Africair Ndege Ya Wenela

By Ken Fuller, 1998.

Many aviation related books, especially those of a historical nature, are now out of print. All too often an aviation enthusiast misses out because they are not able to get hold of a copy of a book because of a limited run.

Two such books, by Ken Fuller, are ***Down Memory Lane, Rand Airport The Early Years after World War Two***, and ***Africair Ndega Ya Wenela***.

We felt that this was poignant as the publications fall within the scope of the South African Airways Museum Society's endeavours to collect the history of civil aviation in South Africa.

Down Memory Lane details some of the Aircraft Operators from a bygone era and Africair Ndega Ya Wenela tells the story of one of aviation's greatest achievements.

Our thanks to Ken who agreed to us to publishing the books in their entirety here on our website.

Africair

Ndege Ya Wenela

by Ken Fuller
Published in 1998

Ken Fuller, an ex training ship "General Botha Cadet", Airline and Corporate Captain now retired. He considers himself lucky in having experienced the relatively early pioneering days of flying to a modern jet operation.

This is a story of one of aviation’s greatest achievements; an airlift of Mine labour operated by Wenela Air Services and managed by Africair formed in 1952 and operated out of

Francistown, Botswana. It eventually became one of Africa’s busiest flying operations. In 22 years they flew 1.8 million passengers without a single accident into the heart of Africa.

Then came the 1974 Skymaster aircraft crash due to the negligence of the fuel operator supplying contaminated fuel.

This was the beginning of the end, when in combination with a series of political events operations ceased.

INTRODUCTION

This book is dedicated to those who made the Wenela airlift the success it was and is being written because so often part of our Aviation Heritage is lost to future generations by not being recorded.

I am not, or do not pretend to be an accomplished writer and could not have written this book without the support and contributions from those I have acknowledged.

This story should have been written years ago, for unfortunately many of those who took part are no longer with us. Because of this time span information was difficult to obtain, and so I apologise for any inaccuracies.

As most of the personal stories include humorous anecdotes, readers might jump to the conclusion that personnel spent their time partying, obviously this is not so! They were responsible people, and knew when to call it a day. The nature and place of the operation required a time to spend unwinding. The safety record speaks for itself. To all of you a big thanks and especially to Dennis Gordon and “TEBA” for background information without there would have been no beginning or end.

In its time the Wenela airlift was the busiest aviation operation in Africa that ended through no fault of the operator. The ill-fated crash of one of its DC-4 aircraft on 4 April 1974 due to the negligence of the fuel supplier supplying contaminated fuel was the beginning of the end. President Banda banned operations into Malawi and in combination with a series of other events Wenela Air Services flying operations ceased on 30 June 1977.

I joined Africair in June 1953 where I initially flew their DH Rapides before transferring to their Dakota fleet based at Francistown, Botswana, and later on to Grootfontein in Namibia.

In October 1954 I left for Nairobi to Join East African Airways. I was grateful for the time I spent with Africair. It was a good Operational Training Unit for budding pilots and gave that “kick start” to many of us fledglings starting out on a flying career.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to acknowledge the contributions by the Africair personnel who took part in the airlift, without which this book would not have been possible. Also extracts from Dennis Gordon and the TEBA Times, the late Dr. Jonathan Whitby who in his book “Bundu Doctor” aptly describes the reaction of the tribesmen to flying. The Bulawayo Chronicle for newspaper cuttings, and Tanya Casteling of Billiton, Rosmary Burke of Teba, Dave and Grace Culver and Colin Ewels who have been a great help and wealth of information.

“TEBA” for their assistance, and finally the Aero Club of South Africa, who made publishing possible.

I hope this acknowledgment and gratitude will be accepted by all.

NDEGE YA WENELA

WENELA AIR SERVICES

The idea was born in 1944 when William Gemmill, a man of vision, dreamed of flying mining recruits from airfields in Central Africa to the Mines in South Africa. They thought William Gemmill had taken leave of his senses but they were to be proved wrong.Eventually Wenela (Witwatersrand Native Labour Association) would be running the busiest Airline in Africa, but that was not to come about till eight years later after many setbacks.

WENELA

Wenela was a joint recruiting organisation run by field officers and controlled by the Chamber of Mines which began recruiting operations before the end of the Boer war in 1902. It was always called Wenela north of Capricorn and NRC (Native Recruiting Corp) south of Capricorn.

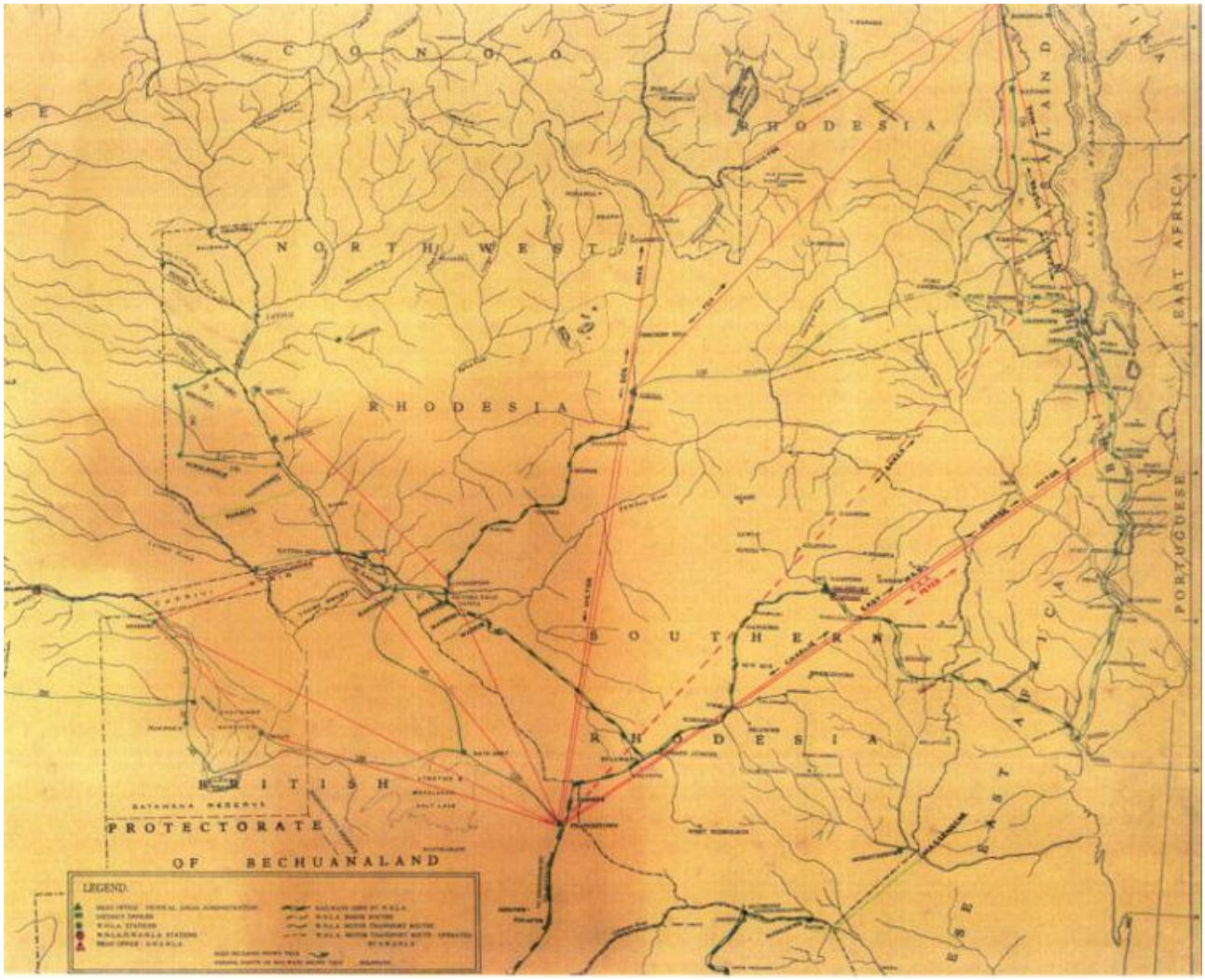
In 1974 the name was changed to TEBA (The Employment Bureau of Africa) after H.M. Taberer the original G.M. of N.R.C. The reason for the name change was because "Native" was no longer an acceptable word. In the earliest days recruits from the far interior travelled months on foot or dugout canoe before reaching a Wenela outpost.

H.M. TABERER who became known as “TEBA” in simplified African pronunciation of his surname was appointed Native Advisor of the two labour organisations, the NRC and WENELA of the Chamber of Mines. That appointment held until his death in 1932.

From there they were either sent by train or bounced on the back of hard sprung lorries along sand roads through some of the most inhospitable territory.

These roads stretched some 2,800 kilometres and led to the Wenela Depot and railway station at Francistown.

There the men were issued with documents, their health checked and they boarded trains for Mafikeng, and onwards on South African Railways to the goldfields.



WENELA Air Routes

GEMMILL'S PLAN

L to R: Dr. Leonard Bostok; Mary & William Gemmill.

His plan was to fly the mining recruits from Central Africa, cutting down to just a few hours a journey that sometimes lasted many weeks. It would slash traveling expenses, provide safe travel and open up large tracts of least developed parts of Africa to civil aviation. The cost in those days would be twopence per person per mile.

This was considered higher than rail fares, but lower than the cost of transportation by road. It is interesting to note that the cost of flying a Dakota was 37 pounds 10 shillings per flying hour with demurrage charges about 15 pounds 11 shillings per day. The Yellow Fever problem was solved by only flying as far as Francistown and not direct to Johannesburg. After inoculation there was a required quarantine period before people from an endemic Yellow Fever area could enter South Africa.

Wenela Dakota

This period was spent in Francistown and on the train to the reef. There were many other problems such as Airfields, politics etc. which is not the main subject of this story but is dealt with in detail by Dennis Gordon in his book "Pambili"So after many rejections and setbacks on the 19th of February 1952 approval was given to Gemmill's plan for an experimental air lift of miners from Lilongwe in Nyasaland to the railhead at Lusaka, the Capital of Northern Rhodesia.

It was postponed until April for unstated reasons when Africair Ltd, an aircraft company connected with General Mining Finance Corp, was to fly the trial run to Lusaka.

A telegram arrived at Wenela Johannesburg from Dowa, the Nyasaland headquarters not far from Lilongwe.

DAKOTA ARRIVED LILONGWE ONE THIRTY WITH TWENTY-TWO REPATS BUMPY TRIP NO SICKNESS ALL PLEASED LEFT THREE PM NINETEEN RECRUITS FOR LUSAKA STOP DAKOTA WAITS LUSAKA UNTIL MORE RECRUITS AVAILABLE DOWA STOP REPEATED SALISBURY=WENELA

The fear of Africans not wanting to fly also proved unfounded and from the success of this flight Gemmill's dream was fulfilled.

AFRICAIR LTD.

