



Born in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, Richard Landreville has been an jumbo jet airline pilot, musician, actor and CEO of three international companies.

Misadventures is a true story. Believe it or not.

He has broken his back twice and has cheated death more times than a proverbial cat.

You will find yourself holding your breath as you take the roller coaster ride from one adventure to the next.

From the province of Quebec in Canada to the African deserts, Richard has seen many diverse living conditions and come face to face with danger.

On one hand, Richard has lived a life of near poverty while playing music and acting in his theatre group, while on the other hand he has tasted the finest food and rubbed shoulders with the Who's Who as a Check pilot for international airline companies.

Richard has finished his second book The Four Musketeers and is working on a screenplay of his children's theatre piece The Enchanted Saxophone.

So, buckle up and enjoy the ride.

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Misadventures Of An Escape Artist

Richard Landreville



The Misadventures of An Escape Artist

By Richard Landreville

From an orderly, to a musician, to a jumbo jet pilot,
The biography of a man who took a leap of faith.



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The biography of a man who took a leap of faith.

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Preface

To you who have taken the time to read my story and for those of you who can read between the lines, greetings and salutations.

I have lived a charmed life, doing almost everything I wanted to do. Sure, I have suffered a few disappointments, but nothing that made me tumble so low to not be able to get up again and to amaze even me.

I consider myself a rational person. However, there have been times in both my personal and professional life when my inner wild child has ruled the roost.

My protagonist is named Antoine because of my fascination with the hero, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. He was the author of *The Little Prince*, the pilot and writer who was born in June, 1900 and died in flight over the Mediterranean in 1944.

A brief history of me, I am the oldest of three boys, born in the Eastern Townships in the province of Quebec. I must have been born under a shooting star as I have been successful in all that I wanted to accomplish, without working too hard.

Throughout my life I have always told myself, “Rather than becoming very good at one thing, one job, I decided to be middling at everything.”

Life is short, so enjoy, have fun, kick up those heels.

I have worked as a hired hand, day labourer, musician, actor, jet airline pilot, entrepreneur and even as CEO of my own three international companies.

I was fortunate enough to start my aviation career when flight regulations were not yet strictly enforced.

Planes flew overloaded, poorly maintained and in dangerous weather conditions.

On the other hand, I was able to go through experiences and meet people I would never have the chance to get to know today.

So, ladies and gentlemen this is your captain speaking...

Place yourself in a comfortable position and fasten your seatbelts.

Was this a stroke of luck?

I have been an airplane pilot for more than thirty years. For the last sixteen, I was flying jumbo jets. At the beginning of 2014, I was a captain on an Airbus 330, I had a nearly perfect life. I was well paid, enjoying life to its fullest and the world was at my feet. I rubbed shoulders with fascinating people and provided lavishly for my family. I was handsome, slim, and tall, in my early fifties.

On the evening of 11th February, I received a call from my superior Marc Gilbert, the Chief Pilot at Air Mirabel. Would I interview potential new pilots for the airline the next morning? In the past, I had always stubbornly refused to do these interviews for the company, but Captain Gilbert told me that they were

really overrun. I told him that I would make an exception this time. He told me that the first interview would be at 8:00 am.

The building where the interview took place housed offices for the chief pilots, check pilots and flight dispatchers. The airplane repair hangar, company's engineering department, as well as the mechanical department were also in the same complex.

In the interview room, along with myself there was a representative from human resources and the chief pilot of Airbus 310 Captain Réjean.

The interview had no sooner begun when suddenly I began to feel strange. I excused myself and headed for the bathroom.

I had no idea what was happening. I tried to vomit, with no avail. I decided to go back and continue with the interview. Once again, this strange feeling overcame me, so I returned to the bathroom.

I didn't realize that I was having a stroke.

Of which I have no recall.

No image, no sound, no smell.

After waiting a period of time for me to return, Captain Réjean went to see what was happening and found me lying on the floor. He ran to get the security guard who called an ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, I apparently asked them to take me to the Jewish General Hospital.

While I was in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, my heart stopped.

When I arrived at the emergency department, the neurosurgeon and his team were waiting for me. With the information from the paramedics, the doctors had already diagnosed my condition: A cerebral vascular event or in other words, a stroke.

I was rushed into the operating room where the surgeon quickly cut through my parietal and temporal bones, in an attempt to stop the bleeding that had started in the left region of my brain, the area controlling motor skills, comprehension and vision.

The operation lasted six hours. Once again, my heart stopped and they had to revive me before resuming the procedure. I spent two days in a coma before regaining consciousness. The surgeon had no hope for my chance of rehabilitation, let alone survival.

Air Alma

So, there I was, lying in the back of an ambulance after suffering from the near fatal brain bleed of a stroke. An event that I have no memory of.

Did my life flash before me like a TV rerun? I don't know, I can't remember.

After I finished school, my life took many directions. I went from being an orderly in a mental hospital, to working on a Christmas tree farm. I installed alarm

systems alongside my father, to earn enough money to go to flight school. I performed as an actor and became an accomplished musician. I got married, had two sons and was a pilot for an international airline for thirty years.

I'm twenty-eight-years-old and co-piloting the eight passenger Piper Navajo prop plane for Air Alma. Captain Marc Goeman is an experienced older pilot. The flight is between Bonaventure and Alma, two small towns in the north-eastern part of the province of Quebec. The plane is transporting six engineers returning home after working in the Baie-des-Chaleur region. The Gaspé Peninsula is a very scenic area bordering the mountains near the mouth of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The flight took place in the early evening in December, in a snowstorm covering most of the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick.

The take-off has been smooth and uneventful and we have reached our cruising altitude of 8,000 ft. We are heading in a westerly direction over the Chic-Choc Mountain range, which starts from the Gaspé Peninsula descending southwards into the Appalachian Mountains and continuing into the state of Georgia.

After cruising a few minutes at this altitude, all electrical systems on the plane suddenly shut down. But since we know there is a back-up system, Captain Marc and I are not overly concerned.

The artificial horizon, speedometer and altimeter are still operating and the compass is able to give the flight direction.

The artificial horizon indicator will enable us to fly the plane in a straight line, to climb, descend, turn right and left, without ground visibility. We have turned on our flashlights in order to see the instrument panel. But there are no instruments functioning to guide the Piper to an airport and a safe landing.

Assuming that the electrical back-up system would eventually kick in, we remain calm. Once the system is up and running, we would regain our navigation. But when we try to activate the back-up system, nothing happens. So, we try again. Again, the system doesn't light up.

We look at each other.

It is not possible to descend to a lower altitude, for fear of flying into the top of a mountain. But flying in our present direction also presents the same problem, because of the lack of visibility caused by the snow. We realise that the chances of a safe descent was becoming less and less of a possibility.

Landing safely was quickly becoming a pipe dream, literally a wish and a prayer away.

After a few moments of careful thought and by keeping our composure, we devise a plan. With the help of our magnetic compass, we will veer 180 degrees and turn towards the sea. Once over the ocean, we can always start to descend without coming into contact with obstacles on the ground.



Heading towards the shore, we notice a faint light filtering through the clouds. Usually outside an aircraft there is total darkness when flying over mountains. And we are flying over the sparsely populated Gaspé Peninsula. The distant light is a sure sign that we are near a town on the east side of the Chic-Chocs. This means that we're above the Baie-des-Chaleurs, which opens onto the Gulf of St Lawrence and the North Atlantic.

We might be safe to descend.

Finally, a glimmer of hope.

But we are not out of the woods yet.

Slowly and carefully, we begin our descent, hoping to see the lights in the distance on the ground. We descend gradually and at about 500 feet, the town lights are finally in sight and the horizontal visibility is good. We are facing New Brunswick when we break through the

clouds. There is an airport in Bathurst that has 24-hour landing lights. However, without the navigation charts deciphering its whereabouts, we are literally in the dark.

It is often the case in many of the small airports that the runway lights are turned off to save electricity. In order to turn the landing lights on, the pilot has a radio frequency for this situation. The pilot presses or clicks the microphone three times within five seconds and the lights come on for ten minutes, just enough time to land or take off. If the pilot needs extra time, a simple click of the microphone will turn the lights back on.

But we have no radio!

We decide to make another 180° turn and head back towards the province of Quebec. Arriving on the Gaspésie coast, we are approaching a village called Chandler, recognizable by an illuminated tower. The next town to the west is Bonaventure, the town we had taken off from a half hour earlier.

We agree it is our best shot.

Flying over the city, we are trying to find a road to land on. The plane will be likely be a casualty, but we and our passengers would have a fighting chance.



Bonaventure runs along the shoreline and the town lights are giving us a view of possible roads. But the cables and phone poles which litter the streets greatly hamper any chance of a safe landing.

Now we are going to try and land on the frozen waterfront of the shoreline. Hell, the coast is packed with blocks of ice several meters thick, so no smooth surfaces. The pitch darkness is making it impossible to go further inland to find a makeshift runway. Landing out past the shoreline is now the next option. I have always been a water baby, but landing in the freezing sea is a bit too much of a stretch even for this merman.

Suddenly we notice that the lights of the Bonaventure airport runway are on. This is serendipitous, as only a handful of aircraft would take off and land at night out of this little town.

We lower the landing gear as quickly as possible. Without electricity, the landing gear needs to be pumped using a hydraulic apparatus. Usually after fifteen to twenty pumps the landing gear will deploy and then be locked and secured in place. But even after fifty pumps the landing gear still doesn't seem secure. There is a small mirror on the left engine which allows us to see if the nose wheel is down. We can see the wheel in the mirror, but don't know if it is locked in the landing position.

We watch as a plane takes off and then disappears into the clouds.

As we fly towards the runway, the lights go out. We now know where the runway was in relation to the airport beacon. The runway is 120 feet above sea level and 6000 feet in length. Knowing this and other crucial landing facts we decide to go on a long final and try to land. Slowly and with extreme caution, we descend into the darkness.

This will be the moment of brutal truth.

But son of a bitch, *it's a no go*.

The tops of the trees are brushing against the fuselage.

We repeat a long descent a second time and realise that a crash is most likely eminent.

Will we be third time lucky?

We are going to make a low pass over the control tower. So, with full power, we hope that someone will know that our Piper is in trouble.

Call it fate, luck or a miracle, a mechanic happens to be working on a plane in a hanger. Hearing the Piper's engines and not seeing any light in the sky, he realised that there could be a plane in trouble, so he turned on the runway lights. We immediately make our last approach. Having no clue if the landing gear is safely locked in place, we tell our passengers to prepare for a crash landing by putting their head between their legs.

And to kiss their asses goodbye.

Humour always!

The landing gear has in fact been secured and the wheels touch down smoothly. We taxi towards the airplane parking area as if nothing has occurred.

After deplaning the passengers, I contact Montreal Area Control to inform them of the incident that had taken place on that stormy December evening. Forty-five minutes previous, this air traffic controller had watched our Piper's call sign disappear from her ATC radar screen.

She immediately burst into tears upon hearing of our safe return.

After a careful examination of the Piper Navajo, the reason for the instrument failure was evident. The battery had melted in half like a piece of ice in the noonday sun. It was the wrong type of battery for the Piper. We could have easily ended up in a fireball midflight. We also discovered that the chief engineer had removed the back-up electrical system from the plane because it had been problematic. It was actually illegal to fly that airplane.

Flying for Air Alma

In August, 1980, from the age of twenty, I worked two years as a flight instructor. But the money was not nearly enough to support my lifestyle. I closed the door on my aviation career and opened the door to the entertainment world.

I spent many successful years working as a musician and actor.

After seven years on the ground, I once again heeded the call from the wild blue yonder and so I had to repeat my flight instrument test. I passed the written exam, but the next part was actual flight training.

My instructor was a grizzled old pilot named Roger Menard. He had been working as a pilot and flight instructor for Transport Canada for thirty years.

I needed to take twenty hours of flight lessons in order to get my licence up to date. The plane was a Seneca II and it was old and just about ready for the junk yard, but it served the purpose.

At long last I was ready to take the Transport Canada flight test.



Seneca II



IFR blinders

I would be practicing ‘blind flying’ (flying the plane without any outside visibility). I would only be viewing the instruments located on the control panel, since I would be wearing a helmet with an IFR blinder visor that hid the side view.

This exercise allows the pilot to approach the runway in low visibility, as well as practicing being in a holding pattern. Often a plane needs to wait its turn to approach the runway. This usually involves flying away from a fixed aerial point for one minute, then turning 180 degrees and returning to that point. The pilot needs to do this until the air traffic controller gives the go ahead to

leave the holding pattern and carry out the approach to the runway.

After passing my written and practical tests with Transport Canada, with CV in hand I set off to visit small airplane companies in the province of Quebec. After two weeks I had an interview with the chief pilot of Air Alma. I was hired as co-pilot for two of their twin-engine aircrafts, the Cessna 404 Titan and the Piper Navajo.

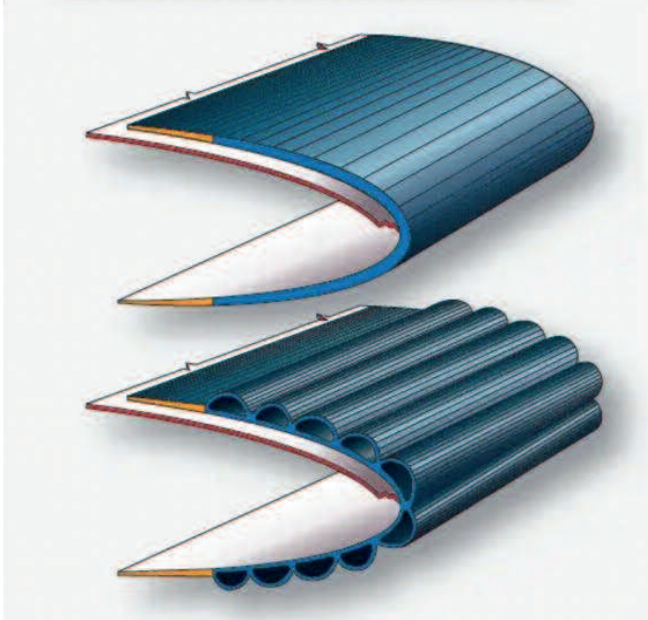
After discovering that my license was only valid for six months, the Air Alma Chief Pilot said that, had he known this before, he never would have hired me. Transport Canada often grants a new pilot a six-month flight permit, to be reassessed after this period, instead of a one-year licence.

My training on the two aircraft took place in October and by the end of November, I was a professional commercial pilot, with a decent paying job.

My first flight as a co-pilot was in a Cessna 404, flying between Montreal and Alma. The following morning, I flew the Piper Navajo for the first time. The pilots I flew with were the well-worn Captain Gaudet and Captain Demontigny. Both had been with Air Alma for a while and seemed content not to move on to larger airports and bigger planes.

They were great teachers and as a result of their guidance I became a better pilot. I learned how to fly in difficult weather conditions like ice, freezing rain and low visibility. This is important to know, as in the larger planes the front part of the wing is heated to prevent ice from forming. The wing tip needs to be ice free in order to gain lift, the force that holds the plane in flight. But

smaller airplanes are fitted with inflatable de-icing boots. These pads are glued to the wing tips and are fashioned with inflatable rubber chambers that fill with air to break any ice build-up on the wing tips.



Captains Demontigny and Gaudet had shown me that timing was key in using this system. Too late and the ice would be too thick to break. Too soon and the system would not have the power to work to its full capacity. Our elders have a bank of knowledge and it would do us all good to make a withdrawal from time to time.

Losing control on take-off

I am now a captain, a flight commander on a Piper Navajo, as well as on a Cessna 404. I was soon to learn a valuable lesson that would serve me throughout my life as a pilot.

I took off from Alma airport in difficult weather conditions, in a pelting rainstorm. There was a low ceiling, with the cloud layer only 200 feet above the ground. The plane didn't have a working autopilot, so after take-off I needed to keep my eye on the artificial horizon to ensure the plane was flying at a 15-degree pitch angle. As the plane ascended quickly into the clouds, I had to keep checking to see that the 15-degree pitch was being maintained. I foolishly decided to glance at the instrument panel on the right side to see that everything was ok.

This was a colossal mistake.

Looking back at the artificial horizon, I saw that the plane was hurtling towards the ground. Panicking, I pulled the controls towards myself for a fast ascent back to proper altitude. I missed crashing the plane into the ground by a mere few feet. This was the first and last time I lost control of an aircraft. Control is first and foremost. Then, and only then, can you assess a problem and take the necessary steps to address the situation.

Engine temperature in the red

Six months after that near fatal mistake, I was flying solo towards Kuujjuarapik village next to the Nunavut in the Hudson Bay in northern Quebec. I was transporting cases of machinery parts to a company in urgent need of this equipment. There were no passengers on board, so no need for a co-pilot.

In those days, many small airline companies did not respect the rules concerning maximum weight and temperature limits for their aircraft. The Navajo had a lower temperature limit of -35°F . Yet some small airlines in Quebec demanded that their pilots fly at even lower temperatures. Today these regulations are followed to the letter by most countries.



Navajo PA-31 aircraft

I had been in the air for two hours when I noticed that the temperature of the engines were in the red zone. In

other words, I was headed for a complete engine melt down. I realised that if I were to crash in this wilderness, there would be a good chance I would not be found alive. The outside temperature was -55° F and the engines were not to be used under -35° F.

I was far from any airport and my home base was hours away. The radio frequencies from Transport Canada were out of range. There was an HF radio on the plane, the same system used by pilots and the navy to contact traffic control centres across the Atlantic and Pacific, when they are more than one or two hours away from the nearest land.

I contacted the chief mechanic who informed me that the oil from the engines had frozen and that I needed to reduce my engine power and my flying speed to a few knots above the stall speed.

The mechanic told me to use full flaps, with lowered landing gear, which would reduce the airspeed and increase the pitch angle. This step would alleviate the frigid -55° F air hitting the oil pan and freezing the oil. Without this oil the unlubricated engine pistons rub directly against the metal cylinders, overheating them until they melt down.

Now with the lowered air speed, the heat from the engine could defrost the oil. In less than five minutes, the engine temperature dropped to normal and I continued my flight without incident.

Saving a life in Parent

It was nighttime and I received a call to fly to a tiny village in the north part of the Province of Quebec. The town of Parent had a population of two hundred, with no hospital or airport. I would be picking up a seriously ill child and transporting him to the nearest hospital in La Tuque, which was a six-hour drive from Parent.

Air transport was basically the only solution for a chance of survival for this remotely located medical emergency.

Because of the situation of the village and its location, a navigational aid was only a pilot's wet dream. The region was surrounded by vast expanses of forest and lakes.

The makeshift runway was a one-kilometer road, with two flaming barrels of oil at both ends.

It was a gorgeous starry night and the flight was smooth. Unfortunately, no copilots were available and I did not want to fly there solo. So Jacques Simard, the president of the airline, agreed to accompany me on this journey. He was a flight mechanic, not a pilot, but he was my security blanket on this dangerous journey.

The child was about six or seven and we quickly tucked him, his mother and the nurse safely on board the Navajo. We took off for La Tuque airport where an ambulance was waiting to take the sick child to the hospital.

The next day we returned to Parent, with a real co-pilot, the now recuperating child, his mother and the nurse.

On final approach I noticed a rather high hill. It hadn't been there the night before while landing in the darkness. Or had it?

We must have missed it by only a few feet.

Luck, that ultimate trickster, has a way of toying with our lives.

Who the hell forgot to close the luggage door?

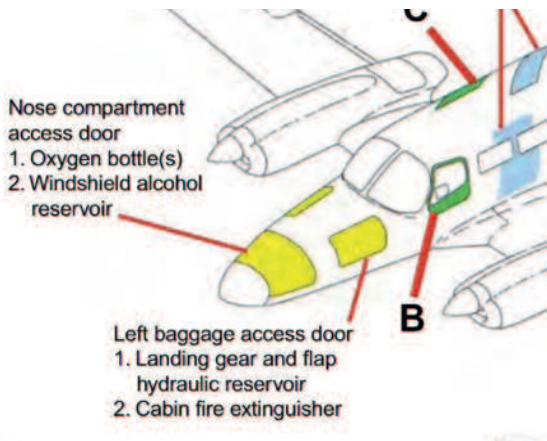
During the winter, while on our regular evening flight schedule between Alma, Roberval and Montreal, a frightening incident occurred. We had left Alma for Roberval, to pick up additional passengers for the final leg to Montreal. The co-pilot left his seat to welcome the additional passengers. Sitting behind me on the first passenger seat was the head of the flight school where I had trained as a pilot eight years before.

My co-pilot put the passengers' luggage in the hold, which was in the nose of the aircraft. The baggage compartment opened upwards like a trunk. He placed the luggage in the hold and closed the compartment door but forgot to fasten the latch.



Cessna 404

The co-pilot returned to his seat. I started both engines and positioned us for takeoff. Acceleration was perfect but at the moment of lift-off, the baggage compartment door swung open. It was at a 90-degree angle to the wind, so it wasn't immediately torn off its hinges. I realized that if the door came off, it could easily fly into the engine or the plane's rear stabilizer and send us crashing to the ground.



I immediately reduced the thrust of the engines to lower the speed, without stalling the plane. I climbed to a safe altitude of 2,500 feet

It was clear that we needed to return to Roberval to land. Despite the low visibility and bad weather, I made a slow 180 degree turn to try another full instrument approach at slow speed, hoping not to lose the baggage door on our return to the runway.

We had to fly ten miles away from the airport and return on a long final following the instrument approach in the snow. I finally saw the runway. We landed and went back to the parking zone, killed the engines and I finally caught my breath.

Checking on the baggage compartment, we saw that the plane had not been damaged in any way. So, we were able to resume our flight now that the baggage door was secure and locked. While I taxied our plane back to the runway, my flight school instructor Mr. Mathieu leaned forward behind me and congratulated me on a job well done.

I could not stop grinning!

Rain, rain, go away

In February 1989 I began my training as a co-pilot on Embraer 110. This twin engine aircraft is powered by two PT-6 turbines. The plane is not pressurized, so it is flown between a six and ten-thousand-foot altitude. The airline had never ordered the optional weather radar and so avoiding a thunderstorm was hit and miss, as pilots need an in-depth knowledge of cloud formation.

Eventually I made my first flight with passengers on the Embraer 110.



Embraer 110

We were cruising at an altitude of seven thousand feet, in and out of heavy rain. Suddenly we entered an extremely violent storm cloud and were sucked up into it.

