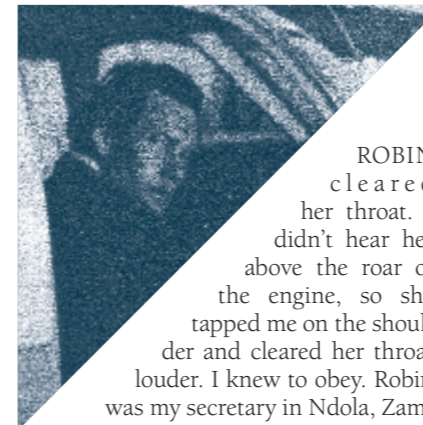


WHAT I WAS TRYING TO SAY WAS...

Anthony Preston on how those little misunderstandings can lead to a girlfriend getting her knickers in a twist, and your flying instructor trying to strangle you



ROBIN cleared her throat. I didn't hear her above the roar of the engine, so she tapped me on the shoulder and cleared her throat louder. I knew to obey. Robin was my secretary in Ndola, Zambia, where I worked for Kent Instruments, and absolute obedience was demanded.

We were flying from Nairobi, Wilson, to the Mnarani Club on Kilifi Creek, between Mombasa and Malindi. Perhaps unwisely, I had invited her along on one of my twice-yearly business trips to East Africa. She was both secretary and lover.

Robin was in the back seat and a friend, Michael Airy, in the co-pilot's seat of the Mooney Super 21, a fast, low-wing monoplane, speeding across inhospitable bush. She declared an urgent interest in a comfort break. There were no facilities on board.

We'd find a strip in a clearing, descend, check it out and reject it – potholes, resident baboons, towering anthills. By the time we reached Mnarani the poor girl was desperate.

The airfield at Kilifi allows you to taxi

up to the front door of the club. But with no time for niceties we stopped at the intersection of the two grass runways and bustled her out to squat under the tail.

The arrival of an aeroplane at Kilifi is a rare and wonderful thing. Even as you touch down the locals, with their dogs, hens, pigs and kids, come rushing in from all directions, shrieking with delight.

“We had, for the moment, forgotten the young lady under the tail answering a call of nature. With a burst of power the Mooney leapt forward, bowling the hapless Robin, rolling like tumbleweed, into the path of the fast encroaching army”

It was at this point that we kind of lost our heads. In a moment of lapsed concentration Michael and I agreed that we should turn the Mooney around to face in the direction of the hotel before being surrounded by a horde of excited locals and their livestock. We had actually, for the moment, forgotten the young lady under the tail with knickers around her knees.

With a burst of power the Mooney leapt forward, bowling the hapless Robin, rolling like tumbleweed, into the path of the fast encroaching army.

As a result, despite the undeniable attractions of the exclusive Mnarani Club, communications between pilot and secretary suffered.

TO ROLL OR TO FLICK?

Failure of communication, from poor radio comms and radio navigation to misunderstandings in conversation, is often the cause of grief. Human error is to blame in most air accidents: some failure in communication at root.

Take Chetwynd as another example. RAF Ternhill in 1956 was one of Flying Training Command's *ab initio* stations where recruits spent 120 flying hours, over 10 months, taming the Hunting-Perceival Piston Provost. Engined with a lusty Alvis Leonides radial nine of 550hp, the Provost was a delight to fly.

RAF Ternhill in Shropshire was a classic military aerodrome with a long tarmac runway that could become very busy when a number of flights flew circuits. On these days a designated flight might be relocated to nearby Chetwynd to ease congestion.

Chetwynd was a large, open field of smoothly mown grass. It had no permanent runways, so our instructors marked out the day's runway in use with parallel rows of movable white markers between ▷

▷ which you were encouraged to take off and land.

Early in the morning the black-and-white chequered ATC van would arrive from Ternhill through the wooden gate, like some mobile chessboard, and park in the middle of the bright green field, its first duty to supply mugs of filthy tea.

In the event of a change in wind direction the instructors, their charges aloft and alone, sped out from the chequered van and, by means of much bellowing and arm-waving, realigned the markers. On such occasions one instructor at least, exhibiting a surprising level of intelligence, would remain aloft. The ritual required that he buzzed his colleagues in an attempt to decapitate the slow and unwary as they pranced about the meadow.

The failure to observe an actual decapitation was compensated for by the pleasure of seeing our deified masters flung to the ground. A bonus was the probability that the runway would be bordered by distinctly wavy edges, thus providing the astute pupil with a plausible explanation for a wiggly take-off run.

It was my second or third solo flight on a sun-soaked, spring day, early afternoon. We were doing circuits and bumps.

The wind had changed; a new runway direction was required. A message came over the radio:

“Aircraft in the Chetwynd circuit – Orbit – Over.”