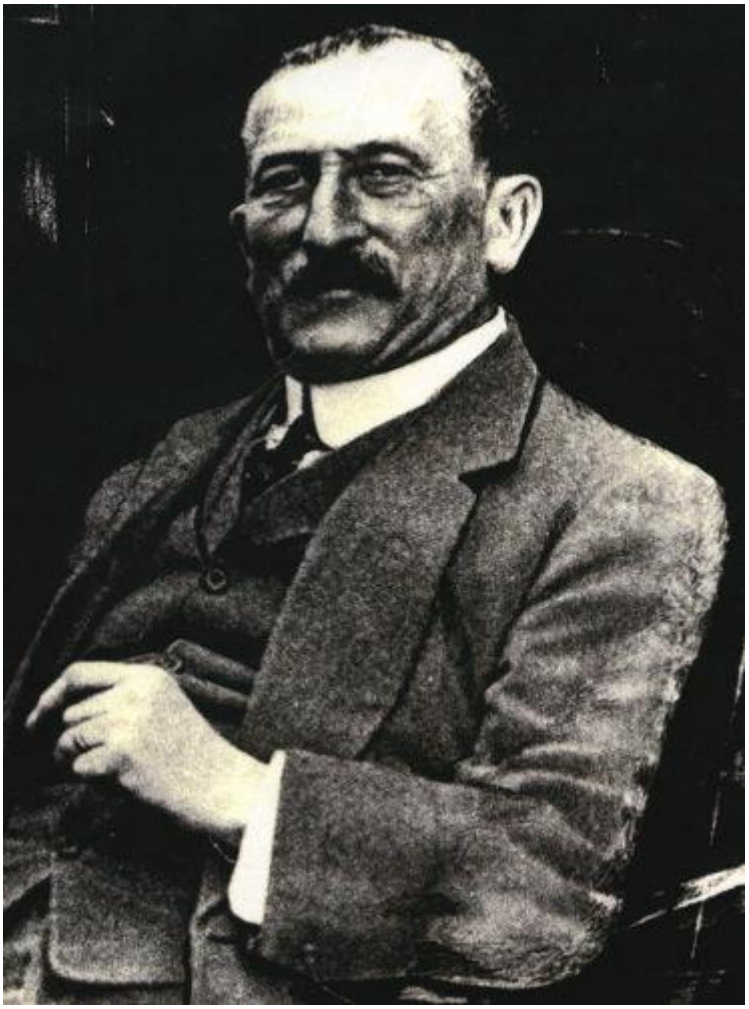
In 1946 Anglo Vaal Air Services named A.V. Air Transport and "Africair Servicing" amalgamated to form Africair Ltd. Both Companies were part of General Mining Industries.

A.V. Air operated a Dakota between South Africa (Rand Airport) and England (Croydon). Six months later they purchased a second aircraft fitted out as a "Combi" (passengers and freight).

Avair pilots were Hansie Harhoff, George Grey, Jimmy Boyd and their radio operators were Ted Oxlee and Chris v d Westhiuzen.

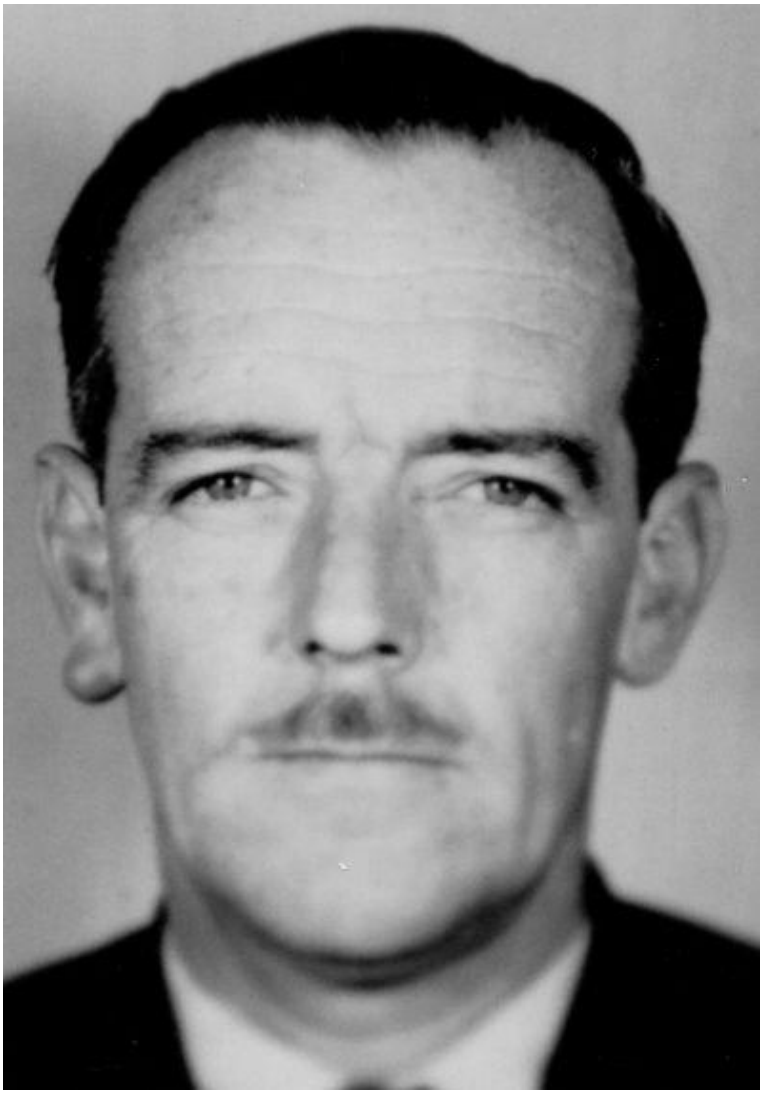
Africair Servicing, a division of Miles Aircraft S.A., was the agent for Miles in the U.K.

The first Miles aircraft ferried out from the U.K. was a Miles Gemini, a small four seater twin, flown by well-known Alex Henshaw of International fame.



Sir George Albu Chairman Africair

The Management of the newly formed Africair was Chairman Sir George Albu, Managing Director T.V. Mitchell, Directors G. Lloyd and T. Ward, Operations Manager and Alternate Director Jack Andrew.



Jack Andrew Manager Alternate Director.

Tommy Ward Technical Director

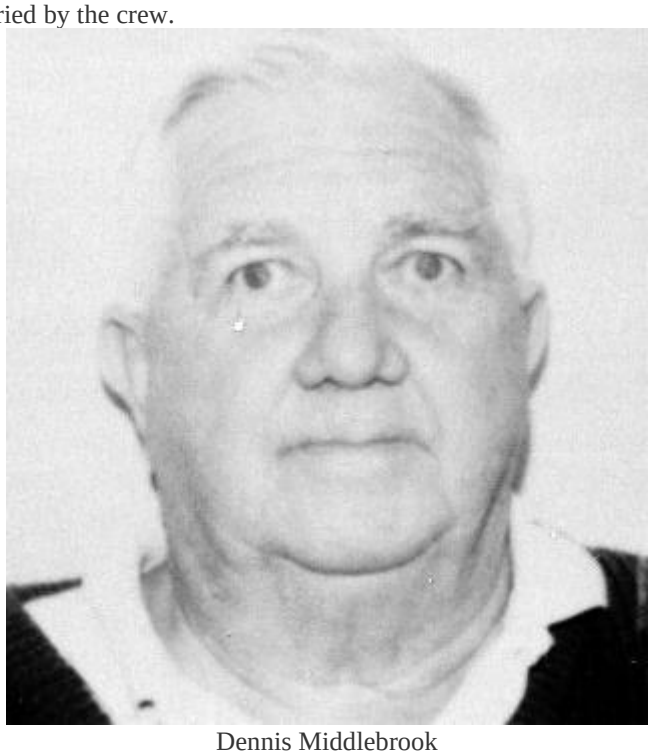
In April 1951 Africair successfully operated a trial run for Wenela between Lusaka and Lilongwe to prove the viability of Gemmil's plan. As a result of this successful flight Wenela Air Services was formed in 1952 with Africair as the operating Company using Dakota aircraft with Francistown as their base.

This operation was to last twenty two years flying 1.1 Billion passenger miles on 52,000 flights. The number of aircraft hours flown was over l 36,000.

A total of 1,857,231 passengers had been airlifted to remote corners of Central Africa to landing strips that gave its pilots the extremes of flying experience.

Early days were five trips a week between Lusaka and Lilongwe. Night stops were dependent on loads.

First crews were Jack Andrews, Kurt Kaye, Ted Hartwell and Dennis Middlebrook. Dennis says they lived in two hotels called the Lusaka and Lilongwe and had no transport, relying on taxis. There were no maintenance facilities at either end and therefore all servicing and repairs had to be carried by the crew.



Dennis Middlebrook

In the meantime at Rand Airport the internal development continued to the point that the Company could provide every aspect of aircraft maintenance and engineering back up required.

From this solid foundation they were able to fill the demands of the truly great airlift that was to follow.

By 1953 Francistown Airport was a hive of activity. Under Station Commander Corney Bait crews were flying often over 100 hours a month to the airfields of Fort Hill, Lilongwe, Livingstone, Maun, Mohembo, Mongu and Katima Mulilo.

1956 saw the introduction of Skymaster DC4 aircraft on some of the routes. Compared with the Dakota the saving was enormous, and far more efficient and convenient for Wenela and the miners.

Mine Workers boarding the Skymaster

Early morning Douglas DC-4 Skymaster take-off.

In 1965 a decision was made to move the Rand Airport facility to their Africair Bulawayo branch run by Squadron Leader Gibbons and Steve Kock. This resulted in Africair losing a lot of their valuable staff.

By the late 60s and early 70s Southern Africa was placed in a dilemma when political refugees from South Africa were granted asylum by the Botswana Govt. and were transported out of Francistown Airport . On one occasion an East African Airways Dakota VP-KJT which had been chartered to carry refugees to Tanganyika, was mysteriously burnt out while on the ground at Francistown.

This spurred the demands by the African States to the North against South Africa and did nothing to help Wenela Air Service which already was on a political tight rope.

Air Malawi also wanted a slice of the pie and after applying political pressure also began operating and transport miners into Francistown in 1973.

They were using modern Turbo Prop HS748 aircraft against the fairly obsolete aircraft of W.A.S. Furthermore the DC-4's were fitted with low back steel seats whereas the HS748s were using normal passenger seats. This had an adverse effect on the recruits. Never the less the DC-4s continued to operate to the end.

After the tragic DC4 crash on the 4th April 1974 through no fault of W.A.S. (covered later in detail) Dr. Hastings Banda, the President of Malawi, banned W.A.S. from flying Malawian miners.

The Chamber of Mines then approached Safair to use their Lockheed Hercules aircraft to transport the Malawian miners in conjunction with Air Malawi direct to Jan Smuts airport.

Wenelas flying operation was brought to an end on June 30th 1977. The last six months of its operation only 895 miners were flown by W.A.S. The continent's busiest Airline had now only a fleet of three Dakotas.

Safair were instructed to close Africair Bulawayo and transfer both materials and certain equipment to Johannesburg.

So ended an era. A tragic crash coupled with politics was the beginning of the end for what was then the busiest flying operation in Africa.

Africair and the men who took part in it can be proud of their achievement.

FRANCISTOWN

Coming in to Francistown Airport

Francistown named after Daniel Francis 1866 is located in the North Eastern part of Botswana (formerly Bechuanaland). Botswana is a land locked country/ a land of contrasts, mainly desert with the Okavango basin to the north west. The rainfall is undependable and the country subject to drought.

When Africair arrived in 1952 to start the airlift Francistown was pretty much a one horse dorp with a string of stores lying on one side of its one street, and the railway line on the other.

