The World's Shortest Regularly Scheduled Airflight

By Peter Mikelbank

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ORKNEY, Scotland–The 'World's Shortest Regularly Scheduled Airflight' churns its twin Lycoming 260 horsepower motors against a screeching wind of equal force. Propellers droning, insisting with frightening mechanical roar-the sound of Hell surely, rising in your ears and heart, the tiny BN 2-B 'Islander' gathers speed, racing down the tarmac towards dark churning waters. Before an onrushing skirl of sea and sky-one final molar rattling shudder, wheels licking fresh sea foam, she rises violently into the air. Angled between earth and sky, hands straining the stick, the veteran RAF pilot forces the boxy aircraft upward. Above the furor, he calls, "Right then, everyone TUCKED IN?"

Moments like these, heart slowly resuming the task of beating blood back into your brain, you ask yourself: 'Is a career in travel writing everything I imagined?"

Tapocketa-pocketa ...

The Air Age-an era stretching from Kitty Hawk to Concorde and onto Hooters Airlines-is exactly100 years old this December. And since the day the Wright Brothers first coaxed their dream of bicycle parts into history, aviation has progressed into today's interminable terminal delays, gate waits and plastic cutlery; its treadmill of security check-ins, wade-throughs, searches, inspections, and further waits.

With over 14,000 airfields in the U.S. alone, flying has become life's commonly worn fabric-and about as exciting. Mankind's most exhilarating experience has somehow become largely a routine of mileage points and industry bankruptcy enlivened only by the promise of cabin turbulence, lost luggage, and occasioned air rage.

Logan Air's flight 500, however, departs the obscure grasslands airfield at Kirkwall, the Orkney Islands, north of Scotland, on time. A decidedly Walter Mitty airflight, its a residual wind-in-your-face, rush-to-the-stomach experience. A 'here's your ticket/now out that door/ straight onto tarmac where the plane is waiting with engines running' reminder of what flying was/ should/ can never be again-unless your aircraft resembles a tartaned '72 Pontiac with wings and your heading is an out-of-the-way, off-all-charts, top-of-the-world pinspot.

Performing air taxi/bush pilot/island hopper service in a lazing 40-minute arc over a sparse northern chain, skimming latitudes farther north than Juneau or Moscow, the route manifests a few resident peculiarities. Oddities. Monty Python eccentricities. Flights, for example, often accede 'request stops', unscheduled detours to a dozen unpronouncable islands. And, all flights touch down on 'unprepared airfields', a term designating pastures groomed into emergency landings in the '30's and maintained since-as pasture. As in, you'll bump down beside cows. Peacefully grazing Hereford and Guernsey, unmoved by approach and departures.

At apogee, a point where the Atlantic Ocean slamdances the North Sea into roiling 40-foot high breakers, the daily flight links two remote outcrops: Westray (pop. 600) and Papay (pop. 70) across a roiling strait known as Papa Sound. Its 1.5 mile long hop won Guinness Book of Records recognition and notoriety as the world's shortest flight over a decade ago. And, while officially its a scheduled 2-minute flight time, informal competition among pilots long ago lowered that mark to less than one up-sa-daisy! whiteknuckling minute.

One complete flight, one airborne minute. Takes about as long as that last paragraph.

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Befitting its unusual stature, pre-flight and boarding procedures are a bit unconventional. Ticketing and check-in, for example, is a mostly handwritten affair and once bags are weighed,

passengers are asked to join them on the scale. The combined sum (a rather unmetric 'eleven stone, five'), announced loudly enough across the Shetland pony-sized terminal to rattles both magazines in the airport news-and-teashop.

"Flying up here is unique," concedes one of the line's four pilots, "because frankly there isn't enough time to get bored." Retired after a career of flying 747s from London-to-Hong Kong for British Airways, he migrated to Orkney, believing, "this is just about as close as you can get to real flying. It's quite nice sometimes. Landing about in wildflowers, the hatching chicks and the weather up here … well, things like horizontal rain keeps it interesting.

