

In & Out of Africa!©

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During September/1978 I joined the Douglas Aircraft Company Commercial Field Service organization as a Senior Field Service Representative; shortly thereafter I was assigned as a permanent on-site representative at London's Heathrow Airport. My primary responsibility was to support British Airway's evaluation of the DC-10; collectively, I monitored 44 DC-10 flights a week by 11 different world-wide airlines and DC-9 operations by numerous European carriers. An additional responsibility included a requirement for periodic visits to Lagos, Nigeria in support of Nigeria Airways. The following describes my "adventures" in supporting Nigeria Airways!

Nigeria Airways, based in Ikeja, Nigeria, near Lagos at the Murtala Mohammed airport, took delivery of a new DC-10-30 during October/1976. A second new DC-10 was ordered during 1977. Initially, these aircraft were to be used for flights between Lagos and other western-Africa locations and London-Heathrow, Amsterdam-Schiphol, and New York City airports. Nigeria had contracted with KLM for the accomplishment of all DC-10 in-service and out-of-service maintenance requirements, as mostly carried out during overnight stops in Amsterdam. Douglas Aircraft Co. Captains, First Officers, and Flight Engineers, domiciled in a hotel near London-Heathrow airport, conducted all flight operations while simultaneously training Nigerian flight crews. I coordinated closely & frequently with these Douglas flight operations personnel who often requested my assistance in contacting Nigeria Airways to resolve an on-going technical issue.

At one point Douglas and other major DC-10 suppliers were considering establishing field offices in Lagos to support Nigeria Airways. However, due to rampant corruption, high crime rates, and various other short comings and complications that existed in Lagos, it was decided not to establish any field offices there. Instead, it was agreed that Douglas and major supplier representatives would visit Nigeria Airways headquarters periodically. Specifically, in the case of Douglas Aircraft Co., it was decided that the Field Service Representative assigned to London-Heathrow would be responsible for these visits! Thus, my number was up!



I began to wonder just how I was to “pull off” my periodic visits to Lagos!? That is: What are the visa requirements? How would I get there? Where would I stay and for how long? Who would I visit while there, etc., etc.? To answer these questions, I sought advice from the Douglas flight crews who were routinely flying in and out of Lagos and from Douglas Field Service Representatives who had previously visited there. The answers to these concerns were surprising indeed as I will explain further!

At the time, none of the Douglas persons going in and out of Lagos had applied for a visa. Since experience had shown that flight crew members did not require a visa, it was concluded that if other non-flight-crew travelers in fact “posed as flight crew members” then they too would not require a visa! Shortly thereafter I visited the British Airways flight crew uniform store where I purchased the required gear including trousers, shoes, shirts, and shoulder epaulets with 3 gold stripes – designating me as a First Officer pilot – perfectly qualified & ready to bore some holes in the sky!

I was also informed by my Douglas colleagues that “deadheading” flight crew members who were providing a service to Nigeria Airways were entitled to free first-class travel to/from Lagos on Nigeria’s DC-10 and authorization for this travel only required a phone call to a Nigeria representative at Heathrow airport! Wow, so far, so good! Now, where was I to stay upon my arrival in Lagos? That’s easy; all “flight crew members” supporting Nigeria were put up in the “Airport Hotel” at no charge! Gosh, things seemed to be getting better and better (or almost unbelievable!) as each of my travel concerns was getting resolved! Oh yes, one other detail concerning the local currency; since the Nigerian “Nira” had no value at all outside Nigeria, when flight crew members (supporting Nigeria Airways) checked in at the Airport Hotel, each person was given the equivalent of \$200 US dollars in Nigerian Niras. The only condition was that at the time of checking out from the hotel, any remaining unexpended Niras had to be given back! Oh shucks! Are you still with me or have you entered a state of total disbelief!?

Considering the high occurrence of malaria throughout Nigeria, I was advised to begin taking anti-malaria pills several weeks before my intended travel dates. I certainly did do that!

Nigeria Airways had a Tech Rep at London-Heathrow airport and my routine at Heathrow included occasional visits to his office. Considering my interface with the Douglas flight crews who were doing all the Nigeria DC-10 flying, I soon learned that I knew more about the technical status of Nigeria’s DC-10’s than he did! However, he did give me contact info for Nigeria’s Technical Department Head in Lagos with whom I began to communicate; I sent him a telex and advised him that I would be in Lagos on a specific date and wanted to visit him at his office at 10:00 a.m. the next day. His reply stated that he was looking forward to my visit! Great, now I knew one person in Lagos!

