

Who Says Angels Don't Exist?

By Mitch Stirling (via Dave Newnham)

These days, in retirement in Victoria BC, I seem to spend a lot of time reminiscing. Is this a sign of age, I wonder? Have I surreptitiously joined the 'pipe and slippers' brigade, without even noticing it? My friends scold me and say I shouldn't live in the past so much. I remonstrate, saying, "But I like the past, it was a good place". My latest journey to that good place took me to Victoria Falls. I spent many happy days of my youth there; on the north bank in Zambia and on the south bank in Zimbabwe. Although, in those days of the 1960's and 1970's, Zimbabwe was called Rhodesia.

From the north bank, the Falls of Queen Victoria can be viewed from a number of spectacular vantage points, some of which involves leapfrogging from rock to rock, on the edge of the vertical drop where the waters of the Zambezi rush away, straight down 300 vertical feet. You can do this only at certain times of the year when the volume of water in the river is at its lowest. Right on the lip there is a rock wall under the surface of the water where a small natural pool exists, called the 'Devil's Pool'. Some silly people bathed in it and, floating flat on their tums, they peered over the precipice. Invariably most of them were fortified with liquids that came, not from the river, but from the nearby hostelry! This 'silly' old writer shudders to think about it now, particularly as it was not unheard of for an occasional 'silly' to disappear over the edge into oblivion in the 'Boiling Pot' below.

Much of my time on the south bank was spent as a young pilot with R.U.A.C (Rhodesia United Air Carriers) which operated aerial tours over the falls, and the nearby game reserve, with old Piper Aztec aeroplanes and even older Piper Apaches. Of the latter, if my memory serves, one was the oldest operational Apache (PA-23) in the world. The flip over the Falls was called 'The Flight of Angels', coined cleverly from a phrase used by David Livingstone back in 1855 to describe his feelings when he saw them for the first time... "scenes so lovely must have been gazed upon by angels in their flight". His statue gazes upon them nowadays. Passengers on our flights would gasp in astonishment as we flew directly over the chasm and into the spray which rose several hundred feet when the river was in full spate. 'Mosi oa Tunya', the smoke that thunders, was the description used by the local indigenous folk, long before the arrival of white man Livingstone. This shows how people have tried for hundreds of years to find the most suitable superlatives in their language to describe the place. But the Falls and environs are almost indescribable in their beauty, particularly in the light of a lunar rainbow, a 'moonbow'. On the accompanying game flight, up-river towards Kazungula, there was a money-back guarantee to any dissatisfied customer... so plentiful was the wild life. Rare lechwes could be spotted. It was one of the last unspoilt places on earth.

We operated from Sprayview aerodrome which, sadly, has been swallowed up by encroaching suburbia in recent years. But, I'm told on good authority, if you know where to look, there are still bits and pieces of aeroplanes and instruments to be found in the surrounding bush that date back, way before my time. In 1935 the local garage owner, Ted Spencer, started a small air charter company called Spencers Airways. Initially he operated a second-hand Puss Moth, but added a Fox Moth soon after. His milieu was the remote area of the Zambezi river stretching into Barotseland where the famous kuomboka took place at the height of the summer floods. This was an annual event near Mongu where the Barotse king, the litunga, resplendent in a British admiral's uniform, transferred his entire village by barges to higher ground, amidst much colourful ceremony. At Mongu it was common practice for a pilot landing on the old golf course to shout a loud 'fore' to warn any players. The new runway there, when completed, was made entirely of bricks, millions of

them. Runways at Balovale, Kalabo, Sesheke were all unpaved surfaces; but an unpaved surface in those days was something quite different to an unpaved surface in today's world of aviation. They were rough, and at Senanga a man-eating lion had to be dispatched on one occasion to ensure the safe arrival and departure of passengers. It is the stuff of dreams and National Geographic.

In later years a Tiger Moth and a Fairchild were added to Spencer's fleet and some Piper Tri-Pacers, Avro Ansons and DH Rapides. They buzzed around the local area and stretched further afield. But, never-to-be-forgotten, was the advent of the wonderful Flying Boat service to Victoria Falls. BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) landed their Short S.45 Solents on the Zambezi river just above the Falls from 1948 to 1950. They were en route from Port Bell on Lake Victoria, Uganda, to the Vaal dam in South Africa. The jetty on the river bank, called 'Jungle Junction', is still there today with a commemorative plaque marking the spot. Can you imagine disembarking there in the old days and walking up the gangway to be greeted by an enormous python in the overhanging tree, with a half-eaten monkey in its mouth? This really happened, and might best be described as... coming face-to-face with darkest Africa! The stories are legendary and many old characters who lived there are like something out of fiction. Like Jack Soper, who came to live at the falls in 1904, and kept a pet crocodile. Over the years, many famous passengers joined the angels in their flight. Lady Baden-Powell was one. And Prince Paribatra, brother of the King of Siam, and his family appeared on the early passenger list as well.

Sadly, the magic of Victoria's waterfall was interrupted for a time during the 1970's when political troubles in the area were at their peak. "It was a time", as the old euphemism goes. There were 'freedom fighters', or 'terrorists', depending on whose side you were on, who were determined to destroy the political system of the day in Rhodesia. My thoughts on this matter are very clear, but largely irrelevant today. It was a long time ago, before most Canadians were even born. Suffice it to say that "The Flight of Angels" became a very risky business, after a heat-seeking SAM (surface to air missile) was fired from the north bank at one of our Aztecs. It missed, but ended up 'seeking' the thatched roof of the Elephant Hills hotel and burnt it to the ground. And a mortar bomb landed in the tea garden of the world-famous Victoria Falls hotel one night. Nobody was injured, fortunately, but the "Grand old Lady of the Falls", built in Edwardian days in 1904, suffered great indignity. Two Canadian tourists were shot dead by rifle fire from the north bank in 1973 while they were exploring the gorge beneath the falls. "It was a time", indeed - The angels wept.

Best forgotten? Some of it, probably. But most of it, definitely not.