

## Chapter 3

### Emergency Landing

The chart read “heavily wooded” but a glance at the solid green mantle five thousand feet below proclaimed this as a gross understatement. It had been an hour since the two small float planes had left the Urubamba River and started following a small tributary eastward. Now the river had disappeared into the green of the Peruvian jungle, and the only sign of water below was an occasional glimpse where the sun happened to peek through the towering trees and catch a reflection of the stagnant water on the jungle floor.

Jim Price was at the controls of Number 277, an Aeronca Sedan he had ferried from the States four years before. The other Aeronca, Number 255, was at four o’clock high and was being piloted by Merrill Piper. The two planes had left Atalaya in the foothills of the Andes, their destination a small Indian village in the watershed of the Rio Purus. Jim’s plane was loaded with cargo which the translators needed at their Indian village, while Merrill was carrying the translators themselves, a young couple with two small children.

From five thousand feet, the cloud-speckled world looked like a green quilt from which a mischievous child had pulled countless tufts of wool. For more than an hour, the two planes had dodged rain squalls following the serpentine course of the rivers. Now, over the jungle, they were looking for the first signs of the headwaters of the Rio Purus.

Below them, and stretching out as far as the eye could see, was the illimitable Amazon basin. Within its more than two million square miles spread the largest tropical rain forest on earth. A hotbed of competing life forms, more than one hundred thousand different varieties of animal and plant life teemed in the steaming swamps below. The waters of the rivers and streams swarmed with countless species of fish: some armored, some fanged, some stunningly colorful, some man-eating. Reptiles — snakes that climbed, swam, slithered, and choked their prey to death; alligators, crocodiles, and other armored lizards — all lived and died by the jungle law of the survival of the fittest. There were giant worms that reached five feet in length and burrowed into the putrid mulch, as well as the smaller grubs and leeches that would get under a man’s skin and wriggle and crawl into his intestines or vital organs. But it was the insects — biting, stinging, disease carrying — who were the actual rulers of the realm. Voracious hordes denuded fields and forests and tormented settlers and Indians alike. The Amazon basin remained a region dominated by nature, its vastness dwarfing the most ambitious works of man to tame it.

Jim shaded his eyes against the brightness and looked down. Ahead and to his left he saw the glint of sun on water. It was the beginning of the Rio Purus as it started its two thousand miles of twisting journey through Peru and Brazil toward the Amazon.

He picked up his microphone and called Merrill in 255, telling him he had spotted the river. He waited for an acknowledgment, but there was none. He keyed the mike again.

“255, this is 277. Rio Purus ahead at eleven o’clock.”

Again there was nothing, only the steady roar of the engine.

“255, this is 277, do you read me?”

The speaker was silent.

Looking back and above, Jim could see the other Aeronca in level flight off his tail. “255, this is 277. If you read me, wiggle your wings.”

Jim grinned as the other plane did a sudden, graceful imitation of a butterfly.

“Okay, Merrill,” Jim said into the microphone, “I guess I’ve got a bum receiver. I hope you’re in contact with Yarinacocha and can let them know our position. According to my calculations, we still have an hour to go before we reach Rio Curanja.”

Shaking his head, Jim slipped the mike back into position. Something was always going wrong, it

seemed. He remembered Paul Wertheimer's report to the Moody Bible Institute. "JAARS is a flying junkyard," he had said. "They are robbing one airplane to pay another."

Wertheimer was right, Jim thought. It was 1953, and they still didn't have a spare set of sparkplugs, nor the money to buy them. Jim had brought down a barracks bag of fabric scraps and five gallons of surplus dope when he arrived four years before. That, plus some scrap rivets and some tools owned by Les Bancroft and Ernie Rich was about all they had. Everything was handled on a shoestring. The pilots weren't even allowed to circle the base when they came in to land — it used up too much gas. If they didn't know the wind direction, they had to guess at it. They were forever moving boxes around in the dingy old hangar at Yarinacocha, trying to find some spare part to fix one of the always-broken airplanes.

Yarinacocha was one of Uncle Cam's dream places. A four-hundred-acre slash in the jungle, the base was located on what used to be the mainstream of the Ucayali River, just twelve miles from Pucallpa. However, during a high flood, the Ucayali had changed its course, having found an easier way through the jungle. This left behind the huge curved lake, now almost separated from the river although filled with bounding porpoises, alligators, and the ever-present piranhas. For years, Uncle Cam had seen Lake Yarina ("cocha" means lake) as an ideal spot to base a float-plane operation. Now, gradually, the base was beginning to take shape.