Many of the old timers will remember Francistown by the main dirt road and the two Hotels, the Grand and the Tati, one on each end of the street, the latter being opposite the station.

The Grand was owned by the Haskin family and run by the Byletts and later the Tugwells.

The Tati Hotel

The Tati Hotel with its wide gauzed in verandah was where the New Year's Eve dance was always held. One of the residents was "Bluejacket" Andersen a well-known old mining character who must have got his name after the gold reef he discovered.

There were numerous trading stores, with a hitching post outside Haskins, and the Cafe was owned by Jack Games, a Texan with an old world charm.

Behind the railway line was where Wenela had its headquarters, the Railway Houses, the Creamery and tennis courts.

Just outside the town was the old Monarch Mine, derelict and finished. There was a story that somewhere in the district lies King Solomon's Mine.

Who knows that it isn't the Monarch?

The airfield was situated three miles outside the town and initially consisting of two asbestos huts and two recently completed runways, the tops of which were dressed with the local lime stone to take Dakota aircraft.

In 1954/5 when forty inches were recorded at Francistown the dry river bed flooded and those pilots living on the Monarch Estate had to leave their vehicles and cross the river by means of an suspension footbridge.

For the rest it was necessary to drive ten miles by the roundabout soggy road, and then cross the river.

Annual Flood Event Race.

Bess Shaw (nee Cawker) as a young girl who grew up in Francistown writes; The arrival of Africair in Francistown was exciting for the small population and especially for the young ladies, of whom there were six, with ages ranging from 17 to 20 years.

We soon got to know the single men from the married ones. My Uncle Jock Ellor used to say of one of us that she could look up at a Dakota going overhead and tell if the pilot was married or single.

There were some wild parties in the beginning, the likes of which we locals had not seen; the crews certainly breathed new life into the town and brought an aura of romance with them.

(Bess was to marry Capt. Phill Shaw of Africair which was the event of the year, with every one joining in).

I remember one of the pilots "Boots O'Riley" (so called because he landed an aircraft wheels up, forgetting to lower the undercarriage) always wanting Phill to sing a song of which he only knew the words "the dawn creeping across the lawn". Then there was one of the engineers while sitting in the lounge of the Grand Hotel would try to sink the ship portrayed in a picture on the wall by throwing a tankard at it.

We would have "braais" in the dry river bed of the Tati River and sit around a fire of dry branches on the sand, singing and talking. The traffic on the bridge being non-existent we would sometimes dance on the bridge. Tennis was quite popular and tournaments were often played at other towns.

A lady I worked with told me that driving down the main street one weekend with her little boy in the car, they saw the handcart that was used to collect the mail from the station was damaged. She said to her husband "I wonder what happened?" Her little boy piped up "It was most probably Africair."

One of the nurses from the local hospital loved her Gin and would often get involved in drinking bouts at the Grand hotel. One night, quiet late, she was well away and some of the pilots took her along to the room of a "Man of the cloth", opened the door pushed her in, and left. I never heard what happened after that.

At the hospital there was only one Doctor, "Doc" Morgan, well-loved in the town: he did everything from babies to pulling teeth. Once as a little girl, I ran to see "Doc" at the hospital, when he asked what he could do for me I said "I've come for my pain". To which he replied "Well I haven't got it " but he fixed it anyway.

In the beginning, the village school consisted of a large hall where all the children were taught by one teacher, from sub A right through to Standard six. The classes where small and one teacher could cope. After Standard six it was off to boarding school.

Grace Culver (nee Openshaw) writes that when she first arrived in Francistown, by train from Bulawayo, she saw little more than the bleak railway station where she was met by friends who lived in the Camp. This Camp was about half a mile out of Francistown (back towards Bulawayo) and where you could find the Government Offices, the police station and staff houses, the little hospital and the Doctors home.

Looking back she said she would love to live there again if it could be the way it was. Everybody knew everybody, literally, and everybody was friendly.

Norman Ellor talks about Room 6 at the Grand Hotel as where it all happened. The big room was turned into an annex where most of the young engineers stayed. He remembers Piet Pieterse's bed, with him still in it being placed on the railway line, and the railway foreman shaking his fist at the lads because there was a goods train coming from Bulawayo. Norman and his father ran the local cinema, the highlight of the community of Francistown. One evening, he thinks it was Jack Quirk and Boots O'Riley who came up to the projection room to ask how much longer to go. When told 40 minutes they remarked "that's great, fantastic", and screamed down the stairs to where all the cars were parked. They then proceeded to place all the cars in one long line, bumper to bumper, removing the rotor of the front and rear cars. At the same time they put Alfie Brooks new Peugeot in the Grand Hotel's lounge. They then hid waiting for the people to come out of the cinema to see their reaction.

It was quite something, people just stood there dumbfounded, then just about everyone started to laugh. Generally they all took it in good spirit, they were that kind of people. This was very much the relationship the people of Francistown had with Africair, they were accepted as part of the family.

It can be said that Francistown was the town Wenela built. It became the great traveller's crossroads of Africa. The railway station and later the airport at one time handled the largest number of passengers outside the urban areas of South Africa. In 1974 320,000 mine workers travelled from their homes in central Africa via Francistown on the TEBA transport network.

Francistown's Softball Team.

AFRICAIR ENGINEERING

Tommy Ward a Director of Africair writes with justification that in the normal course of events it has always been the flight operation that has gained the lime light. It would however, be a grave injustice if the efforts of the engineering staff at the Rand Airport base was not accorded their fair share of this rich segment of Aviation History. In truth, it was there that it all began, a crew that worked throughout the night to make the first flight on schedule. Theirs was a prevailing spirit, full of enthusiasm and freshness of mind that created innovation above all a desire for the Company to succeed that would be the envy of any emerging organisation. To cap it all an "Esprit de Corps" that survives till the present although Africair is long gone.

The history of Dakota ZS-DFN is a remarkable illustration of what transpired at the time. It was bought from the S.A. Air Force disposal stock for an absolute "song" and made its way to Rand Airport from Waterkloof Air Station, without wings, towed by the "horse" section of a heavy transport vehicle.

Its purpose was purely to provide a cheap source of uncommonly used spares which would not normally be held in stock, and to provide a test bed for our engines.

A short time later as a result of the Korean War prices of old Dakotas climbed to record levels and became a much sought after commodity. Knowledgeable minds turned to the lonely old "bird" and decided that it was easier to build an engine test bed than an aeroplane and so the rebuild of a flyable aircraft was started.

Some months later after complete overhaul phoenix like, ZS-DFN, after test flights and a great celebration party, began a second career and was involved in the very start of the airlift in Francistown.

On the practical side a Wenela Dakota was a very special aircraft because in order to make the entire operation feasible a beyond normal economy had to be achieved. This entailed reducing the empty weight of the aircraft to the stage where forty passengers could be earned over stage lengths of 1100 KMS with safety reserves of fuel.

This was achieved by light weight cabin flooring, light weight smaller cabin seats and lighter radio equipment.

Dennis Middlebrook who was Africans Chief Engineer tells the story about another Dakota ZS-DIW, owned by Anglo American which crashed at Rand Airport on a training flight. This aircraft was extensively damaged, including a broken main spar, and Africair engineers successfully rebuilt this aircraft for the airlift.

Another aircraft with a history was a DC-4 named "Guill Faxi". This aircraft was originally owned by Icelandic Airways which had forced landed on an ice flow. It was recovered by Scandinavian Airlines, repaired and sold to Africair who converted it for use by W.A.S.

From this beginning the internal engineering section developed where every aspect of maintenance was successfully provided.

Norman Ellor who grew up in Francistown talks on how his life changed when he joined Africair, first as a refueller, followed by a short spell in the stores department.

His interest in electronics and radio changed his career path when he moved into the radio section under the watchful eye of Ted Broom and Mitty Griffen. Most of what he knows about electronics he learnt from Ted, and says he owes so much to him, a brilliant man, teacher, and deep and faithful friend.

He found in Africair they were not just a group of men working together to keep airplanes flying but a kind of brotherhood who supported each other through thick and thin, and he was proud to be part of this group.

Norman mentions an amusing humorous story when during an engine check where the engine filters are removed to check for traces of metal they for fun put brass filings they had made in a cloth and showed it to Al Binding. Al nearly had a heart attack thinking it had come from the engine, knowing he had to use all the Dakotas the next morning. And then there was an old gantry which was used to remove an engine, place it on a tyre, and put the new engine into position. The only one who could manipulate this gantry with precise precision in spite of being "squint" was a boss boy named "boiling water".

He also remembers on one occasion there was a dispute with the hangar boys who had decided to go on strike. Al Binding drew a line across the hangar floor and in his broad English accent said to them. "You have five minutes to cross this line, those of you who have crossed will keep your jobs, those of you who have not are fired."

Needless to say, they all crossed the line, not so much because they were afraid of losing their jobs, but were loyal to Al.

Lofty De Beer keen on acting would normally take the leading role in the local plays, and would learn his lines by pacing round the hangar floor. We were all in the office one day when lofty entered, and not saying a word wrote on the wall "The writings on the wall". How true those words were, for not long afterwards operations came to an end.

Norman says Africair had a great influence on his life, morals, and the importance of doing a job correctly. He also feels the legacy will live on and trusts that through the pages of this book the dream will survive.

L to R: Frank Kemp, Jimmy Miles, Stan King, Peter Place, Bill Drew.

“MA NEW ONE”

The repatriates known as "Magongo" called the new raw mining recruits "Ma New One".

Dr. Jonathan Whitby who was at one time Wenela's medical officer had the opportunity to observe the reaction of raw tribesmen as well as the repatriates to flying. In his book called "Bundu Doctor" he wrote that for men who yesterday had never seen a plane before, I thought them remarkably quick in accommodating themselves to this new method of travel. They had heard a little about these strange birds from repatriates on their return to the village, a fact that made them anxious to try as soon as possible.

Some would even travel to the airfield to see the aircraft landing and taking off, then return to the villages to discuss the matter with their friends before finally deciding to take the risk.

They boarded the plane and sat down, if a little bewildered at first, but only as a raw yokel of any country would do in similar circumstances. They watched everything below them with wide open eyes, as objects became smaller and smaller to finally show as dots, without any sign of fear. Many of them then settled down to sleep. I noticed how few of them were sick.

The reaction of the average repatriate was that of the experienced traveller. He had already written of his first flight to his family, and as a consequence his prestige would offer incentive to others also anxious to gain importance in the village, for they would have a better pick of the women on their return! Now the repatriate would be an important person in the village; he would be able to elaborate on his adventures to the envy of others. He got into the plane, his luggage, bicycle, and other belongings having been loaded for him on the airfield. All he had to do was sit down, and this he did with a superior look on his face. Soon a grin would spread across it, and he would sing, as an outlet to his excitement at the thought of getting home.

If he was one who was returning to the mine after a spell in his village, he would sit next to a new-comer, to whom he would explain the formalities to be gone through at the depots, and the way of life on the mine. The "ndegi", or bird, was no longer a source of wonder, since it was lifted from the ground by some special power of the white man, in whom he had implicit trust.

I was intrigued by the curious assortment of articles taken in the "ndegi" by these repatriates. Though the average tribesman is fond of bright colours he is also practical in his purchases.

First he would select the box into which his articles are to be put with great care. The box may be of wood or steel, but both are painted in striking colours.

I noticed that red, yellow and green seemed to be favoured the most, through two colours predominate: red and yellow.