"It's bush-pilot flying mostly," another pilot, an RAF Falklands fighter veteran, joins in. "Particularly in winter or Air Ambulance service." The route demands between 200-250 medical flights annually including emergency nightflights, he says, "and what makes those unusual are unlit airfields. For emergency flights, the islanders come out, line landing strips with lights. They've gotten battery lamps only in the last ten years. Before that they used open-flame gooseneck lanterns, oil lanterns burning paraffin, from the Twenties." Similarly unchanged from the '20s' "until just a decade ago were regulations letting passengers bring small livestock onboard. Goats and lambs mostly."

These days, the line's most unusual carriage, they agree, are persistent 'Guinness Collectors': a global subculture using the Guinness Book of World Records as travel guidebook, determined to experience first-hand as many of its entries as possible. Accounting for some 70-to-90 passengers annually, these travellers have been arriving for over a decade, often coming half-way around the world to claim a flight leg considerably shorter than most runways. "It's amazing, but they'll come all the way up here just up for the wee hop between islands," says Logan's station manager. "Just for the two-minutes.

"Last month we had one from Hobart. That's Tasmania. Australia. Be the farthest anyone has flown. Probably, the farthest you can fly. Last year, we had one booked round-trip from Japan. Flew non-stop Tokyo-London-Glasgow-Kirkwall-Westray-Papey. Then, Return. Flew straight through-something like 35 hours, just for the two-minute jump. Never spoke to anyone. Never got off anywhere along the way!"

"Truth is," returns the first pilot, "I preferred those paraffin lanterns myself. Open flame show the way the wind's blowing. Funny thing, even with the extreme weather up here, they never blew out in a gale."

"And those days," his colleague sighs, "when a small calf flew as co-pilot are sadly gone now."

"Wait a minute," the station manager appeals. "We don't want to give the wrong impression. We're not barnstormers. This isn't wing-and-a-prayer flying, no Biggles of the Air Squadron up here. We're not white-scarf, goggles, mascot, open-cockpit barnstormers here. Right?"

"Right," agrees the pilot. "Not wing-and-a-prayer barnstorming. But,' he winks, "real close."

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Tossed like stones upon the ocean at the top of the world, "Orkney is composed of islands and officially, the count is 70-odd islands, rocks and skerries," explained the island's Tourism Director. "And the distinction between a rock and a skerry, you can make for yourself."

Crushed beside pilot and seven stout Orkadians, chugging island-to-island above open sea at 400 feet, skittering in gusting crosswinds, islands are easily recognizable. Trace northward, they're larger outlines, clustering farmland and fishing villages. Rocks and skerries, however, greatly resemble one another. Poking about broad ocean surface, they're no more than shadowy green crags, blanketed with tiny moving white dots, which the pilot identifies as 'Sheep.'

"Ones that eat seaweed mostly. Care to drop down and buzz them?

"Or maybe you'd like to see some seals on the way up? A baronial Victorian castle?" Voice etching a cutglass accent, he inquires

"perhaps something Viking Age today? Would anyone onboard know anything about archeology, by chance?" Receiving only grumbles from returning islanders, he announces, "Right! We'll leave all that sightseeing off and just head straight up."

Within moments, sightseeing vanishes into a bank of grey cable knit weather, flash lightning and seas suddenly spurning like triple Starbucks lattes. Alone, the immense isolation of the grey northern seas to reflect upon you suddenly realize that you are flying above a notorious shipping graveyard. In an additional moment, starker realization occurs as you realize that at this Arctic latitude, the only thing between you and Canada are waves; between you and the North Pole, Santa's elves; AND THE ONLY! THING keeping you from either: two '*TA-POCKETA*' engines.

Times like these, your head fills with a swirl of images. You think 'Greenhouse Effect' and picture a few starving polar bears drifting very slowly southward on breakaway ice floes. Or you beginning gauging your fellow passengers with the grim dawning resolve of an Andean bound soccer team coach.

