

Chicken Run

It was my first trip as 2nd Cook & Baker aboard the M.V. Salmela. I'd flown in to join the ship in Rotterdam and we were bound for Noumea in New Caledonia.

The trip went fine for me until twodays before Panama. I was below deck in the cooling room slicing bacon for the next day's breakfastand daydreaming. I then noticed that there was blood on the sliced bacon. „Strange“ I thought, „bacon doesn't fuckin bleed“. Then the pain hit me. I'd sliced off the tip of my thumb and was bleeding like a pig. I ran above to the Chief Steward who bandaged it for me. The pain killing tablets that we had aboard were pretty mild and didn't help very much. I was really glad to get to Cristobal.

After lunch (chicken) I was taken ashore to see the Doc in the Clinic. He asked what had happened and started to fumble about on my thick blood encrusted bandage. Between gasps of pain I asked him to leave off my thumb and told him what had happened. He then produced a bottle of peroxide and poured the stuff over my bandage telling me that the bandage must come off and that it wouldn't hurt. He was right, I'd never experienced anything like it before, the bandage practically dissolved off my thumb....and it didn't hurt. „Black magic, fuckin voodoo or something like it „, I thought.

He continued examining my thumb, then said I needed a penicillin injection. I okayed. He then explained that I needed a double shot. Not realising the situation I okayed again. Then he explained that for medical reasons he'd have to give me the double shot in one injection. „ Oh fuck...“ I thought, „this's going to be a real pain in the arse“, and reluctantly okayed again. After the nightmare injection (the needle was as long but not as thin as Cleopatra's Needle) which took a lifetime, the Doc asked where we were bound for. I told him we were heading for New Caledonia. Hearing that the trip would take around three weeks, he told me that I must go home as I couldn't be without proper medical attention for so long.

Back aboard Captain was very „happy“ with me after I told him that I had to go home. He read the Doc's line then after a wee bit of ranting, raving and cursing (or the other way round), he said that I should pack my bags. Shortly afterwards the Agent arrived with a taxi and took me to a hotel where I spent the night. After breakfast he arrived again with a taxi and brought me to the railway station. There, he gave me my Discharge book and a ticket to Panama City, telling me that someone would meet me there.

Apart from the pain in my a... (penicillin shot) and in my thumb it, was a wonderful experience travelling alongside the canal and watching the ships, instead of sailing through it. The journey must have taken about 2 hours as we stopped at every farm on the way. In Panama City I was met by a taxi driver who drove me to a „foreigners compound“ on the edge of the jungle. The manager told me that I would have to stay until my flight the next day. Otherwise I was free to come and go as I pleased. As they had been expecting me, he had asked the cook to put aside a meal. He then showed me my quarters, a two bed room in a large hut with a spacious verandah. Afterwards I went to the canteen and was given my lunch of chicken and rice. I spent the afternoon relaxing and having a look around. After dinner I spent the evening on the verandah chatting with two American sailors and watching the fireflies darting around. After breakfast I was driven by taxi to the airport where I was met by another ship's agent. He gave me my flight tickets to Edinburgh via Miami and London. He also told me that I would be met in Miami. During the flight the passengers were given a light chicken meal. The landing in Miami was one of the hardest, bumpiest I'd ever experienced. The wheels hit the ground so hard and so many times that I wasn't sure anymore if we were landing or taking off. I wondered if the pilot was related to Jimmy (Flight of the Pheonix) Stewart, the film actor.

After disembarking there was no one there to meet me, so I joined the queue at the Immigration. When it was my turn to go through I showed the Officer my passport (I thought that it might be better than my Discharge Book as it had been stamped in Panama whilst leaving the American zone). I explained to him that I was on my way home to Scotland after having had an accident aboard my ship. Amazingly (remembering past formalities to get a shore pass on previous trips) he let me through. I then, despite the long queues, managed to quickly get through the Customs and heard my name being called over the loudspeaker.

I went to the desk and was met by another ship's agent with an Immigration officer. I said that I'd already been through Immigration and Customs. The Immigration man said that I would have to go through again as I'd illegally entered the USA. I also had to submit my Passport which, I was told, would be given back to me when I boarded my flight to London.

It took me two long lousy hours to get through Immigration and Customs again (my arse and my thumb were hurting) as I had to join the end of the long queue. The Customs were very fussy this time and had everyone open their baggage. Two men in another queue, on their way to Madrid, were taken away by Customs officers as they had plants, wrapped in newspaper, in their suitcases. Eventually I too was through and spent the next hours sightseeing Miami until my evening flight.

In the evening I boarded my flight to London. I should have known better than to wait upon being called upon for my Passport. I waited and waited. Nothing happened. As they were closing the aircraft doors I called a stewardess and asked about my passport. She said that she would have to ask the Chief Stewardess. She came back a few minutes later and asked me to wait whilst the Captain cleared the situation. About twenty minutes later the main aircraft door was opened and I received my passport. Pity that BOAC doesn't exist any more, very good service. We were given a

chicken dinner, „if it keeps on like that,“ I thought „I soon won` t be needing a plane to fly,“ that evening. After a turbulent flight we made an easy landing in Heathrow.

I managed through the Immigration and Customs quickly, without fuss and caught my flight to Edinburgh. The inflight meal was – chicken (I could feel the feathers starting to grow and didn` t speak in case I crowed). From Edinburgh (no one there to meet me, Salvesen`s later told me that they didn` t know when to expect me) I travelled home by bus and train, no meals there.

My mother was delighted, telling me that, although she did not know of my accident and that no one had been in touch with her, she had had a strong premonition that I would be coming home that day, and as the next day would be my birthday, she had been shopping and had bought a special **surprise meal**.....chicken.

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