The captain began to push down on the controls in order to stop the plane from climbing. At the same time, he shouted at me to reduce the throttle as we were exceeding the maximum speed.

As I had already reduced the engine power, the captain did not seem to understand the situation. The plane was climbing at an alarming speed.

Suddenly we were out of the storm clouds and into a bright blue sunny sky.

We were not in Kansas anymore!

Before getting caught in the storm our altitude was seven thousand feet, heading southwest. After emerging through the thundercloud, we were at an altitude of seventeen thousand feet, heading northeast.

At seventeen thousand feet there is less air and it is hard to breathe, so we descended rapidly to our initial altitude.

Thankfully all the passengers happened to be in their seats with their seatbelts fastened.

From Sept-Îles airport to Conakry

I continued to fly for Air Alma until my final flight February 1990.

Three weeks later I was in Guinée West Africa.

I had been offered the job by one of my co-workers at Air Alma.

As luck would have it for me, this pilot did not have the flight hours needed for the job.

He gave my name to the recruiter, who arranged to meet me at Montreal airport the following evening, on the tarmac next to my Cessna 404.

There was a snowstorm, but I was used to inclement weather.

The recruiter was the mechanic from the African based company. He was about sixty years old, short, with a dad belly, a smiling face and brown eyes. Like me, he was French-Canadian.

After greeting me he said, "If you can fly in this weather, you can surely fly in Africa".

The following week I received a twenty-page contract.

Signed and sealed, I arrived in Africa where I would earn three times my Canadian salary.

Arrival in Africa

Now in Guinée, West Africa, I was the only pilot for AREDOR.

The plane was used for flights between the capital of Conakry and the village of Gbenko, the site of a major diamond mine.

In Gbenko I had a stone house provided by the company. Only pilots and foreign mine workers lived in stone houses. All the rest were mud huts.

In Conakry I always stayed at the gorgeous seaside Novotel hotel, facing Îles de Los Island. I can still remember the taste of the amazing gambas that I so enjoyed eating.



Gambas

Guinée was one of the poorest countries in Africa, despite its immense resources of minerals.

There were no tourists in the region and less than ten white Europeans living in the capital. However, in Gbenko, because of the diamond mine, there were about fifty foreign workers living with their families.

Gbenko produced high-quality, unusually large diamonds. It had a diamond reserve of about five hundred million carats.



The Guinée Star

The Guinée Star was an 89.01-carat diamond, D color, flawless with a rare, shield shaped cut. It is a combination of all these rare characteristics that made the Guinée Star diamond one of most famous in the world.



Cessna 404

I made my first five Cessna 404 flights with Captain Macron, between Conakry GUCY and Gbenko GUGO airports. I was surprised to learn that I was here to replace her, a slim, short thirty-year-old French woman, who was very difficult to get along with.

She had been fired for reasons best left unknown.

Madame Macron was furious that I had arrived to replace her.

The Cessna 404 plane that I flew was maintained by Jean-Francois Le Gault, the mechanic who had hired me. He had been living in Gbenko for several years with his wife. He was to become an important person in my life.



Flights with M. Conté

My first flight with my trainee co-pilot Monsieur Conté, was quite eventful. He was a forty-year-old man from the Toma tribe, a colonel in the Guinéen army, with shaved black hair and a round face. This would be his first job as a pilot.

Previously he had learned aviation with the Russians but had only been a mere passenger for ten hours on the MiG-21 ‘flying coffin’ fighter jet. Sadly, he had no experience of instrument navigation or even flying in visual VFR conditions.



MiG-21

The previous pilots like Madame Macron had never allowed M. Conté to fly the Cessna 404 aircraft.

She had treated him like an old sandbag, sitting useless in the co-pilot seat.

So, I made sure that every other flight M. Conté was at the controls. For the first few months, his ability to control the plane was a bit shaky, but with my encouragement and patience, he became a pretty good pilot.

My first flight with Conté was from Conakry to the small airport of Gbenko, a flight of about an hour and fifty minutes.

Navigational aids in Guinée never worked or were out of order most of the time. Local people would steal the copper from the system's cables to resell for food.

In the 1980s, GPS (Global Positioning System) was not yet available. I flew by following a VFR (visual flight rules) chart or an NDB, a non-directional (radio) beacon. On my first flight, I tried to find my way by following my position on an aviation map. Mountains, villages, roads, railways and everything else that could be seen from the sky were on these maps.

The visibility was good but it was the dry season so I couldn't make out the rivers as they had dried up and the villages were always hidden by huge Baobabs or Fromagers trees.

The VFR map was not helping me much to find my actual position. After an hour and fifty-five-minutes into the flight, I had no idea of my location.

Because Conté had been so mistreated by Captain Macron, he refused to help me navigate.

I was getting worried that we would run out of fuel and have to make a forced landing in the rainforest.

Finally realising that I had no experience of the area or any idea where we were, Conté relented and told me to make a 90-degree turn to the right. We found the runway at Gbenko airport in less than seven minutes.

Colonel Conté began to teach me the lay of the land. In return, I allowed him to fly.

Conté was terrified of a region called the Devil's Falls. These were magnificent waterfalls that fell from a height of 1,000 feet.

I wanted to have the chance, when there were no passengers on board, to admire their grandeur.

Mr. Conté was convinced that the devil lived behind these falls and he was deathly afraid of them. One day, as we approached the forbidden area, Conté grabbed control of the plane and veered it away from the waterfalls. He would rather have crashed than go near that evil devil's lair.

In case of fire?

When the plane was leaving or arriving at the Gbenko airport, the fire brigade was always there in case of an accident. I recall that during my year in Guinée, I never saw any water in the truck's tanks. I suspected that the water was being used for putting out other fires .



The defunct airline Air Guinée. Fortunately, I never flew with these blokes.

Transporting diamonds

Every month, I would make a special flight carrying diamonds worth between twenty-five and thirty-five million dollars.

The evening before the diamond transport, the mine manager would notify me that there would be a shipment of diamonds on my flight to Conakry. I was to keep this information under wraps.

The passengers were oblivious to our cargo.



Diamond mine

The next morning, I boarded my five passengers, leaving the last two seats by the passenger door free.

I headed for the runway, as if to begin the take-off.

It was always the same drill, engage the brakes and wait patiently. I would then be surrounded by around twenty soldiers in army trucks. Moments later, an armoured vehicle would be positioned near the passenger door. A soldier carrying a Kalashnikov AK-47 machine gun would step out of the armoured truck. Then a northern European civilian would follow, carrying a large briefcase attached to his wrist by handcuffs.

The two men would board the plane and sit down at the back of the aircraft.

I would immediately take off and climb rapidly to the cruising altitude to avoid the risk of being attacked by rebels firing missile or rifles from the ground.

As we neared the airstrip in Conakry, I had to make a low altitude approach over the runway, without lowering the landing gear. This low-level passage was scheduled so that I could see a soldier on the edge of the airstrip giving me a signal confirming that we could land safely. If I didn't receive the signal, I had to immediately return to the airport at Gbenko.

On landing, about thirty soldiers in jeeps, trucks and armoured vehicles followed until the aircraft came to a complete stop.

Then my co-pilot would leave his seat, go to the back of the aircraft and let the two passengers out, loading them into one of the armoured cars. The diamonds were then transported to the De Beers headquarters in the city centre, where they would be stored until transported to Antwerp in Belgium, the diamond capital of the world in those days.

The Conakry military

When I slept in Conakry, I would go to nightclubs with European friends like the De Beers representative. For those nights out, I used a personal driver, a Guinean that I had met at the beginning of my stay in Conakry and with whom I had become friends. From the hotel, we had to drive two to three kilometres to go to the clubs. At these discotheques, there were only Guinean men and women from the city. My driver always parked in front of the club, ready to drive me safely back to my hotel.

Frequently there were military roadblocks. These soldiers with their Kalashnikovs and their shoeless feet had not been paid for several months.

When we encountered one of these roadblocks, they demanded our papers.

Many of these soldiers couldn't read or write. In the glow of our headlights, they would take the papers, look at them quizzically and hand them back to us. I often saw that they looked at my passport upside down.

We always carried around \$20 in Guinean francs to pay the ransom.

DC-10 near miss

I would leave for my semi-annual holiday, always heading for France or Belgium before changing planes to continue to Canada. I remember a flight to Brussels

where the co-pilot had gone to smoke a cigarette in the back of the plane. I also got up to have a cigarette. After a brief conversation, the co-pilot discovered that I was a pilot, so he invited me into the cockpit.

It was a McDonnell Douglas DC-10. What an experience, I was overcome by the outside view and the dials and levers on the instrument panel.

A few weeks after my return to Guinée and while I was at Conakry airport preparing for a flight, I witnessed a landing that missed being a catastrophe.

It was the rainy season and a DC-10 was coming in for a landing. That morning the airport was shrouded in fog and a light Scotch mist.

In 1990 Conakry International Airport was not fenced in and people frequently crossed the runway by car, truck or on foot. Airliners flying in the region used the NDB, non-directional (radio) beacon, a so-called non-precision approach.

A few minutes before the DC-10 landed, it started to rain.

A Guinéen was crossing the landing strip in a truck. As his small vehicle did not have a roof, he got soaked and running for cover, left his truck right in the middle of the runway.

The DC-10 aircraft was landing.

On touchdown, the pilot suddenly saw the truck on the runway directly in front of him. He knew that he could not regain enough speed to take off again, so he

could only continue the landing and crash into the truck on the runway.

But like a jigsaw puzzle the small truck fit perfectly between the fuselage and the left engine. By some incredible luck there was no damage whatsoever to either vehicle.

I met the captain at the hotel bar that evening and spoke to him for a few minutes. His hands were shaking as he held his glass of scotch.

Reroute to Freetown

On a flight to Conakry from the village of Gbenko, M. Conté and I arrived in a heavy thunderstorm at the airport and had to divert the plane to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. After landing and approaching the terminal, about fifteen soldiers with Kalashnikovs surrounded us.

The soldiers ordered us to get out of the plane and kneel on the tarmac, with our hands on our heads.

The plane was searched from top to bottom, with the hope of finding weapons and money.

I had to negotiate for more than two hours before they would let us get back on the plane and return to Conakry.

Last months in Guinée

Push, push in the bush...

It was a beautiful day with no wind or clouds, the temperature was around 40 degrees Celsius and would rise to above 50 degrees by noon. Keriékourou was a small bush airport north of the village of Siguri. Everything went smoothly on the flight out. When we arrived at the airport, we shut down the engines and unloaded the equipment off the plane.



After taking the time to relax and talk with the villagers, we got back onto the plane to start the engines to return to home base.

The left engine refused to start. We realised that the starter was broken. We contacted the chief mechanic, using the HF radio on the plane. In the village there was no telephone, nor any mechanic or modern tools available.

The mechanic at the base told me that it would take more than two days by truck to get from Gbenko, because a regular vehicle could not maneuver these roads.

I was getting concerned as they did not have fresh water and food that I could eat. Coming from Canada, my immune system was not strong enough to drink and eat the village food without falling desperately ill.

The mechanic suggested that after starting the right engine with the working starter, to remove the starter from the running engine and install it on the left engine for a normal start.

Sounded like a great plan, but we had no tools! As luck would have it, we found a villager who had the correct screwdriver. Only a flat screwdriver was needed, which was actually the only screwdriver he had.

Removing the starter from a running airplane engine is quite difficult. I was less than a foot away from the running propellers, in a temperature of over 50 degrees Celsius. I was able to remove the right starter, install it on the left engine and then start up the second engine.

While preparing for take-off, I noticed that the temperature of the right engine was extremely high. So high in fact, that it was minutes away from starting to melt. I pushed both engines to their take-off power and hoped that as we approached cruising speed, the wind would return the engine to its normal temperature.

The engines returned quickly to normal after a little over five minutes of flight time. Upon our arrival, the chief mechanic replaced the faulty starter and confirmed

that both engines were in good condition and working well.

Storm trooper

It was the thunderstorm season and a high-ranking military officer summoned me to Gbenko airport at around 2:00 pm. He ordered me to prepare the plane to fly them to Nzérékoré GNZE airport in the south of the country near Liberia. Studying the en-route weather, I told them that we would not be able to take off and reach their destination because there was a line of heavy thunderstorms between Gbenko and their stop. The General ordered me to prepare the plane because it was mandatory to fly to Nzérékoré. But I continued to explain that the weather conditions were not safe enough for them to make the flight that day. The general informed me that if I refused to fly, I would be arrested. And thrown into prison.

Suddenly four soldiers at gunpoint surrounded me.

The prison in this village was a container set outside in the blazing sun.

In order to survive, the prisoner had to rely on villagers to bring water and food.

So, I readied the plane, boarded the soldiers and prepared for take-off.

We headed towards the first storm. I knew that at a low altitude the turbulence would be incredibly strong, but I would still be in control of the airplane.

After less than two minutes of severe turbulence, my passengers were vomiting and terrified, shouting and begging to return to the airport.

I flew back to Gbenko for a smooth landing, never to be put in that predicament again.

From that day forward, my word was Law for them.

Weekend at Bernie's

Airports in Guinée often saw only one or two flights a month at best.

A few weeks after my thunderstorm adventure there was a truck accident near Kankan airport.

I was asked to transport the two injured men to the hospital in the town of Labé in the west of the country. The two passengers were in very bad shape during the flight. As soon as we arrived at Labé airport, they were quickly taken to the town hospital.

My co-pilot Conté and I took the opportunity to visit the hospital before heading back to Gbenko.

The few beds that were there had bloodied sheets, the hospital pharmacy had run out of drugs and the doctors were using unsterilized instruments and their own hands to perform operations. A very sad state of affairs.

The next day we returned to Labé to pick up the two wounded men and take them back to Kankan, the town where the men had been born.

When we landed at Labé airport we saw our two men lying in the grass. We assumed that they were sleeping. Approaching them, we discovered that sadly they had both passed away during the night. We decided to place the two bodies on a seat and fasten their safety belts.

Landing at Kankan airport, we saw about seventy-five people approaching the plane. We opened the aircraft door, carried the men from the plane and placed the bodies on the runway.

We were quickly surrounded by around twenty women who were weeping and moaning loudly.

In African countries death is a common occurrence. The affected families hire women to mourn a loved one. In this French speaking country they are called ‘Pleureuses’. Unlike us Westerners, who often mourn for months or even years, they have one day to mourn.

African adventures come to an end

Flight to England...

At the beginning of 1991, the right engine of the Cessna 404 was in poor condition. The company owning the aircraft had decided to fly the plane to England to have it replaced. I felt that if the mechanic would agree to fly with me, it would mean that the plane was in good

enough shape to make the long flight. The mechanic agreed, adding that his wife would also be coming along.

The faulty engine was only running at fifty percent of its power on take-off.

Reaching cruising altitude, the engine slowly regained near-normal power.

The distance to Dakar was short, so I had been able to reduce the amount of gas in the fuel tanks.

The flight lasted four hours and we made it to Senegal without any problems. I must admit I had felt a bit anxious during the flight, but after landing in Dakar I began to feel a bit more at ease.

We found an excellent hotel and after a delicious meal, enjoyed the warm evening. The next morning, with a full tank of fuel, we took off for Casablanca, our next intended destination.

This was the year of the Gulf War involving Iraq and the United States. The family of Saddam Hussein had been moved to the Western Sahara to protect them from the war.

I had learned, while planning the flight, that the day before, a Convair 240 cargo plane coming from Mauritania was shot down by the Western Sahara army.



Convair 240

I decided to change the route, even though it would lengthen the journey by spending several hours flying over the ocean.

After taking off from Dakar, I flew towards the Atlantic Ocean, away from the coast of Senegal. I headed for the Grand Canary Islands, the archipelago belonging to Portugal. This would lead us away from the desert and the Tan-Tan festival in Morocco.

Every year in May, the Tuaregs and other semi-nomadic desert peoples come to the city with their camel caravans, their traditional dances and handicrafts, to celebrate the annual Moussem cultural festival.

This celebration of Saharan culture is famous worldwide as Intangible Cultural Heritage and UNESCO ‘Safeguarding our living heritage’.



The flight over the sea took us to the city of Las Palmas on the Gran Canary Islands.

I was quite nervous because of the condition of that engine and the fact that we were a long way from land. We arrived in Las Palmas after four hours of flying over the sea.

The next morning, we took off for Faro, a beautiful coastal town in Portugal, facing south towards the Mediterranean. We flew over Casablanca, the largest commercial city in Morocco, before crossing the Mediterranean Sea. We spent another beautiful evening in Faro before heading to France the next morning and then onto our final destination England.

The flight to Nantes in France proved to be a little more challenging than the others because we had to cross the Alps in winter and the plane was not equipped with the de-icing boots to protect against the frost that would accumulate on the wings. It had only been flown in western Africa, where ice is non-existent.

The flight over the Alps was often in zones where ice would form on the wings. Luckily the amount was not thick enough to cause any real danger.

We spent our last night of the flight in Nantes before leaving the next morning to Gatwick airport in England.

As we approached the airport, I was informed that the cloud layer above was heavy, so an instrument approach was required. But I didn't have the approach charts for Gatwick airport.

As luck would have it, the air traffic controller was very accommodating and took the time to give me the VOR frequency, the approach direction and the minimum descent altitude on short final.

I was quite anxious making the approach into Gatwick, as I didn't know the terrain or how high the obstacles around the runway were.

Without the aid of the traffic controller, we would not have been able to make it to our destination that morning.

When I reached the minimum approach altitude of about 350 feet above ground level, I saw the runway in front of me, but I was too close to lower the landing gear and land safely. I tried a second approach, but I was still too close. On the third approach, I decided to lower the wheels at one thousand feet on final.

This landing was just right.

We spent three weeks in England after the repairs were completed. We played tourist, visiting all the interesting places and even went to check out Sherwood Forest in Nottingham.

Two weeks after arriving in England, I got a call from Air Canada, *supposedly* offering me a job.

I contacted a pilot from Quebec, who agreed to replace me in Conakry at a moment's notice.

So, I never returned to Africa and left for Quebec and a job at Air Canada.

But before continuing that story, lets go back fifteen years earlier.

Tricking the Grim Reaper

Water has always been a special part of my life. I am a good swimmer, always ready to do a few laps in open water or in a pool.

I had just turned fifteen and was frolicking in Lake Memphremagog, at the cottage belonging to the father of my friend Michel.

This lake is famous for supposed sightings of the Loch Ness like monster Memphré.

We were horsing around doing belly flops at the end of the dock. As the water was only a few feet deep, we made sure that we landed on our bellies or backs to avoid hurtling into the shallows.

Just when I was about to do my final belly flop, Michel reached out and touched my back, which threw me off kilter.

I plunged into the water, crashing my head into the bottom of the lake.

I felt no pain and saw my astral body floating weightlessly over me, hovering three feet above the surface of water. Suddenly I felt myself being propelled towards a brilliant light. I had never felt so free, so happy or so safe.

I continued floating towards the light when suddenly I felt like I had been sucked back into my earthly body. It was as if someone was grabbing me by the collar and stuffing me back inside myself.

I stumbled out of the lake, staggered to Michel's cottage and collapsed on the living room couch.

My left arm began to go numb. It felt as if the blood on my whole left side had suddenly stopped flowing.

Michel's mother ran next door to fetch a chiropractor. He foolishly told me that I had only pulled a muscle and that I would be fine in a day or two.

My father arrived at the cottage and wanted to call an ambulance, but I adamantly refused.

As I couldn't sit, he laid me in the cargo area of his station wagon and took me to the small-town hospital about fifteen minutes away.

The doctor on duty told my father that I had to be quickly taken to the university hospital located forty minutes away.

Luckily, that week a conference of spinal specialists was being held at that hospital.

As soon as we arrived by ambulance at Sherbrooke University Hospital, I was placed on a long steel table. I remember lying there for almost four hours, waiting for the doctors to decide what to do with me.

I could hear the medical specialists discussing my case. I overheard one of the doctors saying he doubted if I would survive the day. Another doctor said that I would most likely end up a quadriplegic.

One physician told me that I must have had very powerful legs to have been able to stand up, wade out of the water and make my way to the cottage.

What was bothering me the most was that I was still in my wet trunks, the steel table freezing against my bare skin.

It was hours before a decision to place me in traction was made.

Holes were drilled on each side of my head, at the bottom of the parietal bone. As there are no nerve connections in this area of our bodies, I felt no pain, but the vibrations of the drill were curious.

They moved me to a hospital bed for the rest of the procedure.

An ice tong like device with two arms was inserted into the two holes on either side of my head.



Attached to these arms was a traction cable that went to a pulley at the head of the bed, which held a weight of a few pounds. The bed had a slight slope, which kept my cervical vertebrae stretched so as not to crush the cervical fluid.

Following this procedure, every fifteen minutes a nurse would come in to check on my reflexes, to make sure that all my limbs and muscles were responding normally.

I remember my friend Michel visiting me at the hospital. One moment he was standing in front of me, then the next he suddenly disappeared.

He had fainted and was lying on the floor.

When he came to a few seconds later, he crawled out of the room. He couldn't bare seeing me in traction.

After a week I underwent surgery on my first three cervical vertebrae.

Two of my vertebrae were welded together and a piece of bone was taken from my right hip to secure the third.

I spent eight hours on the operating table and then three weeks lying on my back in traction, with ice tongs on each side of my head, to keep me from moving.



A few days after my operation, my cousin Gilles came to my bedside. Looking at the ice tongs, we were both laughing like idiots. The tongs reminded us of rabbit ears, those TV antennas from yesteryear.

Gilles asked me if I could receive television broadcasts in my head. I sadly found out that laughing was not the best idea. Any movement was agony in the

first few days following the operation. The nurse insisted that Gilles had to leave.

The nurse that cared for me was the highlight of my day. I don't remember her name, or even her face, but I remember her scent and the way my heartbeat when she was near.

After many days lying in a hospital bed, I was able to slowly turn to my left side and see my reflection in the mirror on the wall. I had always been healthy, with a clear complexion.

What a sight! I saw that my face was covered with acne.

I realised that the nurse had seen me like this.

I was devastated.

I thought to myself that I didn't care if I end up a paraplegic for the rest of my life, I just couldn't deal with looking like a monster in front of the nurse.

Two weeks after my operation, I was put in a cast that went from my waist to the top of my head. There was an opening for my face and a space on my chest so that I could breathe properly.

