

An aerial view of a red bush plane flying over a vast savanna. The plane is in the center, flying towards the left. Below it, a large herd of animals, likely wildebeest, is scattered across the green grass. In the background, there are rolling hills under a blue sky with some clouds. The text "Dream Career Bush Pilot in Africa" is overlaid in the upper half of the image.

# **Dream Career Bush Pilot in Africa**

**Dream and Adventure**

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“Dream Career Bush Pilot in Africa”

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Sample chapter

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## Escaping from Gabon

The seasons changed and the photo trips got fewer, so did the supply flights into the jungle. Peter was quite pleased about this. The frequent flights from Libreville into the jungle had tired him. When Dr Mike Fay asked him one day to fly to the south along the coast to the Iguéla station he was pleased about this change. Mike also announced more frequent flights to the two national parks Moukalaba and Mayumba that were located along the coast. Young researchers from all over the world had to return to Libreville on their way back home. New faces were then waiting in Libreville to be taken to the various stations by air. And he should also fly Dr Lee White, the research manager, more often.

He was delighted about these developments because they also implied that he would be seeing Hannelore more often, who was still working on the humpback whale project. Although they saw each other rarely, or maybe precisely because of this fact, Hannelore had become an important star in the sky of his African life. He had reduced all that was important to him to two ideas on which he focused as often as his work would allow: his wife and his aeroplane. The time with Hannelore was always short but intense. In the aeroplane, however, he spent many hours and days and it had become a very familiar home to him. He serviced his plane meticulously and adhered to all the prescribed 50- and 100-hour checks and used every break to do inspections. A certain symbiosis developed between him and his Cessna. He cared for his plane, regularly scrutinised it and repaired every tiny defect before it could develop into a disaster. Some thought he was crazy, others thought he was overdoing things. But he knew what he was doing. And his Cessna reciprocated with absolute reliability. He felt a certain affinity towards his plane and learnt to unconditionally entrust his life to the Cessna.



His flights in the new, changed environment hardly differed from his previous flights. Again he was flying over an element where an emergency landing was unthinkable and impossible. During the many hours he spent in his plane, the endless sea of dense jungle trees made way for the endless sea of steel-blue waves. More and more often he now flew far out over the sea, driven by the curiosity that Hannelore had awakened in him.

Every time when he spent some time in camp at Iguéla and looked at Hannelore, he saw in her eyes the same glow of purest fascination that he had seen so often when they had met 25 years ago. The very hard, physical work had led to a few new wrinkles around Hannelore's eyes but these could hardly be seen in the light of the fire at night and she seemed younger than before. “She looks so slim and agile; just like when we first met,” Peter thought as he landed one evening in camp and Hannelore was walking towards him. He felt his heart yearning for her. When they sat around the camp fire and she told him about what had happened during the day, she mainly spoke about one topic: the whales. Initially Peter had difficulty listening attentively, but then she had stirred his curiosity. More frequently he now looked out of his plane to spot these giants of the sea and he even instructed his passengers to do the same.



One day he had to take two new students to camp: Kea from Korea and Mark from the States. Shortly after take-off he did not turn directly towards the south to fly along the shore but flew some miles out over the sea. He remained rather low, about 900 feet above seal level, before he turned and flew parallel to the coastline. They had already travelled for more than an hour when a short but ear-piercing shriek virtually blasted the headphones. Peter looked to the back. Kea gesticulated wildly before she pointed clearly to something right below them. Peter could not see over the two of them and did a steep turn. Just below them was a large group of whales with their young. He flew over them another time and counted about two dozen animals. His habit of capturing important locations made him press the GPS button. But this time it was not a potential spot for an emergency landing that he marked, but that of a large group of whales. Once he had arrived in camp, he described their sighting. A new idea had been born. He now flew out onto the open sea more often than his direct routes would have required. And every time he spotted a group of whales, he pressed the GPS button, reached for the microphone and gave the researchers in camp the co-ordinates. They loved him for this! They were spared many hours of searching by boat with a doubtful entertainment programme consisting of rough seas, wet clothes and nervousness when meeting these giants. More and more of these search flights ensued. Soon the counting of the humpback whale migration along the coast of Gabon right up to the islands of São Tomé, Príncipe and Annobón that were located about 190 miles to the west of Libreville had become part of Peter's new tasks.

