

each other's last moments a little more comfortable, because that's all they could have done.

The coroner's office said they'd all died within a few days of the crash, mostly from the elements or from starving to death. They'd all lost quite a bit of weight before they died.

The FAA took a little longer, but the full story finally came out. Their ruling: Navigational error.

The plane was supposed to be headed for Sacramento. Somehow in the storm they'd gotten a degree or two off course. On a 1000 kilometre trip that would amount to quite a bit after a while. They'd missed Sacramento by 50 kilometres and overshot it by several hundred. They finally ran out of gas in the northern part of the state and the plane went down. If they'd had enough fuel to stay up another 45 minutes, they'd have hit civilization. They were headed straight for Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Oh, there was one last thing you should know. The investigators had the hardest time puzzling it out. But among the personal effects of one Captain John Albacore, flight navigator, was a brand new ELT, and a newspaper clipping of the accident dated November 3, 1960, -- eighteen days after it had happened.

CAPTAIN ALBACORE

A Ghost Story For Brave Souls



By Caitlind L. Alexander



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15 - Minute Book

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Captain Albacore/Caitlind L. Alexander

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My emergency survival kit had been taken out from under its seat and was sitting in the aisle, wide open. I went through it quickly, hoping the Captain had felt a little weak and wanted one of them high protein candy bars or something. Then he'd left it open to let me know something was gone.

Something was gone all right. My ELT. The only thing I couldn't figure out was where he'd got to with it. If any of the doors had been opened, believe me, I'd have known it. And the windows were way too small to climb out of.

Suddenly I had the answer whirling around in my stomach, even though my head didn't want to admit it. I touched down in Klamath Falls, fuelled up and headed home again without saying a word.

By the time I made it back to L.A. and stowed the plane the news was hitting the airwaves. Flight 413 had finally been located, forty years to the day after it went down. Somebody had caught the track of an ELT.

It took a week or so for the full story to hit the papers, telling me my gut was right. By then they'd rescued what was left of the bodies and figured out pretty much what had happened.

Some of the passengers and crew had survived the impact, but they'd never had a chance. They were 400 kilometres from anything that resembled civilization, and all of them had broken bones and severe injuries. It looked like they'd tried to tend to each other. Hopefully they made

About two hours out he stuck his head into the cockpit area. "Hey," he said. "I just wanted you to know how much I appreciate this. It means more to me than you'll ever know. Thanks." Before I had a chance to tell him I was enjoying the trip as much as he was, he disappeared back to his seat.

That's when the uneasy feeling started. It was something to do with the way he'd said it. Something in my stomach was telling me he wasn't saying thanks, he was saying good-bye. I stuck the plane on autopilot and headed back into the cabin. It was empty!

I checked every place. I even lifted up the seat in the john. Nothing. Captain Albacore was no longer on board. Wherever he'd gone to, he'd taken his flight jacket with him, and one other thing.



CAPTAIN ALBACORE

We never knew. We never knew until it was over.

Captain John Albacore just showed up one day. He came into the flight room like he belonged there, got himself a good strong cup of coffee and sat down at one of the tables. He looked around like he hadn't been there in a long time and was trying to reorient himself. But we knew he'd at least been in the place before. Every flight room I've ever been to has the same black mud in the coffee pot. Anybody who isn't a tried and true airman would die at the first swig of this stuff. I think it's made to test your intestinal fortitude. If you've got guts enough to hold this stuff down, you've got guts enough to fly through anything.

Anyway, Captain Albacore was the skinniest man you'd ever want to see, and dressed in an old flight jacket from another generation. Probably a relic passed down by his father. Though torn in a couple of places, it was in good condition. Somebody had taken care of it.

He just watched. He listened to us filing our flight plans and just kept watching. He was there for about a week. He didn't talk much, but we got to know him in our own way.

He was a first class navigator. Said that's what he'd done for a long, long time. If he'd done it for half as long as the jacket he'd wore, he'd had lots of practice. But then he shouldn't have been that old.

He'd just sit and watch us filing our plans. He seemed to be looking for a plane going a certain place, but we never knew where. And we never saw him attached to any kind of plane. I think he was just there for the atmosphere. He seemed almost like he was trying hard to relive some old glory years.

Then about a week after he first came in, he passed out. I'm not saying passed out of our lives, I'm saying passed out literally. He stood up from his table and started to head for the door. Suddenly it looked like somebody'd punched him in the gut. He got all woozy looking, his head swum around once or twice, then he sunk down to take a nap on the floor.

Of course we called an ambulance right away. They hustled him off to the hospital and a couple days later the verdict was making the rounds of the flight room. Malnutrition. The idiot was starving to death. That's when we remembered we'd never seen him take in anything but the coffee they had in the flight room. I wouldn't have poured that into Frankenstein's empty stomach without expecting to see the spectre of death.

None of us knew that much about the man, but as a fellow airman, we felt duty bound to stand by him. We

For those of you who don't know, an ELT is this little gadget. If a plane goes down, that baby sends out beep signals and calls everybody in a hundred-kilometre radius to come lend a hand. It's the greatest thing since Mickey Mouse.

"I also got an automatic ELT on board," I said more politely. "Don't worry. Anything happens and they'll find us. But I ain't gonna let anything happen."

He seemed reassured and we climbed aboard. I got him seated in one of the rear chairs. For some reason he didn't want to sit up front. He kept checking his wrist anxiously. He wanted to get off the ground.

