in North America?"

She paused and smiled slyly. "I don't know. But my own tub isn't far. Let's find out."

And wouldn't you know, in the whirlwind evening that night, and in the few weeks with Kim that ensued, I completely forgot to look down a drain, even once.

Asleep At the Helm

Invercargill, New Zealand to Melbourne, Australia 86

- Falling asleep in the cockpit
- Australian accents causing navigation problems
- Reflections and observations about Australia

I spent a day or two poking around the south coast, and stayed at a wonderful bed and breakfast that reminded me of the idyllic, small-town beach house where the characters of Nevile Shute's *On The Beach* spent their last days. Grassy hills overlooked the water. The shortening fall days and overcast nights of the onset of Australian fall further evoked the slow darkening of Shute's tragic nuclear narrative. I found myself wondering what I'd do with my last weeks, there, if I too just learned that radiation from a full-scale nuclear war in the northern hemisphere was slowly, inevitably, making its way south. I thought of the poison pills and syringes as described by Shute, produced hastily by the government in one last despairingly euthanistic public service. Would I have the gumption to use such things on myself, or loved ones, there in that most perfect of beach houses, with that most perfect of vistas, with the onset of radiation sickness?

Late one night before going to bed, I watched a procession of penguins come ashore from the surging waves. Fairy penguins, I was told, common to the south coast. No bigger than seagulls, the little creatures waddled ashore, bellies full of fish to feed their young. The world, the real world, there and then, was still so vital—so goddamn *alive*.

Population: 150

Melbourne, Australia to Tibooburra, Australia 93

- Heavy winds force a precautionary landing in a dusty, remote town
- Befriended by friendly locals Jack and Elaine
- Australian drinking songs: *Who Put the Roo in the Stew*, *A Pub With No Beer* (said to be based on an actual incident), *Click Go The Shears*, *My Boomerang Won't Come Back*, *The Day I Rode the Emu*, *Tie Me Kangaroo Down* and more!
- Solo hiking to abandoned gold mines

Over a fire late in the evening, I looked up into a vast canopy. The sky was so desperately black and the stars so clear there that the swath of the Milky Way galaxy was easily visible. The big dipper is hard to see in Australia, but the Southern Cross is truly magnificent. Stars winked. Satellites arced. Meteors flashed silently across the sky. The occasional plane swept by, high and silent. It was hideously romantic, and all the ancient mining machines around me lent the scene an odd kind of grotesque eroticism. In the animation of the firelight, these rusting structures seem to cavort and contort in bizarre slow rituals, like they were dying, or mating. And they were doing it clandestinely; I could only catch them out of the corner of my eye, for if I looked at them directly, they'd stop. It was wonderfully creepy anthropomorphosizing these things against the bright starry sky, and I had great fun scaring myself to sleep. I couldn't tell if it was fear making me shiver, or the cold from the onset of the Australian winter.

- The great dingo fence

Eccentric Things for the Strangest of Reasons

Tibooburra, Australia to Alice Springs, Australia 104

- The difficulty of sightseeing from the air
- Discovering a U.S. military surveillance operation in Alice Springs
- Visiting Uluru (formerly Ayer's Rock) by bus
- Russia experiences one of its worst air disasters

Spaceport

Alice Springs, Australia to Weipa, Australia 112

- The lonely Australian landscape from the air
- Helping air traffic control locate a downed plane
- The Starship mistaken for a spaceship by locals expecting a spaceport to be built
- A fishing trip upriver
- Seven foot high termine mounds
- Toad popping

Automatic Gunfire

Weipa, Australia to Palu, Indonesia 120

- Flying to an island where 1,000 people had been killed in fighting the year previous
- A Christian enclave in the world's most populous Muslim nation
- Firecrackers on the street
- Crazy kiteboarders
- The sexless Indonesian language
- Talking lizards
- Clove cigarettes

The Occasional Beheading Is Still Reported

Palu, Indonesia to Tarakan, Indonesia 128

- Mountain illusions

- Flying over a lonely section of the world
- Overconfidence and equipment problems
- Oil and forestry in remote Indonesia
- Sleeping in the plane and squatting in the river
- Playing drums for kids on the beach, and jamming with local musicians
- The cross-cultural bond of music