Into the box goes all the purchases except the large articles such as the sewing machine and bicycle.

On the day of the departure he is up with the dawn to prepare for the journey home.

He washes and puts on his cowboy shirt and khaki trousers, beautifully adorned with multi-coloured patches.

The young repatriates favour blue tight-fitting cowboy pantaloons with boots to match, which are often made of rubber minus the spurs. Then on goes the ten-gallon hat. He now fancies he is a cowboy he has seen on the films. Lastly he polishes his coloured spectacles with care. These are often just of plain glass. They are essential, and no self-respecting repatriate would be without them. They lend him an air of dignity. It is important that he impresses his folk with his "riches", and his knowledge of world affairs, for it is certain that he will be called upon to relate his experiences and to show how he has profited by them.

Norman Ellor tells the story of one miner who arrived with a huge tractor and was determined that the tractor would be loaded on the aircraft and flown home. It took Mick Rundle of Wenela a couple of days to convince him that it was impossible, and eventually the tractor was sold and he took the money with him instead.

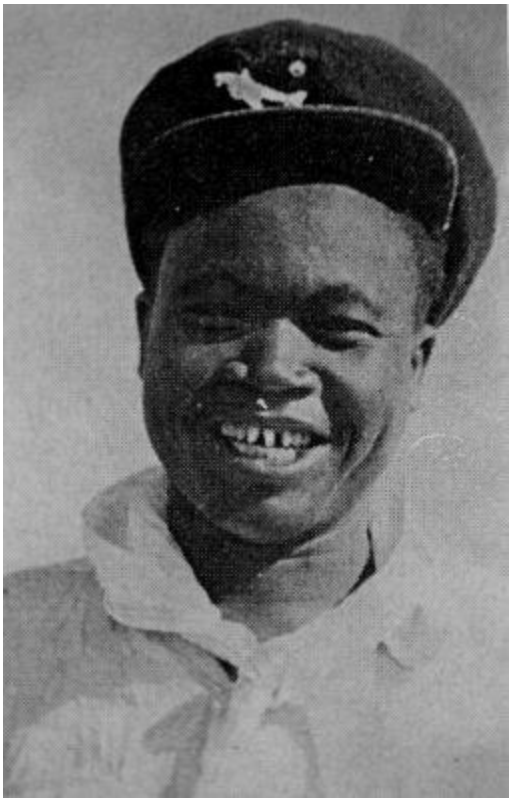
When the Catholic church started up in Francistown there was Father Murphy and Germanus, who was a good friend of Norman, and told him the story that they would be woken up at the Mission between 3 and 4 in the morning with that days passengers requesting a blessing before they flew out. It was not known whether they did not trust us or whether they were just good Catholics.

Some of the remarks of the Miners when asked the hard question why they thought the aircraft flying, pondered and then said; "It's power ... It is wind." Opinions on the theory of flight were equally divided between groups. Another traveller, asked his opinion of the airlift, gave the extraordinarily descriptive reply, after the usual interval for thought: " To fly like this is very good; you are going like the devil-yet you stand still!".

As the plane soars into the air he begins to sing lustily, and soon the aircraft rings with the chorus of male voices, eventually to give peace to sleep.

Meanwhile the witch-doctor and the family have been forewarned on his coming, and asked to keep away the" tokoloshe".

Wenela designed a lapel badge, golden in colour, of a Dakota aircraft with the words "Wenela" inscribed on top of the fuselage. This was given to the passengers who wore it with pride as if they had been awarded pilot wings.



Typical Miner displaying his WENELA badge.

L to R: Dave Alexander; Sammy Samuelson; Paddy Mc Namara.

AIR CREW

In April 1953 I joined Africair. Initially I (Ken Fuller) flew their de Havilland Rapides with a chance of later being transferred to the Dakota fleet once I passed my Instrument Rating.

One of my more interesting flights was to Maun and Ghanzi in Bechuanaland, now known as Botswana. I also had the privilege of flying the first schedule flight from Francistown to Maun for the newly formed B.P. Airways.

After passing my Instrument Rating I was to abandon the Rapide for the Dakota. I was transferred to Francistown, as First Officer on their Mine Labour Airlift. Francistown was a real cowboy town with wild parties and all sorts of goings on.

After consuming a few drinks, a senior official, had the well-known habit of firing everyone, even if they had nothing to do with Africair. The next morning he would inevitably know nothing about it – not that anyone took any notice anyway.

Shortly hereafter, my initial Dakota training started; and what training it was!

Sit in the right hand seat and learn to operate the retractable undercarriage. Spring lock unclipped, pull, and raise the hydraulic lever and you were flying away.

On my first flight the Captain engaged the auto pilot soon after take-off and promptly went to sleep. The remainder of the flight may best be left to the reader's imagination.

First Officers took turns as the duty slave. This entailed picking up the crews at sparrow, refuelling, preparing the load sheets and operating the radio in the control tower. One also ran the Meteorological Station and many of our forecasts are still used by the professionals to this very day! No weather forecasts were given on Sundays as we were not allowed to lie on the Sabbath!

I remember that on one flight we had to carry out an emergency landing at Belvedere, Bulawayo, because of an engine fire warning indication. This necessitated a night stop.

Our dress was commonwealth-type formal, consisting of a gritty pair of overalls. The hotel was somewhat reluctant to allocate accommodation to this prize couple of scruffy waifs. Ha, what price Romanticism!

Our passengers were raw African recruits for the mines and we became very professional at closing the cabin door and sprinting to the cockpit, holding our breaths.

This exercise, of course, helped for blowing up the mercury tube when paying our compulsory visits to the Central Medical Establishment for our medicals.

I contacted a very bad case of Malaria and was sent to Fort Hill to recuperate. At the same time I was required to operate the radio station. You had to be pretty tough to survive (especially the perpetual parties). Nevertheless, it was a good operational Training Unit for budding pilots.

I was then transferred to fly with Bill Drew on our airlift to the Diamond Mine at Oranjemond. In the meantime, my application for employment as a First Officer with East African Airways had been successful. I sadly left Grootfontein after being bundled on a bus to Windhoek to catch a flight to Johannesburg and Nairobi.

JIMMY MILES

Jimmy Miles

Jimmy Miles joined the airlift in 1954 as a First Officer. He was appointed Station Manager in !973 leaving in 1975 for Suid Wes Lugdiens as Chief Pilot, and on retiring moved to Kroonstad in the Free State.

He was in charge during the ill-fated Skymaster crash through no fault of Wenela Air Services.

Never the less although he was under a lot of stress he handled the situation admirable. Not only having lost some good friends, he comforted families, answered questions and generally tried to keep the press at bay. His wife Rhona was a great help in assisting him. (This tragedy is covered in more detail later in the book.)

When he went to head office to see T.V. Mitchell to report on the accident he was warned that if after the interview he was invited to lunch everything would be fine otherwise who knows! Lunch it was and finally he was able to relax.

Jimmy had a lot of incidents, some amusing during his career. There was the time when he saw a notice on the Dakota control column: "Snake in aircraft which cannot be found. Snake bite serum behind seat".

The Boksburg Yank lost his American accent after landing with No 3 engine feathered after a fire. The controller remarked "Funny, E.W. always sounded like a Yank, this chap had an Afrikaans accent!"

Then there was the time on an early morning flight on take-off three quarters down the runway a Kudu appeared in the lights disappearing under the nose. Power was pulled off and then opened again. The Kudu appeared to pass between No 3 and 4 engines - without having been hit - how nobody knows?

A Dakota flight from Francistown to Lusaka, Fort Hill return normally took ten hours flying time. Someone did it in twelve hours including all stops so the game was on to beat the record.

Barry de Swart in his attempt with F/O Joe Ross speeded up the turn arounds by sharing duties and chasing up the ground staff. When Joe said at Lusaka "I've got to go to the toilet". Barry replied there is no time we take off in 5 minutes.

The same thing happened at Fort Hill and on arrival back at Francistown, Barry put his hand on Ross' shoulder and pointed to the toilet. Too late said Ross I am constipated.

Total time 11.05 hours.

On one of his flights at Shakawe a CSU was changed as the left prop was hunting.

After a satisfactory ground run up he took off and on reducing power to M.E.T.R.O. the left prop ran away and the engine caught fire. After carrying out the emergency fire drill and unable to feather turned back to the airfield with a windmilling propeller.

Loosing height fast and realising he would land short of the runway he opened up the shut off valve and pushed the throttle wide. The engine ran for about thirty seconds and froze solid, this was enough to reach the runway. As the saying goes flying is hours of boredom with seconds of sheer terror.

A couple of days later another pilot approached him "How could you re-start a fiery engine?" His reply was "Jim OK, the Paxs are OK and apart from fire damage so is the aircraft, so get lost".

Jimmy's years of flying skill had once more paid dividends and saved the day.

PHIL SHAW

Phil having served out a 5 year short service commission with the R.A.F, and after a short business venture decided to return to flying. He joined Africair on the 1 April 1954 as a Capt. on probation.

He writes that conditions were not the best - the aircraft only flew because of the dedication of the engineers who looked after them, spares were few and far between and grudgingly provided, but morale was good and the pilots were a happy bunch, though they drank too much - but this, I think, was a carry-over from WW2 days, when flying and drinking went hand in hand.

Flying was programmed for every weekday and timed to finish in Francistown in the early afternoon, when maintenance and servicing took place.

In rainy weather, the cockpit of all the aircraft leaked profusely and we used to fly with raincoats over our laps; in winter it was bitterly cold, as the heating system had been removed to save weight, so we wore whatever warm clothing we had and took blankets along. I had a room in the Grand Hotel and early call for the flight was 4.30 when we were served warmed-over coffee from the previous night - ghastly, but it did wake us up. We collected doorstep sandwiches made of meat from the previous night's dinner, and the crew transport, a dilapidated ex-army 15- hundredweight, collected us at about 5.00 and we did the rounds, picking up pilots from the Monarch mine before getting to the airfield at about 5.30.

The flights were generally uneventful - on the Lilongwe flight, we had a huge breakfast at the local hotel while the aircraft was being loaded with recruits and then flew back to Francistown.

Occasionally we spent a week in Lilongwe and shuttled to and from Fort Hill. On one of these stopovers I was suffering from tick bite fever and though I went along on every flight I did not contribute much.

The Captains I flew with for the first six months were all characters with their unique characteristics, but were heavy drinkers and often showed up for a flights suffering from a hangover, which meant that the co-pilots got in lots of flying.

Lambie would retire immediately after take-off to a deck chair in front of the baggage compartment and sleep all the way to destination, only waking up for the landing.

Place spent most of his time reading the paper, and others took some interest in what was going on, but, generally, it was a fairly relaxed operation.

One of the more popular pastimes, on the way to Mohembo, which involved flying over the Okavango Swamp, was to fly at about 100 feet above ground level and game watch. This was not popular with the passengers, as it could be quite bumpy, and they all suffered from airsickness. In fact, airsickness among the passengers was one of the most unpleasant aspects of the whole business. The cabins were basically furnished (or unfurnished!) with canvas seats, no upholstery and no carpets, so that, apart from the smell, leaving the aircraft at the end of a flight involved skating down the aisle to the main door. What the aircraft skin looked like under the floor only Heaven-and the engineers knew!

