

Seven, Seven, Double O

By Devskanda M Krishna

Liam George was in a great place. Not metaphorically or even philosophically, but quite literally. He was at the airport, and in fact had just passed security. For most people the airport is a great place because it's the entree for adventure, reunions, business deals and well deserved vacations. Liam George liked all those things, but that's not why he liked the airport.

He appreciated the airport for what it was. A megahub for airplanes. From the first time he set foot in one of these metal birds, Liam was hooked. He had caught the "aviation bug" as his fellow enthusiasts called it, and, after collecting his carry-on bag from the X-ray machine, made his way directly to the massive windows that provided a clear view onto the tarmac.

In this respect too his choices at airports differed from the average air traveler. While most people pour into the shops and restaurants after security, Liam's intentions were set on watching airplanes from the moment he stepped into the terminal.

A massive thunderstorm had passed earlier that morning, leaving the sky clear and the runways soaking wet. The wind was blowing from the east, and Liam knew this because all the parked aircraft spoke to him. Without any hydraulic pressure pulsing through parked airplanes, their rudders were reduced to very expensive and colossal wind vanes. Any doubts he had about this logic would only be confirmed by the direction from which aircraft were arriving.

“Mommy, why is there a green light here but a red one on that side?” Liam saw a young girl, probably ten years old pointing at the wing of a parked aircraft.

“I don’t know baby, but why don’t we google it when we get home, okay?”

“Okay,”

Liam saw that the girl was disappointed, and approached the two.

“Excuse me, I overheard your question, and I think I can help you out!”

Liam explained to the little girl why lights on the wings were different colors, and also grabbed at the opportunity to show off his aviation knowledge, while fueling a curious young person’s enthusiasm.

“Do you know which way the wind is blowing?” he asked, making no attempt to hide his excitement or modesty. Two traits that vanished at airports, in aircraft or during even the most inconsequential aviation conversations.

Soon enough Liam found himself at the bottom of the air stairs waiting in line to board. The shrieking air conditioning packs didn’t bother him as much as the fact that most passengers would have mistaken the noise for the aircraft’s engine. The queue moved slowly and seemed to stop altogether once Liam realized that an amateur nut who couldn’t comprehend seat and row numbers, or an overambitious swindler might have occupied his meticulously preselected, and unrefundably prepaid window seat in the hopes that he would allow it.

As he entered the aircraft a cabin attendant greeted him, “Welcome,” she said.

Liam nodded and smiled, glancing quickly into the flight deck before impatient passengers urged him to move along. He noticed the pilots were eating breakfast. He didn’t really care for the Creme Cafe’s cheese sandwich, but both pilots seemed to be enjoying it thoroughly.

Fortunately this flight was relatively empty, and not only did Liam get his desired seat- 24 A, but had the entire row to himself. He sighed in relief. He wouldn't have to make small talk with strangers distracting from the fascinations of flight, or worse, endure sitting in close proximity to people who were yet to chance upon the activity of taking a shower.

Ten minutes later the engines began to roar, and Liam was pushed into his seat as the aircraft accelerated for takeoff.

A few hours into the flight, and several short naps later, Liam and the other passengers noticed something was wrong. Flight attendants were walking frantically up and down the aisle, and the curtains to the front galley were closed.

As he observed one of them walk towards him, he assumed she'd return to the back galley, but instead stopped at his seat.

"Sir, Sir, we need your help. Do you know how to fly?"

"Excuse me?" Liam asked in utter disbelief.

"Do you know how to fly an airplane, sir?" She repeated, more urgently than before.

"Well, no, not really, why do..?"

"You're well versed with aircraft are you not, sir?" The lady cut him off mid sentence.

"Yes but I'm no pilot!" Liam couldn't believe this conversation was actually happening. "Who told you I was!?"

"The young lady in row 20 sir," the flight attendant pointed a few seats ahead, and as Liam's eyes estimated where she was pointing, he saw a tiny face pop up from under one of the seats and smile at him. It was the little girl from the airport.

He sighed.

“You’re our best bet sir, please, our only hope. Please, follow me”

Liam flicked his seatbelt open and followed the stewardess to the front galley.

Behind the curtain, to his horror, were both pilots heaped unconscious against the galley bulkhead.

“Are they dead?!” he exclaimed.

“Afraid so Sir” one of the flight attendants responded with less emotion than one would expect in this situation.

Liam entered the cockpit. The screens and buttons were overwhelming, but somewhat familiar. He couldn’t help but wonder that the unhealthy hours spent slumped behind the flight simulator at home might finally pay off.

One of the cabin crew walked in “You let us know if you need anything at all sir,” he reassured Liam, whacking the jump seat until it unfolded. “I’ll be right here to help you out. Good thing we had an off duty pilot on our flight today, huh sir?” The crew member seemed confident in Liam’s abilities as he took his seat, and fastened his waist belt.

“I’m not a pilot! Liam swung around, looking back at the crew member dressed in a crisp black suit with a bright orange and purple tie. His shiny name tag read “Mark S” in clear black font.

“What’s that sir, I didn’t catch what you said?”

“I’m not a pilot,” Liam repeated. Mark didn’t say a word, but his actions spoke volumes as he hastily reached for the body harness, buckling himself into the jump seat as securely as his paunch would allow.

“I’ll try my best to get us down,” Liam consoled Mark, who seemed to have discarded his brave optimism, collected the anxiety of half the economy class section and displayed it, all at once, on his face!

Liam would normally be offended that someone doubted his aviation abilities, but today he had bigger problems to deal with. He adjusted the captain’s seat and grabbed the headset. Liam quickly found the transponder and Dialed in four digits no pilot ever wishes to encounter: 7700. He spun the knob on the radio control panel until the tiny display read “121.5.” Just as Liam was about to push the talk button on the mic, three blood red lights illuminated, accompanied by a persistent ringing sound only a dead man could have ignored. He pushed the button to cancel the noise, but as his finger depressed the button, it disappeared, and the bell blared louder.

Frantic for an explanation, and desperate for a solution, the rookie pilot scanned his instruments, and as his eyes fixed on the dark blue digital display, it slowly transformed into an alarm clock.

The ringing stopped abruptly, and as Liam’s hand flowed off the snooze button, he had never been more relieved.

Thank god dreams don’t come true.