Between diving, music and hiding from the occasional monsoon, time passed quickly. Before I knew it, it was my last night in Tarakan. As usual, we passed it at the Bom Bom, where a larger crowd than usual had gathered. Halfway through the set, Butch and Boi became conspiratorial and gestured to the other guys that they were going to now do the “special song” they’d been rehearsing. I recognized it as John Denver’s “Leaving on a Jet Plane”, joined in and even sang innocuously along in the choruses before I understood its significance. This song was dedicated to me, they announced to the crowd midway through. My song, to remember all our fun by. I was flabbergasted. Here was a group of people I could barely understand, that I barely knew, bidding me goodbye in the only real language we shared in common: music. Maybe it was the rum, but there didn’t seem to be a dry eye in the bar that night, that minute in time. We just played on, grown men from different cultures singing, smiling at each other with our stupid smirks, even weeping a little. Traveling can be so much fun. And so goddamn sad.

*All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go
 I'm standing here outside your door
 I hate to wake you up to say good-bye
 But the dawn is breaking, it's early morn, the taxi's waiting, he's blowing his horn
 Already I'm so lonesome I could die
 So kiss me and smile for me, tell me that you'll wait for me, hold me like you'll never let me go
 'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again
 Oh, babe, I hate to go ...*

On the Trail of Redmond O’Hanlon

Tarakan, Indonesia to Manila, Philippines 141

- The emotional impact of light and clouds
- Seeing the rivers on Borneo plied by Redmond O’Hanlon
- Landing in Manila without propeller reversers

A Lesson in Bombast

Manila, Philippines to Hiroshima, Japan 146

- The folly of repairs in Manila
- Jeepneys and the challenges of driving in Manila
- Hiking Philippine volcanoes
- Decoding aviation weather reports
- Avoiding thunderstorms
- The death of pop singer Aaliyah
- Videogame-like night landing in Japan

More Than the Absence of War

Hiroshima, Japan to Wakkanai, Japan 154

- History of Hiroshima bombing
- Hiroshima as a city-sized peace memorial
- Seeing *Pearl Harbor* in Japan
- Japanese cell phones

The taxi driver’s cell phone went off, and it being Japan, his phone was about half the size I remembered mobiles being in North America. LED lights flashed in the phone’s transparent case. And it rang not with a patterned beep, but a singsong melody that was pleasant but unrecognizable. It seemed everyone in Japan carried small, fashionable cell phones I didn’t recognize that sang songs I didn’t know. Conventional rings were clearly passé, there. You realize you’re far from home when you don’t recognize the tunes of the local cell phone songs.

- A stolen Starship?
- Flight over Japan: Tokyo from the air, William Gibson-esque sprawl
- Close to the border with Russia

September 11th, 2001—The World Changes 163

- Claiming one of 365 precious days for everyone
- Impact of the terrorist attacks on a round-the-world flight through the Middle East
- The geopolitical balance of the world suddenly askew
- Speculation on the fate of the pilots on the doomed planes

Nuclear Time Bombs Under the Sea

Wakkanai, Japan to Shanghai, China 167

- Instrument oddities over the Sea of Japan
- The hidden submarine reactor graveyard
- Autopilot failure at 37,000 feet
- A rainy landing in Shanghai

Mr. Big and the Egg

Shanghai, China to Chengdu, China 173

- Afghanistan bombing begins
- Anthrax in America
- Modern Shanghai
- Shrimp marinated live in alcohol
- The egg incident
- Late night drinking with Chinese gangsters
- The Zen state of flight
- Skimming the foothills of the Himalayas
- Politics over a sidewalk hot pot meal

Belly of the Beast

Chengdu, China to Kathmandu, Nepal 185

- Anti-American demonstrations in Pakistan
- Colors in Chengdu
- One of the most barren, underdeveloped places on the planet
- The hidden dangers of mountain flying
- The real Himalayas

After a hand-off to Kathmandu Center, the world suddenly changed. As if on cue, the mountains got higher and whiter. Without really noticing, somehow everywhere I looked, including behind, everything had become white and deathly dangerous-looking. These were the Himalayas, suddenly. The real Himalayas. Home to Everest and its ilk. *These* were the peaks one visualizes when thinking of Tibet or Nepal.

