



A bruncle with nine lives!

The dust was still coming back to earth as we scrambled from the wreckage. There was a discord of voices in panic. People lurched from the mangled, still-smoking mess of a car and hugged each other, thanking *The Almighty* and whoever else was in earshot, for the fortunate continuation of their lives. I had struggled in an upside-down fashion to release myself from the seatbelt, then crawled through the shattered glass window, to safety. Bleeding and in shock, I was otherwise okay.

It was a balmy summer's afternoon in the tea growing hills bordering Rift Valley Kenya. A few minutes earlier, those same eight people – taking up three rows of seats in a chocolate-coloured *speed taxi* - had been chatting and dozing as we raced on towards Nairobi. Then out of the blue, a slumber-jolting bang! A tyre had blown; the car out of control. I watched from the centre-left seat, as the driver fought valiantly with the steering, but the car won the battle, parting company with the tarmac and moving slowly

into a graceful barrel roll, or so it always seems now, looking back with the benefit of glorious technicolour hindsight.

Those few moments changed bliss into nightmare, anticipation to despair. My previous Houdini-style escapes from the jaws of death, to that point in time, numbered two. Was this rapidly developing disaster in Kenya, going to be my third time-lucky ... or unlucky. As the car soared gracefully into the air, I remember this morbid thought flashing across my fertile mind. Could it be the last few seconds of my earthly existence, paradoxically in striking distance of where humankind was thought to have begun, and where I might now be destined to die.

About three decades before that impending catastrophe in Kenya, my first approach to the pearly gates had been foiled when a gallant young man plucked me from the Australian surf, just before I disappeared under the swell. I was not a good swimmer; in truth *'I couldn't swim to save myself'* (as by coincidence the saying goes) ... and truth as we all know, will sometimes out.

The plastic airbed I was half-dozing on had secretly contrived to drift away from the beach and into deep water. In fact, it may not have been very deep water, but it was certainly deeper than me, which caused panic to set in as I stepped off the bed expecting to set foot on firm sand, or something similar.

Ever since then I have this image imprinted on my brain, of looking across the surface of the water to a few very distant figures on the beach, in the hot noon-day sun. Slivers of their voices carried to me: intermittent sounds floating across the water. Immediately I was faced with a choice: whether to strike out into even deeper water - to catch up with the airbed which had somehow made its escape and was swiftly drifting seaward - or to forget that and try for the safety of shallower water and the beach. Instead I did neither. Panic set in, and I raised my arms, yelling out in desperation to all those I couldn't see; a vain hope it would seem to any bird that happened to be circling above, looking down on the frantic scene.

But then, just when it seemed I was going under for a second or perhaps third time, and beginning to take in an unhealthy amount of seawater, I spotted a lone figure swimming towards me. It took perhaps ten or fifteen seconds, but I recall it seeming like forever until the guy pulled alongside and put his arm under mine, to stop me heading down for what was in all likelihood, my final underwater adventure. I remember him telling me to hang on to his shoulders as he struck out for the shore.

Now, I am six feet tall, and I would guess my thirteen stones must have hung from his neck as if they were, just that: stones ...made of lead! So it was no mean feat for this man, who appeared out of nowhere, to get me back to the beach. The fact that he was there, in the vicinity at the time and such a strong swimmer, undoubtedly saved my life.

He dropped me on the sandy shore, took my pulse and checked I was still breathing, then took off, back along the beach, back to where he had come from... the wide blue yonder. I can still see him running away from me and will never be able to thank him, but will always be indebted to that young man, as I am positive that if he had not responded to my desperate signals, I would have been written up in the next day's Melbourne Age newspaper, as yet another incompetent victim of the Australian surf.

The funny thing was that as I lay there on the beach - breathing hard and blowing seawater like a beached whale - I remember passers-by chastising me as yet another young hooligan; implying that I had drunk too many beers, or inhaled too much marijuana, then put my rescuer's life in danger because of it. But in truth it had been sheer carelessness on my part - nothing to do with drink or drugs - which had endangered my own life and that of my courageous rescuer. In hindsight it seemed a harsh conclusion for them to reach; for even I did not get legless before noon. But it did indeed emphasise the fact that before tempting fate, and launching out into the Australian surf once more, I should learn to swim properly ... and soon!

I shrugged it off, picked myself up and headed over the sand dunes for lunch. I told no-one the story for many years, but the event has re-visited my consciousness a thousand

times since the day it happened. Sheer luck and the cold fact that a strong swimmer was there, in close proximity to me, had saved me from a particularly watery grave.

A few years later, water again could have been my nemesis, but this time, the problem stemmed from gross negligence in the air. In those days my work took me to faraway places in rural Australia, and at times the commute was by small, four or six-seater aircraft. In the majority of cases it was nearly always very much routine stuff, and quite safe. However, it is always worth remembering that with a single-engine aircraft you are totally at the mercy of the internal combustion engine, which in turn drives the one-and-only propeller. It perhaps goes without saying that the ability of both to continue to function is what keeps the plane afloat. In short, if your faithful old engine dies in mid-air, then it becomes an extremely serious – and potentially fatal - problem.