The hangar itself was a miracle. Larry Montgomery had told Uncle Cam that in order to accommodate the Duck they needed a hangar at least fifty feet wide and seventy feet deep. Uncle Cam had gone into a lumber mill near the base and asked for lumber to build the trusses. The man, a Spaniard, had laughed at him. As usual, Townsend returned home and prayed. Several weeks later, when he and Elaine started looking for scrap materials to build their own house at Yarinacocha, he returned to the lumber mill to scrounge around in the high grass to find slabs to use for siding. Walking through the high weeds behind the mill, he stumbled on a pile of old trusses. Cam knew they needed eight trusses at least fifty feet long. He counted them. Eight. He stepped off the length. Fifty-four feet. Some of them were even put together with bolts, and all were cut and fitted perfectly. They had been lying in the weeds for over a year.

Townsend went to the yard owner and said. "Thanks so much for getting our trusses for our hangar at Yarinacocha."

"Your hangar?" the Spaniard said. "See all that machinery rusting out there in the rain? I'm saving those trusses for a roof for my sawmill."

Cam went back to the base and continued praying. This time, he enlisted some help from the others. A month later, he returned to the sawmill and told the owner he had come for his trusses. To his delight, the owner told him to take them away. He probably would never get around to building his sawmill shed anyway.

Yet even with a good roof, the hangar at Yarinacocha still had an uneven dirt floor which turned to mud when it rained — which seemed to be all the time. There was a rickety, badly warped workbench leaning drunkenly against one of the walls. The hangar was surrounded with cane walls on three sides which bowed out crazily. And in the middle of the thing was the old Duck, the engine sitting on the floor, the wings off and leaning against the wall, stripped of their fabric. Larry Montgomery had landed the Duck on a jungle river, not knowing that one wheel was dangling down. The plane had flipped over on its back, almost drowning Larry in the open cockpit. Later, they had put the remains of the plane on a balsa raft and floated it down the river to the base — in pieces. Les Bancroft, who was the first full-time mechanic in Peru, and some of the other pilots had put the thing back together — partially. They were now waiting for additional parts and new fabric to finish it.

Jim stretched his legs in the Aeronca and managed a crooked grin at no one in particular. He had already had three forced landings in the jungle during his four years of flying in Peru — all caused by lack of funds to supply the proper parts. Fortunately, this time it was only the radio receiver which had gone bad.

Hmm! The tachometer showed the engine RPMs were at 2100. Just a minute before, it had been

at 2250 — the usual setting for economy cruise. Jim wrinkled his brow. It seemed that every time he flew a float plane over trees, the engine seemed to go into “automatic rough” — at least until there was water under his floats once more. This time seemed different, however. He applied carburetor heat and a mixture change. The reading remained the same.

Odd. There shouldn't be any carburetor ice below eight thousand feet, at least not at this latitude. Besides, there was some hint of exhaust fumes in the cabin. Suddenly it was more than a hint. The cabin was filled with smoke, eye-burning, choking smoke that swirled from under the instrument panel and instantly filled the entire cabin area.

Jim glanced at the tach. The RPMs were down another fifty. He opened the window to blowout the smoke, which seemed to be thinning, but no amount of control settings could coax more power out of the Continental 145 up front.

The smoke was gone, and the engine had settled down to a rough, though steady, 2050 RPM. All instruments indicated normal operation, all but the rate-of-climb indicator. That bothered him. He was descending at the rate of a hundred feet per minute. He couldn't stay in the air.

Jim bit his lip, picked up his mike, and informed Merrill in 255 that he was going to set down on the first stretch of good usable river which showed. Thirty minutes passed, and he was only seven hundred feet off the trees with no possibility of pulling up to go around. The Purus, by this time, was good-sized, but coiled like a snake. If there was a straight stretch for a few hundred yards, it was full of sandbars or fallen trees.

In approaching for a landing, the pilot must first consider obstructions that may protrude into his planned path. He must also note the runway surface condition and accommodate his plan to wind and weather conditions. Since in the jungle there are no weather stations — not even a wind sock — wind direction and speed is determined by watching the way the banana leaves blow, ripples on the water, or in times of good fortune, rising smoke.

