

## **2 O'clock at Entebbe**

*Author: J Boyd Nicholson (Former Editor of Counsel Magazine)*

At about 6000 feet we were crossing into Ugandan airspace, heading for Entebbe. The azure sky was punctuated with puffs of cumulus. The earth below was deep, rich green. But everything was not as peaceful as the scenery. President Idi Amin had ordered the expulsion of all Asians, limiting them to one suitcase of personal belongings. Only three days before in Zaire, we had picked up a signal on the radio that any foreign aircraft flying into Ugandan airspace would be shot down.

We couldn't raise a signal from Entebbe. The radio silence was ominous and we scanned the horizon for any speck that might suggest an approaching aircraft.

At last, only 40 miles out of Entebbe, we got a response, a curt "Permission to land."

It was a small aircraft, carrying only the pilot, a lady missionary with a sick baby, and me. The missionary was going to be met by friends from Kampala. The pilot was to pick up some missionaries' children returning to Zaire from school. I was to catch a South African Airlines flight at 10:30 that night for London.

We carried our baggage into the immigration office and fished out our papers. The measure of our welcome was soon evident on the official's face. "Dont you know," he said angrily, "that the President has forbidden any white persons to enter Uganda?" We didn't know that edict had been passed only the day before. "Get out of the country – now!" he shouted. It was more than anger. There was fear there.

"That is exactly what I want to do, on the first flight to London tonight," I replied.

"Get out the way you came in," and with that the official turned to his desk. As I tried to explain how that was impossible because the plane was to be loaded with children for Zaire, he added one more complication, "Get out of the country by 2 o'clock, or you'll be arrested." I could easily believe him as I looked around at the many armed soldiers.

From a child, I had been taught to pray. To pray for little things and for big things. We had prayed before setting out, but it was surely time to pray again. As we stood there – the pilot, the missionary with her baby, and me – we looked at one another, sensing the urgency. A verse from the Bible had come to my mind. No doubt it was from God, "*Jesus Christ: angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him*" (1 Pet 3:21-22). So standing there, we prayed and claimed the truth of that scripture and asked the Lord to deal with these authorities and the urgent need.

The pilot made plans to return to Zaire with his load. The missionary was met by her friends and was taken off under their protection. I waited, occasionally going to the gate for something that might be the answer to my dilemma. The time ticked away.

Then I saw a jet landing. As it taxied in, I could read British insignia on its side. Going to that airline counter, I inquired where that flight was going. "Non-stop to London," the agent replied. "Wonderful! Put me on it, please." My relief was momentary. "Sorry, sir, but that is an unscheduled flight stopping only for added fuel because of strong headwinds that have developed between here and London." Then to extinguish any candle of hope, he added, "In any case, I have the passenger list from Nairobi. Every seat is taken."

"Well," I compromised, "would you put my baggage on?" "Yes," the agent nodded, "we can do that." It was a relief to get rid of the collection of stuff I had brought out of Zaire. I felt at least more mobile now for whatever might happen.

As I watched, I saw some of the passengers alighting for a few minutes and going into the terminal through another door. I decided that perhaps this was God's provision for me, so I took up a position near the gate. When I heard the call to board and, as the passengers stepped out on to the tarmac, I moved in behind them, passing by the uniformed personnel at the gate unchallenged. I could just feel their eyes boring into the back of my neck and I waited for a shout – or worse, a shot. But none came!

Climbing up the steps, I expected a flight attendant to be there to check for a boarding pass, and I did not have one. My ticket was for the night flight on another airline. But there was no attendant at the door. Walking slowly up the aisle, I looked for that one important seat, the empty one! Every seat was full, and many small children were on the knees of adults. All were Asians, I discovered, that had already fled from Uganda to Kenya. One could feel the tension. No doubt there was much concern that they might be detained again at Entebbe.

I went the length of the aisle without seeing a seat available. Then I passed into the first class section. A crew member came from the flight deck, and, seeing my uncertainty, asked, "Can I help you, sir?" I hesitated. "Well, I'm looking for a seat." "Where was your seat," he asked.

"Oh," I faltered, "I don't have a seat. I just boarded here." "I'm sorry, but you'll have to leave the aircraft. We are not permitted to pick up passengers here. This is an unscheduled stop for fuel only." By now I had taken a quick look around. There were one or two empty seats, but all with "occupied" tickets except one.

"How about that one?" I asked, explaining the dilemma of my impending arrest.

"Well, the flight was full, but I'll check," said the officer and walked down the aisle. Time dragged on. I tried out the seat for size. It fitted perfectly! Then I heard what seemed to be the thump of the door closing.

All these long minutes my heart was crying to the Lord and claiming (1 Pet 3:22). The officer reappeared. "I don't understand it, sir. We were supposed to have been full when we left Nairobi, but we have to go. That seat is yours!"

What a sweet sound it is to an old pilot, the surge of the engines on take-off and the "clunk" of the undercarriage that signals we have broken with gravity. But they were never more sweet as I leaned back in my First Class lounging chair to thank God for His timely help. I looked at my watch. It was 2 o'clock. *"Angels and authorities and powers"* and dare I interject – and winds, and airlines – *"being made subject unto Him."*

Soon the aroma of food wafted our way and I didn't realize till then how hungry I was. It had been many hours since we had lifted off from the grass strip at Nyankunde in Zaire. I watched with anticipation as the attendant passed out what appeared to be a delicious steak dinners.

"We seem to be short one meal, sir. Would you mind taking an economy lunch?" the attendant asked apologetically.

"Fine. Thanks." That was better than what I would have been having in Entebbe about now. He passed a steak dinner to a turbaned gentleman across the aisle.

"I don't eat meat," he frowned.

The attendant turned to me with a smile, "Would you oblige, and take this one?" I obliged.

Now there was the ticketing problem. There I was, flying to London on an airline for which I did not have a ticket. I engaged in conversation with the gentleman beside me and he

was most interested in how I ended up in a seat that had been occupied by someone else out of Nairobi. I told him the story as I knew it and of my problem about the tickets. It turned out that he was an airline executive who had been sent to Nairobi to organize the airlift of the fleeing Asians to London.

This was the last such flight and he was going home. He had a bag full of schedules and tickets. "Oh, just leave it to me," he said, "We'll sort it out in London."

Sort it out he did. My tickets were rewritten, connections made, and then, since it was now very late, he arranged a voucher for me to stay the night in the luxurious Gatwick Shelby Hotel.

At last, as I lay back in bed, safe and showered, I could not help but marvel at the gracious intervention of the Lord and of His mighty power. Who was it that stirred up those winds that caused the plane to land and extricate one of His servants from danger? We marvel with the disciples, "*Even the ... winds obey Him.*" And who was it that occupied that seat from Nairobi to Entebbe and did not return to claim it? How does that verse begin again? "Angels ..."

How did that executive and I get seated together? "Authorities ..."

Why was I not halted at the gate? "Powers."

All are subject unto Him.

And I did enjoy that steak!