THE WEDDING

The date was set - 30/7/55 - and the whole community had been involved. The bride, Elizabeth Cawker of Francistown and Philip Shaw, an Africair pilot, had decided to tie the knot on this date and have a month's honeymoon before he took up a position with East African Airways in Nairobi.

This, the first wedding of an Africair pilot, (and the last) to take place in Francistown, was a great occasion, and everyone contributed to make it a memorable one.

Wedding photos were taken by the District Commissioner free of charge, even including the enlargements; all wedding presents were in the form of cash, owing to the pair's imminent departure, and made possible a good start to their marriage.

The ceremony went off without a hitch, being conducted by Rev. Rushton in the local St. Patricks church, and the couple left the church between a guard of Africair pilots, after which everyone repaired to the Grand Hotel hall for the festivities.

Everyone enjoyed the "Wedding of the year" and the happy couple got away in good time, leaving the bar in the capable hands of John Tugwell, Louis Cawker and some of the other local youngsters. They made sure no booze was left over.

GUARD OF HONOUR:
Mac Dermid; Nick Methley; Peter Barnard; Phil & Bess Shaw; Neville Smith; Bruce Alexander; George Blackwell; Saaf Cooke.

JIM BRENAN

Jim Brenan joined Africair (Wenela Air Services) on 1 October 1965 as o co-pilot. He was young, 24 years of age, single and prepared to go anywhere for heavy-type experience.

He writes that I was told not to expect a great deal from Francistown, and so was not disappointed. I spent the first night at the Grand Hotel after a long, hot drive from Johannesburg.

Although the room was comfortable I did not get much sleep between the rowdy noises and mosquitoes.

My friend, Don Gordon and his spouse Jane were also new comers, and because they were married were given a house. They kindly offered to share it with me, and I had no hesitation in accepting.

The house was a square brick building with white plaster, situated in the area of the old Monarch Mine. The hot water system was dependent on an external fire, burnt in a tower arrangement which heated a 44 gallon drum of water. If someone forgot to keep the fire going - no hot water!

We made a nice garden under Jane's direction as she had an agricultural qualification, so we ended up with a nice stock of vegetables tenderly cared for by an old wizen faced gardener named Jim, who seemed to spend most of his time during the day recovering from the excessive effects of dagga.

There was an old 6x6 meter bricked construction, plastered and painted blue, with only an inlet and an outlet, and to call it a pool would be flattering. As it had no filter it would be come green in a matter of days, so we solved the problem by scrubbing the pool clean, refilling it with clean water and pouring half a dozen bottles of Jik bleach into the pool. It became a great asset as we then had clean water for weeks before having to drain and refill.

On October 1, 1965, I reported together with Don and a third new co-pilot Angus Me Kenzie to the Station Commander, Peter Place, at his home also on the Monarch Mine.

I found Peter and his spouse, to be charming people and took to them immediately.

We were told that we would not be converted on to the Dakota as that aircraft did very little work - the demand was for DC-4 co-pilots. This news took me back a little as it was quite a jump from light twins to the DC-4. The other problem was that neither Don or Angus had a multi-engine endorsement nor an instrument rating, so they were required to go to Salisbury for training before their conversion.

Meanwhile, I was told to report to the Chief Pilot, Jimmy Miles, and prepare myself to write the DC-4 Technical examination as soon as possible and also to fly on selected flights as a supernumerary pilot.

That afternoon I reported to Capt. Miles at the airport to discuss the technical exams only to discover that there were no training notes for pilots.

I had to make a decision there and then - either I forget the whole thing and leave Francistown, or make up my own technical notes. I decided to stay and put up with the situation, and therefore began a task of writing up a set of notes for the purpose of passing the technical exams for both the Dakota and DC-4 aircraft. The Dakota notes were necessary because a week or so after starting the DC-4 notes, I was told that I was also to be converted on to the Dakota.

This task took me two months to complete, and it was thanks to the assistance of the aircraft engineers that I was able to obtain the use of Maintenance manuals to help me.

I wrote the two examinations in Bulawayo, passing both, and my notes were subsequently used by a host of new pilots.

My flying training began one Saturday morning at Francistown converting on to the DC-4 with Capt. Miles and flight engineer Keith Cummings. We took off and flew a left hand circuit and I made a very smooth landing. By, now, I had got their attention!

I was told by Miles "you will never make it three out of three". I did. That was it - three circuits were enough and I was on line the following Monday.

In contrast when later converting on to the Dakota with Peter Place I found it more difficult to handle on the ground than the DC-4, especially the landings.

It was during this Dakota conversion, after the training was complete Peter said, "I have it - sit tight." He shot up Francistown, flying down the main road at 100 feet when everyone was busy doing their Saturday morning shopping!

Landing quickly, he said "get out quickly, put the chocks under the wheels, put the prop covers on and then run like hell for the hangar offices before the police arrive".

It was not very long before two very agitated Police Officers rushed into the office.

They found us sitting with books on our laps as if we had been there all morning, swatting under Peters direction.

One Police Officer asked Peter if he had seen a Dakota land and take-off within the past 15 minutes, as he had scared the town with a dangerous beat up. Peter, being a very laid up person, kept a straight face and said (In all honesty) that he had not seen any aircraft land or take-off. The police eventually left and swore that the pilot would be thrown in jail if found.

If the police had been wide awake, they would have heard the sound of "cracking" coming from the errant Dakota as it cooled down. How the aircraft was not recognised I shall never know.

On my first flight as a qualified DC-4 first officer I flew with Jimmy Miles to Blantyre, a three hour or so flight. After about an hour Jimmy asked if I would like to take a break, use the toilet at the rear of the aircraft reserved for crew! I did so, and wandered through the cabin to the toilet. Although I did not want to use the toilet, I went anyway: to see how it functioned in flight. After about 30 seconds, the rear of the aircraft gave a violent twitch. I was standing in the toilet area and managed to hang on to something.

When I got back to the flight deck, both Jimmy and the flight engineer, Koos de Villiers, were laughing their heads off, and watched closely to see if I had wet my pants. I told him I did not use the toilet and a look of disappointment fell across their faces. This was apparently, one way they liked to initiate a new crew member.

One of the DC-4's had a hot plate. Whenever the crews were rostered on that particular aircraft a mixed grill used to be served as a treat. Barry de Swart was always keen to leave his seat and prepare the food - he always did a good job of it!

That hot plate was the aircraft's finest asset-if it was not working the aircraft was declared unserviceable!

On board our aircraft we always carried a long thick rope to help hand start the engines if necessary. The rope would be wound around the propeller boss from the front to the rear. The rope was then held in tension by the passengers. On the command "run",

the team would run as fast as possible at right angles to the propeller boss which would then result in spinning the propeller faster than normal. This was manpower at its most efficient!

Most of our flying was typical airline-type flying. Lots of routine, flying into airports which one came to know pretty well, making the turnaround as smooth and as fast as possible. There were times when one had late afternoon flights and to fight one's way through heavy thunderstorm activity with no air-born radio. The aircraft was bounced around in areas of heavy rain or hail, but the DC-4 was an extremely strong aircraft and seemed to shrug it all off.

The standard of maintenance was very high considering the obsolete equipment the engineering staff had to maintain. They were real engineers who could improvise and think their way around a problem, unlike today when every unit is modular and only needs to be replaced.

There were only two occasions in the 18 months that I spent at Africair when technically, things did not go well but for all that, there was no blame attached to the maintenance staff.

The one incident was an engine fire caused by a cylinder pot splitting around the top and almost in half on No. two engine. Bill Drew was flying and we successfully extinguished the flames and completed the flight without further incident.

The second incident was a minute hole in one of the hydraulic pipes which sprayed a fine spray of oil whenever the system was used. There were no spares available at Blantyre, but the engineer was not to be beaten, and he found a stainless steel pipe from a motor garage which they could adapt to fit.

It fitted like a charm! After running an engine and the flaps up and down, no leak was apparent. It did get us back without any further loss of hydraulic fluid, the replaced pipe was probably superior to the other pipes in the system!

The engineering staff were led by Stan King at Francistown, later succeeded by Joe Bolton, and by a genius of a man in Bulawayo, Al Binding.

There were many characters in Africair during my time there and none more memorable than Bill Drew who was thoroughly professional. I liked Bill from the start, learnt a great deal from him and found him one of the few Captains who, although relaxed on the flight deck, took his job seriously and did not cut corners or try to be smart in front of co-pilots.

He was short, stocky man, sporting a grey, nicotine-stained Mexican type moustache, a bald head supported by grey patches of hair above his ears and a pronounced limp.

His car was an old Citroen ID 19 which looked as though he lived in it, it was so worn inside. He was not an eccentric, far from it, merely his own man.

Another person I got to like very much was George Clarence or Garry to all and sundry. He was one of the ATC men, the other being Ted Broome. Garry had been a first officer on Viscounts with the then Central African Airways but had been medically boarded. He shared a house almost opposite to our house, with Jack Grove, an engineer who later joined S.A. Airways.

Garry had an instant repartee and some of his utterances were priceless. He could sum people up in a few well-chosen words and he would be right on the button.

There was an influx of British troops into Francistown, whose job it was to guard the newly established radio station just to the north of the town. This was during the period of Rhodesian "U.D.I." and the radio station used to broadcast propaganda into Rhodesia as well as jam the Rhodesian broadcast transmissions. Their presence added to the political tension in the area.

On Nov 1 1966 Capt. John Wilson operated the last flight out of Mongu after the Zambian Government's statement about not wanting "his people to work on the South African mines."

Mongu is situated in Western Zambia, in Barotseland. The Barotse's main source of income is fishing and agriculture and, being a relatively sparsely area, the people are poor. The work on the mines therefore brought a large sum of money into the area, and all this was to go for political reasons.

On board were Dave Culver, Mongu's last depot manager, his spouse Grace and their personal possessions including their pets.

All the leading personalities in and around Mongu came to the airstrip to say goodbye to the Culver's, who were very popular in the area.

The local school children danced and a small party was held at the airstrip whilst the Culver's bid farewell to all their friends.

After eighteen months it was time to move on, and I left Africair at the same time as Bill Drew - he to join Zambian Air Cargoes and myself to Anglo American Corporation.

NICK METHLEY

Nick Methley writes - In 1955 I joined Africair as a First Officer, leaving in Dec 1956 to join Central African Airways. In Oct 1958 C.A.A. offered voluntary retirement which I accepted and re-joined Africair for a further three years.

Flying was fairly routine except perhaps for the various escapades we got up to in Francistown during the week-end which would fill a separate book.

One unusual flight I remember well was with Hansie Enslin to Shakawe. We encountered low cloud over the swamps and descended to fly underneath it. On arrival at Shakawe, Hansie turned over the depot and dragged a wing tip through the top of a tree, slicing through the leading edge three feet in from the tip and back to the rear spar. All we felt was a thump.

On landing he had to hold the ailerons 90 degrees over and land fast. At the depot there was a pile of broken branches with some of them as thick as a man's arm.

In Aug 1961 having accumulated 5,600 hours I once more left Africair having been offered a flying position with East African Airways.

BRUCE ALEXANDER

"Echoes from the past."

Wenela was not my first visit to Africa. That in fact, was a Viking (GAIXR) of Airwork Limited, which routed from their base at Blackbush via El Adem, Wadi Haifa etc; terminating in Juba.

The date was 23 November 1951.

Then my first flight to Johannesburg was with Captain Kazuba Kazubski in a Avro Tudor V via Castel Benito, Kano and the West Coast to Palmietfontein. The registration was G-AKCD and the date was 7 Dec 1951.

