

AIRPORT



ARTHUR HAILEY

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***Oh ! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings***

from *High Flight*

by John Gillespie Magee, Jr. (1922-1941)

sometime Flight Lieutenant,

Royal Canadian Air Force

PART ONE

6:30 P.M.-8:30 P.M. (CST)

1

At half-past six on a Friday evening in January, Lincoln International Airport, Illinois, was functioning, though with difficulty.

The airport was reeling—as was the entire Midwestern United States—from the meanest, roughest winter storm in half a dozen years. The storm had lasted three days. Now, like pustules on a battered, weakened body, trouble spots were erupting steadily.

A United Air Lines food truck, loaded with two hundred diners, was lost and presumably snowbound somewhere on the airport perimeter. A search for the truck—in driving snow and darkness—had so far failed to locate either the missing vehicle or its driver.

United's Flight 111—a non-stop DC-8 for Los Angeles, which the food truck was to service—was already several hours behind schedule. The food snafu would make it later still. Similar delays, for varying reasons, were affecting at least a hundred flights of twenty other airlines using Lincoln International.

Out on the airfield, runway three zero was out of use, blocked by an Aéreo Mexican jet—a Boeing 707—its wheels deeply mired in waterlogged ground beneath snow, near the runway's edge. Two hours of intensive effort had failed to get the big jet moved. Now, Aéreo-Mexican, having exhausted its own local resources, had appealed to TWA for help.

Air Traffic Control, hampered by the loss of runway three zero, had instituted flow control procedures, limiting the volume of incoming traffic from adjoining air route centers at Minneapolis, Cleveland, Kansas City, Indianapolis, and Denver. Despite this, twenty incoming flights were stacked up overhead, and orbiting, some nearing low fuel limits. On the ground, twice that number were readying for takeoff. But until the backlog of flights in the air could be reduced, ATC had ordered further delays of outbound traffic. Meanwhile, terminal gates, taxiways, and

ground holding areas were increasingly crammed with waiting aircraft, many with engines running.

Air freight warehouses—of all airlines—were stacked to their palletized limits with shipments, their usual high speed transit impeded by the storm. Freight supervisors were nervously watching perishables—hothouse flowers from Wyoming for New England; a ton of Pennsylvania cheese for Anchorage, Alaska, frozen peas for Iceland; live lobsters—trans-shipped from the east for a polar route flight—destination Europe. The lobsters were for tomorrow's menus in Edinburgh and Paris where they would be billed as "fresh local seafood," and American tourists would order them unknowingly. Storm or not, contracts decreed that air freight perishables must arrive at destination fresh, and swiftly.

Causing special anxiety in American Airlines Freight was a shipment of several thousand turkey poults, hatched in incubators only hours earlier. The precise hatching-shipping schedule—like a complex order of battle—was set up weeks ago, before the turkey eggs were laid. It called for delivery of the live birds on the West Coast within forty-eight hours of birth, the limit of the tiny creatures' existence without their first food or water. Normally, the arrangement provided a near-hundred percent survival. Significant also—if the poults were fed en route, they would stink, and so would the airplane conveying them, for days afterward. Already the poults' schedule was out of joint by several hours. But an airplane had been diverted from passenger to freight service, and tonight the fledgling turkeys would have priority over everything else traveling, human VIPs included.

In the main passenger terminal, chaos predominated. Terminal waiting areas were jammed with thousands of passengers from delayed or canceled flights. Baggage, in piles, was everywhere. The vast main concourse had the combined appearance of a football scrimmage and Christmas Eve at Macy's.

High on the terminal roof, the airport's immodest slogan, *LINCOLN INTERNATIONAL—AVIATION CROSSROADS OF THE WORLD*, was entirely obscured by drifting snow.

The wonder was, Mel Bakersfeld reflected, that anything was continuing to operate at all.

