

## Travel adventures while working for SITA (1)

While reading wikisita notes it appears that travelling while working for SITA is a matter which has left traces in many memories. With the above in mind I am relating some of my own adventures during my 40+ years through that particular environment.

In the late fifties Royai Air Cambodge was operating its network serving Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Saigon with a DC-3. One day I was flying with them on the segment PNH/SGN. About half an hour after take off I observed that we were doing a 180° turn around. I asked the steward, a former SITA staff : "Anything wrong ?" "Nothing" was the answer "I'll explain to you later". Actually the RAC flight schedule was for one day PNH-REP-SGN-PNH having for main purpose to carry the tourists from REP (Angkor Wat) to SGN and the next day to fly the other way around carrying tourists from SGN to REP. So on that day after 30 minutes of flight the engineer said " We are Tuesday today", "Yes" answered the Captain, "So we should be flying the other way around" and that was the reason for turning 180° in order to join SGN instead of REP as a first stop.

That is what happens when routine work reduces attention. As a matter of fact the Captain was known as an excellent pilot who retired a few years later at the age of 70.

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An ordinary flight in those days was more like the following : I was flying with Air Laos from Vientiane to Pakse on board another DC-3. Over Pakse the weather was cloudy and we could not see the airport. The radio sent a Q-code message asking the SITA operator - "Do you hear my engines?"

- "Wait a minute, I stop my noisy generator and listen"

Then a few minutes later:

"I can hear you but a bit weak towards the north of the airfield"

The captain turned southwards and soon we could see the airfield between the clouds and ten minutes later we were on the ground.

Actually Pakse airport is close to the Mekong river and a few aircraft, from Bristol to ATR, ended in that river, the last one of them only a couple of years ago.

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Still on board a DC-3, I was on a flight from Qui Nhon to Nha Trang but when we came close to that city the airport had been closed due to bad weather with a thunderstorm around. It was the monsoon season and the whole area was badly affected so we were diverted to Dalat. The flight was extremely shaky when quite unfortunately one engine failed. Dalat Lien Khanh airport is on the Central Highland at an altitude of 3600 feet and flying with a DC-3 on a single engine in such situation was far from being secure. So we were going up and down in the turbulences when all of a sudden a big bang waked me up : we had just landed on the airfield. Then my neighbour, an American, clapped me on the shoulder and said : "Man, thank you, I owe you so much!"

- For what ?

- Well, I know you are an airman as earlier I saw you talking with the Captain on the tarmac. I was quite frightened when the engine stopped in such a weather, but when I saw you sleeping so well I thought if an airman can be so quiet the situation is probably not as bad as it appears to be !

What the man did not know was that I had been working the whole night to repair and complete my work in the SITA centre. To be sitting, even on an old Dakota seat, and have a sleep was the best thing I could expect and what could happen to the plane at that particular time was not on the top of my mind.

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I am at Nha Trang waiting for the milkman flight to Qui Nhon. It is the afternoon when we learn that for some reasons the flight has been cancelled. We form a group and decide to take the bus to Qui Nhon. The bus is full of people, pigs and poultry. Unfortunately we have started a bit late and after a couple of hours the military close the road for the night since the area is not really peaceful. We are not in a city but in the Far East you may always find a food seller providing cooked rice or noodle soup, even in a small village and fortunately that is the case here.

Now is the time to sleep. It is very warm, noisy and not really good smelling inside the bus. It is the dry season and with a few men who seem to be heading for a market we decide to sleep on the top. There are to young pigs in their wicker baskets on my right side, some poultry on the other side and my tool box in lieu of pillow under my head. The night goes well slightly disturbed by the grunts of the pigs and the early morning crow of the roosters.

With the daybreak the military re-open the road and we reach Qui Nhon without any more problems.