I had formed an undaunted trust in air travel and the thought that my complete faith in a machine might be slightly flawed, did not occur to me until the day I was returning with colleagues from a working stint in the Far West of South Australia. Our pilot, also a co-worker, was by profession a *micro-biological scientist*. On this day he was masquerading as a pilot and seemed intent on proving this point by unnerving both myself and four other workmates, as we flew homeward to the state capital, Adelaide.

Following two failed landing attempts at an airfield a little earlier (for which our pilot blamed unpredictable crosswinds), he had finally grounded and refuelled the plane. After that we were off again, heading for home at the end of our working week; myself and the others settling down for a bit of a snooze on the projected ninety-minute journey. The twice-aborted landing was already a fading memory.

At the time of the incident we were about halfway across a thirty-mile stretch of water known as Spencer's Gulf. The low-wing *Piper Cherokee*, a six-seater, had large wrap-over windows and was pleasantly warm, meaning that the early conversations soon after take-off, had now subsided as people dozed, content to leave all the action to the guy in the hot seat, with the drone of the engine - a comforting almost soporific sound – the backdrop to their slumbers. As we reached the centre of this expanse of water and with

land on the East side of The Gulf emerging from the horizon of the sea, most of us on board the plane were asleep, or at least half-asleep.

But suddenly that monotonous drone of the engine was broken: the motor coughed and spluttered two or three times, then became silent. Within seconds everyone was wide-awake. Silence in this case was a numbing sound. Then, as if to make it obvious we were now moving ahead in glide form, rather than powered mode, the feint circle cut by the whirring propeller was there no more, and the form of the black, twin-bladed prop., became visible as it slowed to a standstill.

I was seated in the middle row, but had full view across to the pilot, and was immediately alarmed to watch him pushing and pulling a whole variety of button controls, offering up the distinct feeling that he had no idea what had caused the problem. To make matters worse, I suddenly remembered we were flying at a relatively low height. A short time before, I had listened as the pilot received clearance from Air Traffic Control in Adelaide, to fly just under a low cloudbank, at around 1,500 feet above the sea.

So, there we were, fifteen miles from nearest landfall, and fifteen hundred feet up, inside what had now become a rather heavy glider. It was well known that light aircraft could descend gracefully to earth without power - pilots had to handle this as part of their training - but in this case the equation of our height above sea level and the required glide distance to land, just did not add up. There was no way we could make landfall.

As an added bonus, we were flying above shark-infested seas: waters which were the notorious home of the infamous *Great White Shark*, a sea creature well known for its formidable size and ferociousness, and an innate ability to be able to tear a human torso apart at the seams!

The drone of the engine was replaced now, by a new sound, not silence, but the ever-increasing noise of air rushing over the plane's fuselage and wings, as our craft began to lose height, and in unison we all rushed with accelerating speed towards the waves, which lay in wait not far below. This mode of swiftly intensifying descent probably only lasted for perhaps twenty seconds or so, but at the time it seemed like an eternity.

Peering through the window to view the vista that was coming to meet us, I remember a very inhospitable environment: a foreboding dark frothy green, turbulent swell. As the waves rushed across our bow, the sea seemed to be beckoning us into its depths. Whether or not those waves concealed the great white shark, or any other shark for that matter, was more-or-less immaterial. It looked like a particularly nasty way to go.

Then the most divine sound descended from the heavens! The engine coughed again, as it had done before, but this time struggling back into life, rather than dying an untimely death. In all his frantic efforts the pilot had with mere seconds to spare, somehow managed to discover the remedy for impending tragedy. We skimmed across the choppy seas, then headed up, up, and away from our watery grave, powering back to our rightful position, under those ever-so-friendly, cotton-wool clouds.

For what remained of our journey, hardly a word was spoken by anyone ... even the pilot. We were all in a state of shock. The pilot's brief explanation was that he had forgotten to switch over to the second fuel tank in the starboard wing. In short, we had simply run out of fuel: not too much of a problem in your limo on the ground, but in mid-air and over choppy shark-infested seas, it becomes a completely different issue, where lives can easily be lost. We can only be thankful that he – I think more by chance, than good management – was fortunate enough to hit the right button, so that fuel started to flow again, thus escaping certain catastrophe by the narrowest of margins.

Having reconstructed that incident a multitude of times, since it happened all those years ago, I can never get rid of the thought that a few seconds more delay, or an airlock in the pipes, would have without doubt consigned us to the depths. Ever since that day I have never again flown in a single engine aircraft. Good luck to all those that do, but for me it suddenly became an unnecessary risk that I was not prepared to take.

So considering that this momentous *incident-in-the-air* was forever after on my mind, perhaps I should have reflected on that decision never again to climb on board a small plane in Australia, before I went to step aboard any form of land transport in Africa. This steers me neatly back to where I started this death-defying chapter, when - if you recall -

I was heading off the road in an alarming airborne trajectory, while travelling through hills West of the Great Rift Valley.

