

## IN THE BEGINNING

### Eva

“Final Call Sydney Heathrow.”

The announcer in the international terminal repeated her message.

“Final Call RWA 573. Non Stop to London.”

Eva, waiting with the Royal World Airlines cabin staff at the glass screens for the aircraft to be ready, watched the passengers coming to the gate. This was her first international training trip though she had made quite few flights under instruction on New World International Airlines’s Australian internal flights.

The glass doors slid open and she went with the chief steward and the other attendants to the upper deck of this new enormous very modern jumbo aircraft to prepare for the passengers. She had been allocated to observe the operation of the upper business compartment and, as they went in to the galley behind the first class section, she was surprised to see that there were already two men on the aircraft, who clearly weren’t crew, sitting at the front of the business section. They were sitting next to one another on a pair of seats in the centre of the compartment and were both wearing formal double breasted grey suits; she was puzzled when the cabin staff ignored them as if they weren’t there.

She watched the cabin crew checking that all the food compartments were secure and then helping the passengers to their seats as they came aboard. The ground staff left and she helped close the forward upper entrance doors. She heard the engines starting and then felt the aircraft being pushed back and starting to taxi. She checked that the escape slides were set to automatic.

The Captain warned the cabin crew that they were about to take-off and she sat down next to another stewardess by the port aisle looking aft at the business passengers. As she strapped herself in she glanced at the two men she had noticed earlier and something about them made her feel afraid. She wasn’t a Roman Catholic but to her surprise she felt herself wanting to make the sign of the cross.

# PROLOGUE

## Richard

Richard knew he was dying. He could feel his consciousness slowly slipping away. The whole thing was like a nightmare. One moment he was sitting in the jump seat on the flight deck of the world's most advanced airplane about to land at Heathrow and next moment he was in terrible pain, lying in hospital, with the world spinning around. He tried to remember what had happened but nothing seemed to make sense.

He could not see the room clearly but he could just make out Carol and was relieved that she was there, though he could barely say a word to her. What a homecoming. He was aware of people rushing in and out of the room, looking after him, but he realised it would not be for long.

Though everything was a blur, the flight somehow kept coming back to him. He remembered Harry arranging for him to travel back from Sydney as supernumerary crew. He had been wanting to see the 798's advanced flight deck ever since it had gone into airline service and so he had leapt at the chance when Harry invited him. The 747s he was flying were quite new, but seemed archaic compared with the 798. He had read about the aircraft in the newspapers and magazines, especially those articles by his old colleague Peter Talbert.

Carol had just come into the room again but she seemed far away behind the flight deck. The pain in his shoulders from the shoulder straps was terrible and he tried to loosen them. It had been a wonderful flight until the hijackers arrived. How on earth had they got on board? And onto the flight deck past the marshals? They had somehow forced their way through the flight deck door, both carrying some peculiar looking guns, pointing them at Harry and at Charles, the first officer. Harry had been magnificent controlling the madmen and the aircraft at the same time.

The hijackers had a crazy scheme of getting the Government to give them some al-Qaeda prisoners and then take-off again for the Middle East. Ahmed, the leader, was talking about blowing the plane up if the prisoners were not released. Surely they had not got

## Prologue

a bomb? Perhaps it was all bluff. Richard had known, and surely Harry must have done, that they would never have been allowed to take-off again but Harry played along with Ahmed, the leader, arranging the refuelling on the runway. As if to make matters worse, the headwind from Sydney had been stronger than forecast so they did not have too much fuel and the weather at London was freezing fog. Richard had felt so sorry for Harry to have to carry this burden but he was powerless to help.

Now Carol seemed to be walking through the instruments towards him and bending over him. He tried to move but he couldn't and he knew it wasn't really the shoulder straps stopping him. He seemed to hear air traffic control talking. Harry had turned the speakers off but Ahmed had insisted that they should be turned back on again. He remembered wondering if it was going to be possible for Harry to fly a Category III approach and land the aircraft in freezing fog without it crashing when the hijackers were interfering and interrupting him all the time. He knew the autopilot would be flying the aircraft but the system was not infallible and needed monitoring.

Poor Harry, he seemed only to have one display in front of him and he was continually having to switch from the vertical display to the horizontal one. Charles didn't seem to be having a problem. Richard remembered that he also had had a display and some instruments in front of him but they did not seem to be much use for finding out what was happening. Air Traffic had told them they could not use the MLS on 27L for landing which Harry had wanted as it was out of service but he had known it was permitted to use the Galileo satellite navigation system. He heard Ahmed talking to Harry and Harry telling him to be quiet.

Suddenly he remembered what he wanted to tell Peter. Something that Peter needed to know. He felt himself saying "Peter Talbert. Get Peter. I want to tell him ..."

