

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Don’t tell me that you know anything, tell me what you believe; what you have are opinions, not facts. If I want you to think I’ll have a brain installed; in the meantime just do what I tell you to do.”

John Peters

Live tropical fish are shipped in a plastic bag filled with water; before the open end of the bag is sealed pure oxygen is pumped into the open space above the water, and then the bag is put into a cardboard box. Each box of packed fish usually weighs ten pounds, and may hold as few as one fish or as many as 1,100, depending upon the type and size of the fish. My B 25 bombers could legally carry as much as 12,000 pounds of cargo, but because of space restrictions we could carry only 450 boxes of fish; simply did not have room for more, and even with that number of boxes the plane would be filled from the nose to the tail, making it difficult to get into or out of the cockpit.

At about midnight I was sitting at a table on the porch of a small wooden building located next to the edge of the parking ramp on Atkinson Field, near Georgetown, British Guyana, South America; the bomber was parked only a few feet away from where I was sitting, and George Bergin was loading it with boxes of fish. There were three other people sitting with me, a Chinese fish dealer named Chung, his wife and Bill Hetrick. When the plane was loaded we intended to depart for Miami, taking Madam Chung along as a passenger; and since there was no seat for her on the plane she would have to sit on the floor of the cockpit.

Enroute to Miami we planned a stop for fuel in Ciudad Trujillo, in the Dominican Republic, which turned out to be a very poor choice since a revolution had just broken out there; but of course we knew nothing about that until we got there. Madam Chung would ride with us only in order to save the price of an airline ticket; but somewhat later was undoubtedly wishing that she had gone by airline, and I am sure that what followed was a trip that she will never forget.

The bombers had two very large main wheels and one nose wheel, and when properly loaded the center of balance was supposed to be just in front of the two main wheels, with very little weight on the nose wheel; so loading the plane had to be carried out in a certain order, if too much weight was put into the rear of the fuselage the plane might fall onto its tail. To prevent that from happening you were supposed to put a steel pipe underneath the tail, and we carried such a pipe on the plane.

But, of course, George forgot to use it. WHAM! When I turned around to see what had happened, George was hanging out of a hatch in the side of the plane with a box of fish in his hands; and the plane was sitting on its tail with the nose wheel high in the air. George had started loading the plane from the tail instead of following the proper procedure.

Falling on its tail like that will sometimes damage a big airplane so much that it cannot be repaired, has to be junked; but the bombers were built very strongly and no damage was caused to anything apart from George’s pride. Although the tail missed hitting a truck that was parked beneath it by only about an inch, and also barely missed hitting several other men who had been handing fish boxes up to George in the plane.

So he was dumb; but he was also lucky.

The engines on the plane were enormous, and very loud; they had short exhaust stacks and that made them much louder than usual, and since they were located right alongside of the cockpit you were exposed to so much noise that conversation had to be conducted at a shout; and because even shouting did not always work we had a series of hand signals that we used for communication with the copilot. Some people exposed to the sound level in the cockpit would start bleeding from their ears, and would always be practically stone deaf after a flight; my left ear, which was closest to the source of the noise, was simply destroyed by flying those planes.

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When I started to taxi out for a takeoff, Hetrick said something to me that I could not understand because of the engine noise; which irritated him, so he slammed on the brakes, and then it probably appeared to Madam Chung that we were having a fist fight, and I'm sure that did not do much in the way of increasing her confidence.

Normally we would have followed a different route, would have landed in San Juan, Puerto Rico, for fuel, but there was a large hurricane moving into the area from the east and we had to fly a different route in order to avoid it, although we did fly along the edge of it for about a hundred miles.

Our clearance from Ocean Control extended only to a certain point, and we were supposed to call in on a different radio frequency when we reached that point in order to get our flight clearance extended; but when we got to that point we found that we could then reach nobody on the radio, so I had to go into a holding pattern, flying around in circles while George was trying to fix the radio.

But while he was scrabbling around on the floor of the cockpit, looking for tools, George accidentally pulled the handle that caused our liferaft to start inflating; fully inflated that raft was far larger than the cockpit, and if he could not deflate it we would be pushed right out through the windshield. As it started expanding with compressed air from a bottle of air, it looked like some giant monster from a horror movie, and it scared the shit out of George. I started screaming at him to deflate it, and he said . . . "Deflate it with what?"

And I said . . . "Your teeth if you have to; bite it."

And he tried that, but it didn't work because the raft was made from very thick and strong rubber; but eventually he found a screwdriver and then started poking holes in the raft with that; poked nearly a hundred holes in it, thereby ruining a raft that cost several thousand dollars. None of which escaped Madam Chung's attention, of course.

