

## Flight SwiftAir One Niner

Captain James Donnington was not happy with the load manifest. There were unspecified items of cargo, and on enquiry, he could not get any answers from SwiftAir's representative in Klingon, Dave Callon.

"The forwarders are not obliged to specify the contents of their freight," Callon said.

"What about the IATA regulations," the captain enquired?

Callon shrugged, "Due to a loophole in the regs they can get away with it."

Donnington began to cut up rough, "Specify the items or remove them from the cargo, otherwise I refuse to take off."

He stormed out of the flight office and dragged his crew to the nearest coffee bar.

Roy Jenkins was a flight engineer of many years standing and Peter Westmoreland, the co-pilot, had recently progressed to the 747 Combi from the left-hand seat of 727's.

"I am not happy with some of the unspecified cargo and am not about to take off until I get confirmation that it has either been identified or removed from the load manifest," Donnington told them.

While they were discussing the situation, a representative of the airport approached Donnington and said, "Captain there is a call for you in the airport manager's office."

James Donnington excused himself and followed the airport representative.

He was shown into a small room containing very little, other than a telephone. He noted that the room appeared to be soundproofed. He picked up the telephone and said, "Donnington here." The voice at the other end identified itself as the exterior minister.

"Donnington I have been informed of your concerns and have noted that this is not the first time that you have been perturbed about undisclosed cargo. I would like to point out that we are technically fighting a war and that it is vital that we bring in necessary materials by subterfuge as many of our normal channels have been blocked. So, let me put this as bluntly as I can, I am sure that you will want to enjoy your pension benefits. Do I make myself clear?"

"Are you threatening me?" asked Donnington?

"Most assuredly, I am," said the minister, "The security of our country is at stake."

Donnington was quiet for a while, his mind racing. Eventually he said, "Right, we'll discuss this further on my return."

"Good," said the minister and hung up.

"Christ," blasphemed Donnington under his breath, "The ministry's bloody spies are everywhere."

Donnington wandered back to his crew and said laconically, "The flight will go ahead as planned."

"Why?" chorused the crew.

"National interest - and don't ask anymore."

He led them down to the flight office where they completed their flight plan and the other required documentation before picking up their bags and strolling out to their plane. Delta Delta Yankee stood there, gleaming in the last rays of the sun. She was a 747 Combi, that is, her main deck was capable of being divided into areas for both passengers and freight. Tonight she was configured for 150 passengers situated at the front of the aircraft. A division behind them closed off the cargo area which occupied the rear half of the fuselage.

The cabin staff were busy supervising the loading of the catering while captain Donnington chose to walk around Delta Yankee himself to do the physical pre-flight inspection.

This done, the captain popped into the cabin to meet the attendants, most of whom he knew. Once he'd greeted them, he wandered back up to the cockpit and continued with the necessary checks while the passengers began embarking.

The flight crew checked all the aircraft documentation and the technical log. They noted that Delta Yankee had been giving spurious fire alarms on some previous flights.

"That is something I can do without," muttered Donnington.

Fifteen minutes before departure he called Klingon Tower and requested a take-off slot.

"Good evening Klingon this is SwiftAir One Niner, a 747 Combi at stand Foxtrot-Sixer requesting clearance to Woodville."

With the aircraft ready to push back he called the ground engineer and asked him if his checks were complete.

"Affirmative," he replied.

The engines were started and the big aircraft was pushed back into the middle of the apron.

Assured that all ground equipment was clear, and confirming taxi clearance, the captain taxied the aircraft to the threshold of runway Two Five.

At the threshold, take off clearance was granted, and Captain Donnington lined up the aircraft on the runway centre line and opened the throttles.

The four powerful Rolls Royce motors responded eagerly and Delta Yankee began to gain speed. Soon her main trucks lifted off runway Two Five and Donnington called, "Gear up." "Gear up," confirmed Westmoreland as he pulled the undercarriage lever. Soon he confirmed, "Three green" denoting that the wheels had retracted normally and the gear doors had closed.

The aircraft climbed out over the sea and in the rapidly descending dark the crew anxiously scanned the horizon for the expected thunderstorms that lay ahead of them. They spotted numerous cumulonimbus thunder heads sparkling with lightening.

"This is going to be a rough ride," said the flight engineer.

Donnington switched on the cabin microphone and said, "Hello folk. I am afraid that we are going to traverse a line of thunderstorms and must ask you to keep your seatbelts fastened really tight. Cabin crew please assist and check all passengers' belts and then take your own seats. In all probability the turbulence will only last about twenty minutes. Thank you."

The crew chose a line through the clouds ahead and advised Klingon control of their amended route.

Soon the turbulence began. The 340-ton aircraft was thrown about like a ping pong ball by the fierce up and down draughts that accompanied the thunder activity. The crew knew that Delta Yankee was designed to withstand most weather conditions.

The twisting, bending, compressing loads imposed by the air mass on the air frame were well within her design limits. This however did not make the passengers lot any easier as the aircraft bucked about mercilessly.

The turbulence also had an effect on the cargo.

One of the pallets, with undisclosed contents, was not securely packed. Loosened by the turbulence the containers had rubbed against each other and the resulting friction had caused the unstable product to begin smouldering.

