FLYING FOR LIVES

Chris McLaughlin introduces **www.flight4lives.com** and explains how his own illness turned into a quest to help save lives through flight.

You never know where life is going to take you. So far, it had worked out well.

I was in my 21st year with BA in the left seat of the Boeing 747-400. Then in the spring of 2009, a stomach issue led to blood tests and I was told that I had had hepatitis C for about 30 years. Yikes! Dr Chris Tibbs at the Royal Surrey Hospital said I would need a six- to nine-month course of medication to try to eradicate it.

Dr Jonathan Sackier wrote in his Flywell column in *AOPA Pilot*, October 2011, 'The "hepa" part means liver and "itis" signifies inflammation, so hepatitis implies liver swelling, here caused by a sneaky virus conveyed in several ways: from mother to foetus; via blood donation; sexually; sharing a toothbrush or razor with an infected individual; obtaining non-sterile tattoos and piercings; or from illicit intravenous drug use, although many patients have no obvious source of infection.'

Dr Sackier's concern in writing about it was that, 'Hepatitis C is a slow, subtle and very nasty beast and if the math works out, roughly 7,000 AOPA members unknowingly carry this virus.'

That is 7,000 out of 400,000 members – or 1.5% of the population. How many BALPA members is 1.5%? They only developed a test for hepatitis C in 1992, which is before they discovered hepatitis D & E.

The drug regimen, while gruelling to some, was OK for me so my private pilot and BA purser wife Corrine and I did a US coast-to-coast trip in our Cessna 172XP in the autumn of 2009.

Then, on Valentine's Day 2010, I awoke at 6am and shuffled into the bathroom where I threw up a little blood. We had family coming for lunch so I figured I would deal with it after a couple more hours' sleep. When I next got up, I collapsed.

A massive haemorrhage ensued and Dr Tibbs worked for many hours to save my life. I am only here today because of him.

Touch and go

For two months I was in and out of a coma, having suffered total liver and kidney failure. I was then taken to King's College Hospital, London, which is the world's largest specialist liver transplant unit, and Corrine was told that I had two weeks to live.

On day 14, a suitable organ became available and I received my new liver. By now I had been in bed for two months and would be for another two. Then I had to learn how to walk again. My weight had dropped to 130lbs from 230lbs.

My career looked over, but I was alive, unlike so many. One organ donor can save eight lives and improve up to 75 others, yet there are not enough donors. One thousand Britons and 500 Canadians die each year, as do 18 Americans per day, all because we have not thought about it. You WILL save life and it is free. We worry about recycling plastic and glass yet we do not recycle life. Why let bugs eat something that could give life to people?

So what to do, with everything in tatters? Why not fly the little plane a stupidly long way in support of organ donation? If I was going to lose my Jumbo, I would make the 172 into the Jumbo. It lives on Cape Cod. East or west meant oceans. North is too cold. That left south; Cape Cod to Cape Horn.

So Corrine got me a map of South America and I found a pen about as long as a 49-gallon tank of gas and sure enough, it looked possible. People nodded politely and changed

the subject when I brought up this flight. By now I had cracked my femur and two ribs because of my bones losing density during the coma, but bit by bit it all came together before the urge to go to the Falklands finally consumed me. At 400 miles offshore, only an idiot would go there in a 172.

Press coverage

From Nantucket, we flew down to Florida and through the Caribbean. We crossed to Guyana and then down the coast, all the while getting plenty of press as we talked about the organ donation problem. Our angle was that we were doing this 23,000-mile flight in the wrong aeroplane, but then it would not have been fun in a capable aeroplane. Most of the flying took place below 1,000 feet as we danced among flocks of scarlet ibis, elephant seals and penguins lining the beaches. We were now heading from the Roaring Forties into the Furious Fifties.

