

CHECK FLIGHT by Captain Colin Wilson Shedden

The part I liked least about my job was when I had to act as a check captain. It was a source of some wonder to me that so many pilots actually wanted to do this unpleasant job, while those I thought best fitted for the task had to have their arms twisted. Perhaps my distaste was fuelled by the recollection of a remark made by the chief pilot of one of our larger airlines who, when asked how he chose his check pilots, replied, in his Tassie drawl, *"I just keeper list of all thur nasty shits"*.

So here I was in the right hand seat of a DC3 en-route from Mt Isa to Doomadgee, playing the part of a Nasty S. We had already done half the flight the day before, stitching together a series of Gulf towns and Aboriginal communities from Cairns to the ISA. The pilot under check was a captain who had the unusual nickname of "Fang"; his first-officers had other names for him, as did some of the hostesses. The third member of the crew was the cabin attendant Betsy. She was a beefy, large busted lady in her late thirties, with a hoarse voice and a rough as guts manner. There were many stories told of Betsy and the one I best liked was her method of dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses: she simply greeted them at her door, stark naked.

We were on descent and even at nine am the December sun was causing considerable heat turbulence. Betsy visited us briefly to tongue lash Fang for failing to keep the aircraft steady, before we put the Seat Belt sign on and prepared for the landing. There was a light westerly blowing, so Fang made his circuit and landed in that direction. As the terminal building was at the touchdown end, we had to taxi back along the runway. Before entering the dispersal area, he checked the hydraulic pressure - there was none !. I grabbed the emergency hand pump; but to no avail - we were without brakes. Both engines were cut, Fang punched the magneto cut-off and we sat there whilst the aircraft rolled off the end of the strip and came to a stop about 50 metres into the overrun.

After chocking the wheels, we soon found the leak - there was a mess of hydraulic fluid around the brakes of the port wheel. A further trial with the emergency pump and we could see the oil spurting out. Later inspection found that one of the brake shoes had come off, allowing the activating piston to come clear of its cylinder. Whilst Fang radioed the bad news to the Company, I arranged for a tractor and ropes to drag the beast into the dispersal area.

Doomadgee is built alongside a deep lagoon, the airstrip running close to and parallelling it; large shady trees border the water and even though the river had been reduced to a trickle, the lagoon was still full. It would be at least two hours before we could expect the engineers and, as it was already unpleasantly hot, we decided to rest up under a tree alongside the water. Taking our packed lunches, some soft drinks and a couple of blankets, we moved down to find a suitable tree. A swim seemed to be what the doctor ordered, so Betsy stripped to bra and panties; Fang and I to our underpants. I was about to dive in when Fang grabbed my arm, *"Hang on Col, we'd better find out if it's safe; there may be bloody crocs here"*. So saying, he grabbed Betsy and threw her into the water and with the aid of a handy branch, kept her there. There was a lot of splashing, screaming and profanities until, satisfied there were no lurking saurians, he threw away the branch and we both joined her. The water was surprisingly cool and we thoroughly enjoyed our swim; after which we settled down under the tree where Betsy, now in a forgiving mood, dispensed the drinks and lunch. We had just finished eating when the drone of a light twin signalled the arrival of our engineers.

They had brought a spare wheel with them, so it didn't take long to change it and to bleed the brakes. The rest of the flight was without incident. On arrival at Cairns, I debriefed Fang, congratulating him on a good

performance. The check form had a space for "Comments", in it I wrote, "*Captain Fang displays an original and inspired approach in dealing with unusual situations*".

The flight being ended, we went our separate ways; Fang to terrorise some first-officers, Betsy to bring shock and horror to more peripatetic proselytisers and myself, well, it was back to the second worst function of my job - office administration. And it was there that Betsy found me a couple of weeks later, when she burst into my office, threw a newspaper on the desk and said "Read that you bloody smartass" It was a copy of the Mt Isa daily newspaper. The front page had banner headlines – **“DOOMADGEE TRAGEDY - ABORIGINAL CHILD TAKEN BY CROCODILE”**.