Richard woke up with a start. He must have dropped off into a coma. The pain in his leg was terrible. Carol was still there and so was the flight deck. They were close to landing. He remembered feeling worried as his experience with the American GPS for approaches and landings had not been all that good but Peter Talbert had written that the latest Galileo system was first rate and very closely monitored for errors. Nevertheless he had felt that it

was going to be very difficult for Harry to be able to manage with Ahmed standing there with his gun distracting him. Harry and Charles had seemed very confident even though Ahmed kept interfering. They were down to 100ft now and he looked again at his instruments and then at the hijackers. He tried to yell ‘Pull up, Pull up’ felt himself bracing, there was a crash and he realised that he was being moved from his bed.

Sometime later Richard woke again. His right leg was completely numb. This time the flight deck had gone. He could see Carol and there was Peter standing next to her. He made a supreme effort to talk.

“Peter. The hijacker...”

Peter was leaning forward.

“I wanted to tell Harry...”

He felt himself slipping away.

## CHAPTER 1

### Blind Landing

*“Heathrow broadcast – the airport is now closed. I say again, the airport is closed. Speedbird 6328 route direct to Ockham, climb flight level 100 and join the hold.”*

I was driving in thick fog, trying to get home from Bournemouth. I didn't have far to go to my house in Kingston and I was looking forward to getting back. As I often did, I was listening to the conversation between aircraft and ground controllers on my VHF set. I had had the receiver specially fitted to my rather elderly BMW at what was, in my view, an extortionate cost but I reckoned I could offset it against my tax.

*“Speedbird 6328 climbing to level 100 to Ockham to hold. What's the problem? We are Category III.”*

The transmission from the London Approach transmitter was only just audible, even though I was only a few miles from Heathrow but the aircraft were loud and very clear. Clearly the fog I was experiencing covered Heathrow as well since the aircraft mentioned category III weather conditions. Like the British Airways pilot I wondered what the problem was and why the aircraft was not allowed to land.

*“Speedbird 6328 call Director on 119.2 with cleared level”*  
*“119.2 Speedbird 6328”*

It was strange that Approach did not advise the aircraft of the reason for diversion.

*“RWA 372. Please advise your desired alternate.”*

*“Roger. RWA 372 calling company.”*

*“RWA 372 thank you – quick as you can please.”*

I switched to Royal World Airlines Operations frequency.

*“RWA Operations this is 372. Just been told Heathrow is closed. Why? What do you want me to do?”*

*“Ops to 372. Confirm Heathrow is closed. Request diversion to Stansted. We are arranging a gate for you.”*

It was odd that RWA operations did not tell 372 what the problem was either. I would have liked to have known as well. The fog if anything was getting worse and there was now ice on the

road. Perhaps the airport authority had decided that they needed to treat the runways.

*“Operations, this is RWA 573. Have you arranged the refuelling?”*

*“We’re still doing that. You are having to be refuelled by tankers instead of by hydrants on the stands. We are making sure that they have enough fuel for Karachi and that they can get to your parking position on the runway.”*

*“573 understood.”*

If the reception had not been absolutely clear I would have thought I had misheard the aircraft transmission. It did not make sense.

*“RWA Ops This is 573. I have been asked to establish whether the prisoners have been released and are waiting at the airport?”*

*“573 please stand by. Will advise.”*

There was only one explanation I could think of. The aircraft must have been hijacked. But that was virtually impossible these days with such high security at the airports. I wondered where 573 had come from. What a dreadful situation. If the aircraft was going to land at Heathrow it was no wonder the airport was closed.

There was a short pause.

*“RWA Ops I have been told to remind you that the hijackers are going to blow up the aircraft if there is any delay to their instructions which I passed to you”*

*“573 this is RWA Ops Copied.”*

I wanted to retune my VHF receiver to London Approach but I was frightened I might miss something. However there was nothing more on the RWA Ops channel so I switched to the Approach frequency just as I was entering my drive. I decided to stay in the car until 573 had landed. I left the engine running to keep warm.

*“Speedbird 756 Heathrow now closed. Do you want Stansted or Gatwick?”*

*“Gatwick please 756”*

*“Speedbird 756 maintain flight level 70 and turn left heading 240 degrees. Maintain 220 knots. Expect to hold at Biggin.”*

Clearly there was a real emergency for this hijack. I wondered how many other people besides me were hearing this appalling situation unfold.

*“Director RWA 573 reaching 4,000.”*

*“Roger. Cleared procedural Galileo final approach 27 left”*

*“RWA 573 we’d prefer to use the MLS.”*

I sympathised with the pilot. I always preferred radio beams physically defined in space to virtual centre lines calculated by software.