“What did they mean by ‘orbit’? I hadn’t the faintest idea, so I decided to gain height while I thought about it”

“Wilco!” we cheerfully replied, using our call signs. Mine was Charlie Mike. I said Wilco confidently as I knew it was the right thing to say. We’d been taught R/T procedure. But Orbit wasn’t one of the words included; serious space exploration lay in the future.

What did they mean by orbit? I hadn’t the faintest idea. It sounded like rocket science. So I decided to gain height while I thought about it.

Having gained altitude I naturally thought it a pity to waste it. Thinking back to Nacton and aerobatics with Stan Ward in the Tiger Moth, I decided to see what the Provost could do. After a quick look around, in case others had the same idea,



The Provost was a joy: “I had not previously flown an aeroplane that continued to deliver power when upside-down”

I tried a couple of loops. They were not right: too tight at the top. Then I followed with a slow roll to the left. It was a joy; I had not previously flown an aeroplane that continued to deliver power when upside-down.

After a few stall-turns, better described as wingovers, I tackled a roll off the top. How obediently and briskly it rolled out! Tried it again. Same thing.

Eventually the new runway direction was marked out. A crisp voice came over the R/T:

“Orbiting aircraft Chetwynd, return to field and land as instructed – Over.”

As I wound back the cockpit canopy after landing, I was surprised to find a fuming Flt Lt Mulholland, my instructor, his delicate white fingers groping at my throat. Apparently it wasn’t so much the unscheduled aerobatics themselves, but the way in which they were being executed that had enraged this otherwise placid Irishman. From the large, lawn-like expanse of Chetwynd, a group of experienced aviators, Mulholland included, had instinctively grouped together to look up at one of their prized Provosts being abused in incompetent hands.

What Preston, aka Charlie Mike, had been calling rolls off the top were revealed to the experienced eye as inadvertent flick rolls from which they were anxiously awaiting the inevitable spin and pat-a-poum into the treasured turf of Chetwynd. Oh, the unsightly brown stain.

Hauled from the relative safety of the cockpit, I crouched in the kind of deferential bow that goes with the plucking of the forelock, tucked, as it happens, under the shelter of the RAF-issue bone dome. It wasn’t, on this occasion, so much a matter of deference as the nearest I could get to upright wearing a parachute pack de-

signed for a seated position. I was subjected to the kind of verbal abuse known only to the Irish and the criminally insane.

“What did you think you were doing?” he screamed.

“Orbiting?”

“No, fool, that last manoeuvre?”

“Oh!” brightly, “it’s called a roll off the top or Immelmann.”

The normally pale Mulholland went puce, becoming positively apoplectic:

“Ha! That’s what you think! You were flicking out at the top! Flicking, you flicking idiot!”

“Now,” says the towering figure of Mulholland to the bent and trembling figure beneath him, “you horrible little maggot, you’ll run around the airfield... twice!”

I went to hit the disc to release the parachute harness.

“No, no, you miserable object, that stays on.”

Sitting in the pilot’s seat in the harness was uncomfortable enough, the crotch straps and certain private parts never seeming to accommodate each other. Standing was hell, but running... I used to claim my feelings for the opposite sex took a dive after the event, but that could have been due to other things.

Mulholland stopped me with a grin after a few dozen yards. That grin said an awful lot.

On this occasion the failure of communication was mainly due to my poor vocabulary, but I should have queried the meaning, shouldn’t I?

As often as it’s a misunderstanding, it’s a failure to declare your ignorance among peers. There is a special reticence where R/T is concerned: communication between pilot and air traffic controller is governed by an inexplicable fear of the latter by the former.

Happily, at Chetwynd there was no accident, but there easily could have been. Mulholland’s fury was justified. In a properly executed roll off the top, a half loop is initiated and, when the aircraft reaches the top, inverted, it completes the second half of a slow roll, having gained height and a 180° change of direction; a useful manoeuvre in combat.

Mulholland had been musing upon the big difference between a roll and a flick roll; what the Americans refer to as a snap roll. In the latter the aircraft is no longer flying properly; the wings are stalled, one more than the other. The condition is the same as in a spin, but horizontal, not vertical.

My recovery, on both attempts, must have been something of a fluke. He wasn’t to know I’m into flukes.

ZAMBIA

Sometimes you can work a failure in communication to your advantage, especially if flukes are your thing.

In 1966, the year of UDI (unilateral declaration of independence), I left Rhodesia to take up the post of branch manager for Kent Instruments in Zambia. The move to Ndola on the Zambian Copper Belt represented a decline in flying facilities. The clubhouse, situated in a corner of the International Airport (ha!), was small, dark and lacking in character.