These intrepid ventures led me to apply for a position as a Dakota First Officer with Wenela in Francistown. I was to live for one year at the (well named !) "Tati Hotel".

I arrived in Francistown on 15 January 1955 and immediately joined the flights collecting prospective mine workers from as far afield as Mozambique, Nyasaland, North and South Rhodesia to be entrained from Francistown to the mining compounds in Johannesburg. There were many memorable moments in those days, flying to Maun, a tiny undiscovered grass strip on the edge of the equally unexplored Okavango Delta-a veritable paradise of wildlife at that time not "discovered" by a single tourist.

One trip which exemplified those bush flying days took place on 21 September 1955.

The aircraft was Dakota ZS-DHN and the Captain was Jimmy Miles. We departed Francistown empty as usual, to collect our compliment of some 28-30 recruits.

Our destination was Mohembo with a stop en-route at Maun. After a short stop over at Maun we set course for Mohembo, a flight of about 150 miles straight over the Okavango swamp and, flying fairly low, we had a view of teeming wild life, probably second to know where else in the world. Mohembo is situated right in the North West tip of Bechuanaland not far from the edge of the Caprivi Strip which became famous many years later as the buffer zone in the War of Independence that would lead to the new State of Botswana. On arrival at Mohembo-which had no control tower, we circled the grass strip first to check the field prior to landing and also alert the Wenela Agent living nearby. On circling the field what did we see but a magnificent pair of leopards happily basking in the sun on the "runway"? The agent now aware of the situation with the help of some gun bearers chased the leopards off the runway but were unable to get a shot at them. This was a very different world as lion and other cats were classified as "vermin" and could be shot on sight. One "duka" owner some miles out of Francistown shot eight lions around his perimeter in one day.

Anyway these were great days and since that date I have lived in Africa. Nearly 27 years in Kenya with East African Airways, sadly a short eighteen months in Malawi (Air Malawi terminated its VC-10 Blantyre -Europe service), and now retired at a very different South Africa. My wife and family surely are entitled to belong to that exclusive club known as the "White Tribe of Southern Africa", although the term originally was reserved, perhaps rightly so, for the Afrikaans nation.

SAMMY SAMUELSON

By Charmaine Edwards (Teba Times)

Born in one of the world's coldest countries, Sammy Samuelson spent 21 years as a pilot in Central Africa, transporting many thousands of mining recruits to the Wenela depot in Francistown, where they were transferred from plane to train. He totalled 15,000 flying hours, covering a distance of nearly four-and-a-half million kilometres.

Sammy came to Africa from Iceland, but had no difficulty in adjusting to the blazing heat as much as I did, "he laughs".

"Flying aircraft, I was privileged to see a lot of the most remote parts of Africa before they were spoilt by civilisation and science. Looking down from the plane, I was struck by the unrestrained wilderness of the Okavango Swamps - almost untouched by human existence".

He became interested in flying when watching the activities of the Royal Air Force at Reykjavik. After obtaining a pilot licence in 1950 from a flying school, he worked there as a "week-end instructor" in his spare time.

In 1953 he went to England seeking a British commercial licence, but that year the "cold war" broke out where Britain disagreed with Iceland's more restricted fishing limit. Depending on foreign currency and with all trade links virtually coming to a standstill, Sammy had to return to his birthplace.

Later he went back to England and obtained his commercial licence and instrument rating licence. In London he learnt from a pilot friend about Africair, the company that operated the Wenela Dakotas. He saw their agent who took down all his particulars, including his address in Iceland. Then Sammy waited in Iceland for months before he was called for an interview in London. He was accepted as a pilot and with immigration papers in order at long last, set off in a Skymaster for a country until then not on Sammy's map. It would turn out that he had boarded the first Skymaster to be bought by the Wenela Air services started in 1956.

When the service closed he was transferred to the Wenela depot in Johannesburg and in 1977 was an assistant to the Maintenance Manager, Mr. John du Toit. Later the Public Relations Media Division needed its own maintenance section and Sammy became Building Maintenance Superintendent.

EXCELLENT PILOTS WORTH KNOWING

T.C. Holden writes in the Tebo Times that as the Compound Manager at the Msasa Depot he became involved with the crews who flew into Salisbury.

I remember: Reg Stidolph, the Senior Capt. of W.A.S., ex-bomber pilot with a DFC and AFC, had more flying hours in his logbook than most men accumulate in a life time.

Richard Blackwell was his second in command. Dave Alexander, another World War II bomber pilot wearing a huge beard and sporting a monocle, had flown Liberators under the command of my father-in-law in Ceylon towards the end of the war.

Sammy Samuelsson, co-pilot I well remember as being a very quiet and pleasant individual. "Blikkie" Bakkes, another second officer, very tall, was always full of fun and ready for a good laugh.

There were many more of them, all excellent men well worth knowing.

An incident which comes to mind, in 1976 - at Salisbury. It was an early June morning, still dark and very cold. I had been up at 04h30 to meet an incoming DC-4 from Francistown. We had a full load of ninety recruits to send off and on my arrival at the airport at 05h30 I found them waiting silently in the freezing dawn. None of them had flown before and few, if any, had seen an aeroplane.

It was just dawn and still cold when I espied the flashing lights of the Skymaster coming in from the darkness of the west. In those days we were left very much to ourselves by the airport staff but they would direct the aircraft to its parking bay. At departure time either Noel Nicolle or myself would remove the chocks, give the engine starting sequence and then give final thumbs up to the Captain, who was that morning Reg Stidolph.

After landing Reg Stidolph checked the aircraft and after breakfast the large-eyed recruits were embarked along with their few possessions. At about 07h30 Reg completed a final ground check, the doors were shut, the engines started and the DC-4 eased down towards the end of the runway.

Then, as usual, I went to the airport terminal for breakfast. From there I could watch the plane take off. I was finishing off my breakfast when I heard a familiar sound overhead which did not bode well. As it was extremely unusual for the aircraft to return I rushed out followed by not a few wisecracks from some Air Rhodesia staff.

On the apron I was told that the DC-4 was coming back with no hydraulics. Reg will have to land the DC-4 fully laden with passengers and fuel with no wing flaps or brakes.

Once again it came in from the west. We all watched with baited breath - certainly I did! Lower and lower the DC-4 came down until there was a puff of blue smoke from the main undercarriage and the DC-4 rushed passed us. I wondered if it would ever stop.

However, having used up virtually the whole of the long runway the Skymaster eventually came to a halt. Back on the apron everyone clambered off the aircraft, the recruits looking particularly shaken.

The whole fuselage of the DC-4 was literally covered with hydraulic fluid from nose to tail and looked a real mess. After some hours of hanging around the trouble was eventually sorted out and I was glad to report back to the Manager that things had gone smoothly the second time.

RICHARD JOHN BLACKWELL

I joined W.A.S. in Feb l969 together with Thys Van Der Merwe as a co-pilot after completing my Commercial Pilots Licence at the Rhodesian Commercial Flying School (run by Bill Church an Ex CAA Pilot) with a grand total of 200 hours.

Thys Van Der Merwe

My father George Blackwell a Senior Captain and instructor had been with the Company since 1953 and this was to be the first Father/Son combination, followed later by Bill and Geoff Strike, and Jimmy and Colin Miles.

George & Richard Blackwell

My first instructional flight was with my father in a DC-4 A2-ZER, the same aircraft that crashed in 1974. I was one of the few people to eye witness the tragedy which affected everyone as we were a closely knit community.

I received my Command in Jan 1973 at the age of 24, being one of the youngest DC-4 and DC-3 Captains, and later in 1975 was promoted to Deputy Chief Pilot and a training Captain under station Commander Reg Stidolph. Unfortunately my father was not around to see this as he passed away suddenly in Dec 1971.

A flying operation like this often attracts chancers. I remember one such, who with a doubtful flying licence, blamed the instructor as being unfair by finding him unsuitable on his acceptance flight.

Another test was arranged, this time a senior Capt. occupying the flight engineers seat.

After a thorough briefing the take-off was started and just after VI (decision speed, after which you are committed to take-off) an engine was failed as briefed, by cutting the fuel mixture. The pilot being tested decided to wrongly stop by standing on the brakes, but for some reason only known to himself he left the other engines at take-off power.

This resulted in the aircraft veering across the runway towards the terminal building.

The instructor took over and hauled the aircraft into the air, narrowly missing the terminal building, while the Capt. acting as flight engineer hastily restarted the failed engine.

Fortunately no tyres were blown and the aircraft made a safe landing, ending this pilots short association with the company.

W.A.S. stopped operation in 1976 and thus came to the end of the biggest airlifts in Africa.

JACK ANDREW

Jack who recently passed away was a character in his own right. He was the Manager for Africair, and an Alternate Director. On leaving Africair when the Rand Airport base was moved to Bulawayo he formed and operated the successful Air Lowveld Airline.

Little is known about his private life, but an amusing story is told by Dennis Middlebrook about him having a dab hand at poker and saving the day.

In those early days we operated out of Lilongwe, and on one flight had to divert to Fort Hill due to an engine failure. A relief Dakota delivered a replacement engine and we started work immediately as we had no desire to remain long in Fort Hill, which consisted of a Guest House, Trading Store, Wenela Depot and little else. In those days the crew consisted of a Capt., First Officer and Engineer.

We decided to work through the night, and as there were no lights at the airfield we positioned two trucks to light up the working area. Every one lent a helping hand including Jack, and at about 2130 hours we were startled to hear a roar, and low and behold a Lion was seen at the trailing edge of the centre section. That was enough!

We beat a hasty retreat to the Guest House.

The next problem was that between us there was hardly any money to pay for one beer let alone the accommodation. As Jack was a dab hand at poker it was decided to play a game or two with certain of the locals who had been in the bar since lunch time.

With Jacks years of experience in the dives of Malta, Niece and Cairo, and a little swapping of cards between us, a very enjoyable and rewarding evening was spent, enabling us to pay the bar and accommodation account.

Had it not been for the Lion we would have spent an unpleasant night working and without liquid refreshment.

GEORGE BLACKWELL

George and his son Richard were the first Father/Son team in Wenela Air Services.

He was a bomber pilot in the R.A.F. during the war, and served in No. 10 Squadron and rose to the rank of Acting Squadron Leader. After the war he spent 12 months in India and was demobbed in late 1946.

He then worked for Marshals in Cambridge and in 1955 after reading an advert in a flying magazine he went for an interview with T.V. Mitchell in London, and shortly afterwards was accepted and joined W.A.S. as a First Officer. Promotions followed rapidly to Captain and Chief training Capt.

He died in Sept 1971, but his wife Pat continued working in the office at the airfield where Barry de Swart was Station Commander, and after he retired for Jimmy Miles.

Pat remembers a very funny incident when Bas Everad returned from his flight he could not find his jeep anywhere. Needless to say he was ragged and told he only thought he came in his jeep, and eventually went home in the company transport. What had transpired was that some of the young engineers had put the jeep in a storeroom and locked the door. Eventually Bas got his jeep back, taking it all in good spirit.

SURVIVOR

(Extract from the TEBA times)

Vincent Raliengoane comes from Teyateyaneng. After working in the Wenela Depot, Johannesburg, for nine years he was appointed a special conductor to accompany Malawians traveling home, firstly by train in Francistown and then by air to Lilongwe.