Fortunately, in jungle flying, once the plane is below the tree line, wind is not usually a determining factor; and when landing on a river, there really isn't much choice as to runway selection anyway.

As Jim fought to keep the plane from descending into the trees, Merrill, in the other Aeronca, was winging his way ahead, trying to find a suitable landing spot on the river. Down below the treetops, following the course of the river like a roller-coaster car follows the rails, he was praying desperately — knowing that behind him 277 was steadily losing altitude. The encroaching trees kept reaching out to brush the wings at every turn.

Suddenly there was a clear curve followed by a straight stretch which opened up with a sandbar on one side and deep water on the other. Jim immediately banked his plane in the direction of 255 and skimmed in over the river. Easing back on the power, he allowed the plane to settle. At normal landing speeds, water becomes nearly as hard as concrete, but Jim wasn't worried about jarring his spine. If he didn't get it on the water this time, there would be no second chance. There was no way to pull up and go around. He was committed.

The plane was too high, but there was no time to think about that — the jungle wall was coming at him through the windshield. Cutting the power, he pulled the wheel all the way back into his lap. The plane shuddered into a stall and dropped, the stall warning blaring. White spray cascaded up around the windows as the floats smacked into the sluggish current of the river. Jim released his pressure on the wheel, allowing the nose of the plane to rock forward. For a second, he thought he would go all the way over into the water, nose first. But the Aeronca righted herself and sat rocking, back and forth, on the surface of the river.

Engine off, Jim opened the door and crawled out onto the left float. The plane was drifting toward the sandbar on the inside of the curve. Apart from the metallic slap of waves against the floats, there was no sound except the high-pitched salute of a band of monkeys, high in the limbs of an overhanging tree. Obviously, they were not accustomed to such strange intrusions into their jungle home and were putting up quite a fuss about it. Attaching a line to the floats, Jim jumped across to the fine sandy beach and pulled the plane to a secure position. The other Aeronca pulled

up, circled, and came in for a landing from downstream.

Merrill had made radio contact with the base at Yarinacocha. The Duck, of course, was still scattered all over the floor of the hangar, so the two pilots and their passengers spent the night on the sandbar. While the translator family slept in the two planes, the pilots spread their mosquito nets and wiggled their way into the sandy beach for a comfortable night's sleep.

Morning showed the usual jungle fog hanging in the trees, with the hot sun trying to break through. The beach around them was covered with tracks, indicating they had been visited by both alligators and tapirs (large pig-like animals) during the night. And the markings on the sand gave unmistakable proof that some kind of huge jungle snake, probably an anaconda, had crossed the sandbar during the night on its way to the jungle. The width of the markings in the sand indicated it was almost as wide as Jim's body. Both men shuddered, and Merrill said audibly, "Thank You, Lord!"

Jim removed his tools, a must in jungle flying, from the rear of the plane. Soon he was digging into the 277 while Merrill loaded up his passengers and as much cargo as possible and took off upstream for Curanja. By the time he returned, Jim had discovered the cause of all the smoke the day before, a hole about the size of a fifty-cent piece in the top edge of a piston. Further inspection showed no other damage except a cracked cam follower. After cleaning the screens and the lines and as much of the crankcase as possible, he reassembled the cylinder except for the valve push rods. Hoping to be able to coax the plane off the water with only five of the six cylinders working, he started the engine. But it was no go. The best he could get was 2000 RPMs, which was not enough to pull it up onto the step for takeoff.

Merrill put in another radio call to Yarinacocha, asking Les Bancroft to send a complete cylinder assembly to Atalaya by TAM Airlines. By Friday afternoon, Merrill had delivered the rest of 277's cargo to Curanja, flown up to Atalaya, and was back with the new cylinder. Once again, the two pilots bedded down on the sandbar with the gators and snakes.

Saturday dawned with a solid low overcast, which was welcome as far as working on the plane was concerned. They soon had the jugs changed, and a run-up showed everything normal. It certainly sounded much better with all six cylinders working. A check of the filters showed very few metal particles in the oil, so they replaced the cowling. They were ready to fly as soon as the ceiling lifted a bit. Jim wasn't about to fly an ailing engine over the watershed without plenty of altitude.