“*Jesus Christ*” I cried: on reflection probably not the best choice of profanity to utter, when surrounded by God-fearing Kenyans. But from where I sat on the middle-left seat of this Peugeot 504, I could see the driver had a serious problem as he struggled with the steering wheel: and from my personal view, enough of a problem to warrant my untimely indiscretion.

Local newspapers abounded with stories of death and carnage on the country’s roads, caused in the main by three rather crucial factors: bad roads, poor cars and even worse drivers. But for some implausible reason I seemed to consider myself immune to death by car in Africa, and just as my mind was so quickly focused many years before, by the fast-approaching waves of Spencer’s Gulf in *the land down under*, the folly of my misplaced belief in the safety of African travel came into the spotlight, as our vehicle soared off the road and into the air in Kenya.

Fortunately Jesus Christ heard my plea, or at least I hope my fellow passengers saw it that way. Our car for the journey – living up to its name of speed taxi and now transformed into an airborne projectile - only managed half of one barrel roll (a term borrowed appropriately from fighter pilot parlance) before coming back to earth on its roof, with one thunderous crash! The effect was to crumple the body, shatter all the glass and compress what was, the upper section of the vehicle, to about half its former height. The car had not slammed into a tree or rolled down a hillside, it had just come to earth with one earth shattering din and a whole lot of dust, in a wide and grassy gully, probably a metre or so below the level of the highway.

It is amazing how disoriented one becomes in such a situation. Upside down and with arms and legs everywhere (both your own and other people’s), it takes a little time to identify with the re-positioned world around. But considering the fate that had just befallen us, there was remarkable calm amongst my fellow passengers, plus the driver

and luggage, all squeezed into relatively small confines. Maybe it is part of the African psyche to withstand traumatic events with aplomb; God knows, they are used to them.

I was certainly making more noise than most, scrambling as quickly as possible to find the nearest way out of what I could see was fast becoming and incredibly risky situation. My best and quickest exit turned out to be a much-diminished window space, garlanded by cut glass, which I slid through with some difficulty, suffering scratching and bruising of shoulders, arms and legs, in my haste. It was those thoughts of a petrol-fuelled explosion which made me hurry: an alarming concern that what was now just a disfigured metal box, with four wheels still spinning on the top, could suddenly become an inferno of flames, in this otherwise calm African setting. That was what most frightened me. The thought of death by fire will probably be the preferred choice for my final exit, but at the time in question I was petrified that my ashes would be scraped up, from what promised to be a roadside conflagration!

Minutes after the crash, my friend and I sat on a nearby grassy knoll. We were surrounded by a crowd of people that was rapidly gaining football ground proportions. They stared at us, emitting a constant chatter in the local language of the Kalingen community, none of which I understood. Some of those closest to us – with ringside seats as it were - even pinched and pulled our skin, perhaps to check whether we were still alive. They could see the wreck of crumpled metal that lay just a few metres away, and perhaps they were right, by the look of that mess, with the dust still settling, we should indeed have all been dead.

I motored past the site of that crash many times in later years, and on a couple of occasions even stopped to check out the scene more carefully. Of course the car itself soon disappeared; sold for scrap metal I guess, it was way past any thoughts of repair. But the place remained the same, just outside the town where my friend and I had been taken by a passing bus, to the local hospital.

In hindsight, perhaps the most alarming fact was not *how*, but *where* the crash happened, or where it did *not* happen, to be more precise. The incident occurred on a

straight flat, tree-less stretch of road, but on closer inspection, just a few hundred metres on from where the car had parted company with the tarmac, either side of the road was dotted with big sturdy trees and the land beyond descended down precipitous slopes. So one can only assume, if it had happened a few seconds after the actual event, we would have either slammed into a massive tree trunk, or if spared that fate, rolled like a barrel, to land at the bottom of a steep valley. A sobering thought, if ever there was one, and not dissimilar to the fate that could have been, were it not for last minute rescue from death by drowning in Australia.

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So, there it was: death survived by the proverbial skin of one's teeth, not just once, but three times, and on two different continents. Thus I am now able to boast that I have narrowly escaped premature departure from this earth by water, in the air, and on land. Not many people could brag about such a fascinating achievement. Since these three near-death episodes, I've had a number of other narrow escapes, but they all came later and perhaps were not as clear cut, in terms of being '*All be it for the Grace of God*' occurrences; although I must admit that being there, inside *Westgate Mall*, Nairobi, when Al-Shabaab came calling on the 21st of September 2013, was good enough to warrant a chapter all of its own. (see Chapter '*A Shopping Experience*').

In retrospect, one of the most intriguing aspects of these events, is the way in which they are forever in memory: traumatic happenings I can only assume, have a similar effect for everyone. I don't remember most of what I did yesterday, but only have to visit the beach, or spot a small plane in the air, or drive at speed along any road in any place, and the appropriate trauma comes racing back into my mind.

It makes me wonder whether these are simply markers, pointing towards a lottery for my final demise. Are they there to indicate that in the end it will be a violent strike that claims my soul? And do other people have comparable experiences, or are mine just a touch extraordinary? I guess we all have similar thoughts, as we progress through life.

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