He was in his accustomed place in the rear of the aircraft and it was routine procedure to him when the Skymaster took off from Francistown in the dark of an autumn morning on April 4, 1974.

But almost immediately he noticed that something was wrong. First he saw sparks coming from the engine, which was making a strange noise like "papapappa" he says.

Then the plane started to lurch alarmingly to illustrate the movement he holds out his arms horizontally and bends to the right and left, like a "touch your toes" exercise.

"You must pray."

"You must pray" he shouted to the passengers near him. (All of whom were killed).

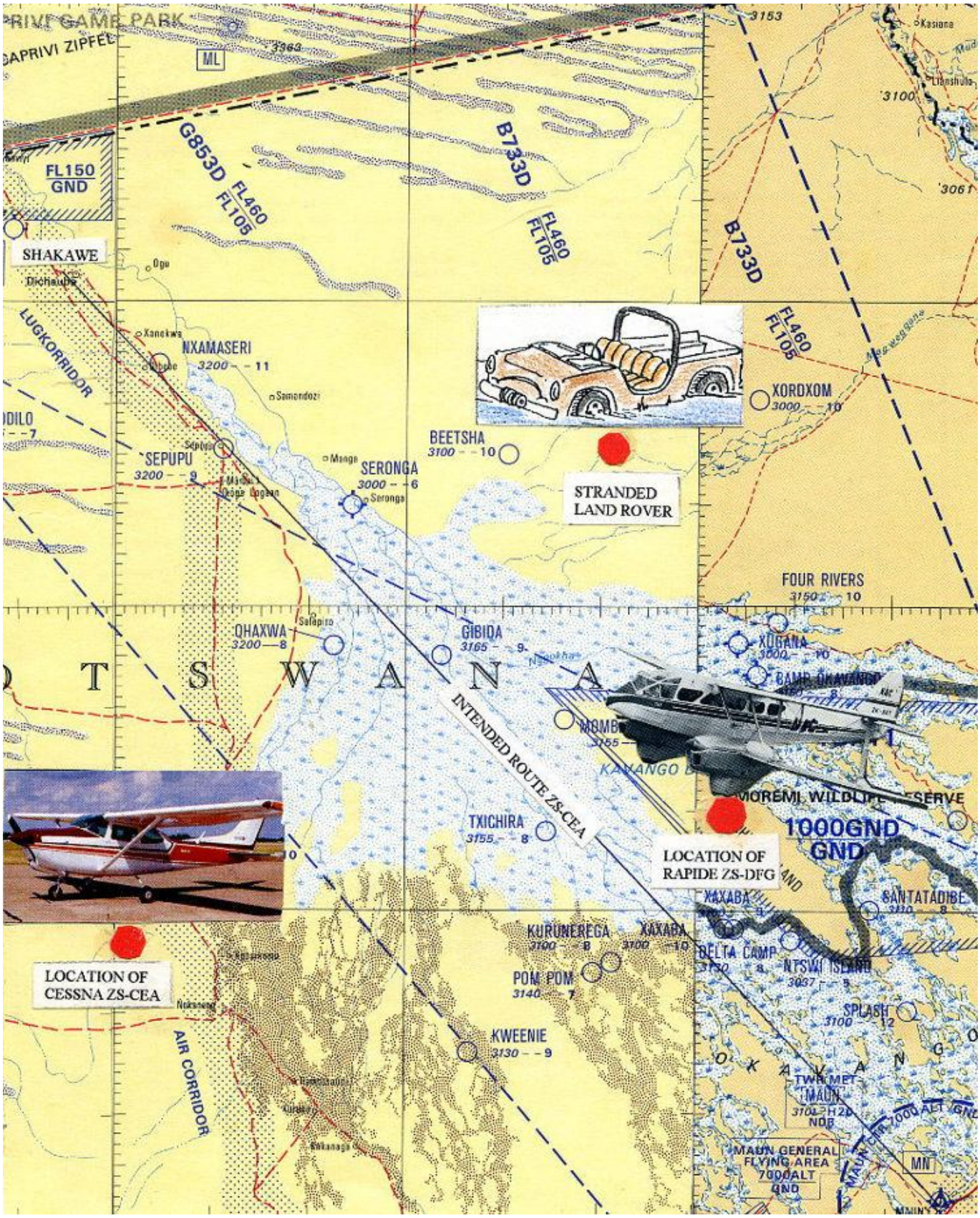
Then the plane nose-dived and he remembers nothing more until he found himself lying on the ground in the open air with the plane a sea of flames near him.

His coat had caught alight and his hands and ankles were badly burnt. He was one of the only six survivors. Seventy eight people had died.

Vincent spent six days in the Francistown hospital and then was transferred to the Wenela hospital. Thanks to skilfully done skin grafts all that can now be seen of his injuries are some scars on his fingers and ankles. He returned to the Wenela Depot and later became a messenger for the Public Relations Media Dept. riding a scooter through the Johannesburg traffic!

He says that he would not be afraid to fly again. "It was an accident." he says, and accidents do happen, and thanks God that he is alive.

SEARCH MISSIONS



Search area Okavango Delta Botswana.

Wenela Air Services were often involved in air searches for missing aircraft or in one case a broken down Land Rover with the occupants stranded somewhere in the swamps.

The search for Peter Place Phill Shaw writes that on 25 November 1954 a D.H. Rapide, ZS-DFG went missing while on a schedule flight from Francistown to Maun. There were three passengers on board, two men from Bulawayo, and a woman living in Maun. The pilot was Peter Place of Africair.

No trace of the aircraft was found, though we searched along its track and both sides of it for nearly eight hours. Eventually, a message arrived at Maun by carrier to the effect that it was down in the swamp about 40 miles NW of Maun.

Apparently Peter had a strong tail wind and when he descended he was way off course long past his destination. He turned back and before running out of fuel did the right thing by carrying out a safe precautionary landing on a pan.

A bottle of scotch they had on board evidently saved the day, and they were eventually flown out by another Rapide who landed next to them on the same pan.

Miracle Rescue

On the 20 Sept 1957 a light Cessna 180 aircraft ZS-CEA piloted by Mr. J.L Flemington and two passengers named Schaeffer and Tromp disappeared on a flight from Maun to Shakawe.

Wenela Air Services together with the S.A.A.F. and other light aircraft searched the area to no avail. On the 27th the air search was called off, and the S.A.A.F. Dakota on its return flight from Shakawe to its base by a miracle spotted the missing aircraft 24 miles NW of Nokaneng. No one would ever of dreamed of finding the aircraft there.

They radioed the position of the survivors, and after dropping supplies which unfortunately the survivors were too weak to gather, continued their flight.

The hero of the rescue was a Boets Botha who landed his light plane next to the survivors saving them from certain death.

It transpired that they over-flew their destination crossing the Okavango river flying deep into Angola, lost he turned back crossing the river a second time and running out of fuel landed.

The pilot blamed a passengers metal lighter which he said affected his compass?

Swamp Rescue

Grace Culver Was manning the Wenela radio at Shakawe on Fri 13 June 1958 when she received a S.O.S. from John Seaman (Crocodile hunter for S.M. Lurie & Co.) who together with a Mr. Mathias of W.N.L.A. and their guide were stranded in the swamps near a place called Njinga. They had some food left, but no water, and seemed very worried. The rear wheel housing of their Land Rover was broken and one wheel had come off.

Two W.A.S. Dakota's were dispatched to drop water and supplies to them. An albion tyre with the tube filled with water, an old blanket as a parachute together with other supplies were loaded. Seaman was instructed by radio to build a fire to direct the aircraft.

It all seemed so simple, a ten minute flight ended in a two hour search. The pilots reported that the bush all around the area was on fire, which made it impossible for them to find the fire they were looking for.

Eventually the stranded party spotted the planes one mile north west of them and passed this on to Grace who in turn relayed to air radio and radio Maun who were assisting her.

It was with relief when the news came through that the planes were circling and dropping the supplies. Most of the supplies landed intact except for John Seaman's disappointment of finding that the tins of beer were squashed flat.

The pilots had spotted a pan less than a mile north and radioed they would indicate the position of the pan to the stranded party by flying directly towards it few times and they warned that there were plenty of elephant about.

On Saturday morning it became apparent that they would need assistance so Dave Calver (Grace's husband) of Wenela left Mohembo, on his way to Seronga to get the spares needed to repair the Land Rover (off an old Govt. Land Rover) and from there he would proceed on foot with the assistance of local tribesman and donkeys to carry the supplies and spares, and as no spare transmitter was available he took with him an a ordinary wireless set to listen for instructions.

Dave was under the impression that he had only 15 miles to walk but it was later learnt from local tribesman and confirmed by the pilots that the village Gudikwe, which is where the guide of the stranded was sent to intercept Dave was more like 40 miles, making the total distance Dave would have to walk at least 30 miles further.

It was then realised that Dave could not reach the men before Wednesday morning and it was a relief when a lorry arrived from Iquaga with a letter from Dave confirming that he had received the transmissions and instructions and realised how far he had to walk.

It later transpired that Dave walked some 70 odd miles on the edge of the swamps following the faint tracks of the land rover through an unknown and dangerous area, showing great courage and confidence, and getting there, supplies, donkeys and all.

His first words on reaching Seaman who he found comfortably camped, picnic style, was "There are three fools here, you two, and me for coming to your rescue".

On Thursday morning Capt.'s. Cooke and Place who flew to the area confirmed that all the men had been spotted and further supplies were dropped.

After repairs to the vehicle the party drove back to Serongwa where Dave boarded the Wenela barge shrugging it off as if it was all in all a day's work...

A CRASH PILOT BEAT THE BUSH

In an article appearing in the Teba Times, Mike Quinn, at the time an apprentice aircraft engineer remembers as clearly as if it was yesterday the events that unfolded from Lusaka airport many years ago.

There were no short distances between airfields in Northern Rhodesia and very little in between 1952, and pilots tended to fly by inspiration and the seat of their pants.

Arthur Meecham was using the formula when he set out on a mercy flight one afternoon in his ageing Fairchild to pick up a critically ill child on the Tanganyika border, many hundreds of kilometres away.

Mike recalls with extreme clarity the moment the plane taxied out. "We had just finished working on it for a Certificate of Airworthiness. I can remember as it passed that I noticed that the tyre paint was still wet."

The plane never reached its destination. An S.O.S. went out from the Royal Rhodesian Air Force for help in the air search and the first to respond was Africair's Dakota ZS-DBP.

The Captain was Bill Drew, the co-pilot John Tainton and the flight engineer Ted Hartwell. The Dakota was the biggest plane in the search group, and young Mike flew with it to help scan the ground for signs of the missing Fairchild.

Nobody found anything. "We saw nothing that resembled a plane. Just bush, bush and more bush", Mike recalls. After seven days the search was officially called off, though the Dak did fly a few more missions in pure hope.

"On a Saturday morning 10 days later", Mike says, Arthur Meecham arrived at Fort Jameson in an Austin Seven driven by the local District Commissioner after having survived not only the crash but the wild animals of the Luangwa Valley as well.

Capt. Drew flew the Dak to Fort Jameson and brought him back to Lusaka. Arthur Meecham was lacerated but no bones were broken.

He had made a spear to defend himself from a broken strut of the plane and had used the inner tube from one of the landing wheels to make a catapult. He took along one of the plane's hub caps and used it to boil grass seeds into soup.