Mel, airport general manager—lean, rangy, and a powerhouse of disciplined energy—was standing by the Snow Control Desk, high in the control tower. He peered out into the darkness. Nor-

mally, from this glass-walled room, the entire airport complex—runways, taxi strips, terminals, traffic of the ground and air—was visible like neatly aligned building blocks and models, even at night their shapes and movements well defined by lights. Only one loftier view existed—that of Air Traffic Control which occupied the two floors above.

But tonight only a faint blur of a few nearer lights penetrated the almost-opaque curtain of wind-driven snow. Mel suspected this would be a winter to be discussed at meteorologists' conventions for years to come.

The present storm had been born five days ago in the lee of the Colorado mountains. At birth it was a tiny low pressure area, no bigger than a foothills homestead, and most forecasters on their air route weather charts had either failed to notice, or ignored it. As if in resentment, the low pressure system thereupon inflated like a giant malignancy and, still growing, swung first southeast, then north.

It crossed Kansas and Oklahoma, then paused at Arkansas, gathering assorted nastiness. Next day, fat and monstrous, it rumbled up the Mississippi Valley. Finally, over Illinois the storm unloaded, almost paralyzing the state with blizzard winds, freezing temperatures, and a ten-inch snowfall in twenty-four hours.

At the airport, the ten-inch snow had been preceded by a continuous, if somewhat lighter, fall. Now it was being followed by more snow, whipped by vicious winds which piled new drifts—at the same time that plows were clearing the old. Maintenance snow crews were nearing exhaustion. Within the past few hours several men had been ordered home, overfatigued despite their intermittent use of sleeping quarters provided at the airport for just this kind of emergency.

At the Snow Control Desk near Mel, Danny Farrow—at other times an assistant airport manager, now snow shift supervisor—was calling Maintenance Snow Center by radiophone.

"We're losing the parking lots. I need six more Payloaders and a banjo team at Y-seventy-four."

Danny was seated at the Snow Desk, which was not really a desk at all, but a wide, three-position console. Confronting Danny and his two assistants—one on either side—was a battery of telephones, Tel Autographs, and radios. Surrounding them were maps, charts, and bulletin boards recording the state and location of every piece of motorized snow-fighting equipment, as

well as men and supervisors. There was a separate board for banjo teams—roving crews with individual snow shovels. The Snow Desk was activated only for its one seasonal purpose. At other times of year, this room remained empty and silent.

Danny's bald pate showed sweat globules as he scratched notations on a large-scale airport grid map. He repeated his message to Maintenance, making it sound like a desperate personal plea, which perhaps it was. Up here was the snow clearance command post. Whoever ran it was supposed to view the airport as a whole, juggling demands, and deploying equipment wherever need seemed greatest. A problem though—and undoubtedly a cause of Danny's sweating—was that those down below, fighting to keep their own operations going, seldom shared the same view of priorities.

"Sure, sure. Six more Payloaders." An edgy voice from Maintenance, which was on the opposite side of the airfield, rattled the speakerphone. "We'll get 'em from Santa Claus. He ought to be around in this lot." A pause, then more aggressively, "Any other damnfool stupid notions?"

Glancing at Danny, Mel shook his head. He recognized the speakerphone voice as belonging to a senior foreman who had probably worked continuously since the present snowfall started. Tempers wore thin at times like this, with good reason. Usually, after an arduous, snow-fighting winter, airport maintenance and management had an evening stag session together which they called "kiss-and-make-up night." They would certainly need one this year.

Danny said reasonably, "We sent four Payloaders after that United food truck. They should be through, or almost."

"They might be—if we could find the frigging truck."

"You haven't located it yet? What are you guys doing—having a supper and ladies' night?" Danny reached out, turning down the speakerphone volume as a reply slammed back.

"Listen, do you birds in that crummy penthouse have any idea what it's like out on the field? Maybe you should look out the windows once in a while. Anybody could be at the goddam North Pole tonight and never know the difference."

"Try blowing on your hands, Ernie," Danny said. "It may keep 'em warm, and it'll stop you sounding off."