- A treacherous landing in Kathmandu
- Paul, Sonny and their Learjet

Rocket-Propelled Grenades Leave Bruises

Kathmandu, Nepal to Hotan, China 195

- In the shadow of the Dalai Lama
- Tricia and the poster boy of the unrequited
- al Qaeda in Indonesia?
- More equipment oddities leaving Kathmandu
- Taxiing over bumpy surfaces in remote China
- An eager welcome
- The Silk Road
- Firing an RPG

I had no idea my shoulder would hurt so much after firing a rocket-propelled grenade. I'd been expecting to just watch some distant fireworks, like guys shooting small arms at targets near the airport, but no. My buddy got me inserted into a squad shooting rockets at clusters of brush hundreds of meters away. In order, you pull the trigger, hear the *woosh* of the rocket speeding off and feel a slam in the shoulder. A second or two later, a muffled explosion creates a small crater approximately where you pointed the weapon. The concussion slams you in the stomach. It was surprisingly empowering, and exciting! I then understood the appeal of military hardware, for it was clear that things like this could be greatly entertaining if it weren't for the unfortunate fact people had to die. The soldiers, most of them half my age, grinned and made fun of my terrible aim.

Despite bonding with the soldiers, when the time came to leave Hotan, I received a rude surprise from Chinese officials.

A Place FedEx Couldn't Find

Hotan, China to Novosibirsk, Russia.....208

- \$20,000 stolen
- Landing gear malfunction

I touched down as gently as possible, rear wheels first, and slowed the plane as much as I could before letting the nose touch. When it did, sure enough, there was a sickening *thump-click-pop* and the nose settled on its gear a little lower than normal. I was rolling, however, which was good, and the belly of the plane wasn't dragging on the runway. But I seemed to have lost steering.

Shit, shit, shit!

The plane was still barreling down the runway over 100 miles an hour, so lack of steering was no small problem. I threw on the prop reversers, steered as best as possible with my brakes, and in a flash of insight tried to use the power levers of the two engines differentially, i.e. one at a time, depending how I wanted to nudge the nose to try to keep it centered. It was like a video game—but one with very, very high stakes. The wheels hit the grass to either side of the runway a few times, but I largely kept it on the runway.

It felt like the world's longest landing roll. I eventually came to a stop midway down the 12-thousand foot runway, shaking and perspiring. When it became apparent I wasn't going to be able to steer the plane to parking, the tower closed the runway and called for a tow vehicle to get the Starship. The tow latched onto the front wheel, lifted it off the ground in standard practice, and pulled the plane to parking, bowed, like an injured athlete.

U.S. Dollars Would Be Fine

Novosibirsk, Russia to Moscow, Russia.....214

- The Siberian winter
- Cheap parts, expensive labor
- An air crash hits home to local Russians
- ICBMs in the back yard
- Russia's friction of distance
- The Ukranian famine of 1933 - six million dead
- Snowing hard on arrival to Moscow
- Lenin: real or wax?
- Today's Moscow
- Two months after September 11th, attitude towards America begins to shift

A Man of Means, by No Means

Moscow, Russia to London, England.....228

- Dark, snowy morning departure
- Plum tea, and a man of means by no means
- The crowded skies of Europe
- First doubts about continuing the journey
- Friends in London

Castle Mud

London, England to Caernarfon, Wales and back235

- Barbara, Kirsten, Hans and Gunar
- The land of J.R.R. Tolkien
- Oliver Twist-esque street urchins
- Flying to a castle in Wales
- Accidentally stuck in the mud
- Speaking of home

A Warm Aerie in an Overcast Winter Sky

London, England to Venice, Italy244

- Planning for Africa with South Africans
- A dramatic departure

Taxiing out, there was an angry ridge of black cloud against a darkening sky, a panorama out of *Lord of the Rings*, where France was. Yet the rain stopped seconds after punching through the stratus that so often hung over London. Only a few thousand feet up, the sky felt cheery and welcoming again. A minute later, it was suddenly hard to even visualize the dreariness of London below we'd been experiencing all morning. It was more than magic, this ability to transcend weather so quickly and profoundly. It was unearthly and strange.