For the cast, I had to be moved to a sitting position. A nurse stood at the head of my bed and held the cable attached to the clamps that were holding my head still. Maintaining the tension, the nurses lifted me into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Once in that posture, warm plaster was applied around my body.

A few days later, I was able to go back home.

I would be confined in this plaster jail for more than four months. I was not in any pain, but scratching my back with a ruler was a bitch.



Return home

When I came home after a month in the hospital, my parents bought me a stereo sound system that used Compact Cassettes. In those days, this was the new wave in electronics.

I had bought some blues and rock tapes: Johnny and Edgar Winter, Deep Purple, Frank Zappa.

I listened to Winter's *Frankenstein*, Zappa's *Stink-Foot* and to Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water*. The song starts with the guitar playing with a fuzz effect.

Since I knew very little about music except for playing trumpet in eighth grade, I thought it was the bassist who played the riff. So, I asked my father to buy me a bass guitar so I could play that famous run.

I couldn't swim, couldn't ride my bike or play in the street with friends, so I played bass guitar.

I started playing bass by listening to tapes: Blues, Rock, and Jazz.

At the end of November, the cast was removed and I spent a few months with a foam cervical collar.

While being interviewed at flight school, I never mentioned my accident, as I would surely have been rejected.

Flying 101

In my final year of high school, it was time for me to decide what I was going to study.

I was leaning toward astrophysics and applied sciences.

I discovered a three-year flight course offered at a CEGEP junior college. It was a school located five hours away from my hometown.

I thought it would be fun and a lot easier than to study 'seriously'.

Boy, was I wrong.

Learning to be a professional pilot was much harder than I ever could have imagined.

Leaving home to become a pilot

My parents didn't have the means to pay for my training, let alone my room and board.

I continued working hard every summer at a Christmas tree nursery. My job was pruning trees with a long machete, so that they would grow into the desired shape. Occasionally, wasps' nests would be found under the tree branches. With my machete, I would clear the nest and swarms of wasps would follow, attacking me. I soon found out that if I dropped my baseball cap behind me, the wasps would attack my cap and leave me alone.

To protect myself from possible machete blows, I always wore hockey shin pads.

But as fate would have it, during my second summer, I slashed myself with a machete in the left calf behind my shin guard. A few stitches later and I was back to work again the next day.

I also worked for my father's alarm company, where my job was to run cables through the walls of the homes to reach the main panel of the alarm system. With these summer jobs, I was able to support myself and pay for flight school.

I had made it to my flight school interview by hitchhiking (or as the Quebecois say, 'faire du pouce'),

with one of my friends who also wanted to enroll. Out of nine hundred, only ninety students would be accepted. At the end of the three years, there were less than thirty-five students left.

The courses were that demanding.

The interview took place in the presence of three instructors from the school and lasted about fifteen minutes. I swear that I don't remember a thing I said other than I had never been in a plane.

My friend was rejected because he had told his interviewers that what he really wanted to do was work in Africa, to help the poor. Eventually he took private flying lessons and got a job as a pilot with Air Canada.

Meeting the fair sex

My first day at college I found myself in line next to a very attractive female student. She turned around, gave me a shy smile, and began talking to me.

She was beautiful. Blue eyes, long blonde hair, tall, slender and through her summer sweater, I could see the curves of her ample breasts.

I was all male, seventeen and totally smitten.

Having previously attended a private boy's college run by Catholic priests, I had no experience with girls. Sadly, the only woman I had known was my mother.

After talking with this beauty, I was completely bewitched, but too shy and tongue-tied.

In my seventeen-year-old mind, this female was a wonderous and inaccessible creature.

An elusive butterfly and I was completely enchanted.

In the following weeks and months, I saw her a few times, between classes.

She was studying biology. We would smile at each other, but I never knew what to say after the first hello.

Towards the end of the first school term, she ignored me.

Perhaps she thought that I was too much of a snob to have a relationship with a local girl. But actually, I was too much of a boy to understand that a man needs to make his move.

I remember a philosophy course given by a professor in her forties. We had forced her to resign mid-term because she could no longer tolerate our shenanigans.

In our torture of this teacher, I was the ringleader and class clown.

I kept asking her ridiculous questions in order to undermine her and make the class laugh.

I had a talent for double entendres and quick retorts.

That poor woman.

Thirty male students, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-two, had no interest whatsoever in

understanding the world, where they were coming from, where they were in life or where they might be heading to.

I, on the other hand, was fascinated by philosophy, but I had the chance to entertain and entertain I did.

I chose tomfoolery before philosophy.

First flight

Only at the end of our first year did we learn to fly. After fifteen hours of training, we could then have our first solo flight.

My first airborne experience with an instructor was in early June. It was a thirty-minute familiarity flight with Mr. Alain Bourdon. It was on a single-engine Beechcraft B-19 Musketeer.

Mr. Bourdon was a good man, encouraging and interested in teaching the rudiments of flying.



I cringe when I think of my second instructor, Mr. Gérald Tremblay, who occasionally slapped me on the back of the head while in flight, when he was unimpressed with my flying.

At times I thought I would never become a professional pilot, let alone a pilot at all.

My first solo flight was made in early October.

I still remember that special day.

After half an hour in the air, practicing take-offs and landings (touch and go) with my instructor Mr. Tremblay beside me, he ordered me to land and taxi to the parking area.

I didn't understand what was going on.

My instructor got out of the plane and told me to perform a solo 'touch and go'.

This meant that I would taxi to the runway, take-off, climb to a thousand feet, turn around, land on that same runway and return to the aircraft parking.



I taxied toward the runway, alone in the plane, alone at the control, alone with my thoughts. And so damn excited.

The control tower cleared me for take-off. I pushed the throttle forward and accelerated to take-off speed. I started climbing towards the sky. I felt slightly puzzled because a small plane taking off with two behaves quite differently than with one.

I still remember with pride the take-off, climbing, descending, and landing. I remember arriving in front of the terminal. After the engine was shut down and the end-of-flight checklist completed, the other students were waiting for me. They poured a bucket of water over my head to mark my first solo flight.

I was now a real pilot.

Tragedy in-flight: *tabarnac!*

When I returned to flight school in September 1979, I excitedly continued my courses to become an airline pilot. We had many weekly hours of theory in class. In between classes we flew with our flight instructors. We also flew solo on the single-engine planes. We would go to the training area to practice flying skills: spins, steep turns, engine failures and other training exercises.

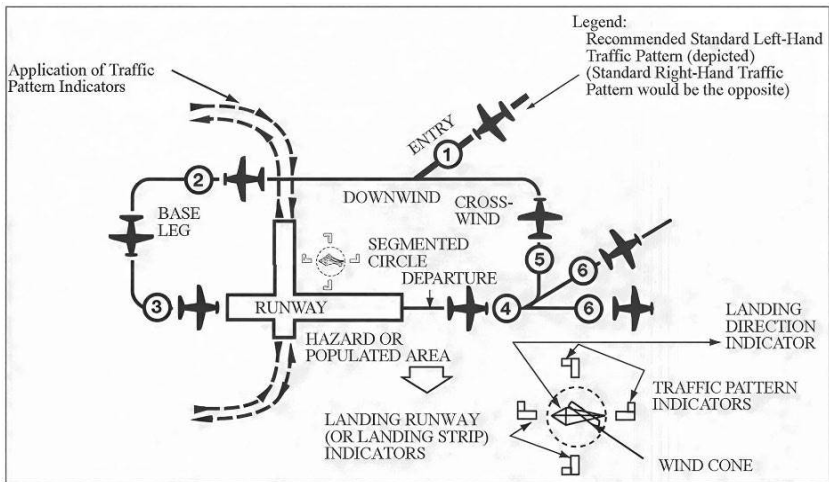
One day two Beechcraft B-19s crashed into each other.

My roommate Berny left student aviation forever at the end of that semester.

He had witnessed the horrific midair collision.

On that beautiful day in September, a Thursday to be precise, there were about ten students who were all practicing flying Beechcraft B-19s.

Some students were flying a fair distance away. They were practicing navigating, following flight charts, recognising cities, roads, mountains, rivers and other signs on the VFR (Visual Flight Rules) aeronautical charts.



Before take-off, Berny, our two friends Germain and Daniel and myself, had decided to communicate with each other by VHF radio once in flight, so we could have some fun.

Berny and Germain decided to make passes under each other. In other words, playing leapfrog in the air.

I was a few nautical miles away, doing my own tricks with Daniel.

As Germain was passing under Berny's plane, the pilot François, unaware of the game, was returning from a flight around Lac Saint-Jean.

François' plane side-swiped Germain's plane at a 45-degree angle, losing a wing.

Each plane went crashing to the ground.

Immediately the pilot of one of the other planes radioed the airport control tower and said that there had been an accident.

The air traffic controller began to contact all aircraft in flight:

Controller: "GOLF UNIFORM GOLF NOVEMBER, St-Honoré TOWER HERE".

Pilot: "This is GOLF UNIFORM GOLF NOVEMBER".

Controller: "FOXTROT ECHO QUEBEC CHARLIE, St-Honoré TOWER HERE".

Pilot: "This is FOXTROT ECHO QUEBEC CHARLIE".

The communication continued until the two crashed planes were identified.

The St-Honoré control tower ordered all aircraft to return to base.

As I was less than two thousand feet above the accident site, the controller asked me to fly over the accident area until the arrival of the Canadian Army helicopters.

I circled the crash site for approximately ten minutes until I saw the Canadian Army CH-146 Griffon Bell helicopters arrive.

I headed back to the airport.

I was in control of my airplane, but I thought to myself that if I panicked and lost control, I'd crash. And die.

This was a first for me. I was going through the motions of flying, trying to keep clear headed, but my mind was obsessed by the fact that I had just witnessed a tragedy.

Clearly, I was afraid to let my emotions take over and loose it.

After landing, I parked my airplane in line with the other planes on the tarmac.

I saw Berny was still in his plane. When he saw me, he got out of his plane and fell immediately to the ground, sobbing. I slowly pulled him up and we walked together towards the terminal.

The bus that brought the student pilots back from lunch arrived at the same time and everyone surrounded us, demanding to know what had happened.

Berny had witnessed everything.

He had been less than fifty feet away when the crash occurred. His plane was literally drenched with fuel and pieces of metal.

Berny lied and told the director of the flight school that he had been a thousand meters away when the other two planes collided.

The director said that Berny's implausible story didn't make sense.

Just as Berny was finally ready to tell the truth, the disgusted director told Berny that their meeting was over.

To this day only three people know what really happened, Berny, Daniel, and I.

The final report explained that Germain was practising spins when he hit François, who was returning

from a navigation training flight. In those days the flight college training area was too small and the risk of an accident was quite high.

Following this tragedy, the training area was enlarged considerably.

I found out several years later that Berny had become the mayor of a town in western Quebec.

Six days after this accident, I was forced to fly with an instructor, to prove that I was feeling mentally well enough to continue my flight training.

Coffee Tea or Mushrooms

Running into drugs...

At the end of that infamous month, the college offered some of us students a trip to the Montreal airport, for a visit to Air Canada.

It was a crazy weekend, where alcohol and marijuana were readily available. Third-year students had gone to Montreal on the bus, along with some flight instructors from the college.

Our friend's fatal plane crash was finally behind us.

At Air Canada we had the chance to fly the Douglas DC 8 flight simulator. The 250 passenger Douglas DC8 is no longer in service, but it was a major workhorse in its day.



Douglas DC-8 EAT1 simulator trainer

During my last two winters at flight college, I took a training course with the Canadian Ski Patrol.

I skied with my cousin Gilles, roommate Berny and another student pilot, Richard Lalonde. We were on the Ski Patrol at Mount Clairval, a small mountain a few miles from our home in Chicoutimi.

There had probably been more skiing accidents on that mountain involving the patrollers than regular skiers.

We were not what one might call very professional in our behaviour.

Still, we had great times on those slopes and at the little chalet at the bottom of the mountain.



I was beginning my third year at flight school. I worked for a few days at my father's alarm company. I was a technician, installing alarm systems in my hometown of Magog.

While having lunch at my father's house, my cousin Gilles arrived unexpectedly. He had just returned from a long trip in the Maritimes, with "magic mushrooms". Gilles had picked these hallucinogenic beauties while on his trip and had hoped to sell them back here in Quebec.

On the kitchen table, he separated the mushrooms and put them into small bags.

Pieces of mushrooms would fall on the floor and I would pick them up and put them back on the table.

Of course some ended up in my mouth.

After helping my cousin for a while, I had to go back to work. I left in my father's company's truck.

Gilles also drove home, which was a few hours away.

I was driving to my next client, when suddenly the few tiny pieces of mushrooms I had eaten took effect.

I stopped the truck, right in the middle of the street, opened the front door, leaving it ajar and sat on the sidewalk.

Suffering from the hallucinogenic effects of the mushrooms, I couldn't move.

Lucky me, nobody around and especially no policemen.

After what seemed a lifetime, but was in fact about thirty minutes, I had enough strength to stand up.

I got back into the truck and drove home. I called my father, telling him that I was not well and couldn't continue working.

I had been very fortunate to get away with this little misadventure.

No more magic mushrooms for me!

One month's suspension from flight school

In order to obtain our commercial pilot's licences, we had to make several cross-country flights to practice visual navigation with charts. So, one morning, I and three students training to be bush pilots, arrived early at the flight dispatch. We were to prepare a long-haul flight plan and then fly off in our Beechcraft B-19s.

The flight dispatcher granted us take-off clearance for the same destination, as long as we lifted off ten minutes apart.

We flew from the Chicoutimi flight school to Sherbrooke airport, located in the south of the province. We would arrive in two and a half hours, returning to the flight school the same day.

When it was time to return to home base, we took off at the same time.

We lined up one behind one another at the start of the runway and on the signal from me (of course), we took off in formation.

We were headed towards Quebec City and then north to the aviation school airport.

We hadn't a clue of the dangers of flying in formation.

One pilot flew left, another flew right, the third was below to the right and I was above. We were busy chatting on the airwaves and having way too much fun. We had decided to talk to each other on radio frequency

123.45. This is a frequency that all pilots use occasionally to contact each other, but not for naughty young pilots using it as a toy.

As we approached Quebec City, I dared one of my friends to fly under the bridge.

On course, we knew this was a ridiculous manoeuvre but our laughter was so loud that it could almost be heard from the ground. Let's just say that on that day, we were pushing the envelope a bit too far.

As we flew over Quebec City, the chief pilot from flight school was taking off from the Jean-Lesage airport. He was flying a school plane whose performance was far superior to ours.

He tuned onto the 123.45 frequency and began to hear our squawking.

He flew behind me and my band of 'merry men', all the way to home base.

After landing we were told to report to the Disciplinary Committee, the Air Safety Committee, and the College Management team.

We were suspended for one month.

It was later explained why we had not all been immediately expelled. As there were only six students in the bush flying section, they decided to allow these nonexpendable three pilots to stay. Clearly, the college could not keep three of their other mischievous pilots and unfairly expel me. Lucky bugger.

Following this infamous flight, student pilots on long-haul trips were no longer allowed to fly to the same destination on the same day.

In spite of my month suspension, I was the first pilot in my class to complete my flight hours and graduate. The other students often encountered bad weather, which limited their flight hours.

But as luck would have it, I always seemed to have blue skies when flying.



Lucky bastard!

Up, Up and Away

Give me twin-engine.

Towards the end of my training, I moved outside the Chicoutimi region. This area was Bas-Saint-Laurent, near the St. Lawrence estuary. Here we would complete our training on twin-engine aircrafts in instrument flight.

We used instrument flying when in the clouds, rain, snow, or over large bodies of water, such as the Atlantic Ocean.

We were all housed in the residences of Rimouski College.





These flights were very rewarding, but they required a lot of concentration and attention. At the end of these sessions, we were often exhausted and soaking with sweat.

I remember one of the flights when our instructor fell asleep after take-off.

We had the lesson plan with us and performed all the manoeuvres and landing approaches. In the final descent at the end of our 2-hour session, the instructor woke up.

We gave each other an A+.

At the end of the month, I took my IFR test on a twin-engine aircraft.

I left Rimouski Airport with the Transport Canada inspector, for my final flight test.

Everything went well and after an hour and forty minutes, we landed at Mont-Joli.

The inspector signed my instrument flight licence, opened the door on his side of the plane, got out and went to get something from the rear compartment.

He came back with his golf bag.

He told me that I now had my licence to fly this plane. And that he was going to celebrate by playing golf.

Actually, this had been his last test before retiring!

I was ecstatic. I did my pre-flight checks and took off.

I could not believe that I was flying this impressive twin engine machine.

I watched the wings as they moved under my control. I will always remember that moment.

I was like a knight on my mighty steed, flying through the air.

Moments like this make our spirit soar and leave an indelible mark on our souls.



Chicoutimi College airplanes

Signed, sealed, and delivered

A few days later, I received my Commercial Pilot Certificate.

After my final flight test, which lasted about an hour and a half, the Transport Canada inspector Mr. Gérald offered me a beer to celebrate. I returned to the residences of Rimouski College where I ran into a couple of friends. They reminded me that I had promised to take them flying before leaving the region for good.

I rented the small Cessna 172. In those days, it was easy to rent a plane from a flight school.

Today you are obliged to go up with a flight instructor to prove that you are capable to fly.

I took off for a short flight around the region. We could see the beauty of this corner of the world, the

wheat fields, the small villages and the majestic mountains descending towards the St-Laurence River.

As we were walking from the plane to the terminal, to my horror, I suddenly saw Mr. Gerard, the Transport Canada inspector, heading towards the planes.

I remembered that about two hours earlier, I had been drinking a beer with him.

The law requires that a pilot who drinks alcohol must not fly for a minimum of eight hours. Eight hours between bottle and stick, is an expression older airline pilots commonly use.

As an inspector at Transport Canada, M. Gérard would be obliged to revoke my pilot licence and medical certificate. My career as a pilot would have ended before it had even begun.

As we passed each other, I did not look at the inspector and he looked straight ahead.

Had the inspector not noticed that I had just left the plane, or had he out of the goodness of his heart, turned a blind eye?

Flight Instructor

Teaching my craft.

When I had completed flight school, the world of aviation was changing in the province.

Québecair was doing very badly and seemed to be on the verge of bankruptcy. Clearly there were hardly any jobs for a new pilot.

In some small aviation companies, jobs were still available for a Navajo co-pilot. The Navajo is a six-passenger, twin engine, two pilot aircraft.

A minimum of five thousand flying hours was required to apply for this job.

I had two hundred and fifty, so my chances were almost zero to get a job as a professional pilot.

In the '60s and '70s Air Canada often refused to hire French-Canadian pilots. The majority of the country was of English descent and French Quebecois were considered second-class citizens.

Due to this injustice, toward the end of Québecair, a large French-Canadian airline company called Air Transat was established.

Many of the pilots had taken out a second mortgage, each pitching in fifteen to twenty-five thousand to start their own airline. They had banded together, forming their own airline company using wide-bodied aircraft. The first Air Transat jumbo jet took to the skies in November 1987, with three hundred and sixty passengers bound for Central American beaches.

Having almost no chance of finding a job flying after I got my pilot's license, I borrowed a few thousand dollars to become a flying instructor.

My course was given by Mr. René Dufour. While teaching me the basics of becoming an instructor, he

showed me how to do loops on a Cessna 172. It is an airplane that is not certified to do this kind of manoeuvre. The Cessna 172 has a carburetor that can't operate upside down.

Therefore, it was always necessary to keep a 1 G force minimum.

This is how the loop is done.

You nose down and accelerate to the maximum speed, then you pull up on the joystick to raise the nose of the aircraft towards the sky and then continue pulling until the aircraft returns to a normal cruising flight position.

It is imperative that the manoeuvre is done quickly so that the speed of the aircraft does not drop too soon. Thus, it looks like the earth's gravity pushes you towards the sky.

This manoeuvre, if done rapidly, does not affect the carburetor.

In mid-December I took my final test for my instructor's licence with a Transport Canada inspector.



Cessna 172

One scary flight with a student

I made my first flight as an instructor two days later, with Mr. Beaudry, a man of about forty, who had always wanted to learn how to fly. I was also giving theory classes, at the University of Sherbrooke.

These classes were for people who wanted to obtain their private pilot licence.

I remember a flight with a student where the visibility was poor and where I had lost my position.

We had taken off from Sherbrooke airport. The student was in the early stages of learning how to fly.

It was our second flight.

After about twenty minutes in the air, the weather began to change and a layer of clouds dropped.

We were forced to fly at tree level to be able to see anything. We were lost, as we didn't have the proper flight instruments on the plane to allow me to navigate in clouds without visibility.

After about ten minutes flying by the seat of our pants, we flew over a road. I decided to follow it, hoping it could be the way out of our impending danger.

After a minute or two, I suddenly saw a road sign on the highway in front of us.

The sign indicated that at the next crossroad, if we turned left, we would find the way to Sherbrooke airport. I made a sharp left turn to follow the road to the landing strip. As soon as the runway was in sight, I landed immediately.

After landing safely, we were finally able to breathe.

Who would have thought that a traffic sign on the ground would save us from impending doom?

After just a year and a half as a flight instructor, unable to afford an apartment on my income, I left to work as a full-time musician.

My instrument was the bass guitar and I had the opportunity to change my life, which was going nowhere. I loved being a pilot and my work as an instructor, but I couldn't make ends meet. It made me remember my first adult job, when I was sixteen at the mental institution.

Life's little lessons

Shit and sweet madness...

In the summer of my sixteenth birthday, I was hired to work as an orderly in a hospital for children with mental development problems. People from the area referred to Butters as the hospital for the insane kids, the crazy people hospital, or the looney bin.

The facility was located across from the Lake Memphremagog and the St-Benoit-Du-Lac Abbey in the beautiful Eastern Townships.

Lily Esther Butters, who lived from 1894 to 1980, built this private hospital for a working-class clientele, who did not have the resources to put their sick or mentally disabled child in a specialised institution.



The hospital opened its doors in 1948, with six patients living in her original farmhouse situated along Lake Memphremagog.

When the government of Quebec purchased the institution in 1972, there were four hundred and thirty-five residents. When the government opted to deinstitutionalise people, Butters closed its doors in 1980.

Some of these people were sick, some just different and some only needed help to survive in society. Most of these mistreated, unwanted souls ended up being homeless.

I had been hired to work from nine to five, every day. They hired me because I was six feet tall, slim, and physically strong. The other workers at the centre were mostly women and not nearly as muscular.

I was put in charge of ten boys between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four.