You think: 'backstroke ... until Iceland, definitely the backstroke."

Twenty hardflying minutes on, winds buffet as often, as heartily, as a fat man. Rain squalling into determined sleet, lightning breaches the clouds revealing a handful of fishing boats and an island point ahead. "I think," the pilot says, "yes, that collection of houses is Westray's biggest, well, ummm ... only ... Yes," he decides. "You could call it a town."

Circling to the island's far northern Bay of Skall, his touchdown is a carrier-like manuever; jolting bumpdown on a 400-foot long field tightly postaged by ocean, hoary trees and a dozen Hereford, and while he hauls baggage for six disembarking passengers, you've two scheduled minutes to examine Westray's stonewalled airfield. A model of Scottish economy, it proves a dismal bog-like pasture whose terminal operations consist wholly of a holed-out windsock, a cottage and a Range Rover used to herd cattle away from approaching planes.

Opposite on the far shore, just visible across a mean, rain-shrouded strait, lies Papay's rockbound airfield-an exact, though smaller and more dismal replica. One, dispensing with most of Westray's amenities. All, in fact. Except the cows.

The local farmer, scheduled by company policy, to arrive 30 minutes before each flight to shoo animals into corners "seems to have gone missing today. Well, never mind, we pilots, you see, hold opinion that the cows on Papay now possess an airline time schedule and graze to it. Its the sheep and rabbits who choose to remain ignorant," suggests the pilot. "Those rabbits are bothersome. Always burrowing about, causing great holes you just can't see-until you've rolled end-up into one, you understand."

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Of all mankind's inventions, flight is our most dreamlike. It is the most exhilarating, most ... "I suppose I could be a complete monster raving looney," announces the pilot. Gunning engines into take-off position, sounding eerily like John Cleese, he resolves, "yes, a complete looney and try for a new record. Try for one on every flight.

"There's one fellow who claims to have done this in 53 seconds ..." his voice falls inaudible beneath growing engine whine. "But I don't know. You see, there's really quite a lot of levers and buttons and other things here to work out in a very, very, compressed amount of time ... "

Staring across the water, he clicks a stopwatch mounted to the stick, and initiates his run.

Shouting, "We take off-full power. Flaps, throttle up, RPM and fuel mixture levers back ..."

With lurching runch, the plane shoots forward. Skidding fresh mud, heavy rain, she hesitates, bucks, finally careening upwards in steep swallowtail climb, commencing a hurtling catapult launch, a trackless rollercoaster, a slingshot aimed at rock of insignificant proportion.

" ... And throttle up, RPM and fuel mixture levers back ..."

Hands spiraling controls feverishly, adjusting speed. Fuel mix.

Ailerons. Straining motors sounding like washing machines on final rinse, he loops the plane, leveling out at a height of nearly sixty feet. Through a steamy windscreen, one island becomes retreating memory; the other, a spit of devoutly wished for land across a mile of churning chop.

"Then quickly into Cruise mode: adjust the mixture and … Look! There's seal pups on the rocks … and adjust throttle, props …"

The whitecaps. Rocks. Cows, sheep, mud ruts, your first high school kiss and a pack of madly excavating rabbits swim over you in real and imagined blur. A miasma shrouding the onrush of a fast-approaching landing; an imminent touchdown on a rain-soaked mini-putt pitch crowded with obstacle livestock which seem in no mood to step aside and let you play through.

" … Before landing … flaps down … further down and …" Touching in with a series of revitalizing shocks and bumps, he brakes hard to avoid a stray cow off his left wing, brakes and brakes again to a final rolling standstill beside a four-foot high stonewall.

"And IN!" he calls. Throwing off one final shudder, the craft becomes deathly still.

Clicking and verifying the stopwatch, he jots down 58 seconds on his log.

"It's all the stuff of any flight, really just extremely compressed. Of course in a flight of this duration, everything must happen a whole lot quicker."

"Actually," he reflects "in a whole lot less time than it takes to explain."