- Winter over France
- European airspace and pending changes
- The self-caricature of Venice

The Contemporary and the Ancient

Venice, Italy to Ibiza, Spain255

- An incredible woman air traffic controller
- Over Chianti and other points Italian
- The Starship as the closest thing to a companion
- The escapist ethos of Ibiza
- Snowflake, the platinum blonde
- Sleeping on the beach

Gateway to Africa

Ibiza, Spain to Casablanca, Morocco261

- A near stall and the need to listen for clues from the airplane
- Over Gibraltar
- Entrance to Africa
- Marrakach market

Way of the Traders

Casablanca, Morocco to Tamanrasset, Algeria268

- Terrorism warnings from Algeria
- An embarrassing go-around because of density altitude
- The Tuareg
- Dinner theories on Africa's problems and solutions

The Land of Ebola

Tamanrasset, Algeria to Mbandaka, Congo276

- Planning for a challenging flight

The fact I was entering a conflict zone was hammered home when calling ahead to the airport to ensure the Starship's JET-A/A1 fuel would be available.

"You're aware the airport is under military control?" inquired a nice-sounding young man with a thick French accent.

"Uh, no, I wasn't."

“Not to worry,” he cooed. “Just follow procedures, and everything will be fine. Do not bring any guns. And don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of fuel, *bien sur!*”

- Runway incursions
- The amount of timber in the rainforest
- Refueling delay
- The gruesome history of the sleepy town of Mbandaka
- The beauty of the jungle

That last evening there was a decidedly gray sky, yet, over time, a spectrum of muted colors formed outside the window. I went to investigate and found that while the majority of the overcast sky above still evoked shades of gun metal, an open band at the horizon had developed and allowed an impossible blend of pale blue and muted yellow to stream through as the sun descended out of sight. The city and jungle were both airbrushed in a thin pastel by this warm wash of light. In that unreal glow, it became apparent how these clouds, which had lingered almost the entire time I’d been in Mbandaka, were indicative of what the rainforest meant to the world. If the rainforest were indeed the lungs of the Earth, these clouds, it almost seemed, were the slow motion breathing of the world.

A Different Kind of DNA

Mbandaka, Congo to Livingstone, Zambia287

- The adventure capital of Africa
- Africa’s beauty and riches as the source of its problems
- Nodding off in the cockpit
- An amazing open-air hotel on the banks of the Zambezi
- Victoria Falls
- A young man called Happiness

Dying for the Stupidest of Reasons

Livingstone, Zambia to Cape Town, South Africa295

- The "Third World" defined
- The Kalahari Desert
- Click-sound languages
- The southern most tip of the continent
- Why AIDS persists in Africa
- Bullet holes in the plane

Cheetah Pet

Cape Town, South Africa to São Tomé.....304

- Hiking Table Mountain
- When large jetliners crash

It was while in South Africa that two large planes went down in opposite ends of the world. On May 4th, a British jet operated by Nigerian domestic carrier EAS plowed into a suburb of Kano, Nigeria, killing 149 people. In Taiwan a few weeks later, 225 people died in the crash of a China Airlines Boeing 747-200. If it’s hard to believe that something as massive as a jetliner can lift into the sky, it’s harder still to accept, once it’s engaged in forward flight, that something so stately and certain could come plunging back down.

I have a hard time coming to terms with the reality that these same great, modern aircraft that I taxi around on the ground with, whose flight crews I wave to on the apron and share the sky with, occasionally careen tragically from the sky. Even after seeing a few crashes firsthand—a large sub-chaser at an airshow in Toronto that fell into Lake Ontario in front of thousands of people, and a small Cessna departing a fly-in in Sacramento, California that stalled on climbout—it’s hard to accept the mortality of a large aircraft. Modern planes seem to possess an innate sense of reliability, exuding trustworthiness; especially up close, when you can sense their strength through your own fingers and be comforted by their exquisite engineering.

While unpleasant to imagine, crashes like these served as periodic but persistent reminders that I or any other pilot could easily suffer the same fate. On any flight.

