

HAPPY LANDINGS
by
Duncan James

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Luke Edwards was in a bit of a sweat, if he was honest.

Not that it was hot or anything, although it should have been, bearing in mind it was the end of August. But he was in a rush, and it was late on a Friday. Everyone else went home early for the weekend on Fridays. But not him. His editor had decided he desperately wanted photographs, and Luke was a photographer on the staff, so Luke got sent. His was a 24/7 job – that’s what they called it these days. None of this 9 till 5 stuff for him. He was on-call all the time. Accidents, fires, murders, VIPs, you name it – he got called out to get pictures for the paper, and to get them before anyone else got them for a rival paper.

So that’s why he was in a bit of a sweat.

It seemed to him that it had been raining for weeks. They said, whoever ‘they’ were, that it was the wettest August since records began, although nobody seemed quite sure when that was. But suddenly the river had burst its banks, as ‘they’ said it would, and the town was flooding, and there were people in rowing boats down the High Street, and the trains had stopped, and cars had been abandoned and everything.

“So get some pictures”, was the message.

Except that if the town was flooded, he couldn’t get into it, could he, he pointed out to his editor, looking at how near it was to going home time.

“I’ll fix that,” said the editor, grabbing the phone. “I’ll hire an aeroplane, and you can take pictures from the air. Much better!”

That was another reason Luke was in a bit of a sweat. He hated flying, and he just knew what was in store. The editor had done it to him before. There was a small private airfield not far out of town, and the editor knew someone who had one of those little aeroplanes which was parked there. Propeller at the front, wings on top, two seats and that was it. You know the sort.

“Perfect for air-to-ground photography,” claimed the editor. “The wings don’t get in the way of the view.”

Luke’s stomach churned at the very thought of it, but there was no escape.

“My chum’s aeroplane is not being used, so get there fast,” he was ordered, phone call over. “It’ll be on the end of the runway with the engine going by the time you arrive.”

‘Runway’ was a bit of a joke, too. It was a grass airstrip. But at least it wasn’t far from the flooded town or from the newspaper’s office. With any luck it would all be over in half an hour or so.

The Chief Photographer (he was actually the only one on the paper's staff) grabbed his bag of kit, hurried to the car park and drove off. It had been a nice day for a change, and he made good time.

Near the airstrip, there was a ludicrous road sign pointing to 'The Airport', with a pictogram of an aeroplane. Not only ludicrous, but quite un-necessary, as you could see it from the road. There was a collection of huts, one of which had a bit added to the roof to act as a control tower, an old red Landrover with a ladder and two fire extinguishers – a Health and Safety requirement, no doubt, - and that was about all. One of the huts, near the car park, grandly proclaimed itself to be a 'Flying Training School' where, for a hefty fee, you could be taught to fly. There were three or four small aircraft parked near the huts, and Luke noticed one on the edge of the grass with its door open and the engine running. His, no doubt.

He parked his car, grabbed his bag and ran to the aircraft, waving cheerily to a man in the control tower who was leaning out of the window. As Luke threw his bag into the plane and scrambled aboard, the man shouted something, which he didn't hear over the noise of the engine.

He slammed the door and climbed into the left-hand seat.

"Let's go," he shouted, as he did up his seat belt.

The pilot nodded and slowly taxied into wind.

"Get a move on," demanded the photographer. "I haven't got all day."

"You want me to take off?" asked the young man.

"What else."

The man revved up the engine, and trundled off across the grass. A bit bumpy and not very straight, Luke thought, but they eventually managed to get into the air just before reaching the hedge at the end of the field.

The little plane slowly climbed away from the field with its collection huts.

"Shouldn't we be turning towards the town?" asked Luke, "its over that way, I think." He jerked his thumb.

"I normally get to 5,000 feet before starting a turn," replied the pilot.

"We need to be lower than that," said Luke.

"If you say so," said the pilot, and very gingerly turned right. The town was on the left, but Luke thought that perhaps it was what they had to do because of the radar or something, so said nothing immediately.

"How low can you fly this thing?" asked Luke, eventually.

"5,000 feet normally, but if you want me to, I can try to go a bit lower."

"As low as you can," replied Luke. "I'll never get any decent pictures from this height."

The pilot looked across at him, and Luke noticed that he tightened his grip on the control column.

"Pictures?"

"That's right. Pictures."

"Why?"

"For the newspaper, that's why."

"Pictures of what?"

"The flooding in the town," replied Luke. "Didn't anybody brief you?"

"Not about pictures," said the pilot.

"Well, that's why I need to go low, over the town. For pictures of the floods."