Mentally, Mel Bakersfeld filtered out most of the exchange, though he was aware that what had been said about conditions

away from the terminal was true. An hour ago, Mel had driven across the airfield. He used service roads, but although he knew the airport layout intimately, tonight he had trouble finding his way and several times came close to being lost.

Mel had gone to inspect the Maintenance Snow Center and then, as now, activity had been intensive. Where the tower Snow Control Desk was a command post, the Maintenance Snow Center was a front line headquarters. From here, weary crews and supervisors came and went, alternately sweating and freezing, the ranks of regular workers swelled by auxiliaries—carpenters, electricians, plumbers, clerks, police. The auxiliaries were pulled from their regular airport duties and paid time-and-a-half until the snow emergency was over. But they knew what was expected, having rehearsed snow maneuvers, like weekend soldiers, on runways and taxi strips during summer and fall. It sometimes amused outsiders to see snow removal groups, plow blades down, blowers roaring, on a hot, sunny day. But if any expressed surprise at the extent of preparation, Mel Bakersfeld would remind them that removing snow from the airport's operating area was equal to clearing seven hundred miles of highway.

Like the Snow Desk in the control tower, the Maintenance Snow Center was activated for its winter function only. It was a big, cavernous room above an airport truck garage and, when in use, was presided over by a dispatcher. Judging from the present radio voice, Mel guessed that the regular dispatcher had been relieved for the time being, perhaps for some sleep in the "Blue Room," as Airport Standing Orders—with a trace of humor—called the snow crews' bunkhouse.

The maintenance foreman's voice came on the radiophone again. "We're worried about that truck too, Danny. The poor bastard of a driver could freeze out there. Though if he has any gumption, he isn't starving."

The UAL food truck had left the airline flight kitchen for the main terminal nearly two hours ago. Its route lay around the perimeter track, a journey which usually took fifteen minutes. But the truck had failed to arrive, and obviously the driver had lost his way and was snowbound somewhere in the airport boondocks. United flight dispatch had first sent out its own search party, without success. Now airport management had taken over.

Mel said, "That United flight finally took off, didn't it? Without food."

Danny Farrow answered without looking up. "I hear the captain put it to the passengers. Told them it'd take an hour to get another truck, that they had a movie and liquor aboard, and the sun was shining in California. Everybody voted to get the hell out. I would, too."

Mel nodded, resisting a temptation to take over and direct the search himself for the missing truck and driver. Action would be a therapy. The cold of several days, and dampness with it, had made Mel's old war injury ache again—a reminder of Korea which never left him—and he could feel it now. He shifted, leaning, letting the good foot take his weight. The relief was momentary. Almost at once, in the new position, the ache resumed.

He was glad, a moment later, that he had not interfered. Danny was already doing the right thing—intensifying the truck search, pulling plows and men from the terminal area and directing them to the perimeter road. For the time being, the parking lots would have to be abandoned, and later there would be plenty of beefs about *that*. But the missing driver must be saved first.

Between calls, Danny warned Mel, "Brace yourself for more complaints. This search'll block the perimeter road. We'll hold up all the other food trucks till we find the guy."

Mel nodded. Complaints were a stock-in-trade of an airport manager's job. In this case, as Danny predicted, there would be a flood of protests when other airlines realized their food trucks were not getting through, whatever the reason.

There were some who would find it hard to believe that a man could be in peril of death from exposure at a center of civilization like an airport, but it could happen just the same. The lonelier limits of the airport were no place to wander without bearings on a night like this. And if the driver decided to stay with his truck and keep the motor running for warmth, it could quickly be covered by drifts, with deadly carbon monoxide accumulating beneath.

With one hand, Danny was using a red telephone; with the other, leafing through emergency orders—Mel's orders, carefully drawn up for occasions such as this.

The red phone was to the airport's duty fire chief. Danny summarized the situation so far.

"And when we locate the truck, let's get an ambulance out there, and you may need an inhalator or heat, could be both. But

better not roll until we know where exactly. We don't want to dig you guys out, too."

