

THE LOST CLIPPER



A FICTION NOVEL BY
MICHEL POULIN

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FOREWORD

THIS NOVEL WAS WRITTEN IN 2011-12, BEFORE THE NOV 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, AND THE PRESIDENT DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL MAY NOT BE THE PRESIDENT ACTUALLY ELECTED IN 2012. FOR THIS, THE AUTHOR ASKS FOR THE INDULGENCE OF THE READERS.

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CHAPTER 1 – FLIGHT DISTURBANCE

21:07 (New York Time)

Thursday, April 23, 1959

Pan American Boeing B707 'CLIPPER AMERICA'

38,000 feet above the North Atlantic, 560 miles east of New York

"So, Captain, happy to be home for Easter?"

William 'Bill' Cannon smiled at the question from his copilot, Denis Brayson, while keeping his eyes on the night sky outside of the cockpit's windshield.

"Sure am! This job is okay but I certainly could use more time with my family. Thankfully, George Kingsley accepted to switch with me for the Easter Monday flight to Paris, so I will be able to enjoy a full four days with my wife and kids."

Denis Brayson, an experienced pilot in his own right, sighed at that answer.

"I wish that I could say that I have been as lucky as you, Bill. I will be flying with Kingsley on that Monday flight. Still, that will give me three days with my own family."

Denis then turned his head to look at their flight engineer, John White, whose station was just behind his seat.

"And you, John? Are you flying Monday?"

"Yup! I tried to switch with Jack Kenney but the bugger refused. I even offered to arrange a date between him and Roberta to get him to switch but that didn't work."

"And what told you that Roberta would go along with whatever plans you would make, John?" Replied Bill Cannon, amused. Roberta Holmes, one of the four stewardesses on their flight, was considered one of the hottest looking stewardesses at Pan Am, which had already a high standard in that department. She was however also very choosy about her men, knowing full well the power of her attractiveness. White answered with a guilty grin.

"Let's say that Roberta owes me a favor."

Both pilot and copilot howled in appreciation at that reply.

"I wish that Roberta owed ME a favor, you lucky bastard!" Said Denis Brayson. Before White could say something, an extremely bright flash of red light from the outside suddenly made the three men close their eyes, blinding them temporarily. For a

moment, Bill Cannon, who had turned his head away from the windshield, thought that he saw Denis Brayson's skeleton, as if he was looking at him through an X-Ray machine. The red glare then faded and Brayson's appearance returned to normal. However, an external shock wave then hit their Boeing B707, throwing it sideways like a simple toy. Bill's old pilot reflexes then took over, chasing the start of a panic in him despite him being still half blind. With most of his instruments apparently knocked out, he fought with his controls with all his strength, soon joined in this by Denis. After a few, very long seconds, they managed to stabilize their plane in a level, steady path.

"What the hell was that?" Nearly screamed Denis, still pale. Bill shook his head, talking through his clenched teeth.

"Don't know but it certainly wasn't good for the plane. John, check the engines!" The flight engineer did not respond at first, taking the time to survey his instruments panel.

"Everything seems okay here, Captain. Our four engines are running smoothly at normal temperatures and I don't see any indications of lubricant loss."

"It's at least that." Said Bill before he realized something with a shock: the night sky they had been traveling in was now replaced by an early morning sky, with the Sun low and at their back. Denis, who had been checking his own instruments for malfunctions, also noticed it.

"Wait a sec! This can't be!"

A quick look at his wristwatch made him swear.

"Damn! My watch has stopped!"

"Mine too!" Said Bill after looking at his own watch. "Our gyrocompass seems to have been knocked out by that red flash, along with our radios and radar. Try to regain contact with air traffic control while I run a check of all our systems."

"Got it!"

A buzz then made Bill pick up the telephone that linked the cockpit with the stewardesses' station. The voice of Sandra Crystal, the purser, came on the set.