"For the newspaper."

“Right”, said Luke, groping in his bag for his camera. “So let’s get over the town, low level, so I can get this job done and we can get home.”

There was silence for a bit, as the plane droned on.

“Are you a photographer then?” asked the pilot.

“Of course I’m a photographer.” Luke was getting a bit cross by now.

“For the newspaper?”

“The penny is dropping at last!”

“And you want me to fly low over the town?”

“Right again!”

More silence.

“The town’s over there,” said Luke, waving his thumb. “Let’s get over there, shall we. Then we can all go home. Once I’ve got some low level shots of the floods, my job’s done, and we can get back on the ground.”

The pilot looked across at Luke, in silence.

“You really are a newspaper photographer, are you?” he asked.

“Of course I bloody am! And you’ve been chartered to take me low level over the town, so let’s get this show on the road, shall we?”

Silence again.

“So if you’re a photographer,” said the pilot, after a time, “where’s my instructor?”

This time, it was Luke who was silent. A shocked silence.

“Instructor?”

“Instructor. I’m supposed to be having a lesson.”

“What sort of lesson?”

“A sort of ‘how-to-fly’ lesson”.

“What sort of ‘how-fly-lesson’ for heaven’s sake? You’re flying, aren’t you?”

Luke was beginning to feel a bit hysterical.

“Yes. But I’m not supposed to be. Not without an instructor, anyway.”

“But you’re a pilot, aren’t you?”

“Not really.”

“What do you mean, ‘not really’?”

“Well, I’m not qualified yet.”

“To do what?”

“To take passengers, for a start.”

“What can you do then?”

“Not a lot, really.”

“How many lessons have you had, then?”

“Three. This was to be my fourth.”

“What have they taught you to do, in these three lessons?”

“Things called ‘general familiarisation’ - that was the first – then ‘straight and level and left turns’ and, last week, ‘straight and level and right turns’.”

“Take-offs?”

“Haven’t done that yet,” replied the man.

“But you just did!”

“That was my first, but I’ve not had the lesson yet.”

Luke broke out into another sweat.

“I hardly dare ask this,” he said, “but what about landing this thing.”

“Lesson six, I think.” The young man frowned. “Or perhaps seven. I can’t remember.”

Silence.

“Is there a parachute on board?” asked Luke.

“I don’t think so. And if there was, you wouldn’t leave me up here on my own, would you?”

“I’d be very tempted.”

Silence again.

“This is typical of my Dad,” said Luke.

“Your Dad? What’s he got to do with it.”

“Never there when he was wanted, my Dad,” explained Luke.

“How could he have helped, then?”

“A real pilot, he was,” replied Luke. “No disrespect or anything, but he was in the RAF and flew proper aeroplanes.”

“What’s he doing now then?”

“Teaching angels to fly, I shouldn’t be surprised. He died two years ago.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said the pilot.

Luke looked across at the man.

“Cock this up, sunshine, and I could be introducing you in an hour or so.”

“Don’t make jokes like that. It doesn’t do my confidence any good. We’re in this together, remember.”

“Sorry,” said Luke. “No offence meant.”

“None taken,” said the pilot. “But I’m going to need your help if we’re to get out of this.”

“So what can I do?”

“For a start, keep your hands to yourself. I don’t want you twiddling knobs or turning switches on and off unless I ask you.”

“You’re in charge,” replied Luke.

“Right! Just remember that,” said the student, grandly. “I’m captain of this aircraft, and strictly speaking, I should be sitting in the left hand seat.”

“Let’s not change round now.”

“Of course not. But don’t forget you’re only a passenger, so you must do what I say and nothing else, - if you don’t mind.”

“You’re quite sure about the parachutes, are you?”

“Stop it!” demanded the pilot. “By the way, my name’s Harry. Harry Fowler.”

“Luke Edwards – but let’s shake hands later, if you don’t mind. I’d rather you kept yours on the controls at the moment.”

“Agreed,” said Harry.

“Is there a sick-bag, by the way?”

“No! If you’re ill, use your camera bag. Otherwise, you’ll spend the rest of the day cleaning up.”

“OK – only joking again. And I wouldn’t be joking if I wasn’t confident you were going to get us out of this mess,” lied Luke reassuringly.

“Thank you.”

“Let’s head for home, then, shall we?” suggested Luke.

There was a pause.

“I’m not exactly sure which way that is,” replied Harry.

“Don’t tell me we’re lost as well!”

“Pilots never get lost,” replied Harry. “It’s just that I am temporally unsure of where we are.”

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