But we eventually got the radio fixed, made contact with another traffic controller and got our clearance extended as far as the Ciudad Trujillo airport. But when we got there they told us that we could not land, that the airport was closed to all traffic; but gave us no explanation. The man that I talked to on the radio could speak only Spanish, and that should have provided me with a warning that something was wrong, because the international flight rules require that only English can be used on the radio.

Secondly, every time I asked him a question he made me wait for a reply, would go away from the microphone for a couple of minutes between my question and his response to it. The actual control tower operator was tied hand and foot with a dirty sock shoved in his mouth, and the guy talking to me was a rebel soldier who had to keep running back and forth between the microphone and the real tower operator in order to answer my questions. Which, of course, I was unaware of until later.

So when the guy on the radio told me that we could not land, I asked him . . . "Well, since we cannot land, do you have any suggestions about where we should crash? How about the main street of town? That would put us close to the fire station."

Finally he told me that we were cleared to land on runway 54, which does not exist on any airport in the world. The number used to identify a particular runway is based upon your heading as you approach for a landing; if, for example, your heading was straight south, or 180 degrees, then the runway would be called 18. You always add a zero to the end of the runway number.

So I told him . . . "Look, I have been around and around over the airport about ten times, and I can't seem to find runway 54; besides, my compass only has 360 degrees, not 540 degrees. So would you be good enough to go out on the tarmac and point towards runway 54."

Meantime, we were laughing like crazy, considered the whole thing to be some kind of a joke.

Finally, he told us to land on runway 34; he obviously had misunderstood the real tower operator's instructions, since he probably couldn't speak very plainly with a sock in his mouth.

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So we landed, and as we were rolling to a stop on the runway, George pointed out the window and said . . . “Look, war games.”

War games Hell, it was a war. Heavy machineguns were mounted on sand bags on both sides of the runway, and the place was swarming with armed rebels. They had seized control of the airport and were still fighting in the city.

Starting or stopping a large airplane engine requires the use of certain procedures; if not done properly the engines may be damaged, perhaps ruined. But with dozens of people screaming at me and pointing machineguns at me, I did not take the time to follow the normal shutdown procedures.

It was daylight by then and I knew that the fish would all be quickly killed by the heat inside the airplane if it remained parked out in the sun; but eventually I was able to borrow an airconditioning machine from the agent who represented Pan American Airlines there, and also got a full load of fuel from him. But the cold-air machine that he loaned me was far too large for my airplane, was designed for cooling a plane about ten times the size of mine; so it then appeared that we had two options, either boiled fish or frozen fish. The load of fish was worth \$50,000.00 and I could not afford to lose that much; if the fish died I would be in deep shit.

So, sitting on a wooden bench in front of the control tower about an hour later, I was approached by a man wearing a military uniform and with a pilot's wings on his shirt. He asked me, in Spanish, if I was the captain of the bomber; and when I told him that I was, he told me that he was also a pilot, and that he had learned to fly in the United States during the war, was trained by the U. S. Navy.

So I asked him where he got his flight training, and when. And he said that he was trained in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1944. So then I asked him who his instructor had been, and it turned out that his flight instructor was my sister's husband, Russ Langelly.

So he looked at me for a moment and then asked me if I wanted to get out of there; and when I told him that I certainly did, he told me to wait and walked into the control tower. When he came back he had an older man with him; a man wearing a civilian suit but without a tie, who had a pistol in his belt, a machinegun in his hand and a cigar in his mouth. The older man never spoke to me, looked back and forth from me towards the plane, and then made a gesture with his hand indicating that I could leave. So we left; and I learned later that ours was the only airplane that was allowed to depart that day.

Again I did not go through normal engine procedures, was far too anxious to get going before somebody changed his mind about letting us go; started both engines as quickly as possible and started my takeoff run from where we were parked, using the taxi strip for a runway, then went screaming off across town only a few feet above the roofs of buildings. When we eventually got back to Picayune, Mississippi, where I was keeping my bombers, I dropped both of those engines off onto the ground and replaced them with new engines; assuming that both engines had been ruined by a lack of normal procedures. And they probably had been ruined, ran very roughly for the first couple of hours after we departed; but at least they continued running long enough to get us home.

We did not file a flight plan and were unable to get any information about the weather in Miami. As I was leaving, I told the man in the tower . . . “Gracias, adios y bueno suerte.” Thanks, goodbye and good luck.

What we did not even suspect was the fact that Miami was under attack from an enormous hurricane, but we learned about that only when we made radio contact with the Miami airport as we approached the coast. In those days, for instrument landings, so-called ‘blind’ landings, they used a procedure called a precision approach; a procedure still being used by military pilots in this country but one that is no longer used for civilian planes.

During the final stages of the approach the pilot never speaks on the radio, but the man directing the approach from the ground speaks continuously, nonstop instructions; if you fail to hear from him for five seconds or longer you have to abort the approach, on the assumption that radio failure has occurred.