- The perspective of flight transfers to life on the ground

The Power of Thunder

São Tomé, São Tomé and Príncipe to Praia, Cape Verde Islands.....315

 Blackmail

“You need security?” asked the young guy at the airport in charge of refueling the Starship. “If you’re going to stay, it’s good idea.”

“Security?”

“Yes. Bad people on the island. We’ve had planes broken into. You never know what people do, especially to a plane like this.” He grinned, but I wasn’t sure whether to read his smile as conspiratorial or quietly threatening.

Was I, in fact, being coerced? Had I walked into a street gang-style protection scam? If I didn’t pay, would I be *guaranteeing* the plane would be vandalized? I was going to decline, but thought about the consequences of refusing his offer.

“Don’t worry, we take good care of her,” he said after I handed over a fistful of U.S. dollars. “My brother Figueiredo come here tonight with his gun and stay here all night and make sure no one get close. You’re in good hands.”

He smiled. I didn’t.

 Hillbillies with machetes Hotel insects al Qaeda suspects arrested in Morocco, accused of planning to bomb passing ships Close to Cartesian 0-0 The second-most terrifying flight of my life

The plane suddenly, without warning, shook violently. I spilled a glass of water all over myself and dropped my sandwich in panic. I looked at the airspeed indicator—in the violent shaking, the airspeed had been pushed actually *over* redline. Whoah. I hauled back on the dual power levers, aggressively, for the first time ever in the Starship. Both turboprops began to wind down and the airspeed started inching downwards. The autopilot automatically began to pitch the nose upwards to compensate for the lack of power, trying to hold the altitude it was set at, which helped slow the plane all the faster. The cabin got very quiet, unnaturally creepy quiet, very quickly. My finger lingered over the autopilot switch, ready to turn it off and intervene by hand if necessary. What the hell had just happened?

Then there was a tearing sound. A low frequency rumble, like the landing gear was being ripped off, or a piece of the underbelly of the plane was coming loose and being buffeted by the wind. Shit!! Adrenaline started flowing. What the hell was happening? I was still being bounced around; had the plane actually started coming apart from that brief overspeed? Was this *it*?

My mind raced. Do I start making plans to land? Call in a mayday? Thank God whatever was happening was taking place over land. I’d half a chance to put it down.

Then the tearing sound repeated itself, louder and higher pitched this time. There was a crackle and a flash below, and then I suddenly realized what was happening ...

A Hard Landing

Praia, Cape Verde Islands to Natal, Brazil.....330

 No-one reviews your flight plans when you’re a pilot, even over transcontinental flights Night, stars, death and the cockpit

The sun sunk low in the sky. As always, when flying westward, its pastel descent became a more protracted affair than usual. In time, however, the sky darkened. It became a still, starry night, far away from the lights of any city. Occasionally, I could make out what had to be the lights of lonely container ships far below.

Above, the Milky Way could clearly be seen. In many mythologies, the Milky Way was thought to literally be the road to heaven. The ancients supposedly thought thousands of departed souls held torches to light the path. To the Greeks, it was milk, and to the ancient Romans it was a trail of wheat scattered across the sky by the goddess of the harvest.

I found it logical that early man might associate stars with departed souls. From there in the cockpit, it seemed the only think that could be more daunting than contemplating the number of stars in a midnight sky could be the mystery of death. The inconceivable reality that stars represent, i.e. a manifestation of the size of the universe, would likely be incomprehensible to the early thinker. Better to just associate stars with that

more tangible, everyday mystery of life and death than consider the possibility that the universe out there—that array of stars so numerous to the naked eye as to actually become blurry in sections—could represent a reality so broad and vast that all of humanity might be relatively insignificant in comparison.

To a pilot, the sky at times can seem as familiar as a familiar landscape, but on dark nights and inside the clouds its alien nature reemerges. Again then it becomes a surreal and dangerous place across which humans may move, but only with care and wonder. Pilots going out into these conditions need to hesitate before they power up for their takeoffs. They need that moment to run through the first critical moves of the flight, to shift their thoughts away from the ground and summon the concentration necessary to navigate the strange sky ahead.