So, with all planning in place, carry-on bag packed, ticket in hand, and decked out in my brand-new first officer’s uniform, I headed to the London-Heathrow airport to board Nigeria’s DC-10 for an approximately 7-hour-long flight to Lagos! As one might imagine, my venture into the unknown was exciting, but somewhat unnerving!

Following my arrival at the Murtala Muhammad airport in Lagos, I breezed directly through immigration and customs – no questions nor no second looks! Then, a group of locals began saluting me and arguing among themselves about who would have the privilege of carrying my bag and getting a tip! (I was only a First Officer but one would think that I was right up there next to Allah!) I waved them all off and proceeded to an outside street where I boarded a flight crew shuttle bus for transport to the Airport Hotel.

Upon my arrival at the Airport Hotel I was given my Nigerian Nira and a room key - at no charge of course considering my flight crew member status! The room was suitable, although hot and sticky. Being a bit tired from the flight, I decided to have a short rest prior to an evening dinner. After lying down on the bed, I noticed a foot-long lizard on the ceiling directly above! This was rather discomfoting to say the least and made sleep a bit difficult!

The following morning I arranged a car and driver to take me to/from the Nigeria Airways facility for my 10:00 a.m. appointment with the Technical Department Head. Curiously, I noted that for whatever reason, this car and many others I saw during my visit had the horn ring removed from the steering wheel!? As the car was driven down the road, the driver held the steering wheel with his left hand and held a horn wire with its insulation stripped off from one end in his right hand; then the driver intermittently touched the horn wire to the metallic center hub of the steering wheel to achieve a “beep beep, beep beep, beep beep” from the horn! As you may imagine, sparks were flying in all directions and it seemed possible to me that the front seat would catch on fire! This constant horn blowing continued for the entire trip without regard to whether there was traffic or not! (Could it be that these guys employed as drivers were so bored with their jobs that these on-going “beep beep’s” allowed them to rock to the beat of some distant drums!? At the time, I couldn’t really arrive at any other explanation!)

I arrived outside the Technical Department Head’s office at 9:45 a.m. and was told by his secretary to wait. After almost 2 hours, the office door finally opened and I was invited in. I noticed that there were boxes of soccer shoes stacked floor-to-ceiling along all 4 walls of the office; the department head had a clipboard and apparently was in the process of determining exactly who would receive all these shoes. I introduced myself but, being preoccupied with his shoe project, he showed very little interest! When I asked him if he had any particular DC-10 concerns/issues that he wished to discuss, he abruptly replied: “We don’t have any DC-10 problems; KLM does all the maintenance; thank you for coming; see you again next trip”! So, my visit with this man lasted about 5 minutes! After leaving his office I decided I would “scan the woodwork of the facility” in search of any/all available true aviation enthusiasts!? Thus, I walked down the hallways, knocked on some doors, and introduced myself to the occupants! Perhaps luckily, I managed to meet both a quality and material department representative. Both these individuals were of East Indian heritage and were cordial, and knowledgeable.

I asked to be shown their spare parts warehouse and was accommodated accordingly. What I saw was 100’s of the original wooden shipping crates, containing millions of dollars in spare parts, stacked on top of each other from floor to ceiling. Not good! I then said: “Just suppose that you have a grounded DC-10 that needs a specific spare part. How would you know which one of all these crates contains the part you need and even if you knew, how long will it take to gain access to that crate? The point is, I would strongly recommend that the material department inventory the parts and assure that they can be rapidly accessed when needed!” I stated that during my next visit I would like to see their progress!

The following day I visited Nigeria’s Flight Operations department and met the Chief Pilot (not yet qualified to fly the DC-10) and a handful of other pilots, all of whom were still being trained to fly the DC-10.

On my 4th day I returned to the airport to catch my return flight to London. The airport terminal was quite new and eerily empty of travelers. I was the lone customer in the restaurant that overlooked the single airport runway. The runway had dense jungle on both sides. As I peered out the window at the runway, an African woman with a basket balanced on her head and a child in both hands came out of the jungle, walked across the runway, and disappeared into the jungle on the other side! It seems she had no thoughts what-so-ever that walking across an airport runway is not a wise thing to do!

My assignment at London-Heathrow lasted only 1 year; during this time I actually made 2 visits to Lagos. Although I gave it my personal “best shot” to provide some meaningful degree of Douglas Aircraft Co. technical support to Nigeria Airways, I felt my trips to Lagos were not really worthwhile at all. However, they were indeed memorable Field Service “adventures”!