Soon they were through the storms into clearer air and the cabin crew could begin serving the evening meal.

Suddenly a fire alarm went off in the cockpit.

"Damn," said Donnington. "It's the upper deck cargo hold area."

He sent Roy Jenkins back to check the area.

Jenkins entered the cargo hold through the partition behind the passengers and shone his flashlight over the cargo pallets. Nothing seemed amiss. He returned to the flight deck and said, "Looks like the spurious alarm jinx again."

"I sincerely hope so," said the captain.

The flight continued awhile but there was an uneasiness in the cockpit.

Suddenly the alarm triggered again and this time the fire extinguishers in the cargo hold fired automatically.

"Get down there," Donnington snapped to the co-pilot and the engineer.

As they left the cockpit the alarm went off again and fired the remaining extinguishers.

While Westmoreland and Jenkins were investigating, Donnington called up SwiftAir control in Woodville and apprised them of the situation.

"I want permission to divert to Manxton," he said.

Normally he would have taken this decision but in view of the minister's threat, and the fact that the government of Manxton was hostile to his country, he felt it prudent to ask for permission.

"Captain Donnington?" the radio crackled.

"Yes," he replied.

"Please hold on."

The minister's voice was next, "Captain it is imperative that you maintain course for Westport. If you land at Manxton the aircraft will be impounded, and we will lose our air transport licence."

"I am no longer concerned about your bloody pension or your license," snapped Donnington, "I have a hundred plus lives in my hands."

"Captain Donnington, the stakes here are greater than a few lives and I am sure that you would not want any harm to come to your family?"

"You bastard," snapped Donnington and cut off the transmission.

At this point the crew entered the cockpit, ashen faced.

"One of the cargo pallets is smouldering and the fire does not react to the hand extinguishers. It's a strange fire, hardly noticeable, but impossible to put out," exclaimed Jenkins.

"We have been instructed to proceed to Westport and not to divert to ..." "What?" both cut in with exclamations of horror. "We have been threatened with the lives of our families."

"The fucking bastards," Jenkins exclaimed.

"Never mind that now," said Donnington. "For the sake of the passengers and our families let's try and get this old girl to Westport as soon as possible."

The chief stewardess came into the cockpit, "Captain smoke is beginning to seep through the partition."

“Jenny get all the passengers right forward and on to the upper deck. Drop the oxygen masks and show them how to use them. We must prevent them from inhaling poisonous gasses.”

They could conceivably by now be within VHR range of Westport and the captain tried the tower, “Westport, SwiftAir One Niner, do you copy?”

“Good evening SwiftAir One Niner, go ahead.”

“We have smoke seeping from the cargo hold and request an emergency descent to 12,000 feet.”

“Roger, you are clear to descend. Do you wish to declare a full emergency?”

“Affirmative.”

“Roger One Niner you are cleared for a straight in approach to Zero Three. QNH 1012.3, wind calm”

“Roger Westport, straight in to Zero Three. QNH 1012.3, wind calm”

Suddenly there was an explosion in the upper cargo deck. A gaping hole blew out of the side of Delta Yankee. The blast severed all the control and communication lines to the tail of the aircraft effectively rendering the black boxes useless from this moment on as they were located in the tail.

The explosion also severed the links to the auxiliary power unit in the tail which could provide emergency electrical power.

More seriously the elevators and rudder of the big aircraft were now non-operational.

Some passengers screamed and a few, inexplicably, released their seat belts.

A secondary explosion followed the first one and severed communication to the engines and ailerons leaving the aircraft out of control.

All four motors cut and with them went the alternators that drive the electrical system of the aircraft.

The plane was plunged into darkness.

With the motive power and all control surfaces now gone, the holes resulting from the explosions tilted the plane into a spiral dive.

Those who had loosened their seat belts fell into the nose of the aircraft bouncing off others as they fell.

Pandemonium now reigned. Some people screamed in terror, others sobbed uncontrollably. Some were merely silent.

It was pitch black inside the big aircraft. The G-forces from the spiral dive were flinging people around. The unnatural forces on the airframe twisted the fuselage causing the overhead lockers to spill open and dump their content into the black void. Because of the vertical dive the baggage fell towards the nose. Those who never listened to the requests to keep heavy baggage out of the overhead lockers were unaware that these falling objects were now injuring, and killing, some of those on whom they fell. Not that it mattered anymore.

Apart from the terrified screams and sobs the only other noise was the eerie screech of the wind which increased as the aircraft gained speed in its death dive.

Suddenly some pallets, their retaining ropes burned through, crashed down on top of the passengers.

This, mercifully, ended the fear of some souls but it sprayed most of those still alive with burning bits of substance.

The crippled fuselage could no longer hold together and Delta Yankee broke in three, spewing cargo, baggage, fuel and people into the dark, cold air.

Shortly thereafter, in quick succession, the three parts of the 747 slammed into the ocean.

“SwiftAir One Niner, do you read me?”

“SwiftAir One Niner, come in please. Do you copy?”

Only the hiss of static answered the Westport controller.

**Ray Hattingh**