"Captain, this is Sandra. The passengers are nearly panicking about what shook our plane. What was it?"

"I don't know yet, Sandra. Tell them that we are in full control of the plane and that they have no need to worry. I will address them in a few minutes."

"Uh, understood, Captain." Said the stewardess in a voice that showed she was not exactly convinced. She however cut her call without asking more questions, letting

Bill free to evaluate the state of his plane. Apart of the fact that his radar set seemed to be fried and that his compass was gyrating crazily, everything else seemed to be working.

"Denis, do you have the air traffic control on the radio?"

"No, I get no radio traffic at all on their frequency, nor on the frequency of the controller in Paris."

Cold sweat then broke on Bill's forehead as he remembered his vision of his copilot's skeleton during the flash of red light. He now had nightmarish thoughts about all this meaning that they were now in the middle of a nuclear war. Maybe a stray nuclear missile had exploded prematurely near their aircraft. Urgent knocks on the door of the cockpit made his head snap around, just before Sandra Crystal stormed inside, agitated.

"Captain, it's daylight outside! Also, everybody's watches have stopped."

Bill made a grim smile to the pretty brunette.

"I certainly noticed, Sandra. Unfortunately, I have no explanation yet to offer for that. It must have been an effect of that red flash."

"But...nothing could possibly cause that, no?"

The pilot had to give her good marks for common sense.

"I know, Sandra. However, I am as clueless as you right now. The good thing is that the plane seems to have suffered no real damage. You may tell that to the passengers: it may calm them down."

"Yes, Captain."

A minute went by after the departure of Sandra. By that time, Denis had not yet been able to raise anyone on the working frequencies of the day. In frustration, he switched their secondary radio to the international distress frequency, the only frequency that never changed.

"To any station that can hear me, this is flight Pan Am 164, out of Paris and heading towards New York. Our navigation equipment is malfunctioning and we can't raise any air control center on other frequencies. If someone can hear us, please respond!"

To his relief, a voice answered him after his second call.

"Pan Am 164, this is US Coast Guard cutter SENECA. Can you hear us, over?"

"Affirmative, SENECA! We hear you loud and clear, over."

"Pan Am 164, what was your last known position, heading and speed, over?"

"SENECA, from Pan Am 164, our last known position dates from four minutes ago and was 565 miles east of New York Idlewild International Airport. Our heading was 242 degrees and our speed was 540 miles per hour at an altitude of 38,000 feet, over." This time there was a distinct delay before Denis got a response from the cutter, with the tone of voice of the operator having also changed.

"Pan Am 164, say again your last known position?"

"I say again, 565 miles east of New York Idlewild International Airport, over."

"SENECA to whoever is there, you better quit your attempt at joking." Said a new voice on the radio. "There is no Idlewild Airport in New York and Pan Am went bankrupt decades ago. You better identify yourself correctly before I alert the Air force." Denis exchanged a bemused look with Bill, who had listened on the conversation with his own headset.

"What the fuck are they talking about?"

"Don't know but I will certainly rattle their cage: I am talking over this conversation. Coast Guard cutter SENECA, this is the captain of flight Pan Am 164. We are presently in distress, with all navigation instruments out and 108 passengers aboard. If you can confirm our present position, say it or pass us on to someone who will. I am certainly in no mood to joke, over."

There was another long delay before the latest voice answered, with no trace of apology in his tone.

"Unknown contact, you may want to try the frequency of the New York air traffic control center, on 388.5 megahertz. Good luck with them, out!"

The last sentence had been said with sarcasm, something that both confused and enraged Bill Cannon.

"The prick! I'm going to report him as soon as we land. Let's try that new frequency: hopefully, he didn't give us a bogus one."

Changing himself the frequency on their main radio, Bill double-checked his list of official frequencies before talking, to make sure that this new frequency was not on it. It wasn't.

"New York air traffic control, this is flight Pan Am 164, over."