He had walked about 160 km through some of Africa's wildest territory before coming to a village. From thereon he knew he was safe. The villagers got word to the DC who drove to the nearest point to pick him up.

THE AIR DISASTER

Captain Jimmy Miles, the Station Commander and Chief Pilot of Wenela Air Services, remembers April 4th, 1974 well. He was woken up by his wife Rhona saying that an aircraft was 'making funny noises'". Instantly Jimmy was fully awake too. He realised in those fateful seconds that something was terribly wrong with their aircraft A2-ZER on its flight to Blantyre, Malawi. He remembers vividly running to the window and seeing the plane's engines flashing as it went passed. He phoned the control tower and asked what was wrong with the aircraft.

"Clarrie Clarence", the controller, replied: "Bill Strike says that everything has gone wrong.... he says he's coming in to land. It's turning on final now...Oh Christ, it's crashed!"

Capt. Miles asked his wife to go to the homes of crew to give as much comfort as she could to the wives. He did not think anyone would be coming out of the crash alive.

Rushing to the airport he took a Land Rover from the hangar and together with D.P. Smith rode along the Orapa road stopping as close as possible to the crash site, then running the remaining distance through the bush. He described the scene as a giant funeral pyre, a mass of flames reaching up to the clouds which were 250 to 300 feet high.

De Villiers the duty engineer took another route along the extension of runway 29 arriving there first. He took his friend Red Redlinghuis to the hospital, the six surviving passengers followed after being loaded on trucks that arrived shortly afterwards.

The sad remains of WENELA DC-4 A2-ZER c/n 27242

The first thing Capt. Miles did after leaving the scene of the accident, was to obtain a police guard, and telex Blantyre where a plane had arrived earlier and ordered it grounded. Just as well, they were having difficulty starting the engines when the telex arrived, and the engines were later discovered seriously damaged. They only arrived there safely because the amount of contaminated fuel loaded at Francistown was not as much as the crashed aircraft, and so fortunately a second tragedy was averted.

The crash claimed the lives of 74 Malawian Miners as well as the pilots, Captain William "Bill" Strike, 54, and First Officer John Ernest "Butch" Nightingale, 42, and an air conductor named Gabriel Khute. Flight Engineer H.J. Redelinghuys, Air conductor Vincent Randingwana, and five passengers survived the crash.

Redelinghuys, 51, who had an incredible escape apparently had been catapulted by the impact through a window opening of the plane from his jump seat behind the pilots.

Vincent Randingwana who was on his second flight felt routine enough for him to be catnapping as the plane took off. Within a few minutes he was woken up by worried shouts by the miners.

He found himself lying on the ground in a circle of flame. He could see trees through the flames and got up and ran through the flames to safety burning himself badly. On hearing screams nearby he ran back through clear patches in the flames and pulled three men to safety.

The shock of the tragedy came home to a stunned Francistown, with its close knit community. The Town rallied, from Dr. Moeti, superintendent of the hospital and his staff, the wives, colleagues, in fact everyone.

Capt. Miles writes that he and his wife Rhona attended a moving service for the Conductor in the African Church at Francistown. I have never heard such singing - it went on and on, as only Africans can. One hymn after the other, as you can imagine we were all under stress, not only having lost some good friends, but, also trying to comfort families, answering questions etc. On leaving the church in tears I was asked to make a speech at the grave site. This is what I said: "Together we have flown to the North and back, Shakawe and back. We have flown in the sunlight and the dark. We have flown through rain and ha/7, storms and weather. Seen the sunrise and you have flown into the sunset and deep of night. I am proud to have had you with me. Rest in peace."

The crew were buried in a moving service at the Francistown cemetery, and because of the problem of identification, the plans to fly the passengers bodies home were scrapped. They were given a mass funeral at the Botswana border township's cemetery.

It also brought to a flaming end the safety record of Wenela Air Services through no fault of the operator. In the 22 years of its operation it had never had a fatal accident.

History of Douglas DC-4 A2-ZER c/n 27242

Bought by Douglas Aircraft Company 13 December, 1945 and converted to DC-4, conversion No. 24. Bought by Delta Airlines 2 April, 1946 registered as N37475. Bought by Pacific Northern Airlines 27 February, 1953. Bought by Overseas National Airways in 1957, registered as N410NA, named "Loma D". Sold to Witwatersrand Native Labour Association of Rhodesia (WENELA) and registered ZS-CLN in 1960. Reregistered VP-YST March 1961, reregistered September 1968 as A2-ZER. Crashed two minutes after take-off from Francistown, Botswana on 4 April, 1974, due to contaminated fuel. 78 of 84 killed.

THE INQUIRY

The report of inquiry into the accident confirmed what every one suspected that paraffin for turbo-jet aircraft, recently introduced by Botswana Airways, had found its way into the petrol tanks of the piston engine plane.

It is too lengthy to quote fully, but extracts from the salient parts of the report are worth mentioning.

History of the Flight

On the morning of the 4th April A2-ZER was scheduled to fly a passenger load of repatriating Malawian mine workers back to Malawi. At 0232 hours after a normal engine start and run up A2-ZER took off from runway 11 Francistown for the flight to Malawi. It appeared to pass the control tower at a lower altitude than normal and shortly after the pilot complained that the aircraft felt heavy and climbing was difficult.

Almost immediately after take-off and after retraction of wheels and flaps the temperature on all four engines started to rise and continued to rise in spite of opening the gills. As temperatures rose "off the clock" back-firing started, with fluctuating r.p.m.'s and loss of power and the throttles had to be held open to prevent them from hitting back. Back-firing, torching and increasing loss of power continued throughout the remaining duration of flight.

Contact was made between the control tower and the aircraft shortly after take-off and Capt. Strike who was operating the radio said "We are coming back". The control Officer on duty in the control tower said "What's the trouble, Bill" and Capt. Strike replied" Everything, and we are going down". No further calls were received from the aircraft.

The aircraft made a left hand circuit with the object of returning to the airfield. At no stage did it reach a height of over 400 to 600 ft: and with rapidly increasing loss of power height could not be maintained. The aircraft completed almost three legs of the landing circuit but before being able to turn in onto runway 11 it crashed about two miles short of the threshold of the runway at approximately 0238 hours. Immediately before crashing the First Officer switched on the landing lights and all evidence indicates that the aircraft was in the correct attitude for a crash landing. The total time taken from take-off until the crash was 5.5 to 6 minutes.

The terrain where the aircraft came down was bush country with mainly bush and small vegetation. However three or four larger trees in a direct line with the path taken by the aircraft in crash landing contributed largely to the massive damage done to the body of the aircraft and to the break-off of a section of the tail which incidentally also enabled the six surviving passengers to escape out of the rear of the aircraft.

The fuel tanks were ruptured during impact and the aircraft caught fire immediately. It seems almost certain that in the absence of fire the number of survivors would of been considerably increased.

Conclusions

To sum up the Board found that no blame can be attached to the crew in respect of the cause of the crash, and in the circumstances prevailing the crew did all that could be expected of them to minimise the effects of the crash.

That fuel contamination occurred in the aircraft because it was refuelled on the 3rd April, 1974 from refueller AV 810 with over 4000 litres of Avgas contaminated with Avtur. The degree of contamination in the aircraft was between 25-30%.

The Board is satisfied that the accident was due to the act default or negligence of Shell and B.P. Marketing Services (Pty) Ltd, or of persons in its employment and it remains for the Board to decide whether and to what extent to award costs against Shell and B.P. Marketing Services (Pty Ltd).

SHORT FINALS

The first side-effect emerged on April 8th, when Hylton Davis, in Lilongwe, telexed head office in Johannesburg: "Office of the President and Cabinet have suspended the acceptance of recruitment of Malawian nationals for employment on the mines until further notice. In regard to repatriates (that is, returning miners) these may only be flown by Air Malawi and not Wenela Air Services and only from international airport in South Africa to Malawi".

This proved a fatal blow from which Wenela Air Services never recovered. The continents busiest flying operation ended up with three Dakotas, and its operation limited to the North of Botswana only.

The war in Angola, politics, and other pressures made it uneconomical and on the 30th June 1977 operations ceased and the aircraft once brought to life became quiet.

Many of those who took part in this epic are no longer with us, having departed to that big hole in the sky. It is my sincere wish that this story will be a memorial to those who made this epic possible, and not be lost to future generations which is so often the case.

AIRCREW/PILOTS

This list was compiled by memories of my contacts and any omission is regretted.

C= CAPTAIN; F= FIRST OFFICER; S/C= STATION COMMANDER

Abbot	Jock
Alexander	Dave
Alexander	Bruce
Andrew	Jack
Archer	Dave
Arthur	Jonathan
Balt	Corney
Bakes	Brak
Barnett	Peter
Beatty	Tas
Blackwell	George
Blackwell	Richard
Brennan	Jimmy
Cooke	Ainsley
Coupar	Ian
De Brauwere	Marcel
Dejager	Jeff
De Swart	Barry
Downie	Eric
Drew	Bill
Wlliot Wilson	Noel
Enslin	Hans
Everard	Bas
Fuller	Ken
Gibson	John
Goddard	Tom

Gordon	Don
Grace	Lyle
Griffiths	Graham
Henning	Sakkie
Inggs	Vic
Knight	Graham
Lambinon	Lambie
Kaye	Kurt
Kayne	Lou
Koller	Eddie
Lourens	Vic
Mc Dermid	Doug
Mc Kenzie	Angus
Mc Vicar	Earl
Meaker	Ken
Methley	Nick
Miles	Jimmy
Miles	Colin
Morgan	Len
Mildenhall	Aubrey
Morgan	Len
Nash	Don
Nell	Alex
Neuman	Werner
Nightingale	Butch
Oakes	Titus
O'riley	Boots
Parsons	George
Patterson	Graham
Pienaar	Piet
Place	Peter
Pole	John
Quirk	Jack
Rae	Alex
Rose	Bob
Ross	Joe
Rybicki	Andy
Reichman	Chris
Snelgar	Cecil
Shaw	Phil
Samuelson	Sammy
Slaven	Jack
Smith	Neville
Spicer	David
Stidolph	Reg
Strike	Geoff
Strike	Bill
Tainton	John
Tainton	Robin
Van Hoff	Noel
Van Der Merwe	Thys
Van Der Westhuizen	Chris
White	Jack
Wilson	John
Wixley	Bill

ENGINEERS

Binding	Al
Bolton	Joe
Boschoff	Bossie
Broom	Ted
Canny	Keith
Clarence	Clarry
Conway	Mike
Cumming	Keith
De Beer	Lofty
De Beer	Pat
De Villiers	Ezak
Drew	Jack
Du Plessis	Sepie
Ellor	Norman
Fell	Ronnie
Foster	Wilfy
Francis	Vic
Goedhart	Henk
Griffen	Mitty
Greenwood	Ken
Grove	Jack
Hartwell	Ted
Hill	Stan
Keyser	Rodney
King	Stan
Mc Namara	Paddy
Middlebrook	Dennis
Mollentze	Molly
Nicolle	Noel
Phillips	Barry
Pieterse	Jj
Pieterse	Piet
Probert	Len
Redlinghuys	Red
Rowe	Mike
Roos	Mike
Sharman	Harry
Small	Ronnie
Sprong	Spider
Symons	Paul
Tullett	Jack
Voget	Ken
Ward	Ernie
Ward	Tommy

The End.