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Long distance flights were operated by DC-4, DC-6 and Constellation. With the Super-Constellation and its longer range came the possibility to reach Japan from Europe with a technical stop in Alaska and cruising in the vicinity of the North Pole since flying over the USSR was forbidden. I had planned a Tokyo/Paris flight as I was negotiating the implementation of SITA in Japan with KDD and the Ministry of Communications, reporting the progresses to Head Office, taking my annual leave and for that reason I was travelling with my family. The flight was not full and we were offered a first class pass. So we were at Tokyo Haneda airport in the first class lounge. The Super Constellation had engines terribly sophisticated, engine problems were quite frequent and that was the case on that day. At midnight the airport terminal closed all the shops, bars, lounges and so on, and we were moved, all waiting passengers, into a very cold small room where we stood until being called at around 2am. We thought the Japanese were too rigid applying their rules and customs and that they will have to adapt themselves to a changing world.

The flight went well and we landed at Anchorage some ten hours later. There we were told that the engine problem had resumed during the flight and we were invited to go down on the tarmac. From that moment bureaucratic problems overcame the technical ones. The passengers had no US visa so they could not leave the aircraft. No, the customs will not allow anyone including the cabin crew to climb back and collect any belonging or anything else on board. So we were waiting in the Alaska cold weather under the wings of the plane. At least the flight engineer being authorised to enter the cockpit for a technical test was able to bring back three blankets for the children, one of them being handed to my 3-year old daughter.

The engine faulty part had to be replaced by the engineer appointed by the engine manufacturer but unfortunately that man had left for salmon fishing and a team had been sent looking for him. So the hours passed but at least we were finally authorized to move to some warmer wooden huts. More hours were spent there after which we were informed that a bus will take us to a hotel in the city of Anchorage. We did not enjoy for long that hospitality since two hours later we were told that the aircraft was ready and we were taken back to the airport. The previous day we had been complaining about the Japanese rigid laws and customs but it was nothing while comparing with what we had been facing in the US State of Alaska. A couple of years later Anchorage became a well known technical stop with a top class duty free and his famous stuffed polar bear killed near the airport, but for the time being such development was not even part of our dreams.

Nice to be on board, the engines were warming and running fine, we enter the taxi way and were going to enter the runway when the captain said : "We have been informed that our flight plan which has been handed more than 24 hours ago is now expired so we have to return to the flight information bureau and produce a new one". Another hour was thus spent before we could finally take off for good.

The flight towards Hamburg went fine as people were sleeping after such a long time spent on the ground in Alaska. Eight hours or so after taking off the captain said : "We have been facing very strong winds and as a consequence we are now heading towards Stockholm for refuelling...

We landed smoothly on the Swedish soil where it was very early in the morning and, but for the technical services, all other airport services were still closed. It took time for the refuelling to start and we spent more than two hours on the ground before taking off, this time for Paris. For the last segment of the flight there was no more food or drink available on board...

There were not many tourists travelling by air in those days and most of the passengers had already experienced the hazards of that new means of locomotion. I did not heard anyone complaining against the airline itself but all the recriminations were addressing the attitude of the airports authorities leaving the starving passengers in the bitter cold because such events had not yet been foreseen in the local administration's rules and regulations.

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Later came the jets with the Boeing 707 and the Caravelle. There were not yet any reverse on the reactors and for instance the Caravelles landing at Katmandu had to deploy each time their tail parachute in order not to overshoot the short runway. Also these aircraft had a range shorter than the Super Constellation and they had to use the Southern Road between the Far East and Europe with two technical stops for refuelling between Bangkok and Paris.

I was on board a Boeing 707 night flight from Bangkok to Paris and the foreseen stops were Delhi and Athens. I had been upgraded to first class where there were only few passengers. I noticed however that 4 seats were empty but "Reserved" and I was given a seat just behind them. We landed at Delhi in the middle of the night. I was always

keeping my seat belt visibly locked so the crew will not wake me up since it was not mandatory to leave the aircraft during refuelling. While being half asleep I saw people taking the four "Reserved" seats and I thought they were wealthy Indians.