The sweat, in increasing quantity, was gleaming on Danny's balding head. Mel was aware that Danny disliked running the Snow Control Desk and was happier in his own department of airport planning, sifting logistics and hypotheses of aviation's future. Such things were comfortably projected well ahead, with time to think, not disconcertingly here-and-now like the problems of tonight. Just as there were people who lived in the past, Mel thought, for the Danny Farrows, the future was a refuge. But, unhappy or not, and despite the sweat, Danny was coping.

Reaching over Danny's shoulder, Mel picked up a direct line phone to Air Traffic Control. The tower watch chief answered.

"What's the story on that Aéreo-Mexican 707?"

"Still there, Mr. Bakersfeld. They've been working a couple of hours trying to move it. No luck yet."

That particular trouble had begun shortly after dark when an Aéreo-Mexican captain, taxiing out for takeoff, mistakenly passed to the right instead of left of a blue taxi light. Unfortunately, the ground to the right, which was normally grass covered, had a drainage problem, due to be worked on when winter ended. Meanwhile, despite the heavy snow, there was still a morass of mud beneath the surface. Within seconds of its wrong-way turn, the hundred and twenty ton aircraft was deeply mired.

When it became obvious that the aircraft could not get out, loaded, under its own power, the disgruntled passengers were disembarked and helped through mud and snow to hastily hired buses. Now, more than two hours later, the big jet was still stuck, its fuselage and tail blocking runway three zero.

Mel inquired, "The runway and taxi strip are still out of use?"

"Affirmative," the tower chief reported. "We're holding all outbound traffic at the gates, then sending them the long route to the other runways."

"Pretty slow?"

"Slowing us fifty percent. Right now we're holding ten flights for taxi clearance, another dozen waiting to start engines."

It was a demonstration, Mel reflected, of how urgently the airport needed additional runways and taxiways. For three years he had been urging construction of a new runway to parallel three zero, as well as other operational improvements. But the Board of Airport Commissioners, under political pressure from

downtown, refused to approve. The pressure was because city councilmen, for reasons of their own, wanted to avoid a new bond issue which would be needed for financing.

"The other thing," the tower watch chief said, "is that with three zero out of use, we're having to route takeoffs over Meadowood. The complaints have started coming in already."

Mel groaned. The community of Meadowood, which adjoined the southwest limits of the airfield, was a constant thorn to himself and an impediment to flight operations. Though the airport had been established long before the community, Meadowood's residents complained incessantly and bitterly about noise from aircraft overhead. Press publicity followed. It attracted even more complaints, with increasingly bitter denunciations of the airport and its management. Eventually, after long negotiations involving politics, more publicity and—in Mel Bakersfeld's opinion—gross misrepresentation, the airport and the Federal Aviation Administration had conceded that jet takeoffs and landings directly over Meadowood would be made only when essential in special circumstances. Since the airport was already limited in its available runways, the loss in efficiency was considerable.

Moreover, it was also agreed that aircraft taking off toward Meadowood would—almost at once after becoming airborne—follow noise abatement procedures. This, in turn, produced protests from pilots, who considered the procedures dangerous. The airlines, however—conscious of the public furor and their corporate images—had ordered the pilots to conform.

Yet even this failed to satisfy the Meadowood residents. Their militant leaders were still protesting, organizing, and—according to latest rumors—planning legal harassment of the airport.

Mel asked the tower watch chief, "How many calls have there been?" Even before the answer, he decided glumly that still more hours of his working days were going to be consumed by delegations, argument, and the same insoluble discussions as before.

"I'd say fifty at least, we've answered; and there've been others we haven't. The phones start ringing right after every takeoff—our unlisted lines, too. I'd give a lot to know how they get the numbers."

"I suppose you've told the people who've called that we've a special situation—the storm, a runway out of use."

"We explain. But nobody's interested. They just want the airplanes to stop coming over. Some of 'em say that problems or