They spent all day wearing football helmets in a padded room, banging their heads against the wall.

According to the doctors in the Centre, the boys had mental ages between ten months and a year and a half.

Needless to say, they all wore heavy cotton diapers. During the day I had to bathe them often because they covered themselves in feces. It was not easy to get them into the bath, but it was the only way I could keep them fairly clean.

I spent hours swimming in poop so, at the end of the day, I was literally full of shit.

The first week was emotionally challenging. After that week, I felt perfectly at ease in this environment of shit and sweet madness. I loved my group of new friends.

One of my main jobs was to feed my boys, as they didn't know how to eat using utensils.

There was an employee at the centre who worked at night. He hit the boys and abused them. After suffering from this unforgivable treatment, one of my little friends who had actually been taught to eat on his own, regressed and never ate by himself again. I was shaken by witnessing this inhumanity, but assumed I had no authority to speak up.

During the three months that I worked in this centre, I never saw any of the children's parents come to visit. In the first ten years of operation, seventy-five children died in the hospital and in most cases, the parents never even bothered to show up for their child's funeral.

They were buried with a Christian ceremony at the East Bolton Cemetery near Butters Centre, a place with a beautiful view of the lake and in the summer months you can smell the wildflowers and sweet fields that surround the graves.



I remember one of the patients who never spoke,
never even made a sound.

One morning he opened his arms to embrace me and
clearly said, "Mummy".

I must have opened a wee door into his innocent soul.
It made me happy and sad at the same time.

Day tripping

The Centre had funds for activities, but none of the employees ever used the money.

The hospital had a small van that could seat ten people.

Talking to the Butters Centre director one morning, I suggested taking some of the more adjusted teenagers into town to see a film.

I headed for the cinema in the early afternoon with my eight new friends in the centre's van.

When we got to the theatre, the film had already started.

There was only my little group and two other spectators.

Naturally, after thirty minutes of sitting still in the theatre, my teenage patients had had enough.

As we were leaving, I noticed there was a poster of the female star in the lobby.

Suddenly, two of the boys undid their pants and exposed themselves to the poster.

Boys will be boys.

I told them to pull up their pants and move along.

We left the cinema and got back into the van. I made an impromptu stop at a convenience store, to buy them

candies before returning to Butters. The nine of us had an amazing time outside of the hospital grounds.

The next day, I went back to working with my boys in their padded room.

The following summer, because of the closure of the Butters Centre, I worked in a Christmas tree nursery. I needed a well-paying job for my fight school tuition.

The Musician

Antoine's curtain call...

Between the ages of twenty-two to twenty-eight, I left my career as a pilot for a life as a musician and a man of the theatre.

I started working as a bassist for an excellent English Canadian singer. I also started composing music.

The Doorman

*I was born a genius, a child of promise.
A flowery future and happiness.
My teachers were priests and TV
My education was perfection.
But I realised that I'd been lied to,
I thought I was a king,
But I'm only a doorman.*

It's not easy to open doors.

*It's not easy finding the right key.
And throughout my little life,
I open a door and see another in front of me.
But I realised that I'd been lied to,
I thought I was a king,
But I'm only a doorman.*

*I am not going to be discouraged
Because I know there is something somewhere,
Always something to find out,
Always something to discover.
But I realised I'd been lied to,
I thought I was a king,
But I'm only a doorman*

*I'm not going to get discouraged
Because I know behind every door
There is something to find out,
There is something to discover.*

It was the summer of '82, a group of four musicians (including me) lived on welfare, rented a farmhouse and practised as a band for the entire season. Finally, in the fall we did two shows before the band broke up.

The guitarist and the drummer could no longer work with each other.

All summer we had lived on rice and occasionally potatoes. We didn't have enough money to buy meat. We spent nearly four months of intensive work practising for two evenings of entertainment.

It's sad, but that's show biz.

It was during those years that I realised that I was actually a clown. A clown in the true sense of the word. The *Auguste*, the jester who entertains the audience and makes them laugh. The white clown, beautiful, elegant, airy, sparkling, mischievous.

In all the adventures and misadventures in my life, all my trades, jobs, and professions, whether as an actor, pilot, businessman or musician, I had been the tongue-in-cheek joker. For me, life had no tomorrow. Living for today is the only way to really get the most out of life.

Moving to Toronto

In 1983, after the break-up of the band, the three of us who were left decided to leave the Eastern Townships and move to Toronto, because the music scene was booming in that city and we thought we had a better chance of making it as artists. We formed a Jazz Rock Fusion band. We had our lead singer and composer Penny, me on bass, Howard on drums and Pierre on lead guitar. We also added Chris, an incredible violinist. We found a house to rent in the Beaches a very bohemian section of Toronto.

Since none of us had any money, the landlord had several houses in the neighbourhood in need of repair, so hired us as house painters to pay the rent. We practiced music during the day and at night painted houses. Like so many other musical groups, the band was not able to last.



Jubal jazz-fusion band

A one-year tour with the Bobby Griffith band

At the end of that year, I was offered the opportunity to work as a bassist for a year-long tour across Canada, with the Bobby Griffith Band.

Bobby Griffith was a black singer in his fifties, who had made many appearances on the Lawrence Welk show.

His repertoire consisted of contemporary rock-and-roll, ballads and popular hits of the day. He also performed his own well-known song at the time The Badger's Song.

We travelled in an Econoline, with a trailer containing our music equipment.

We would play every night from Monday to Saturday and on Sundays pack up and leave for another town.

After a few days of rehearsals, we left Toronto, to begin our tour in Manitoba.

We ended up in the mountains of British Columbia, after a year of playing in various cities throughout Western Canada.

Twelve months without going home.

Twelve months of road food.

Twelve months of waking up in some god-forsaken town.

We always lived in hotels and all the musicians, except Bobby Griffith, occasionally had to share a room. In those few weeks, I sometimes roomed with our drummer Tyrone.

Every morning when Tyrone woke up, he would quickly do one thousand push-ups. I, on the other hand, could maybe do ten.

In every town Tyrone would meet a local girl and play the “game of love”.

In these remote villages in the Canadian prairies, you rarely saw people of colour.

A girl could not afford to have sexual relations with boys from the surrounding area, because she would quickly be marked as a tramp.

But the arrival of Tyrone, this young black musician, offered these girls a bit of magic in their mundane lives.

I am not a sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll kind of guy. Tyrone, on the other hand...

When he left his flavour of the week, he always promised to come back and see her, write to her or call. In the new town the next night, he had his new ‘true love’ for the week.

I remember twice during this tour when one of Tyrone’s former ‘girl friends’ showed up and gave him a tongue lashing. But apart from that, Tyrone ruled the roost.

Every night, we played four sets of forty minutes, with twenty-minute breaks between each set.

We played from 7:00 to 11:00, six nights a week.

In the first and last set, the guitarist and keyboard player sang.

Bobby Griffith was the big star and only came on stage for the second and third sets. Lazy bugger.



He insisted that we should always be very well dressed and in the same style: tight trousers and a tight jacket to catch the ladies' eyes.

Bobby Griffith taught me a lot about being on stage, how to move, when to smile and when to grimace.

He also was a heavy drinker. Every night he drank forty ounces of vodka. Occasionally, he was not able to perform his last song.

After a year on the road, I returned to Montreal to continue my career as a professional musician.

I performed with a number of rock, jazz and folk musicians and singers. My career was taking off and I was more and more in demand for shows, studio sessions and live performances.

The actor

Act one.

After coming back to Montreal, a girl friend asked me to join the Ligne d'improvisation du Plateau. This was an improvisation theatre group based in Montreal. I was quite interested and began taking acting classes with a few good local theatre teachers. I was then twenty-four.

I was asked to replace an actor who had fallen ill. I was to be the principal actor.

The play was about domestic violence and my character was a forty-year-old wife beater.

I worked day and night to learn the lines. The night before the premiere, I went to a bar for a drink with a friend I had only known for a few weeks. For fun, she put a tab of LSD in my drink.

She informed me only a few minutes after I had finished my beer.

I had never taken acid in my life. Sure, I had tried several drugs in my youth, but that night was really not the right time to try a hallucinogenic drug for the first time.

The premiere of the play was the next day.

I was scared to death of ruining the premiere, so stayed up all night, eyes wide open, fighting the effects. Although this was not strong LSD, I didn't sleep a wink.

According to the newspaper reviews the next day, my performance had been stellar!

Creation of L'Arivanvil

I and two of my friends, guitar player Pierre and Jon our drummer, decided to go visit my cousin Gilles, who lived alone in an old house in the countryside. I told them we were going to breathe in the fresh air, write and practice our progressive Jazz-Rock.

For the politically radical Bread and Puppet show from Vermont, Gilles had designed a rather original puppet system with pulleys, strings and counterweights that slid on a large steel structure. It was a mechanism to move a giant marionette, himself.

His short-term goal was to leave home at the beginning of the summer and drive around North America with his giant puppet show.

Immediately upon our arrival at Gilles' old house, we started practising and composing music for our new musical group, which at that time remained nameless.

Our repertoire consisted of jazz, funk, and rock.

We all worked tirelessly every day.

Gilles, who was not a musician, liked to stop and listen to us perform. Occasionally, he would play spoons, keeping up with the rhythm. After a while, he made his own musical instrument, a kind of maracas, adding rice to an old box of tennis balls. Over the course of the weeks, he made congas and a few other percussion instruments, using old wooden barrels, pieces of wood and assorted metal items.

Gilles would at times join in and play his congas. I composed most of the music and lyrics.

We

*We really don't have,
anything to say,
The more we talk,
The more we lose our way,
We have come to warn you,
You and I,
We have no future
You and I*

Over the weeks spent working with the group, I came up with an idea for a children's play in which we could all act and also introduce my cousin's puppet. Perhaps we could put on our play in the morning and perform our music in the evening.

I seriously set about writing my comedy.

The story of The Enchanted Saxophone would take place in a music shop. I would play the big mean store owner M. Potiron and Cousin Gilles would perform as my employee Pétaracle, whom my character was unkind to.

Gilles' character was the mastermind of my scenario.

Our guitarist Pierre played the mischievous little child named Colibri.

Our drummer Jon played a magician with lots of hair and a beautiful long grey beard. I called him Toutenpoil, the French word for furry. Jon, who was thin and very tall, would come out of an old magical chest, to make the puppet appear. He had to spend about ten minutes squished in a little chest.

Jon didn't speak French at the time and at first, he had no idea of what he was saying, but he knew his lines that he had learned phonetically.

We had also taught Gilles to play a few notes on a saxophone.

At the end of the performance, we played a song that we had composed.

The main goal was to introduce children to music and the excitement of learning how to play a musical instrument. We thought that learning music was extremely useful for the advancement and improvement of our minds.

We had musical instruments on stage, including kazoos, small xylophones and flutes. We also had lots of small toys and stuffed animals that we had found and bought at garage sales. At the back of the stage there was a wide black curtain hiding the frame for the giant puppet.

There were also two backstage doors, one for stage left and one for stage right. And a black board where the musical notes were written.

The play ended with the giant puppet performing saxophone, along with us who were playing our guitar, drums, bass guitar and saxophone.

After a few months of ‘serious’ rehearsal, we had both a jazz rock band and a theatre company.

I went to Montreal to set up a non-profit corporation for our theatre group. I also needed to look for a manager-agent who could find bookings for us.



The Enchanted Saxophone

I found a Mr. Allen, a talent scout who agreed to become our agent. We would now be called L'Arivanvil, Troupe-Musico-Théâtrale.

In just a few days, Mr. Allen had booked two big contracts. We were to represent Quebec at the 1986 Montreal International Children's Theatre Festival.

Our performance of the Enchanted Saxophone took place in June at this summer festival in Montreal's Old Port. On the same day we gave a jazz performance as L'Arivanvil.

We had also been booked in August at the Saint-Jean-Sur-Richelieu Hot Air Balloon Festival.

Some dreams do come true!



After our June performance at the Old Port, we had no more bookings till August.

So, after some discussion we decided to take our band of misfit minstrels to the Gaspé Peninsula.

Gaspé tour

Since it was a six-hour drive, the four of us left bright and early in the morning.

On this early Wednesday morning, we stuffed ourselves into Gilles's old Volkswagen pickup truck and put all our instruments and amplifiers in a small trailer.

We arrived in Rivière-du-Loup late afternoon and parked in front of a bar on Principal Street.

I went to talk to the bar owner, hoping to get us booked for at least one night. I told the manager that we were a jazz rock band from Montreal, starting a tour in Gaspésie, but this week we were not booked.

Apart from the local musicians, big city bands were like unicorns in this neck of the woods.

We were booked for four nights, with room and board as well.

The news spread quickly that a group of jazz-rock-funk musicians from Montreal had arrived.

The bar was packed that night and every night thereafter.

We only had four songs in our repertoire, but we improvised a lot, danced around and were dressed in weird and funny clothes.

Gilles was not a musician, nor had he ever performed on stage. We prepared a corner for him with his congas, bongos, chimes, spoons, tambourines, bells and djembe drums. By moving and dancing, the effect was perfect.

No one in the room could have guessed this was Gilles' first night as a professional musician.

We set off again and headed towards the Matapedia Valley and the Baie-des-Chaleurs.

Over the next five weeks, we travelled through the villages and coastal towns of the Gaspé.

We barely made enough money to eat and pay for gas.



During that summer, I received a scholarship from the Quebec government to study theatre in Paris. I would be studying with Philippe Gaulier, a friend of Lecoq, the famous actor. I had been accepted at the Philippe Gaulier School.



We finished our summer with the Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu Hot Air Balloon Festival in mid-August. We put on our play The Enchanted Saxophone in the morning and in the evening performed our four compositions on the festival main stage. It was a huge venue, resembling the likes of a big rock concert.

And we were treated as stars. What a trip, what a show!

After the performance at the Hot Air Balloon Festival, Gilles and I rented a huge loft in Montreal, on the corner of St-Laurent and Bernard Streets. At the same time, I was starting to work as a bass player with a group of jazz musicians, *A Few Colours*.

Bonjour la France

Paris and me.

A month before leaving for Europe, I met a girl, a friend of the guitarist of the group *A Few Colours*.

She had come to see us play at a bar in downtown Montreal and I fell madly in love with her.

Four weeks later, I was on a flight to Paris.

Life can be a bitch!

When I arrived in Paris, I found a place to live while I took acting classes. It had been a servant's room on the top floor of a six-story building near the Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Montmartre.

The location was fabulous, but at that time of year, still no heating.

The nights were freezing and I was missing the warmth of my girlfriend, in more ways than one.



In my spare time, I visited the magnificent buildings, churches and museums.

I often spent hours at the Notre-Dame Cathedral, mingling with groups of tourists.



I had hardly any money to live on. I would occasionally treat myself to what is called piquette in France, a dollar bottle of wine to go with a baguette and hunk of cheese. I also spent hours reading writers like Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and Emile Zola.

Apart from the time in class, I spent the rest of my days alone.

Other than two other French students, most of my classmates came from wealthy foreign families. There were Germans, Australians, Spaniards and Italians. And oh, so many beautiful women.

I remember an acting exercise where I was put in a cardboard box for thirty minutes, with an incredibly beautiful German girl. I keep reminding myself that I had a girlfriend who was waiting for me back in Montreal. I was shy and a bit sexually inexperienced.

When I returned to Montreal, my friends all said how much of an idiot I was to be surrounded by all this beauty and doing nothing.

Morning classes consisted of physical exercises. Our teacher wanted us to understand that our bodies were our artistic instruments. I remember one activity in particular. We had to run around the large classroom for several minutes.

“Feel the noise and the shaking of the floor and the sounds your footsteps make on the ground,” said the instructor. “I assure you that at the end of our course, in seven weeks, when you run around the room, we’ll not hear a sound in the big room, you won’t see any movement of the floor. It will be as if you were flying, not touching the ground.”

Seven weeks later, at the end of the course, we could actually all run as if we were suspended in the air. No movement or sound could be heard in the large hall while we ran.



Philippe Gaulier

In the afternoon, we had classes with the great theatre professor, Philippe Gaulier. He was very strict and incredibly difficult to impress. I still remember the only time Professor Gaulier noticed me.

He had actually applauded my performance. Professor Gaulier had asked me to lie on my back, in front of the class. “You’re a little pond. There is no wind and everything is calm. Take a few minutes to feel a breeze coming up. Now, get up very slowly and stand up, keeping your role of a pond as well as your energy.”

I never said a single word during the exercise. After my performance, everyone applauded, it was the highlight of my training in Paris.

The Painter

Upon my return to Montreal, I was reunited with my girlfriend and with the jazz band *A Few Colours*.

I moved into a large loft with my cousin Gilles. I also started to play music with an up-and-coming singer-songwriter in Quebec, *Martin Lavoie*. Martin was originally from Lac-St-Jean and composed beautiful lyrics. He was also an artist, a sculptor and a jewellery maker.

At the end of 1986, Gilles had met an old painter. This man had taught Gilles how to paint and how to sell his art door to door. This was an extremely interesting concept because before moving into the loft, we would need a few thousand dollars for cleaning and repairs.

The loft had twenty-four windows, with an incredible view of Montreal. It was large enough to ride a bike from front to back but was in dire need of a good cleaning and repair job.

Gilles and I decided to join forces and work as a team to make money. We would become artists.

Gilles would draw Quebec country landscapes, occasionally adding a few barns, mountains and country roads. These paintings were the perfect size for a family living room.

They were impressionist paintings in the style of Jean Paul Lemieux and Marc-Aurèle Fortin, two well-known Quebec artists.



We bought our canvases and frames from a local carpenter. For the paint we would go to local hardware stores and use the gallons of acrylic paint that had been returned.

Gilles could paint a canvas in about thirty minutes. For the finishing touch, he would apply a coat of oil. Now, we could ‘honestly’ say that these were oil paintings, when in fact they were acrylic.

A painting would cost us, including the canvas, the paint, and the frame, about thirty dollars.

After deciding that Gilles would paint and I would sell, we sold them at an average of one hundred and fifty dollars per canvas.

We bought two minivans on credit. I normally left the loft around 3:30 in the afternoon with twenty canvases and frames, which I carried in cloth bags. In each bag I put five canvases and unattached frames.

I always had a hammer and small nails to mount the paintings I sold.

I would leave Montreal and go to a suburban neighbourhood of new houses of one or two years at most. Some lawns and driveways had just been landscaped, but the owners had not yet decorated their living rooms or bedrooms.

I would arrive dressed like an artist, with a beret and dried paint on my clothes. A real painter. *Yeah, right.*

I would park at 4:00 pm, to start my door-to-door sales.

“Hello, madame, my name is Antoine Leroi.”

I would then present my business card. And carry on the bullshit.

“I have just finished an exhibition at the Palais des Congrès in Montreal”, I would spout off to the homeowner. “I will be leaving the region soon and spend the winter in Charlevoix. I’ll stay a few months at l’Ile-aux-Coudres in La Malbaie, where I will paint, so I can present this winter’s work next summer in many North American art galleries. I wanted to take the time and show to you and your husband what I have left of my paintings. Would you be available tonight for a showing?”

I would make an appointment for six o'clock, another for six thirty, another for seven, then seven thirty and so on. I always made sure I was back on the road by 10:00.

In the mid-1980s, pastel shades were the fashionable color for decorating.

I would always arrive with my canvases and unpack them in the living room.

I would give the couple a few minutes to look over the paintings and then take one that I thought they liked and place it against the wall, so that they could see the effect.

Most of the time, I sold at least one, if not several paintings per home.

I explained that they could pay for the paintings by cheque or even a ten-dollar monthly payment if needed.

Before I left, I would mount the canvas on the wall. Some nights I would make up to two thousand dollars. Chippendales dancers, eat your heart out.

After a few weeks of work, Gilles and I had dozens and dozens of cheques to deposit for the coming months. With one exception, no cheque ever bounced.

Naturally, I only worked when I really needed the money. I was a good actor, posing as a landscape painter, but keeping up the deception became unnecessary when I moved to Alma to be a pilot.

My swan song as an artist

At the beginning of my career as a professional musician, I was really not making enough money to live on, so the sale of paintings was a godsend. Later on, my musical career began to pay off.

I composed music for singers and bands, worked as a studio musician and performed on radio and television.

After two years of dating my girlfriend, she moved to Rimouski to study marine biology.

I would join her on weekends when I was free and she would come to Montreal to spend time with me in the loft.

But then she told me that our relationship was over, that she had a new life and new friends in Rimouski. I was heartbroken. She was beautiful, intelligent, fun and interested in everything.

I spent several weeks 'face down', a Quebecois expression which means head buried in the sand, like an ostrich.



I worked hard as a musician and with my theatre group 'L'Arivanvil'.

We performed The Enchanted Saxophone in shopping malls, primary schools, city centers or at children's parties given by large national or international companies.

After our tour in the Gaspé, our guitarist Pierre was replaced by an excellent Quebecois comedienne and actress, Marielle Léveillé.

At the beginning of 1987 I began teaching the bass guitar. I had developed my own method of instruction and taught both aspiring and more experienced musicians. I even had a few musicians studying music in university.

I introduced the “slap bass” which was invented by Larry Graham, the bassist of the band Sly and the Family Stone.

‘Slapping bass’ is played by hitting the strings with one’s thumbs to give a funk to the music.

I continued performing and teaching bass until I left Montreal and my loft at the end of 1988.

I once again was ready to return to the skies.

Fortunately, I had made good money in the previous few months, enough for me to return to my career as a pilot. I could now pay for my aviation retraining and regain my professional pilot’s licenses.

I then was a pilot for Air Alma in Quebec for two years.

Later I flew the Cessna 404 in Africa.

Return to the Canadian skies

After my year flying in Africa, I made my last flight on the Cessna 404, for the African airline company on 2nd February 1991. I was thirty years old. Two weeks

later, I impulsively left for Quebec with the potential of becoming a pilot for Air Canada.

On the Air Canada twin prop Dash-8 simulator, I was sure that I had performed well. Yet at the end my simulator trainer Captain Parent told me that I was not competent to fly for the airline.

I left jobless.

Life throws her curve balls.

As a fully-fledged Air Mirabel captain a few years later, walking towards my Airbus 310 for a flight to Paris, I came face to face with my instructor from Air Canada, Captain Parent. He was the training pilot who had told me that I was not a good enough pilot to fly for Air Canada. I stopped and we talked for a while about aviation in general.