Slowly but surely he developed an eye for these creatures and could spot them easily. And he learnt more about these fascinating giants and their habits. Humpback whales, killer whales, dolphins and sablefishes, flying fishes and countless other water creatures – an unheard of diversity of life in the sea. For fishermen this was paradise. Time and again he also flew over steel giants. A couple of trawlers were roaming this area too. Initially he considered them as potential assistants should he ever have to ditch. “Should I ever have to ditch, I’ll do it close to one of these ships,” he thought.

His opinion of these ships changed, however, when one day he saw a long, brown trail on the surface that stretched along a couple of miles along the coast. He descended to just above the water level and flew along the trail. At its end was an old oil tanker that was cleaning its tanks at sea. Another time he saw how trawlers were dragging their nets up and down the coast. “So close to the coast?” he asked himself. And the people on board the ship also reacted strangely when he approached. Some clearly tried to cover up the ship number and name. The explanation for this was given to him in camp. They were illegal fishermen. Entire fleets of trawlers were totally depleting the entire continental shelf, leaving no escape for any animal. His perspective changed. Now he suddenly noticed that many trawlers that he passed had provisionally covered up their ship names, while they were pursuing their murderous and illegal fishing operations together with their mother ships. When Peter and Mike spotted 36 illegal fishing boats on their first section of about 15 miles along the coast on one single day, they had finally had enough.



They decided to do something against this with the help of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Soon they started checking these ships, taking photos of them, jotting down their GPS co-ordinates and reporting them to Libreville. But this was to be the end of their work in Gabon, as they soon realised. The first indication of this was awaiting Peter and Hannelore in their hotel in Libreville. Initially he was unsuspecting when Matamo, the friendly and ever-smiling porter, handed him a large, grey envelope without a sender's address one evening. To his astonishment it contained a summons of the court. The following day already. Peter could not believe his eyes. He was accused of having contravened various sections of the law and it was indicated that a penalty of US\$20 000 could be imposed on him. However, the entire letter failed to indicate what he was being accused of. "This can only be a mix-up or an error," he thought and phoned Mike with whom he had already arranged another flight to Iguéla for the following morning. "OK, we can postpone that. Go and see what this is all about," was Mike's reply, "Let me know if you need anything," he added.

During the hearing on the next day he was questioned extensively about his flights to the border areas. Very soon Peter knew what they were up to. Obviously they were trying to pin something on him. He was informed of court proceedings that were to start three days later. Suspiciously quickly for Africa. He phoned everybody that could possibly help him, but very soon he realised that for some or other reason, they attempted constructing a case around his person. He had illegally flown over the borders to the Congo and Angola and had smuggled persons and soldiers, as well as weapons; he was acting as a drug courier, had given incorrect co-ordinates of an airstrip in the jungle to a South African crew, which caused them to disappear and, and, and... Peter collected evidence, invited his actual passengers as witnesses and took along the flight logs of the GPS equipment.

The case was ridiculous. It was very short and ended with a clear result, "You are whiter than the snow on Kilimanjaro," was the judge's decision, which clearly expressed Peter's absolute innocence – he was acquitted. Only during the course of time did they realise what the reasons for the allegations had been: the entire coastline of Gabon was frequented by many trawlers, some of which were illegal. Many of these fishing boats received their fishing permits through relatives of the former president or his ministers in exchange for some cash. Europe is said to have delivered a couple of Mercedes to get their fishing permits. It was sad that nobody checked and stopped these boats when they had dolphins, giant turtles and whale babies in their nets and killed these. It was also sad that these rusty, old and dilapidated ships went within 50 metres of the shore and tore open the bottom of the sea so that it was destroyed for the next 50 years.



A minister said after the acquittal, “Now it looks as though we made a mistake. That can’t be. Let’s arrest him anyway.” Because stopping the fish trawlers would have meant the end of an additional source of income for many a Gabonese government official. For this reason certain corrupt circles wanted to get rid of him and his aeroplane. Peter was declared a national enemy and his photo was soon to appear in every police station. It was a matter of millions, as was established some years later. Of course he never knew how much of this he destroyed with his tracking down of illegal trawlers.