- Mireia and her thong bikini
- Denouement?

I stood at the rail. While the scene in Recife was an awful lot like Ibiza, I was now close to home. I could feel reality nibbling at the edges of my awareness. Ibiza itself had no real subtext; it was an innocent party, only one of many stepping stones on an indeterminate journey. Yet there, on that balcony, my addled brain found itself suddenly aware of this adventure's impending end. As I stood looking over the ocean and sky I became aware it was likely a hugely important moment. For if the future showed this trip indeed to represent one of the biggest accomplishments and highlights of my life, that moment then and there—a small-town Canadian in South America celebrating my relative youth, freedom and means to have flown myself almost around the world—might, in retrospect, mark one of the high moments of my life. One of the last big climaxes I was ever to have. Was everything—the rest of this trip, the rest of my life—just one big denouement from then?

Stowaway

Natal, Brazil to St. Kitts via Cayenne, French Guiana.....338

- Two passenger jets collide over Switzerland; controller blamed
- The *real* Amazon
- Jonestown, Guyana redux
- A disorienting night landing in the islands

A Sky Full of Novembers

St. Kitts, Caribbean to Bermuda, Caribbean347

- Portuguese slave trade in the Caribbean
- Hissing at women on St. Kitts
- Peace breaks out in the Congo?
- Memories of first commercial air travel
- The North American airspace system demystified

Stomping Grounds

Bermuda, Caribbean to Toronto, Canada.....356

- Twenty-two square miles of Bermuda
- A CEO and his family nearly succumb to hypoxia in their private jet
- Turbulence horror story
- Too close to an MD-80 for comfort over New York

An Irresponsible Kid with an Adult Toy

Toronto, Canada to Wawa, Ontario365

- Flight around the city with old friends
- Retracing favorite driving routes in Northern Canada from the air
- Improved communications technology not necessarily improving communication
- Statistics behind the Great Lakes
- Hiking old favorite trails ... and getting eyes infected

The Real Home

Wawa, Ontario to Brandon, Manitoba376

- The U.S. begins to talk of war with Iraq
- Flying over the prairies and the great grid as North America’s distinct signature
- A flight with the grandparents over their small farming village
- What life was like for early settlers on the prairies

A Close Call

Brandon, Manitoba to San Jose, California386

- Another near-miss with an MD-80, this time on the last leg home
- The challenge of scaling the worldwide air traffic control system to meet the needs of near-future air travel
- The world as a large garden, with every inch under someone’s control
- The number of man-lives that had been spent creating the roads in the U.S.
- The controllers guide the plane in, and send it to its old parking spot

“Starship one-alpha-sierra, San Jose ground. Negative request. Taxi via Yankee to hangar.”

I was confused. “Tower, one-alpha-sierra. Please clarify.”

“One-alpha-sierra, taxi to your normal parking place.”

My normal parking place?

I checked one more time, and she confirmed it. She was sending me to the same hanger I’d previously rented years ago.

Of course, it was at the other end of the airport, which meant an eternity of taxiing. What a nice favor from the FBO though, I thought, as the plane rolled along. They must have heard I was coming back. It was flattering to be remembered and recognized at the field. Taxiing was a great opportunity to gaze once again at the nighttime San Jose city skyline—an updated version of the *exact* same view I contemplated while taxiing out on my journey two years earlier. One of my last good views of California had become one of my first.

I rounded a corner to the hanger space, and no less than a hundred people waiting there suddenly broke out into applause. Lights attached to broadcast videocameras switched on. Flashbulbs flashed. I recognized dozens of friends waving and jumping. The FBO guys who’d previously tended to the Starship were there, laughing and clapping. Many of the strangers turned out to be from the media, arranged by some of my more publicity-savvy buddies. I was to learn later that my parents had passed specifics of my return to my friend André, who orchestrated the event with other friends.

It wasn’t exactly the quiet moment for personal reflection that I’d planned. But big adventures help you understand that good planning isn’t nearly as important as being flexible enough to accommodate developments outside your control. So it was after wiping a misty eye that I climbed down the steps of the vehicle that had so nobly transported me, and bade hello to a community that I, for the time being, called home.

Flight Log396

Epilogue397