Captain Parent said, “It must be great to be a captain at Air Mirabel on the Airbus 310. It certainly requires a lot of experience and talent for the pilot.”

He did not realize that a few years earlier that he had told me that I was not good enough to be an airline pilot.

I didn’t want to embarrass him by letting him know that he had trained and failed me on DASH-8.



DASH-8

It took more than two months for me to recover from the disappointment of failing the Dash 8 training.

I needed to find a new job.

Avionair was a third level company based at Montreal airport. It operated aircraft that could only take a weight of not more than 12,500 pounds. These companies operated aircrafts carrying two pilots and less than twenty passengers. Planes like the Navajo, King Air and the Merlin SW-4.

The owner hired me to work as co-pilot on a Merlin II, a twin-engine turboprop. It was a pressurized aircraft. I had only flown unpressurized piston aircraft until then. Unless equipped with oxygen masks, unpressurised planes could not be used at altitudes of over ten thousand feet. Above this the risk of weakness and loss of consciousness is greatly increased. The Merlin II

could fly up to altitudes of twenty-four thousand feet, thanks to its pressurization system.

I received my training with Captain Gilbert, the Chief Pilot at Avionair. I was hired as co-pilot, but for some reason the Chief Pilot trained me as pilot-in-command. So, I did all my training in the left seat, the captain's seat.

I passed my final flight test with a Transport Canada inspector.

Then I flew as a pilot in training for five days with Captain Gilbert, 'on the line', a flight with passengers.

These flights with the Chief Pilot were to introduce me to the procedures of this airline. My first flight with a co-pilot from Avionair took place in August between Montreal and Kuujjuarapik in Nunavik, on the far north Canadian coast of the Hudson Bay.



Merlin II

At the end of the month, the Chief Pilot Captain Gilbert resigned Avion Air, to go fly for Air Mirabel as second officer on the Boeing 727-223.

The second officer on an airliner is a pilot or mechanic who sits sideways behind the co-pilot. He faces a panel with switches and dials. They are responsible for engine parameters, fuel tanks and electrical systems. On newer aircraft this is now done by on-board computers.

When Captain Gilbert left, Mr. Proulx, the owner and president of that company, called me to his office.

“Leroi, you will now be the new Chief Pilot of Avionair.”

Avionair had about twenty pilots. Many of them had been with the company for years.

I told the owner that I could not accept this promotion. I spent the rest of the day talking to the other pilots and they all told me that I should accept the job because the owner was an immoral bandit and madman. That way I could keep the deviant under my watchful eye.

I accepted the position of Chief Pilot and spent the first week of September at the Transport Canada offices learning about the responsibilities and duties of Chief Pilots in Canada.

I received an increase of two hundred dollars above my normal salary and should have been paid eight times as much for the position of Chief Pilot. This despite the fact that I was a green horn and had next to zero experience in airline management.

Two weeks after my certification as Chief Pilot, four Transport Canada inspectors showed up at Avionair for a five-day audit to thoroughly check the airline. I hadn't as yet been told to do anything illegal. That week opened my eyes concerning my later career in aviation.

I continued to work as a pilot on the line. I also spent all my free time during the day on my job as Chief Pilot, which required hours of work.

I would often fly nights, even if I had worked the entire day as Chief Pilot.

I was in my early thirties and loved my job. Flying for me was not a chore; it was a pleasure, at least most of the time.

An hour before midnight on 1st February 1992, I was ordered to go to Mirabel Airport to pick up packages from an Air Canada Cargo Boeing 727, scheduled to fly to Fredericton. The weather at the destination was bad, so Air Canada would not allow their planes to take off.

My boss made his money by forcing his pilots to push the limits. When my co-pilot and I arrived at Mirabel with a cargo version of the Merlin, I began to take a serious look at the weather in the Maritimes. It was snowing in the whole area and there were heavy turbulences and poor ground visibility in the region where we would be landing.

I asked the ground personnel to remove several packages from the load so that we could add more fuel to the tanks. That way, if landing at our destination was not in the cards, we would have enough fuel to fly back here.

We took-off from Mirabel to fly to Fredericton. The first hour of flight went well. But as we approached Fredericton, the turbulence was getting stronger. On final at Fredericton, the visibility in the snow was good enough to see the runway at about five miles on our approach.

But the turbulence was so severe I had difficulty keeping the runway visible in the cockpit window.

The Merlin was moving sideways and bucking up and down. I was constantly struggling with the controls, trying to steady the plane. The turbulence was causing the aircraft to change pitch fast and furious. I clearly understood that we would not be able to land on this runway. I pushed the throttle to climb back up and return to Montreal.

As we were climbing, air traffic control radioed, “Captain, Air Canada cargo has contacted us to ask if you would be ok to fly to the Halifax airport, which should be good to land at for another 45 minutes.”

We took a minute to assess the situation. If we flew to Halifax and couldn’t land, we would not have enough fuel to return to Montreal. But the weather was still good in Halifax and the winds were calm on the ground, so we decided to accept the change of destination.

It was a flight of about twenty minutes. Nearing the airport, we came out of the snow clouds and, as we were descending, my co-pilot started shouting at me, “Shit! The wings are covered with ice. Damn, damn, damn, the ice is thick and it is still building.”

We had just entered an area of severe freezing rain. Soon, the aircraft’s controls began to lose their

effectiveness. Maximum engine power was necessary to keep the plane in flight, because of the ice on the wings. My co-pilot continued to yell that the amount of ice on the wings was getting fucking dangerous.

I was struggling with the controls to keep the plane level to the runway. A wind coming from the right was pushing the airplane to the left side of the airstrip. I saw that we were going to miss the runway because of the lack of control that I had.

Fighting with the controls, I was able, by force and pressure and sheer will power, to line us up with the landing strip and to touchdown at the right place. When the plane touched down, much of the ice that had accumulated suddenly broke off. The wings suddenly regained full lift and in less than two seconds, the plane rose about 200 feet above the runway.

I cut the throttle and as the air strip was long enough, we were able to descend down the runway for a safe landing. As soon as we landed, the air traffic controller informed us that the airport was now closed. The freezing rain had now turned into heavy snow.

Once the aircraft was secured on the apron, I contacted Mr. Proulx at Avionair who ordered us to unload the cargo in the Air Canada hangars, refuel and return to Montreal.

I told him that the airport was now closed to air traffic. He insisted that we put the plane in the Air Canada hangar for a few minutes to melt the ice and then take off and fly back to Montreal.

Nevertheless, my co-pilot and I left the airport to go to a motel. Our room was on the ground floor opposite

the parking lot. In the morning, we woke up to find that the snow was higher than the door of our room. The night before, there had been about twenty cars in the parking lot. This morning, all we could see was a field of snow. It had snowed so hard that the snow covered the tallest vehicle in the parking lot.

We were experiencing what was later called The Storm of the Century. We stayed in our room until the next day, when we were able to leave Halifax to fly back to Montreal.

Fired as Chief Pilot

That spring, Mr. Proulx sold Avionair to a group of businesspeople who knew absolutely nothing about the aviation industry. Mr. Proulx had told the new owners that they could make money by charging the pilots for their training 'on type', which is on a specific type of aircraft.

The airline had three types of aircraft. The SW-4 Merlin, the Navajo and the King Air.

They needed two co-pilots to work the flights on the Navajo. The new owners asked me to train several new co-pilots on this plane, demanding five thousand dollars from each for their training. It cost the company only \$2,300, so they were making a profit of \$2,700 per pilot.

There was not enough work as a co-pilot on this type of aircraft. I knew that the pilots were being ripped off. After giving two paid but useless courses on the Navajo

to two young pilots, I told the new operations manager, “I don’t want to give any more training. I feel bad for the young pilots.”

A few days later, I was fired. I made my last flight from Havre Saint-Pierre, a beautiful village on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, back to Montreal.



Havre Saint-Pierre



School in my thirties

University.

After being fired as Chief Pilot at Avionair in July, I decided to go back to school. I had always wanted to go to university. I decided to meet with the rector of the University of Montreal. I wanted to be an undergraduate student in astrophysics.

I had left community college (CEGEP) twelve years earlier and did not have the prerequisite required for this field of study. I carefully explained to the Rector that I was an airline pilot and had studied several subjects on my own. I had studied astral navigation during my time as a pilot. I also told him that I had studied atmospheric science and climatology. Except for aviation, weather and some readings here and there, I had no real knowledge about the subject.

Due to my bull-shittery, I was admitted to the Astrophysics programme at the University of Montreal, at the beginning of September. I had managed, as I often did, to convince the Rector that I would be a suitable candidate.

On my first day in class, there were about fifteen students with me. The professor arrived and drew a large curve on the black board behind him and explained to us that it was a mountain. Then he cut across it with a long horizontal line and began to write down formulas, saying to us, “Of course you all know these formulas very well.”

I spent three long hours listening to him and watching the students answering him from time to time. I hadn’t a clue of what was being said in the room.

I had no business being in this class.

I left the course at the end of the first day and decided to change my major. I enrolled in International Political Science. It was a subject that I really enjoyed, the study of the organisation of power in a group.

Of course, I had to work hard in the first few weeks to reteach my brain to concentrate for long periods of time.

Breaking three lumbar vertebrae

I was thirty-three years old when I completed my first year at university.

At the beginning of the summer, I broke three lumbar vertebrae again. I was on my father's boat, a cruiser on Lake Memphremagog.

After some time on the lake, my father and I saw a cigarette boat in trouble, driven by a young boy. The boat was rapidly filling with water and it would quickly end up at the bottom of the lake if the water was not bailed out.

The boat was quickly flooding from the rear. I jumped from my father's boat onto the front of the speed boat, providing a counterweight, so that the young man could apply the throttle and accelerate. As the boat gained speed, he would be able to force the water out of the boat from the rear.



That day, the waves were very high, not a good day to go for a ride in a small boat. As the craft gained speed, it drained the water and was also beginning to slap up and down in the waves. I was standing at the front of the boat and found it difficult to keep my

balance. The boat was finally empty of water and could now slow down and return to port.

I shouted to the young man to slow down, cut the throttle and stop the boat. I yelled that I was having trouble keeping my balance! But he continued to speed through the waves. The front of the boat slapped down between two waves and then quickly emerged on top of the next wave.

I was launched into the air and as the boat plunged into the new wave, I was slammed down and hit the bow of the boat, landing hard in a sitting position.

I immediately felt intense pain in my lower back and found myself lying on the long nose of the boat, as the young man finally cut the engine. As I had already injured my back thirteen years earlier, I clearly knew that my situation was serious.

I asked the young driver to take me to shore. My father, who was following us in his own boat, called for an ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, I was put on a stretcher. I asked to be taken to Sherbrooke University Hospital. It was the same facility that had treated me eighteen years before, when I had broken my cervical vertebrae C1, C2 and C3.

When I arrived at the hospital, the fracture of my lumbar vertebrae L2, L3 and L4 was confirmed.

Before being discharged from the hospital a week later, I was fitted with a corset that started at the top of my hips, to underneath my armpits. The doctors told me that I would have to exercise for at least six months to regain a small part of my strength. Walking and running again without problems was not guaranteed.

When I left the hospital, I went to stay with my mother, so that I could regain my strength. Luckily for me, my mother had rented a condo on the shores of Lake Memphremagog.

The condo was equipped with a long outdoor pool. I immediately decided to go to the pool every day in my corset and work full time to regain strength. I hoped to return to my pre-accident life.

For the first few days at the pool, I could barely move my hands, arms and feet.



It would take me about fifteen minutes to swim to the other end. A month later, I was able to swim laps faster and without my corset. But once out of the water, I put the blasted thing back on.

In September, I returned to university and started my third semester in Political Science.

I loved to study the world through the eyes of intellectuals from Europe and North America. The

courses at the University of Montreal offered points of view from yesterday's and today's world.

Despite many hours of study and courses, I always kept an eye on the aviation world.

But I had not informed Transport Canada of the accident that summer. I didn't want to risk losing my aviation medical licence.

In early November, I was offered a job as a pilot on an Aero Commander, a small twin piston engine for one or two pilots and four to six passengers. The job consisted of flying 'survey' flights in Central America.



Aero Commander

I did my training on the airplane and took an IFR flight test the next day, with a Transport Canada inspector. A few days later, the director of the survey company informed me that the contract was cancelled. I was happy I had not stopped my university studies.

The Magdalen Islands

Air Madeleine

A few weeks later, I was offered a job with Air Madeleine as captain on an Embraer 110, a twin-engine turbine aircraft for nineteen passengers and two pilots. I had already flown this plane as co-pilot at Air Alma.

The job at Air Madeleine was based in the Magdalen Islands, a magnificent group of isles near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, a hundred nautical miles southeast from the town of Gaspé.

It was for a company that was starting a regular service between the Magdalen Islands and the two cities Gaspé and Rimouski, on the Saint-Lawrence River in Quebec. The islands were beautiful and the job sounded fabulous. I was excited to accept the position, even though I would need to stop my studies for a while.

The time I spent at Air Madeleine was one of my pleasurable experiences in aviation. I worked from the end of December 1993, when the company was founded, until it closed its doors at the end of August 1994.



Embraer 110

Air Madeleine had a daily morning and evening flight between the three cities. There were two captains and two co-pilots. We were all based in a large four-bedroom house paid for by the company and beautifully located facing large cliffs and the ocean.

The cliffs were formed by red sandstone, a sedimentary rock composed of quartz and iron oxide.

The wind, waves, tides and ice caused the erosion of the extremely brittle walls, sculpting them into their sometimes surprising, but spectacular shapes.



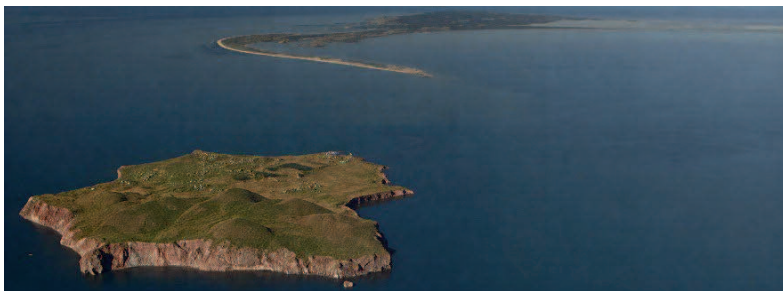
My yellow house near the cliffs

After a few weeks of work, we understood that it was not necessary for the two crews to be on site at the same time. We decided at the end of January that one crew would fly for one week and then be replaced by the other crew. I ended up living one week in Magdelaine Island and one week in my Montreal apartment.



The competition was fierce between the different airlines in those days. There were four air companies flying to the islands.

Seven miles from the main island was Entry Island, which had an all-English-speaking fisherman population, from Irish and Scottish origins. The populous had been dwindling, from the two hundred and sixty people living on the island, to only about sixty today. As there was no airport on that island, a boat was the way to travel there, even though you could fly a small aircraft to its landing strip.



Entry Island

It was so much fun for my co-pilot Jean and I, when we found ourselves without passengers on a return flight, to watch the whales in the fjord or see the seals on the ice floes in the spring. We often flew to Brion Island, which had been closed to visitors since 1983, to see the birds.

Twenty-seven kilometers away was the tiny Roches des Oiseaux (Bird Rock).



Rocher aux Oiseaux

During our flights to these treasured island bird sanctuaries, we flew at a good distance away and used the minimum power of our engines so as not to make too much noise and frighten the birds.

Occasionally we made cargo flights to Charlottetown, the capital of Prince Edward Island. On the return trip to the Magdelaine Islands we would bring back refrigerators, clothes washers, ovens or other equipment that could not be found on the archipelago.

Since there was no fast-food restaurant on Magdelaine Island, the airport employees always asked me to bring back twenty-five Big Macs, when we returned from Charlottetown.

As for me, I always enjoyed the crabs, scallops, mussels and lobsters that were available fresh all year

round. These were the pleasures of living with fishermen.



Magdelaine Island harbour

Thrown out of the company? I think not

I was making the return evening flight between Rimouski and the Islands. After stopping at Gaspé airport to pick up a few passengers, I decided with my co-pilot Jean to cancel the flight to the Magdalen Islands. The weather forecast for the islands was 0/0. This meant a visibility of 0 feet ahead and 0 feet of vision towards the sky. The islands were caught in a fog from the sea. The weather forecast confirmed fog for the next six hours. I contacted the operations manager of the company to explain the situation.

Mr. Quinn replied, “You must return to the island immediately. I want the plane back here tonight for tomorrow morning’s flights.”

I continued explaining my position.

Finally, the operation manager said, “Leroi, I’m throwing you out of the company.”

I told him I would fly the plane and the passengers back to the islands the next morning as soon as the weather was suitable for the flight.

When I arrived on the Magdalene Islands, the operations manager had changed his mind and told me that I would not lose my job. I continued to fly for the company until it closed down a few months later.

I then returned to my life in Montreal, where I would start a small aviation company.

My own boss

Alliance Nord Sud

In June 1994 I formed the airline company Alliance Nord Sud. I managed it with one of my pilot friends, Marc Goeman. I was then thirty-four years old. During the first days of that adventure, I was still working as a pilot for Air Magdalene.

The idea of forming an airline company had been on my mind for several years and with the help of my mentor Pierre Perron, another dream came true. This

man had a background in actuarial science. He was the head of a large consulting firm in labour relations and occupational health and safety issues.

I called him my mentor because Pierre Perron would give me the best business advice. Because of Pierre, I was able to obtain a fifty-thousand-dollar loan to start my first airline company. His presence was enough for the banker to approve the loan. A few years later, I was able to obtain one and a half million dollars from a notary millionaire, to purchase a small business jet.

Having successfully secured my loan, my partner Marc and I were able to formulate business plans and prepare the necessary documents to operate an airline company in Canada.

It required a lot of work to prepare documents such as the Operating Manuals, the S.O.P. (Standard Operation Procedures) and the maintenance manuals for the aircraft that we wanted to operate. We had to get help from two Transport Canada inspectors, who were paid several thousands of dollars to get our operating licence, which we finally obtained in 1995.

As President and CEO of Aviation Nord Sud, I was working on several projects in Quebec, Africa, and Haiti.

I had to do odd jobs in the surrounding area to make a living, since unfortunately my company could not yet pay me a salary. At one point, I was asked if I could redo the entire electrical system in the large basement of a house in the west end of Montreal.

I said, "Of course I can do the job."

In the past, I had installed alarm systems for my father's alarm company. My electrical experience was limited to that. That evening, I bought myself a book with lots of pictures about installing 120 and 220-volt electrical systems. I brushed up my knowledge of electricity in the pages of *Electricity for Dummies* and became a 'qualified electrician'.

My partner Marc had a lot of success with the elderly people in the area. He could find endless part time work. There were always small jobs to be done. Installing a shelf on a bedroom wall, changing a light bulb on the ceiling, unplugging a toilet drain. They were simple and easy jobs, but almost impossible for an elderly person to do. Marc always spent a lot of time talking and listening to his elderly clients, especially the ladies.

A hospital airplane for Southern Africa and a project for Haiti

One of our first projects at A.N.S. was a hospital airplane. It was to be used in southern Africa. It was well known that the African continent was peppered with several regions that were poorly served by roads or regional aircraft. Therefore, many parts of Africa could not easily find solutions to health problems.

Marc and I proposed the purchase of a Twin-Otter aircraft. The Twin-Otter is a Canadian plane, a short take-off and landing aircraft with remarkable off-road performance characteristics, that could land and take off in less than 290 m.

This aircraft could provide a mobile field hospital, delivering vaccinations, small surgeries and neonatal care. We had put a lot of effort into selling our project to countries and humanitarians, but to no avail.

Our budget would not sustain the project and we had to move on.



The hospital airplane

In 1995 our small company was awarded a contract with the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), a UN agency based in New York. We were awarded five thousand American dollars per week to travel to Haiti and study airport facilities.

We travelled throughout the country to study and analyse the runways and buildings of the different regional airports. We calculated the costs necessary to bring the country's airports up to internationally acceptable standards. It was a very needed project for

the country. The rehabilitation work would be immensely expensive, but the benefits for the local population would have been significant and extremely useful. This was another project that the United Nations put on a shelf.

The little twin-engine based in Montreal

In early 1996, Marc and I were able to acquire a PA-31 Navajo aircraft that we offered with its crew to Canadian companies wishing to travel in eastern Canada and the northeastern United States.

We used this aircraft, which was owned by a Montreal industrialist, for flights from February to the end of December 1996. At first the owner of the aircraft refused to rent to us. His wife was afraid that we would end up dirtying the carpets and the passenger seats.

As you might remember, I had already flown this type of plane with Air Alma a few years earlier. We decided to buy carpets and cover the original ones. When the owner's wife saw our carpeting system, she agreed to rent us the aircraft. Since it was a private plane, we had to have it approved by Transport Canada, spending many thousands of dollars that we did not have.

We were the two regular captains, but on occasion we hired three part time co-pilots we had in reserve. This aircraft could be flown with only one pilot. However, the passengers did not like this arrangement, so Marc or I always flew the aircraft with a co-pilot.

Will the real co-pilot please stand up

In July 1996, we obtained a contract to transport the two owners of a large cement plant, Cement St-Laurent, a major company, from Montreal to the airport in Albany, the capital of the state of New York.

Normally these two business owners never flew in the same plane, so that in the event of an accident one of them would remain in control of the company. But for some reason that morning, they had decided to take the same flight.

The plane was to leave at 8:00 am, but due to bad luck, neither Marc nor any of the co-pilots were available to make the flight that morning.



The Navajo PA-31

Rather than lose the contract and the important client, I asked my girlfriend Lisa if she would pretend to be a professional pilot and accompany me on the flight. I dressed her up in one of my old pilot uniforms that looked fabulous on her. Lisa had never sat in a cockpit before, so we arrived at the airport early, in order for me to point out several things to her, so that our passengers would not suspect anything.

I asked her to sit on the right, in the co-pilot's seat. I explained a bit about the instruments, such as the altimeter and the speedometer. I showed her how to hold her hands on the controls in front, to make it look like she was flying the plane.

I also showed her how to get in and out of her pilot's seat correctly. But most importantly, how to open and close the back door of the plane, through which passengers and pilots enter and exit. When passengers arrive, the co-pilot is the one who offers them a seat and explains the safety instructions.

As captain, I remained in my pilot's seat, preparing the cockpit of the aircraft to start the engine, taxi to the runway and take off.

After prepping the aircraft and getting my new co-pilot ready for her 'job', we returned to the passenger waiting room. I took the opportunity to review the weather forecast for departure, flight, and destination.