I glanced at my watch and suddenly it hit me. 4:23. That was the time that his father's plane had taken off. Then my brain rolled over and hit me again. Today was October 16, 2000. Forty years to the day after his father's plane had disappeared.

Well, if that was his wish I was duty bound to honour it. I swung through the pre-flight check as fast as possible without cutting corners. I didn't want this to be my last flight too.

Finally we were on our way. We taxied out to the end of the runway, got tower clearance, and headed for the sky. I set our course straight up the state and climbed to a good altitude. The wind was roaring past the canopy and everything seemed right with the world, even if I did have a dying man sitting in the back. The weather was a little cloudy, but nothing we couldn't fly above.

we had his permission to play hooky from the hospital for the day. I tucked it in my pocket.

By the time we reached the airport we were pushing close to the flight time he'd set and I still didn't know where we would be flying too. I hoped it would work out. I hadn't had a chance to check out any of the weather reports yet.

It wasn't until we got into the flight room and he studied the maps that he finally told me. He wanted to visit Klamath Falls, Oregon. It sat near the California/Oregon border and my plane would just have enough fuel to make the flight.

He did the navigational plotting, and I didn't mind. He made it a straight shot between the two towns. The flight shouldn't take more than three hours each way, and I could lay over in Klamath as long as I wanted. He'd be getting out there. Had some people he had to be with.

I sat him in the flight room while I checked out the plane and went through the last minute details. Just as we were about to board, though, he asked a question: "Have you got an emergency pack on board?"

"Sure," I answered, pointing toward the back seat where it was always stowed. "Has it got an emergency transmitter on it, just in case."

"Yeah," I said, sounding a bit gruff. "Don't you trust my flying?" As soon as I'd said it, I wished I hadn't. That's when I remembered that his father had gone down. If they'd had one of those packs to back up the regular emergency locator transmitter, or ELT, that newspaper clipping might have had better news.

drew straws over the affair, and I picked the short one. It was my great blessing to visit him in the hospital. Truth be told, I'd wanted the short stick.

Before I went to his room, I stopped by the doctor's office and had a chat. They were having trouble getting his weight up. He ate heartily enough, but none of it ever stuck to his ribs. They were still trying to figure out what was wrong.

The doctor clued me in to a little of his history, too. They said he hadn't spoken much of who he was and nothing at all about his past. They had found an interesting item among his personal effects, though. In his jacket pocket, right over his heart, was an old, faded newspaper article. It told about a commercial flight between Los Angeles and Sacramento. Flight 413.

Flight 413 had taken off from LAX at 4:23 PM on October 16, 1960. The weather was clear. A hundred kilometres up the state, though, they ran into some heavy clouds.

They radioed that they were taking a bit of ice on the wings and the plane was getting heavy, but the situation wasn't too bad. Then they left the radar screens. Sacramento never got a fix on them. And they never came in.

Somehow the flight had disappeared and hadn't been found. The article listed those who had been on the flight, and it looked like his father was among the missing. There was a John Albacore Sr. listed as the navigator on the flight. The article was dated 40 years ago, November 3, 1960.

California is one of the most populous states in the nation. I have to tell you, though; there are parts of it where you can go for 100 kilometres in a straight line without ever seeing a sign of another human being. Some of it's desert country, and some of it's mountain. All of it has its own beauty, but it's still some of the most forsaken land on the planet. It was sad to think somebody'd gotten themselves lost out there.

When I visited the Captain's room, he spoke about as much as he did in the flight room. It was kinda tense for a bit, trying to make conversation out of thin air.

Finally he looked me up and down like he was trying to judge what kind of man God had made me. I guess he liked what he saw because he finally spoke. His breath came out kinda low and deep, but breathy like. I had to lean forward to catch what he was saying.

"The doctors can't do anything for me. It's too late," he said. I was about to launch into that all famous line about not giving up on the doctors and fighting to the end when he went on.

"But you can do something for me."

He didn't say anything more for a minute, so I asked him "What?"

"I need you to fly me somewhere," he said.

"Sure," I answered, happy that it was an easy enough request to follow. I had my own plane. It wasn't much, but I sure fancied it. It was an older Cessna, a nice little ten-seater with a wall between the cockpit and the back.

"Soon as the doctors spring you from this joint, we're on our way," I told him.

"No," he said. "I need it now. I told you, there's nothing the doctors can do. Please. Consider it my dying wish. I can't explain why, but I need this more than I need life itself. It's that important."

Well, that one threw me a bit. My pappy always taught me to respect a person's dying words. This being his dying desire so to speak, and him being a fellow airman, I felt duty bound to honour it.

"When," I asked, planning to check it out with the doctors first. If they had any chance for him, it wouldn't be a dying wish and it wouldn't count so much.

He glanced at the clock on my wrist and said: "4:23." I took my turn with the watch and realized that gave me about two and a half hours to get him to the airport, check over everything, and file a flight plan. It was close, but not impossible.

"Let me go make a call and tell Shorty to gas up my bird," I said. I headed for the hallway before he had a chance to remember that there was a phone in his room.

The doctor didn't seem too happy about the idea. But he also admitted that the guy was probably right. They didn't seem to be able to do much for him. And at the rate things were going, this would be his dying wish. I decided to honour it.

I made the call to Shorty and he promised to gas up and get everything ready. The doctor gave me a note that said