

---Columbia -- Mexico -- Catastrophe---

The Super King Air was readied for the long trip to Columbia with added bladders for fuel. Even with the bladders they would need to take on fuel at the Columbia destination for the return trip. After almost 1,500 miles they landed in Harlingen near the tip of Texas just inside the Mexican border to refill the main tank and to insure plenty of fuel for the almost 2,000-mile trip ahead of them. They were flying into the jungle of Columbia about 100 miles inland from Cartagena. Over Central America they ran into horrendous weather – thunderstorms, torrents of rain and wind and ice forming on the plane increasing its weight load. The storms added to the flight time and put them behind schedule for their rendezvous in the jungle. They arrived over the designated area to find no response from the ground contact. This meant having to circle back for a hundred miles or so until finally getting a response from the ground as they approached the jungle target area for the second time.

They received clearance and landed to taxi through mud to a shed where they were to fuel-up and pick-up their cargo. Once at the shed, with the engines still running and the door open, a Columbian jumped on the plane waving an automatic weapon telling them in a mix of Spanish and English, “don’t shut down the plane. The Federales were just here with a helicopter. You have to get out of here. They will be coming back.”

“Where is our cargo?”

“We no have it! You have to leave here!”

“We have to have fuel so give us fuel.”

Shoving his weapon in their faces, “no fuel! Go! Go! Go!”

Harry refused – “I’m not going anywhere until I get fuel.”

At the same time two other Columbians came out of the shed with automatic weapons threatening to shoot. Harry and the crew stood fast knowing that their choices were limited – they could get shot on the spot, get taken into custody by the Federales or stand pat and force the issue to get enough fuel to lift off and hope to improve their chances of getting enough fuel to fly to a safe place. Spotting barrels hopefully containing fuel, Ernie jumped out of the plane and orders two men standing by to roll several barrels of fuel up to the plane. Ernie hops up on the right-wing tip of the plane to access the cap for fueling the main tanks and the men on the ground reluctantly hand-pumped several barrels of fuel into each of the main tanks.

Back in the plane it still wasn’t certain they could get airborne. After a slow muddy turn-around the plane plowed through the mud to solid ground barely solid enough to provide the necessary runway to get airborne. Somehow it worked and they were aloft.

To fly back without cargo didn’t set well but they had a more serious problem. Once at their cruising altitude they reviewed the situation. The original plan was to pick up the cargo in the jungle – get enough fuel there to return for the 2,200 miles to Mazatlan, Mexico where Rico and his contacts had arranged for a total refueling, to get them back to Vegas. They re-calculated.

Ernie, was good at doing math in his head, “there is no way in hell we can make it to Mazatlan.”

Studying the charts – “The best we can do is Mexico City.”

“We don’t have any way to get word to Rico and even if we did he would have to make some magic happen for us to land anywhere else in Mexico but Mazatlan. We are in deep shit if we land anywhere in Mexico where we don’t have special protection.”

“How about Belize, Costa Rica, Panama?”

There was no dependable possibility. Too many uncertainties regardless of where they put the plane down in South or Central America. They finally agreed to stick with Mexico with the hope that their Mexican connections would have enough influence to get them out of whatever problems developed.

They flew with the hope of reaching Mexico City but fell short of their goal. As they approached the town of Puerto Escondido they began to get signals that the fuel was running out. They debated as to where to make their landing. There were two possibilities in Puerto Escondido -- an older dirt airstrip and a brand-new upscale runway, a few miles further out, but still in Puerto Escondido. They were weary of landing on unimproved strips and didn’t want to risk one more muddy landing. They agreed to try the brand-new upscale airstrip. They

would be left to wonder in the weeks, months and maybe years ahead as to how things would have turned out if they had chosen the other.