It was a beautiful day with no wind or clouds from Montreal, to our destination Albany. My only concern was that Albany airport was without horizontal and vertical visibility in the morning fog.

According to the latest airport forecast, the fog was expected to lift within the next hour and the rest of the day promised to be a cloudless sunny sky, a beautiful day for flying.

When our two VIPs arrived, I introduced myself and my co-pilot and we all made our way to the plane. I continued to the pilot seat to prepare for the flight, while Lisa looked after our two important passengers. She explained the security measures, closed the door of the plane and returned to sit in the co-pilot's seat. I started the engines, contacted ground control and taxied to the runway. My co-pilot Lisa turned to the passengers from time to time and gave them a thumbs up as a sign that everything was going well.

We took off and headed towards Albany through a turbulence-free cloudless sky. It was a perfect flight. As we approached Albany, we saw that the fog had not yet lifted from the airport area, contrary to what had been predicted in the aeronautical forecast.



I nevertheless flew an instrument approach to the runway. We were making a precision ILS approach, which allowed us to descend to 200 feet off the ground on short final.

We were in fog for the last six miles on long final before the runway. The passengers were beginning to twitch and become more and more nervous.

I was focused on my approach to the airstrip. When we reached 200 feet off the ground, I was still in the cloud and couldn't see the runway. I had to abort the approach and landing. I had to overshoot, which meant increasing engine power and climbing, as if I were taking off.

I headed back up north to our alternate airport Plattsburgh, a thirty-minute flight from Albany.

I really needed to pee. The idea of not being able to see the inside of a bathroom for another forty-five minutes was unthinkable. Fortunately, there was an empty bottle of water which Lisa handed over to me so I could pee in it.

One of the passengers saw the bottle of my urine and asked if that was apple juice.

I replied, "It was two hours ago".

While climbing, the Albany air traffic controller radioed me that the visibility at the beginning of the other runway seemed to be somewhat better than the rest of the airport. He could offer an approach on this other landing strip. This other runway was the same runway but approached from the other direction. We would

maintain a heading of 190 degrees north instead of a heading of 010 degrees south.

I agreed to the change, hoping to see the runway and finally land.

The two passengers seemed ready to pass out from fear, even though It had been a calm flight and at no time had the plane been in danger.

We started our second approach to Albany airport. I lowered the landing gear. At five hundred feet above ground level, we were still in thick fog. Finally, at two hundred feet, I saw the runway in front of us.

I had just enough time to do the flare (pitching up the nose) and we landed smoothly. We then headed for the private aircraft parking area. Our two passengers couldn't thank us enough. They both seem to be very impressed by Lisa's talent as a co-pilot. They left the airport for their appointments and specified the mid-afternoon time for our 'wheels up' return to Montreal.

Lisa and I then left the airport for a nearby shopping mall, for a walk and nice lunch. A few years later my new 'co-pilot' would become my wife and the mother of my two children.

My last flight as a pilot on my Navajo PA-31 was at the end of December 1996.

The following month, I was working as a consultant on a Cheyenne PIPER PA-42 for Sky Service, a major Canadian charter airline.

Departure from Alliance Nord Sud

As I previously said, in the autumn of 1996 Marc and I met with our multimillionaire notary, who was interested in buying a small business jet for his travels and was willing to spend on this project. That aircraft would be put on the Alliance Nord Sud charter. We had found a beautiful Cessna Citation 1 in Western Canada for seven hundred thousand dollars. The jet had a left front door that could be used for medical evacuations.



Cessna Citation 1

We needed to spend another five hundred thousand dollars to change one of the engines, paint the exterior, redo the passenger cabin and perform a C Check (heavy maintenance). The C Check took several weeks, stripping the aircraft to its bare bones and dressing it back up again.

We had made an agreement with the notary to use the aircraft for Alliance Nord Sud, when the notary was not using it for personal flights. Now, we could offer the jet to the companies in the region that wanted to charter a private plane.

During the same time, Marc and I teamed up with two military helicopter pilots.

I hadn't been trained to fly the jet because I had started working as a pilot for Air Mirabel on a Boeing 757. But I remained CEO of our small airline company.

We moved the Citation to Sherbrooke Airport and accepted the city's proposal to take over the management of the airport. The Canadian government had decided to hand over the operation of all regional airports to their cities. My objective was to establish management of several of these airports in Quebec.

Most of the municipalities didn't know how to operate an airport.

They gave the job to a city engineer with no experience in aviation. I truly believed that my associates and I could turn these airports around and make them grow and develop for the benefit of the local people.

However, our two new partners were not very keen on this project. They were at odds over how the company should operate. The partners came from the armed forces and had an overly rigid and military vision of teamwork.

I myself was having difficulties managing an airline company, a marriage, an international airline pilot job, in addition to health issues.

Something had to go. I would have to give up flying for Air Mirabel, my wife or my airline company.

I decided to let go of the company.

Flying on a Cheyenne

While I was still the CEO of Alliance Nord Sud, I also worked for Sky Service. They were a major Canadian company providing business jets for companies and individuals with deep pockets. They flew small jets with four to ten seats, for short or long-range trips. Some of these small planes could fly to Europe or Africa without having to stop en-route to refuel. They also did medical evacuation from one continent to another.

I would be there to train pilots on the Cheyenne PA-43 that Sky Service had added to its fleet. They also wanted me to revise the SOP, Standard Operation Procedures, for this aircraft.

The flights were mainly to northern Quebec and northeastern United States. It was a fun plane to fly. Larry Turner, the co-pilot whom I had to train, became a good friend.



PA-43 Aircraft

I remember a flight where we had to fly the owner of the airplane and another passenger to Lebel-Sur-Quévillon airport. It was on an afternoon when it was snowing hard in the Quévillon area.

I made my instrument approach and because of the bad weather, only saw the airport and the runway as we were exactly above it.

Because we couldn't land, the owner of the plane shouted from his seat, "We can see the runway, it's right underneath us, land the fucking plane, you idiot."

We aborted the landing and climbed back up to altitude and tried making another instrument approach to the runway. During the second approach, we only saw the runway when we were 650 feet above it.

The passenger screamed at us, "You fucking idiots, why didn't you land? *Crisse de câlisse de tabarnak, de ciboire*. What the hell are you doing?"

I climbed back to altitude, as it was clearly impossible to land at the airport in the next few hours and flew to Val-d'Or.

After landing at Val-D'Or, I was able to explain to the passenger that it had been out of the question to land at their scheduled airport. The owner of the plane finally understood the situation.

I began studying the weather for a return trip to Montreal airport. Montreal was now covered in freezing rain and the forecast was calling for another four hours of heavy precipitation.

We contacted the owner and told him, “We can’t leave for Montreal because of the freezing rain.”

After arguing, I told him, “We’re going to the hotel and we’ll be back early tomorrow morning. Thank you and good night.”

I really enjoyed flying with Larry, we were both the same age and spent a lot of time in the air laughing. Because he didn’t get a captain’s position later on, he decided to quit flying and work as a train engineer for a company in the Montreal area.

I continued to work for Sky Service until my last flight in early 1997. I then got hired at Air Mirabel as co-pilot on Boeing 757s. I had never thought about becoming an international jumbo jet pilot, but there I was.

The Boeing 757

An Important call.

I received a call from Mickael, a pilot with whom I had been at flight school twenty years before. I had run into him by chance a few weeks earlier and we had talked for a few minutes. He told me that he was a check pilot for Air Mirabel.

A few days later, Mickael called me on his speaker phone and asked if I would come and fly for Air Mirabel. Mickael told me, “We would like to have a guy like you on our team.”

While I was talking to Mickael, I heard a familiar voice in the background, whom I recognized as my student pilot Mick Charland.

“You’re talking to Antoine Leroi?”, exclaimed Mick. “Really, Antoine Leroi. Wow!”

Grabbing the phone from Mickael, Mick said, “Antoine, it’s Mick Charland. You absolutely must come see us. We really want you to work for us. I’m so happy to hear your voice.”

Mick was also a check pilot at Air Mirabel. I had been his flight instructor seventeen years before. I remembered that he had been very serious about getting his pilot licence. Mick had paid for his lessons by working as a swimming pool lifeguard.

Mickael and Mick invited me to meet their Chief Pilot Captain Blouin, over lunch the following Friday at the Air Mirabel cafeteria.

In those days, the company required a minimum of 4,500 flight hours before one could apply for a position as a pilot with the airline company. I only had 4,450 flight hours.

Even though I was quite happy flying for small private companies, I decided to go to the interview with Air Mirabel’s Chief Pilot. But before this meeting I knew I needed to buy a new logbook. This is a book where the pilot keeps track of the hours he has flown.

I had made up my mind that adding a few hours would not really be cheating as I most likely would not be hired. So, I added two hundred flight hours, inventing them during my year flying in Africa.

A jumbo jet interview

I arrived at Air Mirabel on Friday, a few minutes before noon. Captain Blouin, Boeing 757 Chief Pilot, had decided to challenge the old way of hiring. He wanted to choose his own pilots, without the approval of the L-1011 Chief Pilot.



L-1011 aircraft

I entered the company's cafeteria at noon, accompanied by my friends the two check pilots.

They introduced me to Captain Blouin, a thin, short man in his late forties, who seemed rather severe.

He looked me over and took my CV. After a minute he told me, "You don't have any experience on large heavy planes. You don't have any training on jet aircraft."

I saw that Captain Blouin was not very impressed with what he saw on the CV. Finally, he looked at me and said straight faced, "Can you start on Monday?"

I said yes and Captain Blouin went back to his meal, without another look at me.

Three days later I was training to be a co-pilot on Boeing 757. I had been hired in less than ten minutes, without having had an interview with human resources, without being in a simulator and without having to meet the Operations Director.

I realised that my two flight buddies had convinced Captain Blouin that in spite of my lack of experience, Air Mirabel would be lucky to have me as a pilot.

After my ground training at Mirabel, I did the simulator training on the Boeing 757 at Delta Airlines in Saint Paul, Minneapolis.

As it was a very busy training centre, the simulator assignments were all from midnight to 4 am.

I did my training in May and, as luck would have it, Mickael, and Mick were the ones who gave me my Boeing 757 pre-test and flight test at the end of my training.

When I got back to Montreal, I had to do one hundred flight hours on the line (flight with a check pilot and passengers on board). After these flights, I was officially a pilot with Air Mirabel.



Boeing 757

***First transatlantic flight**

I was thirty-seven years old when I did my first transatlantic flight on a Boeing 757. While cruising over the Atlantic, the pilot in command, Captain Lessard, left the cockpit to have coffee and talk with the passengers and flight crew.

Before 9/11, pilots could move freely on the planes. We would often leave the flight deck to go walk and relax around the aircraft. But there was always a pilot at the controls of the plane.

That evening, around midnight Montreal time, Captain Lessard left the cockpit to go chat in the back, leaving me to fly.

It was a dark night and all I could see were the stars. They were magnificent, incredible, fantastic. I could not believe that I was at the control of a Jumbo Jet. I had the lives of 230 passengers and crew in my hands. During my first European flight, the descent began over Dieppe, one hundred nautical miles from Paris.

The morning was beautiful and there were no clouds. I could see the beauty of the fields, villages and towns as we approached Paris, the city of lights.

Once on the ground, after the passengers deplaned, a bus was waiting for the pilots and flight attendants at the door of the aircraft. It would take us directly to our hotel, without having to go through regular customs.

We were staying in a beautiful hotel on the Seine in St-Germain-Des-Prés, opposite the Île Saint-Louis. The Notre-Dame Cathedral was located on the Île de la Cité, a two-minute walk away. Captain Lessard and I had arranged to meet up at 6 pm in the hotel lobby. We would go out and have a beer before finding a good restaurant for dinner around 8 pm.



Bedtime was about midnight, so we had an alarm set for the next morning at 8 am. We had to leave the hotel for wheels up at 11 am, to return to Montreal.

Sometimes, after landing in Europe, we had to take a domestic flight to other destinations, as our return flight would be leaving from another city. We would fly from Montreal to Paris one day and the return flight would be from Brussels to Toronto the next day. Occasionally, after arriving in Europe, we could spend three or four days before making our return flight.

London nights

During my first year as a pilot with Air Mirabel, I often flew to London. I always slept in the basement of the hotel, in a sad, windowless room.

After three months, a captain with whom I flew told me that on arrival, the flight attendants would be given the keys by the hotel staff, to the pilots' rooms. The senior flight attendants were stealing my room for themselves!

I was clueless. I had no idea that pilots had to have superior quality rooms with air conditioning.

Air Mirabel wanted their pilots to have a good night's sleep before making a long return flight home.

I remember arriving in Manchester, England, after a long flight. We had arrived at the hotel at around 9:30 in the morning. We had to wait in the lobby for our rooms for more than two hours. When I got to mine, I saw water running from the ceiling, directly onto the bed.

I called the front desk to find another room. I was told that all the rooms in the hotel were taken, as there was a conference in town. I asked that someone be sent to see what was happening for themselves.

I had to wait thirty minutes before someone finally came to see what was going on. I told him that the room above mine was probably flooded. The employee told me that there was no room above. It was the hotel roof.

He then told me, "The water only leaks into your room when it rains."

When I realised that the hotel employee was deadly serious, I thanked him, threw him out and lay down on the side of the bed that wasn't too wet. I was so tired that I could have slept on the bloody roof.

Between France and Mexico

I remember a flight from Mirabel to Paris with Captain Lortie, a pilot with whom I had flown several times. As soon as we reached our cruising altitude, the captain moved his seat back and covered his eyes with a mask.

He clearly trusted me, because he said, “I’m going to close my eyes and sleep for a while. Wake me up before the descent, at the latest.”

Pilots who flew to Europe with a layover could take their wives or girlfriends with them. If no seats were available in the passenger cabin, the wives or husbands could make the flight in the cockpit, sitting on one of the jump-seats situated behind the pilots.

Occasionally, I would fly between Montreal and Acapulco, Mexico. This was a popular destination for women working in Quebec dance bars. Exotic dancing was a very lucrative job. During the winter, they would go every month for a few days of sun and fun.

I remember the dancers often came to see us in the cockpit to say hello and to show us their perfect natural breasts, or their new and improved implanted ‘accoutrements’.

Being an airline pilot had no perks at all!

Difficulty on the ground

A disappointing simulator training

I had to renew my pilot's licence on Boeing 757, this was renewed every six months on a simulator.

I wasn't due to be tested for several weeks, but Chief Blouin contacted me to say that the co-pilot who was due to test in Minneapolis that very morning, had just called in sick. So, I would have to fly to Minneapolis and take his place on the simulator.

I had to be at the airport at 7:30 am for my flight to Minnesota, as my simulator testing session was scheduled that day at 4:00 in the afternoon. During my four-hour training session, there were two hours where the captain was at the controls and two hours for the co-pilot to fly. For flying jumbo jets two pilots are always necessary in simulator training.

My turn as pilot went badly. I had not yet begun studying for the simulator training as I was not to be trained and tested for another two months.

I had not yet studied in-flight failure procedures, engine failures or pressurisation problems.

Unfortunately, I was paired with a Captain Gibbs who did not accept any mistakes from his co-pilots. Captain Blouin programed a simulated malfunction, an engine failure on takeoff. Not being well prepared, I could not control the airplane correctly and I crashed the simulator.

Captain Gilbert turned to Chief Blouin and said, “We have to stop the training, he doesn’t know how to fly. You should fire him, he’s dangerous.”

I was devastated. But then Captain Blouin told Captain Gibbs, “We will continue training.”

Once again at the controls, I took off and had another simulated engine failure which I managed to control properly in flight. The airplane was safe and sound. The rest of the training session went well and I returned the next day with my licence signed for another six months.

Following this flight test on a simulator, I was afraid when I showed up every six months. A month before the test date, I would start to get stressed, afraid of not passing. This horror story of a training session left me upset and overly stressed for years to come.

Moderation is always better

In April 1998 I flew to Ireland. After a short stop in Dublin, we landed at Shannon Airport. It was early in the morning and despite the fact that we had flown all night, we decided to rent a small car and visit the Dingle Peninsula region.

This area is surrounded by fine sandy beaches and truly magnificent steep cliffs. Captain Gendron and I went to a pub while waiting for our rental car. I quickly saw that my captain was a heavy drinker. Captain Gendron had downed quite a few Guinness before our

car arrived. Needless to say, I was the designated driver of our little vehicle.



Mini Cooper

When we left for the back roads, Captain Gendron, who had brought several bottles of beer along for the ride, began to give me a hard time. We were driving on twisting small lanes, with stone walls along the hedgerows. These roads ran along fields where sheep grazed freely.



Dingle Peninsula

The view was breathtaking. The narrow space between vehicles passing each other made driving quite difficult. While I was manoeuvring around a curve, Captain Gendron suddenly pulled on the handbrake, locking the rear wheels and I lost control of the car for a second or two.

Captain Gendron was laughing his head off. I told him not to do this again. But a few minutes later, he did. This time, we almost had a head-on collision. I stopped the car and told him to smarten up or I would leave him on the side of the road.

A minute later, he put his seat back down and immediately passed out. After that, I was able to enjoy the scenery.

As a pilot flying the world, I had discovered wonderful destinations.

There was the island of San Andres, owned by Colombia. I loved Costa Rica, Panama, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago and more. I remember flights from western Canada to the islands of Hawaii. I was paid to always have the beauty of the world at my feet.

In February 1999 I stopped flying the Boeing 757. I always thought that this aircraft was one of the easiest, most enjoyable and safest jumbos to fly.

Air Mirabel offered to train me as co-pilot on the Airbus 330, the new aircraft that my airline would be receiving in the coming months.

The United Arab Emirates

Emirates Airline.

In March 1999, I had my first son. I took paternity leave for several weeks. In Quebec, the government offers new parents, both men and women, several weeks of paid leave to care for a new child.

I took the opportunity to get to know my son and help my wife adjust to her new life as a mother.

After seven weeks of maternity leave, in early May, Air Mirabel, asked me to leave Montreal for the United Arab Emirates.

I was to be trained on Airbus 330 at Emirates Airline; the major airline based in Dubai. The course lasted for almost two months. I was going to be trained as co-pilot on Airbus 330 with Captain Mario Blais. Mario was the

same age as me and had flown Boeing 757 as a captain before then. They were four groups of pilots from Air Mirabel who would be training at Emirates Airline.

The courses there were extremely well structured. We had one day of classroom or simulators and then a day of rest. The simulator sessions were only three hours, instead of four hours like in North America and Europe, which very much improved the learning curve.

Mario and I roomed in a large flat, well located in downtown Dubai, with two bedrooms, a kitchen and a spacious living room with a television. We could visit the city and its surroundings on our days off. We went to the Souk, the traditional Arab markets, where you could find the Gold Souk, the Spice Souk, the Perfume Souk, the Textile Souk and many, many more.



We often went to the beach where the sea water was much too warm. It was way too hot to stay in the water for any length of time. Some of the beaches were set aside for expats, like pilots and flight attendants.



Other beaches were only for women or only for men. There was everything for everyone in Dubai. I often went to the public swimming pools or the outdoor hotel pools. The water was cooled to a lower temperature. The two warmest months in Dubai were May and June, when the temperature could hit 45° C or higher.

After a few days in Dubai, Mario and I found a bar where an excellent live rock band was performing, five nights a week. The first time we walked into the bar, the band was playing *Smoke on the Water*, by the 1970s band *Deep Purple*. We found out that it was a group of musicians from Vancouver, Canada. The musicians were spending several months as a house band in Dubai. We spent a few evenings listening to the band and drinking Scotch.

Mario had not really imbibed before meeting me, but after spending a few days, Mario became a Scotch aficionado. He was a pretty serious man and hadn't lived

much. I was a bad influence and kept taking him off the beaten track.

The room adjacent to the bar where the band was performing was a discotheque. We spent the first few weeks in Dubai listening to the band. During the intermission, we went into the discotheque. Being early in the evening, we were surprised to see that there were already about thirty people in the room, three or four of whom were men and the rest were girls in their twenties or early thirties.

These ladies were drop dead gorgeous. Each one more beautiful than the next. Women from all over the world. We sat down at the bar and started chatting with the ladies. It took us quite a while to understand that they were, in fact, high-class escorts.

They explained that they were in Dubai to service the very wealthy Arab businessmen. These men came to Dubai to have forbidden sexual adventures.

The ladies told us that they were there on a three-month visa. When their visa expired, they would fly out of the country and return the same day with another three-month visa.

At the end of June Mario and I took our PPC (Pilot Proficiency Check) simulator flight test on Airbus 330, with a Transport Canada inspector who came to Dubai from Ottawa.



Emirates Airbus 330 Simulator

Immediately after being tested, I returned to Montreal, as I was eager to see my son, who was growing fast. Before leaving the Emirates, I was offered a job to fly with Emirates airline, working as a pilot. They offered me four times my Air Mirabel salary.

However, I felt indebted to Air Mirabel and refused their offer. Occasionally, thinking back to this time, I have regretted my decision. However, I never regretted my years living in Quebec. Working as a pilot with Air Mirabel took me all over the world. I still had the chance to discover new countries, one flight at a time.

Flying with or without sleep

After spending fifteen days with my family in Montreal, I made my first flight as co-pilot on the A330. The flight was from Toronto to Porto in Portugal. I spent

three days there and returned on the fourth day to Canada.

The Airbus 330 is an airplane designed for long-distance flights of more than nine hours. Fatigue was often a factor on these long flights. Air Mirabel was one of the first airlines to allow its pilots to have short periods of rest, in other words, to sleep during the flight. Following the strict protocol established by the company was paramount. Sleeping during the first and last hour of flight was strictly forbidden.

For example, on a flight leaving Montreal at 10 pm to Paris, after two hours of flight the captain would ask to nap for thirty minutes. The chief purser, the senior flight attendant, was informed that one of the two pilots was going to sleep for a while. According to protocol, the chief purser would have to contact the cockpit every twenty minutes to confirm that the pilot, still at the controls, was awake and in command.

I remember one flight where I was flying from Montreal to Paris. Approaching Paris, at about fifty nautical miles in final descent, I fell asleep for a few seconds. The captain didn't notice that I had nodded off, but this gave me a huge scare. Following this flight, if I was tired, I would ask for a few minutes to rest.

I flew with good pilots and a few idiots. I remember a flight with Captain Deschenes. I was the pilot at the controls and Deschenes, pilot in command, took over both jobs. So, I told him that I would only handle the radio and I never flew with him again.