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The wind on the ground was blowing in excess of 125 miles an hour, with gusts sometimes exceeding 200 miles an hour, the ceiling was about fifty feet high and it was raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock, and had turned cold. I could see literally nothing through the windshield, had to fly strictly by instruments; but the airplane was bouncing around so violently that it was very difficult to even read the instruments.

Which conditions were the reason for the precision approach. The man in the tower was monitoring my altitude and position, and my speed over the ground, on radar. So I really did not need the instruments. He would say . . . “Turn left, now stop turning. Now turn left again.” And so on.

The wind was blowing directly from the north, but I was forced to land towards the east, so the wind kept causing me to drift off to the south side of the runway. I was trying to land on runway 9 left, one of two parallel runways about a mile apart; the other one being runway 9 right.

The wind from the north was so strong that I could not keep lined up with my runway; finally, then down to less than a hundred feet above the ground and about half a mile short of the runway, I asked the tower operator . . . “Is runway 9 right clear?” And when he said that it was, I told him that I would use that, and he then cleared me to do so.

But landing in such a strong crosswind is very difficult; in order to stay on the runway after I touched down, I had to land nearly a hundred miles an hour faster than a normal landing speed. Then put only the left wheel on the ground and tried to drag the left wingtip on the runway; I used up more than a mile of runway before putting both main wheels on the ground.

Just before starting that approach the tower operator appeared to be concerned about the fact that I was flying a bomber, and then told me that Customs agents were waiting for me and that they had told him to order me to shut off both engines and get out of the airplane immediately.

So I then asked him . . . “Will it be all right if I land first? Or do they want me to shut off the engines and get out here?”

The wind on the ground was so strong, and the gusts so violent, that it was very difficult to maintain control of the plane even when trying to taxi; and damned near impossible to see anything outside the plane because of the very heavy rain.

Then, about half a minute after I finally did get parked and got off the plane, instantly getting soaked to the skin, a Customs car came roaring up, with a guy leaning out the rear window on my side and waving a Thompson sub-machinegun around. The car started skidding when they tried to stop and almost ran into my plane. And since I was afraid that the idiot in the back seat of the car might shoot somebody, I snatched the gun out of his hands; which did not seem to please him all that much.

What followed was a very violent confrontation, just short of a shoot out between us and the Customs agents; but eventually we got it all sorted out without any real violence and they cleared my load of fish. They had been worried about the fact that I was flying a bomber because this was shortly after the Cuban missile crisis and several people had then recently made bombing attacks against Cuba. When they learned that I had a load of live fish instead of bombs that cooled things off.

But then I had to leave, because it was far too cold to leave the plane sitting outside; I had to go to another airport, Opa-locka airport, where I knew I could put the plane inside a heated hangar; every hangar on the Miami airport was already full. But the tower told me that the airport was closed, and that I could not take off.

So I told them . . . “Fuck that, you are still landing airplanes so the airport is not closed, and I am going to take off immediately.” And I did.

The center of the hurricane had passed by then so the direction of the wind had changed, was then blowing directly from the west towards the east, and was still just as strong. Given that much of a headwind my takeoff run was very short, only about a hundred yards instead of the usual half a mile; the ceiling was still very low so I made a ninety-degree turn to the right as soon as I had enough clearance for my wingtip to keep it above the buildings around the

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airport; then headed straight north; could not climb much because if I ever lost sight of the lights on the ground I knew that I would not be able to find Opalocka airport.

Then when I saw the lights of the east/west runway on Opalocka airport I turned right again; given the very strong tailwind my speed over the ground was more than 300 miles an hour when flying towards the east. and I passed by the control tower well below the level of the man inside of it. He later told me . . . “The tower suddenly jerked so violently that I thought it was being blown away, and then I looked down and saw that big white son of a bitch pass by several feet lower than where I was and only a few feet away; it was a miracle that you didn’t hit the damned tower.”

Just beyond the end of that runway, to the east of it, there were several tall towers, and Hetrick was afraid I was going to hit one of them; but I knew they were there and had other plans. As we reached the end of the runway I did several things almost simultaneously: pulled the nose up into a vertical climb, climbing straight up into the bottom of the clouds, pulled both throttles back to the idle position, dropped full flaps and the landing gear, and continued to climb straight up until we came to a dead stop, were momentarily motionless in the air, with the tail pointing straight down at the ground.

Then I performed a hammerhead turn before we started to slide backwards, which reversed our position and put us with the nose pointing straight down; then as we started diving straight towards the ground our speed quickly picked up again. As the speed started climbing I started raising the nose, and when we came out of the bottom of the clouds again, about fifty feet above the ground, we were directly over the end of the runway, but then with the strong headwind produced by the hurricane rather than a tailwind. So I kept pulling the nose up, touched down and came to a halt after a run on the ground of about a hundred yards. The wind was so strong that I could have taken off vertically, with no forward speed across the ground.