Sunday morning was, if anything, worse than Saturday, with low fog which lifted a little to a solid overcast. The two men resigned themselves to spending another day on the sandbar. This in itself wasn't too bad, but they knew the planes were needed back at the base. Translators were waiting to go to the tribes. Others needed to come out. Supplies were needed in northern Peru, and no one knew when an emergency would come up and a translator would need to be flown out of the jungle on short notice. Yet, the weather had them boxed in.

Since it was Sunday, it seemed appropriate to have a church service. Merrill reminded Jim of Jesus' words that where two or three gathered in His name, there He was in their midst. Certainly He had been with them so far, and both men felt they should take a few moments on that Sunday morning for a time of formal worship and praise — if you can call a service "formal" when the choir is made up of a batch of screaming, chattering monkeys hanging by their tails from a nearby tree, the ushers are four lazy old alligators sleeping in the mud on the far side of the river, and the congregation is composed of two bone-weary, unshaved, homesick pilots praying for the weather to lift so they can rejoin their wives and families back at jungle base.

About two o'clock, Jim looked over at Merrill Piper, who was half asleep, leaning against the front tip of the pontoon pulled up on the beach.

"If we're going to make Atalaya before dark, we've got to take off no later than 2:30."

Merrill cocked an eye toward the sky, which was right down near the treetops, and said, "Take off? In this?"

Jim grinned. "That's a faith statement. I've asked God to clear the sky by 2:30. That means I'd better be packed and ready to go."

Faith was no empty word to either of these men. Merrill yawned, stretched, and got to his feet. “I’ll be ready at 2:30,” he said. As he began to pack his gear in the plane, he cast another look at the sky. The mist was still swirling just above the treetops.

At 2:20, the sky suddenly started to clear in the west, and through the overcast, both men could see tiny patches of blue. With a whoop, Jim grabbed the rest of his tools and slid them into the back seat of the plane. After a quick check of the water rudders, and twanging the rigging to make sure everything was on tight and straight, he helped Merrill push both planes off the sandbar until they floated free in the water. Cranking up, they did their engine run-up as they floated downstream, checking mags, RPMs, oil pressure, temperature, and going through the other normal cockpit checklist procedures. While Merrill swung his plane into position for takeoff, Jim followed through on the final point of his checklist — an open-eyes prayer, asking God to lift them up with wings as eagles as they broke the bonds of earth to fly skyward.

Merrill took off first. His plane broke water, soared out over the trees, and was immediately swallowed up in the gray overcast. Jim followed. Pushing his throttle all the way forward, he felt his engine roar to full power. Great clouds of spume shot up and out as the airplane sat back on its haunches in the narrow river, nearly touching the water with its tail. The lazy alligators scurried for deep water, and the jungle birds flapped their wings in startled flight. Out of the corner of his left eye, Jim could watch the wake move back along the float to a point just even with the door. He relaxed his back pressure on the wheel, and the plane was on the step, skimming along on the top of the river. From step to flyaway was only a moment, as he once again eased back on the controls, and the little plane broke free from the water’s surface and pointed its nose into the swirling gray mist of the jungle overcast.

At six thousand feet, Jim broke out on top of the overcast and spotted 255 less than a mile in front of him, winging its way westward. He switched on his radio, and out of force of habit called Merrill on the plane-to-plane frequency. Instantly, his receiver crackled to life as Merrill’s cheery voice responded.

“How about that!” Jim almost shouted back. “My receiver’s working. I guess that pancake landing must have jostled something into place. I’ll recommend that procedure to the radio boys when I get back to base. No sense in buying a lot of expensive parts when all you have to do is take the thing out and kick it a few times to make it work.”

Three hours later, just as the sun was setting over the dark, foreboding jungle, both planes swished down on the Ucayali at Atalaya. Jim gave a sigh of relief.

Monday morning, with 255 filled with passengers and 277 hauling cargo, the two planes headed for Pucallpa.

Two and a half hours later, both planes took off from Pucallpa for the six-minute flight over the trees to Yarinacocha and the SIL base.

That night, when Anita Price asked Jim about the flight, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Routine, I guess.”

“Routine?” Anita almost shouted. “Down on a sandbar for almost a week, all of us praying our heads off, and you call it routine?”

Jim winked and reached out to run his fingers through her hair. “Well, routine if you consider the same plane, the same routes, the same rivers, the same trees, and the same endless jungle which stretches forever and ever. But,” he added seriously, “when you stop and consider the grace of God in getting me there and back — well, that’s never routine.”

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