The answer came a few seconds later, as he was about to call again.

"This is New York air traffic control. Say again your call sign?"

"Are they all dumb today, damn it!" Swore Denis to himself before Bill spoke again on the radio.

"New York control, I say again: this flight Pan Am 164, coming from Paris and heading towards Idlewild International. Our navigation instruments are malfunctioning and we are unsure of both our current position and of our heading. Our last known position was five minutes ago, at 565 miles east of Idlewild International, and our heading was 242 degrees at 540 miles per hour. We are still heading roughly east, judging from the Sun, and should be about 500 miles from the coast, over."

"Pan Am 164, please turn left ninety degrees so that we can identify you on our radar screens."

"Finally, something that makes sense!" Said Bill to himself. "Turning left now, New York control."

"Pan Am 164, this is New York control. We now have you marked on our radar screens. You are 510 miles due east of New York. Be advised that your IFF transponders are apparently not working. What is your aircraft type and how many people do you have on board, over?"

"From Pan Am 164, we have 108 passengers and seven crewmembers on board of our Boeing B707-121, over."

This time, the delay before he got a response was significant, prompting Bill to talk again.

"New York control, did you copy my last, over?"

"Affirmative, Pan Am 164." Finally said the man in New York. "Continue to fly east for the moment. The Air Force will send planes to escort and guide you, over."

"Thank you, New York control. In truth, we don't have large reserves of fuel left. I calculate that, at the present rate, I have enough left to fly for about seventy minutes more."

"I copy that, Pan Am 164. Keep a lookout for your escort planes, out."

"Captain, I have a bad feeling about this." Said John White as soon as Bill cut the link. "Why would they not recognize our call sign? And what was this thing about Pan Am having gone bankrupt?"

"John, I have absolutely no clue." Said sheepishly Bill while returning on an eastern heading.

Inside the passenger cabin, uneasy whispers went around the passengers as their plane made two turns in quick succession. The voice of the pilot then came on the speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We still don't know what caused that late disturbance in our flight but I can assure you that our plane is in good condition and that we will land safely in New York in less than an hour. I hope that you will continue to enjoy your flight in the meantime."

Colonel Steve Ritchie, Chief of Air Transport Services at the Supreme Allied Powers in Europe Headquarters, or SHAPE HQ in short, who was on his way to a strategic conference at the Pentagon, raised an eyebrow and looked at his seat neighbor, Brigadier General Allan Foster, who was going to the same conference as him.

"I think that we got served some good baloney, General." He said in a low voice, making Foster frown.

"What do you mean, Steve?"

"Well, I am myself an experienced transport pilot, General, and I can tell when a pilot is trying to paint things over a bad situation. The plane seems to be flying correctly for the moment, but god knows what that red explosion could have damaged. It is bad enough that the night turned literally into day in seconds. That by itself is enough to freak out."

"Yeah, I agree. I just hope that this explosion was not what I am afraid it was." Ritchie understood at once what Foster was thinking and nodded.

"Me too. I think that I will go pay a quick visit to the flight crew."

"Good idea! Keep me posted!"

Getting up from his seat, Ritchie then walked calmly towards the cockpit, only a few paces away from his first class seat. One of the stewardesses, a tall and athletic blonde, however interposed herself politely just before the door to the cockpit.

"I am sorry, sir, but the cockpit is a restricted area for the passengers."

"I understand that, miss, but can you tell the Captain that Colonel Ritchie, of the Air Force, would like to talk to him?"

"I can certainly do that, Colonel." Said the stewardess, eyeing briefly the medal ribbons on his dress uniform before grabbing a telephone handset inside the kitchenette.

"Captain, this is Jennifer speaking. One of our passengers, Colonel Ritchie of the Air Force, wishes to speak with you... yes, right away, Captain."

The stewardess then smiled to Ritchie.

"You may enter the cockpit now, Colonel."

"Thank you, miss."

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