All of which scared the shit out of both Hetrick and Madam Chung, although George did not appear to be greatly concerned by any of it. But it always did take a lot to scare George.

Then we got the airplane in a heated hangar, so the fish were at least protected from the cold weather; but our problems with Federal agents were not quite over yet. When we went into the terminal building a guy came up and said that he wanted to talk with me in private.

But I told him that we had nothing to hide and that if he wanted to talk to me to do so where we were standing. Then George asked him . . . “What’s the problem? Doesn’t the right hand know what the fucking left hand is doing? First you accuse us of bombing Cuba and now here you are trying to get us to bomb Cuba. So make up your fucking mind, we can do whatever you want; if you want Cuba bombed, fine, give us the bombs and we’ll do it.”

And the other guy said . . . “Nobody said anything about bombing Cuba, I have another proposition for you.”

So George said . . . “So why do you need a bomber?”

Then I told George to shut up, and told the other guy that I was not interested in his proposition, regardless of what it was. Did not even want to hear about it. Then I turned away and stepped through a nearby door into another room. And just inside that other room was another man, listening and taking notes.

But we still were not finished with that trip, the fish had to be flown to the Tampa airport, which was impossible to do that night; so we went to a nearby motel and went to sleep for the first time in about thirty hours.

Early the next morning, just as I sat down in my seat, a car drove up and parked directly in front of my left engine; then the driver leaned out the window, looked up at me, and said . . . “You might as well get out, you are not going anywhere.”

So I looked back at him and said . . . “You are probably right, because I doubt if this thing will fly after I taxi it through your car; but I’m damned sure going to do that.” Then I started the left engine, right in his face. Viewed from a distance of about two feet, a propeller weighing more than 600 pounds and being turned by an engine with 1,700 horsepower is very impressive; so he moved his car and I then started the right engine and taxied away for a takeoff.

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Then when we reached Tampa they told us on the radio that the field was closed, that the ceiling was far too low to land. But I had to land there, the fish needed to be removed from the plastic bags soon or they would die from a lack of oxygen.

So I flew west out over the ocean and gradually reduced my altitude until I was almost dragging my wheels through the water; had to get that low in order to be beneath the clouds. Then turned back towards the airport and called the tower when I saw the beach; told them that I could see the airport and was going to land, and also told them that I was beneath the clouds at an altitude of two-hundred feet above the water. Which was a lie, I was actually about ten feet above the water.

Then they called back and said that they had me in sight, but that I appeared to be much lower than I claimed to be, and that I was still moving in and out of the clouds. But they cleared me to land anyway.

And as I was parking the plane was suddenly surrounded by Customs cars; so I got out, read them the riot act, the long version, told them that I was getting damned tired of them fucking with me and that as soon as the fish were unloaded I intended to leave, and that if they delayed the unloading of the fish they would end up having to pay for them.

The guy in charge ended up offering me an apology; then gave me his card and wrote his home telephone number on it, and told me that if I had any more trouble with Customs agents I should give him a call and he would straighten out any problems I was having.

So we unloaded the fish, put them in a truck sent to the airport by a man who owned a fish farm nearby, said goodbye to madam Chung and departed for Picayune, Mississippi. When we got there I immediately removed both of the engines, and while doing that I got two telephone calls from people that I did not know, people who refused to tell me their names. Both of them told me that FBI agents were asking questions all over town about me, and they thought I should know about it.

So, a bit later, when two FBI agents drove up in a car, I was expecting them. I walked up to the window on the driver's side, told the driver who I was and that I knew who he was, and asked to see his identification. So he pulled out his billfold, intending to flash it in my face very briefly and then put it away. But that didn't happen. Instead, I reached out and took it out of his hand; looked at his picture, compared it to his face, asked him his serial number, which he did not know, counted his money, looked at his other papers, and in general acted like I did not intend to return his billfold to him.

But I did return it to him; then, for the next couple of hours, we amused ourselves at their expense. We really gave them a bad time, told them we were hauling Chinese coolies, white slaves and anything else that paid well. Stories that they did not appear to think were all that amusing. Finally, having gotten nothing out of us apart from pure bullshit, they left.

Then, that night, as I walked into the front room of my house in Slidell, I heard the television newsman in New Orleans saying . . . "State police, Federal agents and the local police in Picayune, Mississippi, are still looking for the owner of several tons of aerial bombs that were found early this morning, hidden in a barn near the Picayune airport."

They were not my bombs; had I known about them earlier that day I probably would not have given the FBI agents such a hard time.

Were all the trips that bad? Hell, that wasn't a bad trip, almost average in fact. Sometimes we didn't make it.

Madam Chung apparently felt differently, she refused to go back down with us on the next trip.