Here are some extracts from our blogs on the website:

'We were beginning to see dust storms all around us. Our ETA to Rio Gallegos was going up, and there were no alternates at all. San Julian tower were not answering, Santa Cruz was closed and there had been no radio contact with anyone since Comodoro Rivadavia, so with a phone signal I texted a friend Martin in Buenos Aires for the latest weather. He replied that the wind was 320/22 gusting 38 for runway 25.

'So, no options, a crosswind on limits, and the sky was increasingly looking menacing. UFO-like lenticular clouds lay ahead of us. The landscape became almost lunar. I took the executive decision to just head direct to Rio Gallegos over the water so our speed would rise back to 110 knots and we would not waste fuel.

'Even though only miles offshore, we were still more than gliding distance from it and the sea was angry. The enormity of what we have decided to do really dawned on us for the first time. Tomorrow, we fly for 300 miles over this. Corrine fell silent and after what seemed like an eternity, we again made landfall. Rio Gallegos answered our call, the winds were now down the pipe at a mere 20 knots, so the whole thing became a non-event.

'Friends Jose and Juan met us and showed us the hangar where Blue Jay will spend the night. Built in 1929, it was used by Antoine de St Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince* and pioneering air mail pilot. I hoped that some of his presence might rub off on us for tomorrow.

'We are now further south than London is north and only a short hop from Tierra del Fuego and Cape Horn. But the 800 miles across the South Atlantic in between will prove to be the real challenge of this journey.'

Flying into Stanley

'The next day broke with high overcast and light winds, harmless enough for Patagonia. We hadn't slept much and after a tiny breakfast, we were picked up by Juan, a LAN Argentina Airbus mechanic. Despite dire warnings the day before about customs and immigration, the Argentines treat a flight to Stanley as a domestic one. This was how it would be for us too, so it was just a matter of some photocopies and a flight plan. Simple, right?

'Then they asked for the number of our satphone and whether we had HF. Uh oh. "Sure we do and, um, we'll phone you later," as we ran to the plane and started the engine. Before they would let us taxi, we had to do an HF radio check on 5499. So we sat for several minutes while I played with a variety of knobs, mostly the ADF, in case the tower had binoculars, and came back with, "Unable, maybe it'll work when airborne." They replied, "OK, cleared to taxi."

'So we had gone from nervous about going, to being nervous about not going, to relief that we were nervous again about going. We took off, turned east, watching the coastline disappear behind us and, as we climbed, the tailwind that we had expected began to appear. We had about 40 knots, so three hours to Stanley and two hours to landfall.

'Then the satphone and HF thing began again. Approach passed us to Comodoro Centre who wanted us to call them on satphone. I gave them our iPhone number and truthfully told them that we were receiving a "call failed" message every time we rang. It killed lots of time going back and forth like this and we relayed the only position report through another airliner, so quite what the problem was, we'll never know.

'At about the halfway point, we began to hear Island Radar call us, although with our little radios they could not yet hear us. Eventually, they could. Soon thereafter, Eagle One and Two called us to confirm our altitude. We looked out the left window and saw an RAF Typhoon, nose pointing skyward to match our slow speed, glide slowly by us a few hundred yards away. "Welcome to the Falklands," he cheerily said as he lit the burners and disappeared with Eagle Two blasting by seconds later.

'My whole flying life could be boiled down and the essence of it would be these few moments.'

Something crazy

Further tales and pictures can be found at our website, **www.flight4lives.com**, as well as links to either register as an organ donor or donate money to King's College Hospital who saved my life and the lives of countless others. And this was the purpose of the trip: to do something really crazy in a tiny little plane, and hopefully get people to think about organ donation and that maybe a quick test for hepatitis might be good next time you do a proper physical. I wish I could have dealt with this before it almost wiped me out.

You really never know where life is going to take you. Despite the horrors of what happened, the further surgery that I need and issues that will be with me for the rest of my life, this trip would not have happened if I had not fallen sick and I really would not have missed it for anything, so I guess in some kind of weird way it was all worth it.

But you know what? Do not waste a second. As the saying goes, this is not a dress rehearsal.

And how about we treat life like we would an empty water bottle? ■

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