Peter and Hannelore had planned to go on a quick excursion to Europe over Christmas anyway. At this time they had no idea of the scope of the whole affair and thus thought they were safe when, after the proceedings, they commenced their planned journey home. But the statement by the minister in court made Peter think and he did not want to risk anything. His intuition told him to leave one of his aeroplanes at another place and not in Libreville, as he usually did when they went to Europe. So he hid it elsewhere according to the motto, ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ So, on a hot morning, he moved the aeroplane with a friend to a grass airstrip of the French Airforce, a landing strip about 500 metres from the coast that he had spotted on one of his flights. There he parked the plane with some fuel. Peter and Hannelore then legally left Gabon with Air France. Once they had arrived in their old home country, they received a surprising e-mail from Dr White, “Peter, ‘Wanted’ posters with your photo are pinned up in every police station!” were the words of the unsettling mail. “Impossible, I won the case!” Peter thought. But the acquittal had not been accepted by the minister of civil aviation. He wanted to confiscate the two aeroplanes, lock him up or impose and receive a fine of US\$20 000. So Peter had no choice but to remove his aeroplanes to outside the country in a cloak-and-dagger operation. By e-mail he asked a friend to get the aeroplane out of Libreville. Authorities in Libreville worked relatively slowly. It would take them two to three days before they had issued the warrant for his arrest. “It’s now or never,” Peter thought and started planning the transfer of his planes to Namibia, Botswana or South Africa on the same day still. On the next day already he was on his way back to Lisbon and from there on to São Tomé with a Portuguese airline.

The authorities had overlooked the fact that the second plane was also his. This was now to his advantage. A friend took this plane and came across the sea to São Tomé to pick up Peter there. A short time later the two were on their way to Libreville. Time pressed. Early afternoon of the same day they took off from Libreville again and flew to his other aeroplane that had been hidden in the savannah. When they arrived there that evening, everything seemed to be in good order. Within the shortest possible time both planes had been refuelled and prepared for the long journey. Now they only had to await the best possible time. They took off at three in the morning and flew over Angola to Ondangwa in Namibia. There they had to arrive legally, which



required a correctly submitted flight plan. But at the airport of departure they had had neither electricity, nor fax, nor telephone. Peter was forced to submit the required flight plan to Namibia via his satellite telephone through a European air traffic controller who was a good friend of his. As point of departure for the flight plan, they did not have the usual name of an airport, but an ‘intersection’ on the airway. So, according to the flight plan, they simply appeared at the intersection and continued their flight, as stated in the flight plan, to Ondangwa. Telex systems or telephones often did not work; it happened frequently that flight plans were not transmitted. Often air traffic controllers were left wondering why an aeroplane suddenly arrived without a flight plan. Then you were simply passed on from one radio station to the next.

The nightly thunderstorms did not make the flight any easier. They escaped them by flying over the water because the thunderstorms generally occurred only over the mainland. They passed the invisible border of Angola’s territorial waters. Everything went smoothly until Peter had to refuel by way of his ferry system from the reserve tank to the wing tanks. It simply did not work! Something must have been damaged or broken. They had a problem and needed to stop off to pump the fuel into the main tanks manually. They had taken the route over the water for another reason: Angola was a very explosive and dangerous area. Hours passed. They had no choice. They had to fly towards the mainland in order to refuel shortly. They descended to just above ground level as they reached the coast. Peter was experienced enough to know that at such hot spots with high ‘lead pollution’ in the air you had to fly low in order to leave the people on the ground with insufficient time to aim. Luckily in many regions of Africa it was not yet known that you had to aim ahead in order to hit a rapidly moving object in the air.



It became lighter. The day was dawning when they flew over an area that seemed unpopulated. They chose a forlorn, endlessly long road and landed. Once on the ground, they did not even switch off their engines. Both planes had been stopped with parking brakes on and they started refuelling with the engines running when they saw a car approaching in the distance! Once they had started, they could hardly interrupt the process, they simply had to get the main tanks full for the rest of the flight! This was a real test for their nerves but they continued their work, keeping an eye on the approaching vehicle all the time. It was only about 800 metres away when they had finished. They jumped into their planes and took off. After about 15 seconds they were up in the air and flew just above the car. They could not see whether this was the police or not, and they definitely did not want to know. The rest of the flight was unspectacular and so they landed in Ondangwa late that afternoon. This is an airport in northern Namibia, built by South Africans and still in use today. To fly into Namibia, they needed no flight clearance in the usual sense as in other African countries, but a flight plan and a notification about 24 hours in advance were sufficient. At this time of day there was no customs official at the airport. So they went directly to the hotel. The next morning as they stood at their aeroplanes, a bored customs official approached them, “Aha... you arrived yesterday afternoon?” he asked after a brief greeting. “And where are you going to from here?” – “First to Botswana, Maun, and then on to South Africa.” – “Aha... so you need some more fuel?” – “Yes.” – “Then I wish you a pleasant journey.” They hadn’t expected that it would be quite as easy. A little later they flew their two Cessnas to Maun, from where Peter took his friend back to South Africa and then



returned with his aeroplane. Their escape from Gabon had been successful and the preparations for the biggest adventure of his life could now commence.



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