The club operated a couple of tired Cherokee 140s. During the UDI fiasco, days were punctuated by the regular, up to four or five a day, C-130 Hercules flights, freighting fuel from Beira in Mozambique to overcome the embargo imposed by Ian Smith’s Rhodesian government. The sound of their engines burning up UK Government fuel seemed incessant, could be heard for miles around, and became a significant feature of Ndola life.

Our main customer was NCCM (Nchanga Consolidated Copper Mines) in Kitwe. A very straight but narrow tarmac road, bordered by plain trees for most of its 35 miles, ran between the two towns. The Kitwe-Ndola road simplified navigation in the air and provided a useful landmark if lost.

The wise pilot would simply fly, at a sensible height, from departure to destination, keeping the feature on his left.

The transfer from Rhodesia to Zambia necessitated a validation of my foreign licence, which was down in Lusaka in the hands of the local equivalent of the British CAA. I couldn’t instruct until the update came through, so in the meantime I would

occasionally take up one of the Cherokees to keep my hand in, executing a few modest circuits and bumps on the long tarmac runway at Ndola, the thresholds of which were completely blackened by the burnt rubber off the mighty Hercules and the venerable Gloster Javelin.

Camouflaged in the classic greens in cumuloform, to help the Rhodesian Hunters pick them out against the shades of yellow of the bundu, the Javelins had been sent by the British Government, in its wisdom, to terrorize the Rhodesians into abandoning their errant ways – an anachronistic, sword-rattling gesture that fooled no one.

Upon the day in question I had decided to take up a Piper Cherokee 140 from the Ndola Flying Club, where I was an instructor and, instead of flying touch-and-goes on the circuit, do a cross-country flight, choosing Kitwe as the destination in order to minimize any challenge to navigational skills.

As I sat in the diminutive Cherokee, making radio calls to the tower and preparing to taxi, I watched in disbelief as RAF maintenance crew strutted about on the sturdy delta wings of the Javelins wearing hobnailed boots.

The Gloster delta was splendidly noisy – full of sound and fury, signifying nothing – and an unusual enough shape in the sky to attract attention. However, the aeroplane enthusiast with a taste for aerobatics was invariably disappointed since

the dear old flying machine had reached that inevitable stage of senility where anything more exuberant than a rate-one turn was undertaken in jeopardy.

On the apron at Ndola, waiting for clearance, I speculated dreamily, that hot afternoon, on what would have happened had the Javelin been called into combat with the Hawker Hunters of the Rhodesian Air Force. Javelin delta wings would have become landmarks scattered about the Chirundu valley like shark fins in a tropical sea.

“I watched in disbelief as RAF maintenance crew strutted about on the sturdy delta wings of the Javelins wearing hobnailed boots”

Fortunately this never came about and it seemed at one time that the aircraft was to discover a new lease of life in a civilian role, in which it could refute the scorn heaped upon it by well-informed and arrogant Rhodesians. An enterprising young Zambian politician in Government House proposed that once their military purpose, such as it was, was exhausted, they should be acquired and converted for crop-spraying. ▷



The splendidly noisy Gloster Javelin

▷ Having got clearance and airborne, I picked up the road where it passed the threshold of 07 runway and set off for Kitwe.

People, they say, are either literate or numerate. If it's true, I fall into the literate, having an affection for words and a profound dislike for numbers, which accounts for my low regard for my ability as a navigator. DR, or dead reckoning, calls for mental arithmetic.

Although I can recall only once having been totally lost, I execute each cross-country flight rather in the way of a third-rate boxer who enters the ring speculating not on how he's going to floor his opponent but on how he's going to look the following day with a black eye and broken nose, on which ropes he'll fly through and whether he's going to land on the lap of the pretty blonde in the third row.

The need for a line feature like the road becomes evident. I reasoned that the closer to it I flew, the less likely I was to get lost, physical being more reliable than visual contact. The thought being father to the deed, I descended and pursued my cross-country flight if not exactly in contact with the road, at least in very close proximity to it.

This precaution, no doubt wise from a navigation point of view, had its drawbacks, not least of which was the fact that the road was also occasionally occupied by four-wheel vehicles.

The problem was not so much with cars travelling from Ndola to Kitwe but with those travelling from Kitwe to Ndola. With the former it was possible to believe small children looking back from the rear of a station-wagon, evidenced by cheerful waves as I overtook, derived some measure of entertainment. No, it was those heading south, from Kitwe to Ndola, to whom I should have been paying more regard.

Seeing a small aircraft heading straight at them, they could be forgiven for thinking that it was experiencing an emergency and intended to land. Irresponsibility of this sort demands explanation and I intend to address the issue next month, when I try in vain to explain how I somehow ended up in front of the CAA.

And then in court. □



"I decided to take up a Piper Cherokee"