About one hour before the scheduled landing at Athens the captain informed us that there had been a military coup d'état in Greece and therefore since we have sufficient fuel reserves we shall fly directly to Paris where we arrived two hours earlier than scheduled having skipped the Athens stop. One of the two first class cabin crew opened the aircraft gate and disappeared suddenly in the cockpit. Meanwhile a ground hostess climbed the ladder and entering the plane said what sounds as "leroy". I answered "yes". She looked at me very suspiciously and said "of Nepal" (in French "le roy of Népal" means "the king of Nepal"). I pointed out the gentlemen in front of me. She looked to be hesitating to address them when some cabin crew came out of the cockpit and the situation became clearer. But what about the King's retinue ? That was not clear and the time was pressing. Someone gave an order : "There are only few people in first class, have the group following some steps behind the King"

So I was standing at the gate while the King was stepping down the movable staircase. I saw the Guard of Honour who had been called in a hurry, taking place promptly, one guard still buttoning his jacket, another one fixing his pant belt. Then we followed. That has been my only time, purely by chance, to pass in front of a Guard of Honour after landing somewhere.

Later on I was told that after the Coup d'état all communications with Greece had been suspended. The King, who what supposed to disembark at Athens remained on board whereas working at night the airport staff did not realise there were a Royalty on board the incoming aircraft until the latter informed them by VHF, meaning 30 minutes only before the arrival.

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I was on board a Qantas flight leaving from Sydney to attend a Far East Group meeting at Los Angeles. It was a B707 night flight with a technical stop at Honolulu for refuelling. The cabin was only half full and I had 3 seats for myself meaning ready for a good night and so it was. The purser announced : "We shall arrive at Los Angeles in two hours time meanwhile we are going to serve breakfast". When the hostesses came pushing the trolley a passenger behind me told them :

- "You made a mistake : you said we are going to land at Los Angeles"
- "Yes we are going to land at Los Angeles"
- "So we are returning home ?"
- "No, every thing is fine, don't worry, Sir"
- "But I come from Los Angeles and I have been sitting here all the time"
- "Please show me your boarding card"
- " Oh, where is my jacket ?"

The fact was that there were two QF flights, a SYD/LAX and a LAX/SYD doing a technical landing at the same time at Hawaii in the middle of the night. During the technical stop the passenger had disembarked and when he heard the QF call for getting on board he did not pay attention to the flight number and entered the wrong aircraft. By chance the seat was not occupied (as I said the aircraft was half empty) and the man did not realise they he had boarded the wrong flight.

Such mistake would not occur today as the number of passengers on board is crosschecked very closely to detect terrorism but that was not the case in those days.

I am still wondering whether that passenger did receive the excuses of the airline or if he had to purchase another ticket for reaching the proper destination.

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Here is another case showing the absence of severe identity control in those days. I was still based at Bangkok but I was coming from Sydney and going to Hongkong to catch a Cathay Pacific flight to Seoul in order to negotiate with the authorities concerned the implementation of SITA in Korea.

The local SITA centre should have collected a CX ticket and deposit it at Kai Tak airport for me. I was not yet in charge of HKG at that time so I am not aware of what had happened but there was no ticket ready for me. My relations with CX were good so I explained my case to a traffic supervisor who said : "No problem, wait for 15 minutes and go to the connecting desk downstairs, your pass will be ready". I did so. The employee there was a trainee. She was communicating with another office through the intercom system and I could hear half of the conversation. Obviously she had some problem but as the discussion was mostly in Cantonese I could not understand exactly what the problem was. Anyway my ticket HKG/SEL/HKG/BKK was completed and she gave me the boarding card.

My negotiations with the Korean MOC went on well and two days later I was returning to Bangkok. The Seoul immigration officer was not speaking much English. He tried to say something in Korean but I could not understand it so he handed me my passport with a smile and let me go. Passing through HKG I had already my boarding card ready from SEL so I pursue my journey to BKK without problem.

The Thai customs in the old days used to have the incoming passenger list and was pointing every one on it, probably to ensure that no one had skipped the luggage control. But on that day the officer could not find my name on the list so he added my name on it.

In the taxi from Don Muang airport to home I was thinking of these small incidents. I opened my briefcase and looked at my ticket. It was written in the name of "Mr F. Stop". In other words I have been travelling on three different flights under the name of Mr Full Stop without any serious problem.

**end of part one**