The 'Pilot Flying' is the one in control of the aircraft. The 'Pilot Monitoring' is the person who takes care of

the radio communications and double checks the ‘Pilot Flying’.

Most captains on Airbus 330 at Air Mirabel were experienced older pilots. Listening to them was like opening a box full of treasures.



Airbus 330

A difficult landing

I remember Commander Gaumont, an older pilot who had just transitioned from the three-engine jumbo jet Lockheed L-1011, to the Airbus 330. Captain Gaumont had told me about one of his first flights on the Airbus, a flight from Montreal to Paris, with a stop at Quebec City to pick up a few extra passengers.

Leaving Montreal, he did not take the time to study runway conditions at Quebec City airport. The freezing

rain on this winter's night had passed through Quebec City earlier, leaving a layer of ice on runway 06 and runway adhesion was almost nil. The Airbus 330, which was not quite full that night, could land in about 4,000 feet. The approach and landing took place smoothly. However, when the captain applied the brakes, nothing happened. The runway was covered with hard ice and the eight tires that tried to brake had no grip on the icy tarmac.

Keeping the runway centreline, the aircraft began to slide sideways, turning the nose of the aircraft 90 degrees from the runway. They were still moving on the centreline and continued to slide slowly towards the end of the air strip. Finally, the aircraft came to a complete stop a few feet before the end, with the nose of the aircraft still at a 90-degree angle, perfectly positioned to go straight ahead and enter the taxiway towards the parking area.

As for me, I continued to work as a co-pilot on Airbus 330 until my last flight in April 2001. I then began my training as a captain on Airbus 310 in May. I was finally going to be a jumbo jet captain. I was going to be sitting in the 'catbird' seat.

Airbus 310

My first years on Airbus 310

In May 2001, I was sent to Miami to do my simulator training with a new co-pilot Michel Pepin who had just

joined Air Mirabel. Sharing the same sense of humour, we quickly became friends.

I had to stop training at the end of May because I was returning to Montreal to be with my wife Lisa, who was expecting our second child. I returned to Miami eight days later to complete the training and obtain my certification on Airbus 310.



Airbus 310

After my simulator training, I had to complete one hundred hours of flight time on the line with a check pilot. During these hundred hours, I had great difficulty using the brakes properly on landing. I had trouble slowing down without hitting the brakes too hard, making it uncomfortable for the passengers.

The check pilot who flew with me, Captain Turgeon, told me to be careful and to brake correctly. I did not know how to brake correctly and my training captain didn't offer a solution. Thank goodness a few days later, I flew with the new Check Pilot Captain Ouellet. He showed me how to use the brakes on this aircraft, by

putting a bit of light pressure on the brake pedals for a seconds before applying them fully.

I did my final Route Check in August. I was very fortunate to make my first flight as a captain with co-pilot Isabelle Derome on a flight to Frankfurt, Germany. Isabelle helped me enormously, to understand the on-board computer that helps pilots follow flight routes and make the appropriate approaches to airport runways.

September 2001

Four weeks later I flew with Michel Pepin, my training buddy from Florida. We flew from Toronto to Aberdeen and then to Manchester, England. Our return was not scheduled until Wednesday the 12th, so we decided to get up early in the morning of the 11th and go for a long walk through the hills of the Hope Valley. This beautiful area is situated south-east of Manchester and west of Sheffield.



We walked for several hours, admiring the beauty of the scenery. As was often the case when Michel and I met, we were ill-prepared for our journey. We had not thought to bring water with us. In mid-afternoon, we came across a pub near the village of Edale and decided to stop for large glasses of water and a good, well-deserved beer on tap.

Inside, there were two or three hearty drinkers at a table and we went to sit at the bar. The television on the wall was showing what appeared to be an American disaster film.

The barman who was also watching the television suddenly yelled, “This is not a movie! It’s live TV! It’s really the World Trade Center towers in New York, they have been hit by a plane! Hit by a plane!”

It was absolutely unbelievable. We spent some time watching the horror unfold on TV, then returned to our hotel to contact the airline company, to find out what the

procedures were in place for our return to Canada. We learned that all flights to North America had been cancelled until further notice.

The next morning, on 12th September, we flew as passengers to Glasgow in the north of the country.

Naturally, our return flight was cancelled. There were no hotel rooms available in Glasgow due to all the passengers who could not fly to North America. We finally found a room in a hostel west of Glasgow. This was the village of Largs, on the edge of the North Atlantic, opposite Great Cumbrae Island.



Largs village

We spent several days there before we were able to leave for Canada as passengers, when flights were finally resumed. Following 11th September 2001, Michel lost his position at Air Mirabel for almost two years. The decrease of flights offered by most of the North American airline companies left him without revenue. As for me, my next flight was on 26th September, from Berlin-Schoenfeld to Toronto.

Landing on the ocean?

During the first year of the arrival of Airbus 310 at Air Mirabel, the company did not correctly understand the systems for calculating the fuel used on flights. With certain altitudes or temperatures, the aircraft would use much more fuel than what was forecast on the flight plan. Often, despite the fact that pilots took off from their departure airports with a few extra tons, they arrived at their destination with hardly any fuel left in their tanks.

I recall a flight from Toronto to Shannon, Ireland. Halfway across the North Atlantic, we were becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of fuel remaining. We weren't even sure we would have enough to reach our destination. We didn't even think we had enough fuel to get to an alternative airport.

To add to the problem, the weather at our destination was not cooperating. Low clouds were sitting on the ground at Shannon.

Two hours before we were supposed to reach Ireland, we reduced the cruising speed to use the power that gave the best ratio of flight distance to fuel consumption. Without doing this we would not have had enough fuel to reach our destination and would have had to land on the ocean.

Approaching the airport, we found that the eastbound runway 06 was unavailable, because the tail wind was over 20 knots. This meant that we needed to fly about twenty miles past the airport, do a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and return to the westbound runway 24.

But call it the ‘luck of the Irish’ on final, we saw the runway only at the minimum altitude allowed for landing. We couldn’t believe our luck because a safe touchdown had not been a sure thing. We calculated after landing that we would not have had enough fuel for a second approach. We had narrowly missed crashing into the ocean by a wing and a prayer.



Airbus 310 flight deck

To be a pilot is a job where you never stop learning. It is always important to learn from the mistakes and misadventures of others, as well as your own. You just have to be willing to learn and listen. After my first year as Captain, I was having a lot of fun piloting the jumbos. This was a dream job.

I remember some pilots and flight attendants who had initially been lawyers, engineers, nurses or even medical doctors. I met people who had left their jobs for the pleasure of working as flight attendants for less money, more freedom and the possibility of exploring the world.



Enjoying the Mexican sun

Supporting pilots in need

In 2002 Air Mirabel agreed to sponsor a programme against abuse of alcohol and drugs among pilots. Training a pilot from his first day on the job, until he became an experienced captain, cost the airline company approximately one million dollars. Rather than firing a pilot with an alcohol problem and losing their million-

dollar investment, it was more cost effective to spend \$50,000 on doctors and treatments to help them get back on their feet and return to the pilot's seat.

I agreed to represent the Pilot Assistance group. This association offered help to pilots with personal problems that could affect their ability to do their job. Instead of dismissing a pilot with alcohol problems, Air Mirabel agreed to put them on sick leave. The pilot would have to agree to detoxify and to be sent to a private clinic for thirty days. Leaving the clinic, the pilot had to go to Alcoholics Anonymous every day for at least three months.

After between six months and a year, if the pilot was still sober and had passed the required blood tests every month, he or she could receive a special pilot's licence. This licence allowed them to fly only on aircrafts that required two pilots. For example, they could not fly a single engine craft by themselves.

Every month, the pilot on this programme had to meet with the Tri-Partite-Team. This group consisted of a doctor, a company airline manager and a pilot who had gone through the Pilot Assistance training. They would meet every month with the recovering pilot for a discussion of their progress towards an easier and more enjoyable life without drugs, alcohol or other problems.

After a minimum of two years on this programme, if all had gone well for the pilot in question, they would be given an unrestricted pilot's licence and the Tri-Partite-Team would be dissolved.

I remember a captain to whom I had suggested getting help. This pilot had suffered no restrictions because he was never tested or seen imbibing before or

during the flight. When he arrived at his destination abroad after a flight, he would go and have a beer with the crew, but only one drink. Then he would quickly return to his hotel room and down 40 ounces of gin. The next morning, he was on time for the return flight.

The co-pilots could clearly see that this captain always had shaky hands for the first two hours or so of a flight. However, after two years on the programme, that captain returned to work as a pilot and was sober and well liked for over ten years before his retirement.

I remember a co-pilot named Alain, whose wife had just left him. She departed the country without the children, to restart her life abroad. He found himself alone with four little ones under the age of six. He had been working at Air Mirabel for less than a year. He had no one to take care of his kids while he was at work, no close family and he was afraid of losing his job as a pilot.

He was extremely nervous about being laid off. I went to see the Chief Pilot and asked him to put Alain on forced rest with pay for several weeks. Alain returned to the line after two months, having solved his kids' childcare problems. The last time I saw him, Alain was a happy camper, flying a Boeing 737.

Stubborn as a Mule

I flew to the Caribbean island of St-Martin in early December. After our passengers had left the plane, my co-pilot Marc-André and I went to the control tower. We

wanted to check flight conditions for our next departure. We were flying to Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic and then back to Montreal. Our return trip was going to be difficult, as a hurricane had just approached Haiti on the west side of the island of Hispaniola. We only had a few hours there to pick up our passengers at Punta Cana, then return to Canada before the weather became impossible for the flight.

After boarding our St Martin passengers who were returning to Canada, I asked the ground crew to back up our plane, with the help of the ‘mule’. The mule is a large tug vehicle with a long steel towbar that attaches to the nose wheel of the plane to be moved. Once the aircraft has been moved and is ready, the towbar is disconnected. The plane now can start its engines and move on its own power.



Princess Juliana International Airport on the Caribbean Island of Saint Martin.



That evening, as we were facing the terminal, the mule tow started to push us backwards, so that at a good distance from the terminal, we could start our engines and move away. Some distance behind my airplane were two aircraft waiting for buses full of passengers: a Boeing 747 from Lufthansa Airlines and an Airbus from Air France.

We would have to be careful since the parking area was not perfectly flat and there was a small slope from the terminal.

Suddenly, I realized that we were backing up too quickly down the slope. The tow bar had not been properly attached to the nose of our aircraft. We were moving backwards fast. I knew that behind us, at about fifty metres away, two jumbo jets were parked, waiting for the passengers. My Airbus was extremely rear loaded. I knew that if I applied the brakes too quickly, the nose would lift and the tail of the plane would descend and hit the ground.

I started to apply the brakes very, very slowly, in order to gently slow down without dropping the tail backwards, causing serious damage.

I was thinking of the two big aircraft behind us, looming up fast. My co-pilot Marc-André, without asking me, decided to put on the parking brake, a lever that immediately blocks the eight wheels of the plane's rear landing gear. He mistakenly thought that the normal brakes didn't work when the engine wasn't running. This action would have surely tipped the plane backwards, by raising the nose.

At the last moment, I was able to stop Marc-André's movement towards the parking brake, while continuing to apply the brakes gently and slowly until our plane stopped moving. We were less than thirty feet from the nose of the Boeing 747 from Lufthansa.



Boeing 747

I took a few minutes to explain to ground services and my co-pilot, what had happened. I then started both engines and taxied to the take-off runway.

The flight from Punta Cana to Montreal was extremely turbulent. In fact, for the first two hours of flight the seatbelt sign was on continuously and even the flight attendants were seated with their belts fastened. It

was not a pleasant flight for anyone, but at least we avoided being stranded on the island of Hispaniola, which would suffer a Category 5 hurricane.

A scare at Cayo Coco

As a pilot on the Airbus 310, I would occasionally get a scare. I remember a flight to Puerto Plata airport in the Dominican Republic. It was a night flight with good ground visibility. We were on long final on runway 26 westbound, we had a clear view of the runway. We could see on the ground some areas of the airport where there were small traces of low-level fog. There was no wind on the ground and the approach was perfect.

We saw what seemed to be some light fog on the west side of the runway on final, but nothing very disturbing.

I could not believe what happened next.



Puerto Plata

I made a smooth landing, touching down just as I had been trained to do. I touched the rear wheels first and then slowly lowered the nose wheel to the ground for deceleration. Suddenly we entered a very dense fog, the likes of which I had never seen before, so dense that I couldn't even see the nose of the plane through the window. I could not see anything. No runway edge lights on the left or right, no runway markings on the ground, nothing.

I had no landmarks to guide me on the runway. During the deceleration, I had no idea if we were still in line on the runway or if we were heading off the airstrip to the left or right, into the field. It was terrifying! It was like driving into a wall with your eyes closed. Slowing down towards taxi speed, we were finally able to see ahead and I saw that we were still on the runway. Not exactly in perfect position in the centre but still on track.

At our parking space, we shared a bad joke to refocus, then we got up and left the flight deck. The flight attendants and passengers never knew what a close call it had been and it was just as well.

But I still remember it clearly.

Flight to Puerto Plata. Again

Later in my career as a captain on Airbus 310, I was about to make a landing at the same Puerto Plata airport, but this time approaching from the other direction. It was a beautiful sunny morning. I was flying with co-pilot Martine Olivier, an excellent co-pilot who is now a captain. We got along really well and we had a lot of fun flying together.

During this flight, everything was fine except that on final for runway 08, we both got uncontrollable giggles. We were laughing so hard that we couldn't safely control the airplane. We had to abort the approach and make a 360-degree turn. We re-engaged the autopilot, as we needed that time to stop laughing and compose ourselves enough to resume the approach to the runway and land safely.

That 360-degree turn takes two minutes on a jumbo jet and it was necessary for us to refocus and become competent pilots again. After landing, we told the passengers that there was a plane on the runway on our first approach.

I told the control tower that we had not been properly configured for landing and that we had needed a 360 degree turn to prepare our airplane for final and landing.

A beautiful night in Cuba

During the winter of 2007, I spent several days a month on the beaches of Cuba, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Saint Martin, Guadeloupe and other Caribbean islands. I would then fly back to Canada or Europe. According to our Air Mirabel pilot collective agreement, crews had to be accommodated in high quality hotels by the sea. We could therefore enjoy the beach, the sea, the bars, the swimming pool.

In short, what a way to live!



Can you say Paradise?

I remember a flight from Vancouver, Canada to Cayo Coco, Cuba, a flight of over eight hours. I spent a lot of time chatting with the flight attendants on the flight deck. We were scheduled to land in Cuba at around 8:00 pm. This meant that we were not going to be in our hotel rooms until around 10:00 pm. Earlier during the flight, I

had asked three beautiful flight attendants to join me on the beach for a midnight swim. They were three gorgeous women in their twenties. Laurie was French Canadian and Deborah and Isabelle were English speaking from Western Canada. Deborah's boyfriend was a flight attendant whom I knew and liked a lot. Isabella was married and Laurie had a boyfriend whom I did not personally know.

I suggested that we meet around 11:30 pm at the hotel bar. Afterwards, we would go to the beach for our midnight swim. Being with me, the three ladies would be safe and sound. During the trip, I was telling the flight attendants in all sincerity, "To feel the warm sea water slowly caressing our naked bodies will be very sensual, as we gaze at the stars above."

The flight ended with a gentle landing on a beautiful cloudless and windless night. Disembarking the passengers, which took about forty-five minutes, we were transported by a small bus to the hotel by the sea. By the time we arrived at the hotel the restaurants were no longer serving meals, as it was past 10:00 in the evening. My co-pilot was only interested in going to his room and sleeping.

I went to the bar to wait for my three lady friends to go for a midnight swim. The four of us left the bar around midnight. We walked a good distance towards the beach, to get away from the hotel and its lights. Finally, we decided to stop to rest and enjoy the water.

The sea was beautifully calm. The water was crystal clear and motionless. It was like a pond in the early morning. The stars in the sky were incredibly beautiful. The girls entered the water slowly in their bikinis. I took off my swimming trunks and threw them on the beach. I

then entered the water naked. I said to the girls, “We’re here to live, to laugh and feel the sea on our naked bodies.”

One by one, the three girls took off their bikinis and like me, threw them onto the beach. We all felt the enormous sensuality of the adventure.

Although aroused like any man would be with three beautified naked woman swimming around him, I refused to approach the girls. I let them come to me. We spent several hours playing in the water or on the sand, all the while laughing and watching the stars.

Twice I had to get into the water quickly because with so much female nakedness at my feet, I couldn’t help feeling my male impulses and I didn’t want to show the girls that part of me.

They often clung to me during our frolics. The sensual pleasures that the four of us gave each other were incredible. Clearly what was happening between us that night would stay between us.

Lauri told me at one point that she couldn’t swim. She wouldn’t go far into the sea for fear of losing her footing. I then took her by the hand and slowly brought her into deeper water. I asked her to turn on her back. I told her that I would keep her afloat by supporting her body with my hands underneath her. Slowly she relaxed and finally was able to float on her back, as she watched the stars in the sky.

As I supported her body, we went deeper into the sea and at one point I was just holding onto her calves. I put Lauri’s ankles on my shoulders and waded into the water, with her floating in front of me, for a very long

time. Deborah and Isabella were impressed that I had managed to get this Quebecoise girl into deep water.



After a few hours of fun in the water and on the beach, we saw another Air Mirabel pilot, Captain Calvin coming towards us. The girls returned to the water as the captain approached me and said, “How on earth did you manage to get those beautiful naked flight attendants into the water? It’s incredible.”

I said nothing.

After leaping into the sea, still in his swimsuit, the captain wouldn’t stop coming onto the girls and bothering them.

I went to talk to him without the ladies hearing. “Stop touching them without their approval”, I said, “Let them come to you, if and when they want!

After a few minutes with this ‘playboy’, I said to the antagonized girls, “Let’s tell him that we are leaving and going to our rooms.”

We all walked towards the hotel. As soon as Captain Calvin went into his room, we headed towards the hotel's large outdoor swimming pool. We got into the water naked again. There was no one around except a hotel security guard who came to tell us that we were not allowed to be nude in the pool.

"Hola, aquí todo está bien. Nos vestiremos, gracias, señor.", I said.

We stayed in the pool until the girls had to leave to prepare for their flight. Their wake-up call was scheduled for 5:30 in the morning, for their flight to Vancouver.

As for me, my flight was only leaving in the afternoon, so I went back to sleep. Flying back, I remembered this magical time in the Caribbean sea, with my three beautiful water nymphs.

I would see Deborah or Isabella from time to time, on a flight or in between flights. We always shared that special smile, taking us back in our memories of that wonderous starry night in the Caribbean. As for Lauri, she stopped flying a few weeks later, to go back to school.

Knocking at death's door

On a snowy December morning I was foolishly running on a main street in Montreal. While jogging down three ice-covered steps, I slipped and fell hard, my back hitting the corners of the cement staircase. I found

myself lying on the cold pavement, with a searing pain in my ribs. I was hurting so badly that I couldn't move or even call out.

While lying on the ground, several older ladies walked by and did nothing to help. They didn't even look down to see if I was okay. Perhaps they thought I was a tramp or an alcoholic sleeping off a binge of cheap wine.

City life can be so impersonal and cold.

When I finally managed to stand up twenty minutes later, I made my way to a medical clinic where I was told, "You've fractured two ribs. You have to be patient. In time, in about four weeks, everything will be fine. The pain will go away."

For the next few weeks, I continued to fly between Canada and Central America, despite the pain, which hadn't subsided.

A month later, in the middle of January, when I was at home with my two young boys, the pain suddenly became excruciating.

I had now been divorced for a few months, but my ex-wife and I had gotten along well after our separation. Lisa was now living with her new partner, in a suburban area of Montreal about a thirty-minute drive away.

After putting the boys to bed for the night, the pain became unbearable. I couldn't lie down without losing my breath. I couldn't even sit down. I thought I would have to stay up all night and go to the emergency room in the morning, after finding someone to look after the children.

I decided to call my ex-wife. When she answered, I couldn't make a sound. My breathing wasn't strong enough for me to speak. I hung up and continued walking around the living room, hoping for a solution. Twenty minutes later, my ex-wife arrived. I never knew how she had known that I was in trouble.

A stroke of luck!

When Lisa arrived, she called for an ambulance. I was still on my feet during the ride to the hospital. While waiting for the doctor, I felt like I was going to collapse. I was told that I was perhaps having a heart attack.

After a few tests, it was clear that my heart was fine. I was quickly moved to a large, empty room where I was seated on a chair. Soon the room filled up with about fifteen doctors and interns who were there to see the 'command performance'.

Apparently, the procedure that I would be having was only performed once every two or three years. I was told that I had water on my lungs, which had closed up, pushing hard against the back wall of my chest. That was the reason I could not breathe.

The chief physician held a plastic tube of about two metres long, with a very thick steel needle at the end. He found a spot between two of my ribs on the right side and after quickly freezing the affected area, he stuck the needle hard through the skin. Immediately an almost clear liquid rushed out at the end of the tube and spurted out in all directions. Grabbing the end of the tube, the doctor directed it to a medical container placed on the ground to receive the massive amounts of liquid that were gushing out of my body.

The doctor told me that my lungs, which had collapsed under the weight of all the liquid, would suddenly reopen and that it would be extremely painful. A minute later my lungs did reopen and return to their normal position. It was painful, but not as painful as the doctor had predicted. Anyway, I could always tolerate a great deal of pain.

After most of the fluid around my lungs had been removed, I was put on a stretcher in the corridor as there was not a single room available in the hospital. Next to me on a stretcher was a man with the C. Difficile colon bacteria. This man was constantly vomiting. I was finally placed in a hospital bed and transferred to a semi-private room after my first night in the corridor. I still had a tube sticking out of my ribs to drain the rest of the liquid around my lungs. The doctors kept me in the hospital for another two days.



During that month, in that hospitals there was a widespread epidemic of *Clostridium difficile*, a nosocomial infection (health care related) that emerged with the invention of antibiotics. The common symptoms are diarrhoea, fever and abdominal cramps.

Therefore, the doctors removed the drain from my chest and sent me home. They didn't want me to contract this very communicable disease.

Back home, I still had a fever and was feeling weak. After a few days on my own, my mother came to look after me. I tried to contact the doctor who had been taking care of me at the end of the first week. Unfortunately, he was on holiday.

Finally, I decided to go back to the emergency room because I was not getting better. In fact, I was getting worse and the fever would not go away.

I was immediately given my own room and one doctor after another came to see me. I actually had severe pneumonia. Four days later, at ten in the morning, six doctors arrived. One of them, the hospital chief of staff, told me, "Mr. Leroi, we tried everything to treat your pneumonia, but without success. You should contact your relatives and get your affairs in order. You may only have two or three days left to live. We are very sorry. We have tried all possible antibiotics, without any success."

One of the doctors standing at the back of the room said to the head doctor, "We could still try giving this XYZ antibiotic. We know it has no effect on this type of infection but we have nothing to lose."

The chief of staff gave his approval and all six doctors left the room. I had no intention of contacting my family. I wasn't going to worry my relatives.

Surely, *I would hope*, if I were to die, they would be informed.

I was in pain, but nothing really unbearable.

That evening, the same group of doctors came back to my room. The chief of staff said, “Mr. Leroi, the latest antibiotic has worked and everything is fine now, you will be able to leave the hospital within two or three days.”

Four days later, I was back home.

My relationship with flight attendants

During the winter of 2007-2008, I flew several times with François. He was a co-pilot who thought I was God’s gift to women. François was really impressed by the fact that all flight attendants, male or female, flocked to me.



Truth be told, a lot of flight attendants don't like pilots.

I would greet each flight attendant before every trip and say, "I'm your pilot today and my name is Antoine. I look forward to working with you."

I never walked away from a coworker until we had greeted each other, eye to eye and with a smile.

Being easy to get along with was very important to me. Being friendly makes life so much more enjoyable for everyone.

My love life

After my divorce in my mid-forties, I remained as celibate as a Benedictine monk for more than a year. I had my children and my job as an international airline pilot.

The following year, I met a woman whom I invited for coffee. I had always liked the theatre, cinema, long walks in town or in the countryside, good restaurants and enjoying relaxing time at my chalet.

I was fortunate at that time to have a cottage on a beautiful island, on a large lake a few miles away from my home. There was no bridge between the mainland and the island. You could only get there by boat or helicopter. My cottage faced another uninhabited island classified as a wildlife reserve. This was my little paradise on earth.

When I had been dating for a few weeks, my new friend Lucie told me that she wanted our relationship to get more serious. I said to her, “I’ve just gotten out of a marriage and I don’t intend to get back into a full-time relationship for a long time, if ever.”

So, Lucie decided to leave. A few weeks later, she called me back. She told me, “Until I find a more serious boyfriend, I’m willing to spend time with you.”

Over the next few months, I met several other women in Montreal or in other cities, where I spent a few days a month between flights. These women, nine to be precise, were between the ages of thirty-five and forty and to all these women I made it clear that I did not want a serious relationship.

During that year, I had girlfriends whom I saw occasionally. I liked inviting Natacha to the cottage, Lucie, for long bike rides and Katie for good food in nice restaurants.

Following a year of this dating-go-round one of my girlfriends told me that she was in love with me. I wrote her a beautiful letter in which I told her that we shouldn’t meet anymore because although I cared for her, I was not in love. I delivered this letter to her in person. We talked at length and parted on good terms.

I decided that day that I had had enough of relationships that would eventually hurt somebody. I wrote a break-up letter which I personalised and sent to all my other girlfriends. I had decided to be celibate, maybe for life.

But then...

Love again

Three months later, I flew from Quebec City to Puerto Plata airport in the Dominican Republic, with my co-pilot François. Arriving at our hotel, I did my usual hour swimming laps before dinner time. That evening, François asked me to join him for a drink in town. I left the hotel with François and the four girls he had met on the beach earlier. I had no intention of going out that evening, but François insisted, so I graciously accepted.

One of François's new friends was a Dominican woman who knew all the best places in the area to have fun. Arriving at an outside bar in a small village, I spent part of the evening chatting with Sandra, one of François's new friends. She was an American who lived in New York and was very interesting.

She was terrified of flying. Sandra and I talked about many different subjects, one being aviation: what keeps an aeroplane flying, the lift of the wings, the turbulence, and the fact that with seatbelts, the risk of injury is almost nil.

The next morning, after my long run along the beach, I saw the sweet girl Sandra, with whom I had spoken to the previous evening. She was sitting alone on the shore, her eyes turned towards the sea. I admired her bathing beauty charms from afar, then walked up and sat down to chat for a while. I then had to leave the beach to change and leave for the airport for my early afternoon flight to Edmonton, in western Canada.

Later, as François and I approached our boarding gate, we saw Sandra and her friend walking towards us. They were taking a flight to New York that departed

from the gate next to ours. We spent a few minutes talking to them, until we had to go to our airplane.

After taking-off from Puerto Plata, the turbulence was strong to severe. I thought of Sandra, who was afraid of flying. I had hoped to have reassured her, despite the frightening flying conditions of that day.

One month later, in the pocket of my pilot's uniform, I found an email address from Sandra. I sent her a friendly letter. We continued writing to each other, for a few months. We talked about the films we had seen, our work and our sporting interests.

Several months later, during our pen-pal period, I told Sandra that I had to go to New York on business. I had started a small company with a friend a few years earlier, exporting heavy machinery. I was selling used bulldozers, cranes, excavators and more, mainly to West Africa and Asia.

I didn't really have an appointment in New York, but I wanted to see Sandra. I booked a hotel room in downtown Manhattan and invited her to dinner. It was a wonderful evening. A few weeks later, I went back to NYC claiming that I had another business appointment. Later in the evening, during our third date, I kissed her for the first time.

I was falling madly in love with her.

As captain for Air Mirabel, I could fly between Montreal and La Guardia without having to pay for my flight. I could have a seat on any airline that served both cities, for free. All I needed was for the captain on that flight to agree to accommodate me.

Often, after a flight from Paris to Montreal, I would jump on an afternoon Delta Airlines to New York, to join Sandra for dinner and a movie after her work. The next morning, I would catch a flight to Montreal. Occasionally, but less frequently, Sandra joined me in Montreal.

The good life on Airbus 330

Less than a month later, in December 2008, at the age of forty-eight, I was in an Airbus 330 simulator, training for the beautifully engineered three hundred fifty seat aircraft. I piloted my first A330 flight in January 2009 from Montreal, to Tocumen International in Panama.

I loved my time as captain on this plane. After a few months flying, Air Mirabel asked me if I would agree to be a Check Pilot. I accepted.

Every year, all pilots must make a flight with a check pilot, to confirm that they are still capable to 'fly the line'. I often flew as co-pilot, or as captain with other pilots, for their annual route check. I also supervised a few simulator sessions per month.

The Airbus 330 flew about eighteen hours a day, with stops of about two hours between each flight to deplane, perform technical maintenance and pick-up new passengers.

Occasionally, Air Mirabel passenger flights simultaneously transported cargo. This was a net profit for the airline. The baggage compartments could easily

take more than ten tons of luggage and cargo. Often, in addition to the holiday travellers and their luggage, we would bring back more than five tons of fruit and vegetables when returning from the islands in Central America.



'Antoine' (author Richard Landreville)

During my five years on the Airbus 330, I took my father on vacation for four days in Greece and my mother for four days in Paris. Sandra would often join me on these flights for two or three days in Paris,

London, Amsterdam, Athens or Nice, in the south of France.

I remember a flight to Italy in October 2009 when Air Mirabel gave me accommodations at a hotel in the center of Rome for six days. I asked Sandra to accompany me. She arrived a day later because she was running a marathon on the day that my flight to Italy was leaving Montreal.

Rome was all about walking, running, eating and drinking, the dream life, the life that I had always wanted to live. One could spend days just wandering about many European cities, gazing at the beauty of the buildings steeped in history.

Paris was our city. Having a *café au lait* on a cobblestone terrace, eating a delicious dinner in the evening, drinking a good bottle of local wine, far away from the madding crowd of tourists, this was the magic of the city of lights.

A great achievement

For a few days the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland had been raging, spewing a lot of ash that was rising in altitude and heading towards northwestern Europe.

The morning of April 16th, all the airports in Ireland, Great Britain and most of Northwestern Europe had ceased operations and no flights were arriving or departing. My second in command Yannick and I arrived at the airport on the morning of the 16th. My

crew and I were to prepare the plane for a return flight to Montreal, even though the airport was closed. The passengers were in a lounge, waiting to board the airplane.

While still at the hotel two hours earlier, the Air Mirabel dispatcher informed me that our flight was still on schedule.

Air Mirabel had contacted the engineers at Rolls-Royce to ask them an important question. They wanted to know what percentage of volcanic ash particles the Trent 700 engines could handle, without being problematic.

Each engine cost more than twenty-three million USD, so I did not intend to destroy one of them flying into volcanic ash.

After receiving the answer from Rolls-Royce, Air Mirabel contacted the French civil aviation authorities and they were able to obtain a special permit for our flight. For the moment the volcanic ash particles were at a high altitude. The flight permit only allowed a southward bound route from Paris, at a maximum altitude of 10,000 feet.

I asked for a full tank of fuel and for the passengers to board. I then contacted the Charles de Gaulle tower to obtain departure clearance. The flight controller told me, "Captain, the airport's been closed for several hours, there are no departures or arrivals."

"Tower", I said, "we've obtained special departure clearance for this flight from the French national authorities."

After five minutes the controller informed me that we must take off within the next thirty minutes or the flight clearance would be cancelled.

I asked the flight attendants to stop boarding passengers, as we had to start the engines quickly and taxi to the runway. The volcanic ash would soon sweep over the area at low altitude.

I took off on schedule and quickly turned southwards. We climbed as planned to 10,000 feet. It was a beautiful day with no low clouds and at 10,000-foot altitude, we could see the beauty of the scenery beneath.

We flew toward Bordeaux airport and then continued to Porto in Portugal, a flight of an hour and forty-five minutes. Then we turned south-west from Portugal, across the Atlantic, towards Central America.

After forty minutes of flying over the Atlantic, we were cleared to climb to 40,000 feet.

We were now out of the volcanic ash region and could use normal flight altitudes. Turning north, the rest of the flight went well and we landed at Montreal airport, after a 7-hour 45-minute flight.

I must say that I 'dined out' on that adventure for many months to come.

Airbus 330



The Airbus 330 is an extremely reliable plane. I still remember a flight from Montreal to Toronto on a beautiful summer morning with no clouds and a clear blue sky.

After starting the engines and taxiing to the runway, I noticed on the instrument panel that two main tyres didn't have the air pressure necessary to make the flight.

My co-pilot told me that it probably was a problem with the indication system, not the tyres. Nevertheless, I contacted the Air Mirabel mechanics and told them to join us on the airport apron. We waited about twenty minutes on the tarmac before the mechanics arrived with their truck to check the tyres.



Two of the eight tyres on the main landing gear were in poor condition. Changing them took about twenty-five minutes, after which we restarted our two engines, taxied back to the runway and took-off for a smooth and easy flight. Without the tyre change, we would have had serious safety problems at take-off and landing.

A heavy equipment salesman

In 2005 I had teamed up with my friend Guy Legal, whom I had met while working as a pilot in Guinée Conakry. Guy was a heavy equipment mechanic, originally from France, who had emigrated to Canada a few years earlier with his wife and two children. We had started a small heavy machinery export company, specifically geared towards the West African and Asian markets.



We sold parts and equipment for heavy machinery. We also offered mechanics who would go on site to refurbish equipment, for a few days or a few months. Four or five times a year I would spend a week confirming sales in Africa. I loved to spend time in Cotonou in Benin or Abidjan on the Ivory Coast.



Toward the end of 2013, my 'friend' and business partner Guy suddenly left the country for South America with his family. He skipped town without leaving a forwarding address. With me in the dark our company

had just gone bankrupt, and he left me with a debt of nearly \$100,000, which I had to hand over to the bank.

I had to sell my cottage.

Brain dead: My last adventure

I have no memory of my stroke.

And not for the five weeks after.

With me unconscious, the ambulance picked me up. I came to for a few seconds to ask them to bring me to the Montreal Jewish General Hospital, then fell back unconscious.

From February 12, 2014 and the following month, I have no recall of what happened. No memory, no images, nothing.

Apparently, my heart stopped beating in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. I was told that the paramedic had to resuscitate me. When I arrived at the hospital, the neurosurgeon and his team were waiting for me. They had already diagnosed a severe stroke.

They quickly opened my parietal and left temporal bone, to stop the bleeding that had started in the left section of my brain. This area affects language, motor skills, comprehension and right-side vision. The operation lasted six hours. During the procedure they lost me again. My heart stopped beating and I had to be resuscitated before they could continue working on my brain.

I ‘died’ twice the same morning and I don’t remember anything.

Sorry not to have those memories, it would have been fun to use during a bar fight or on a first date.



After the operation they were able to reposition my cranial bones because apparently my brain had not swollen. I was relaxed and calm. I learned later that often they have to wait up to a month before they can reset these bones on the patient’s head. The brain swells

under stress and it can take several weeks to return to normal size.

I spent two days in a coma before regaining consciousness. The surgeon didn't really believe in my chances of rehabilitation or even long-term survival. He knew that the areas controlling my coordination, comprehension and speech had been severely affected.

After a few days, I began to talk. Apparently, I only spoke English even though my mother tongue is French. That evening, I asked my friend Michel Pépin, a copilot at Air Mirabel, if I had crashed the plane. Were there many deaths? I thought I was there because I had been in a plane crash.

I stayed in intensive care for the rest of February and up to March 6. Imagine being in ICU for almost a month and having no memory of that! Apparently, I slept most of the time. My brain was tired and needed to regenerate cells.

My rehabilitation

I then spent thirty-five days in the Gingras-Lindsay Centre learning to use my arms and legs. I had to relearn to walk, without banging into walls and door corners. I had to be retaught how to speak French, English and a little bit of Spanish.

I don't remember my first week in this rehabilitation centre. More than five weeks of my life had disappeared from my long-term memory. I couldn't walk alone for

the first ten days. I needed someone to hold my hand at all times because my balance was too weak. My right-side vision had been severely affected due to damage to my left brain.

My first memory after my brain trauma was when I was walking with my brother Jean, who was holding my hand to help me walk. He let go of me for a few seconds and as a result I hit the right side of my head on the corner of an open door. I could see in front of me, to the left, above and below but I had no right-side peripheral vision without turning my head and eyes to the right.

Because of the accident caused by my blind spot, there was a gash on my forehead and I had to have a few stitches above my right eyebrow.

I had four training sessions from Monday to Friday with physio, occupational and speech therapists. Two fifty-minute sessions in the morning and two in the afternoon. Relearning to walk and run went smoothly, but regaining my capacity to read and write took me more than a year.

During the first weeks, I started learning to read, beginning with the alphabet like a four-year-old child.

“A - this is the letter A. Just like apple.”

“The letter S which makes the ‘sssssssssssssss’ sound. Just like sea.”

“T – this is the letter T. Just like a cup of tea.”

After many weeks working on all twenty-six letters, I learned my syllables.

“D and U is DU as in ‘due’.”

“A and T does AT as in ‘attention’.”

It took me months of effort. I was given several small flash cards. Different syllables were written on each. I spent a lot of time rereading, studying and memorising them. My brain was overwhelmed. In the evenings I slept like a rock. After a few months of this hard work, learning letters and syllables, I started forming words. Another few months and I could complete short sentences.

My short-term memory started to improve as well. I had, and still have, no memory of the first five weeks of my stroke. My last memory was going into the bathroom at Air Mirabel on the morning of February 12th. All I have from that time are a few photos of me during that time in my coma and what my family and friends have told me.

On April 10th, 2014, I returned home. That day a social worker and a physiotherapist spent some time with me to see if I could care for myself. Could I climb the stairs? Did I know how to wash dishes, turn on the TV? I continued to go to the rehabilitation centre every day for the next three months before I was transferred to another out-patient centre.

Towards the end of April, I was in bed for the night with my girlfriend Sandra. Without any planning, our bodies finally entwined. I don't remember if we made love for a long time but that's when I finally realised that this was 'making love'. After my accident, I had totally forgotten what was involved in having a sexual relation.

I remember thinking to myself, “Is that all there is?” I had been expecting something much more exciting, much more magnificent, much more grandiose.

Had I forgotten what it was like to be a man?

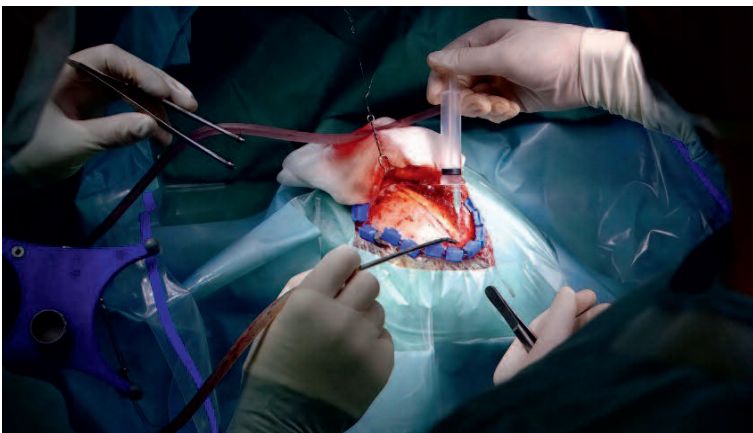
And then...

Intimacy was becoming magic for me.

So, in the following weeks, I would often ask Sandra for sex.

I was not physically aggressive, just more insistent. But Sandra had no intention of accepting my advances. I was no longer the man she had loved. I was mentally handicapped. My mental age was that of a child in those first months of my rehabilitation.

Second brain operation



My neurosurgeon Dr Salvatore Di Maio suggested that I have another operation. This second cervical procedure would correct some of the problems that the first operation had not been able to solve.



My surgery site

Less than two weeks after my second brain operation in July 2014, a nurse came to my house to remove the staples that had placed in my head to fuse the bones that had been removed during my second operation. I had seventy-eight 10-millimetre staples holding my bones securely in place.

The nurse arrived with a pair of pliers and told me to sit in a chair as he was going to remove the staples. He told me it wouldn't really hurt and started to remove them one by one. After twenty-five minutes I was staple free, with just a bit of blood and a touch of pain.

Aside from the right-hand vision side effect of my stroke, I now have a slight speech impediment called

aphasia. This is a mild language disorder. Occasionally I have difficulty finding a word. I will look at, let's say, a table but am unable to say the word 'table'. Fortunately, a few seconds later, the lost name comes back to me. Although sometimes it takes hours to get that word out of my mouth.

I am aware of this problem and being the class clown, I can find other ways to express my ideas. I'm always working on improving my brain function.

A few days after my second brain operation, I was offered the chance to continue my rehabilitation as an out-patient, but in another centre much closer to home. I could walk there in less than twenty minutes. I had lost my driver's license as well as my pilot's license.

I had to walk, take buses, subways or taxis to get to where I was going. A month following my second operation, I started cycling again. I had difficulty visualising the space around me for about a year after my stroke, especially on my right side, which eventually got me into trouble.

I was riding my bike on a busy street, keeping to the right and always passing to the left of cars parked along the pavement. Everything was fine when suddenly my right handlebars hit the left mirror of a car parked along the sidewalk. Because of my vision impairment I hadn't seen that I was too close to the car parked to my right.

The front wheel of my bike turned ninety degrees when I hit the mirror and I went flying forward in the air, landing on the pavement and my wrists. I hurt my left wrist very badly, but luckily, I was almost in front of an out-patient medical clinic. I hadn't broken my wrist but it took almost two months for the pain to go away. I

realised again that I had to accept my lack of peripheral vision very seriously. Look left, look right and look right again.

For a year I continued my rehabilitation in a centre called Constance-Lethbridge. After that time, I had to continue to improve on my own, which I've never stopped doing. I started reading newspaper articles and novels. At first, I found reading difficult. but I accepted that I needed to start over. The brain is a muscle that must always be stimulated.

Eleven months after my stroke, the Constance-Lethbridge Rehabilitation Centre asked if I wanted to reapply for my driver's license. Naturally, I accepted their offer. Over two weeks I was given three driving tests. Each was one hour long with an instructor to my right and an occupational therapist, who sat in the back seat taking notes. The 13th of January was the last of my three-road tests. I was in a snowstorm and about the only motorist in town driving.

After this last test, the results were sent to the Government of Quebec for a study of my file.

A few weeks later they decided to reinstate my driver's license without restrictions.

In 2016 I started an aviation consulting company with three partners. This company was formed to offer support services to airlines situated in West Africa and Central America. After a few months of operation, we decided to terminate the partnership with one of our co-founders. He was only interested in our company to ensure that his own business would have no competition. He was selling aircraft parts in Africa and that was not our business model anyway.

After being ‘fired’, that partner decided to sue us for \$50,000. We could have won our case but the court cost would have been close to \$25,000.

So, we gave up.

For the sum of one dollar, he completely took over the company, entirely in his name.

In fact, he never did anything for the company, he just let it fail. It still cost us \$3,000 in legal fees. Losing our company was disappointing, but c’est la vie.

The future...

I was almost sixty and my future was open. I could return to aviation as a ground instructor. I could write another book. Who knows, I could even start working as a nude dancer.

As I always say, “My future is full of future!”

Contact information

You always can get in touch with me at
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Introduction to writing, at age nine

This is a poem that I wrote in the spring of 1969:

*In spring, life awakens
Listen to the merriment
The bird song
Listen to the blackbirds singing*

*Hurry! Hurry! Hurry-up Spring
I am thrilled
But so sad
When it rains*

*Green the grass
Flowers laugh
Trees in bloom
Time to sing again*

*Such a big sky
What a spectacle
Ice is melting
So thin, like a winter's thread*

*Everywhere flowers
Spring is the gift
Of forgiveness
I like to sing in rhyme*

*Birds arrive
Once again
Building nests
for shelters*

*Trees slowly waking
Friends once again
Forest creatures gathering their young
What a joyous reunion*

*The world smiles
It's spring again*

Unit of measurement in aviation

One Knot	= Nautical mile per flight hour = 1.852 kilometres per flight hour = 1,853 metres per flight hour = 6,076 feet per flight hour
Foot	To measure vertical distances (altitudes) = 0.3048 metre
Meter	To measure vertical distances (altitudes) = 3.28084 feet
Mach Speed	Aircraft speed in relation to the speed of sound in the air = .80 Mach = 80% of the speed of sound
Speed of sound	= 1,224 Kilometres per hour = 760.5583392985 miles per hour