*“Sorry RWA 573 the ATIS is incorrect. The MLS is out of service. What are your intentions?”*

There was a distinct pause.

*“RWA 573 request Galileo approach 27 Left.”*

*“You are cleared for Galileo approach cleared to descend on the procedure. Maintain heading and call the Tower on 118.5”*

*“118.5 RWA 573”*

I switched to the tower frequency just in time to hear 573’s call.

*“Tower RWA 573 ten miles 27 Left. Confirm GBAS OK.”*

*“RWA 573 Heathrow Tower. You are clear to land 27 left, wind calm RVR 20, 30,20 GBAS showing OK”*

*“Roger RWA 573”*

The weather was definitely Category IIIC. The three transmissionmeters measuring the runway visual range along the length of the runway all agreed visibility was at the best 30m. I just couldn’t imagine what it must be like doing an automatic landing in fog while being hijacked, presumably with a pistol being held to my head. It was clearly going to be a completely blind landing. Furthermore, I did not understand why the aircraft was having to use Galileo, the European Satellite System, instead of the Microwave Landing System, MLS. The pilot was very sensible to have rechecked that the Ground Based Augmentation System, GBAS, which augmented the accuracy of the Galileo satellites, was working correctly.

*“RWA 573 two miles to go. You appear to be below the glide slope.”*

*“Heathrow Tower RWA 573 copied please check wind speed.”*

The Tower did not answer immediately then,

*“573 from Tower, the wind is calm. You....”*

Another aircraft came on frequency and blotted out whatever the Tower was trying to say. All I heard was

*“ 564 confirm Heathrow closed”*

*“Lufthansa 564 from Heathrow Tower. Airfield closed leave frequency immediately.”*

The Tower controller tried again

*“RWA 573.”*

Again there was a transmission blotting out the Tower, I suspected Lufthansa was acknowledging Tower’s instruction and asking for a frequency. The controller tried again but the transmission again clashed with another aircraft transmission, presumably Lufthansa.

*“573 you still appear to be low on the glide slope.”*

*“I say again Lufthansa 564 from Tower. Heathrow closed. Change to London Approach 119.2 immediately. 573 abandon approach.”*

*“573 I repeat abandon approach.”*

But there were no more transmissions from 573. The controller incredibly had told the aircraft to abandon approach; he must have thought the aircraft was very low or, more likely, the warning system in the Tower had operated. The silence was frightening. I wound down my car window and I thought I could hear sirens in the distance. I looked at my watch. It was 10.30. It had taken me over three hours to get home from Bournemouth instead of my normal two.

I collected my things from the car, unlocked the front door, cancelled the alarm and went into the house, full of trepidation. Something terrible had obviously happened. It would have been pointless rushing to the airport. I dropped everything and switched on Radio 5.

It was too late to ring Mandy, my girl friend who I had just left. I knew she went to bed early when she was working the next day since her train left at 6.30 am. That was why we had had a very early meal and I had left soon after seven having lingered much longer than we had planned and had very nearly broken our unspoken resolution about where I should stay the night.

I had driven back to my house in Kingston on an emotional and sexual high, trying to listen to some of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s older songs on my CD but having to keep switching the CD off in order to concentrate on the almost impenetrable fog, made much worse by the freezing conditions. It was a very scary drive trying to allow for the vagaries not only of the weather but the other

foolhardy drivers on the road and I was very thankful for my satellite navigator. In the end I had switched the music off and decided to listen to my VHF receiver to hear how the fog was affecting the Heathrow traffic.

As usual Radio 5 was talking about soccer though I did wonder sometimes whether there wasn't a bit too much coverage of football on the BBC. Suddenly the guy leading the discussion said there was breaking news and passed us over to the newsroom.

*"It has just been reported that an aircraft has had an accident trying to land at London Airport. Apparently the aircraft has touched down very early on the A30 to the east of the airport. Crash crews, fire engines and ambulances are trying to get to the aircraft."*

There was nothing more and soccer once more reigned supreme. I turned the volume down only slightly so that I would hear the inevitable upgrading of the news on the accident. I was horrified. Unless a miracle had happened the accident was likely to be a terrible disaster. I dreaded to think of the likely loss of life. Already people would be wondering how the accident occurred. The hijacking was clearly a critical factor.

Automatically I went into my office, and turned on my computer. Aviation was my business. I had spent the first fourteen years of my working life flying for Britannia Airways, until the doctors discovered a heart murmur which had never troubled me but which they considered made it impossible for me to keep a licence. In truth it didn't worry me too much since I didn't want to spend the rest of my life as an airline pilot. I was able to get my loss of licence insurance and with my degree in electronic engineering I was attempting to earn my living as a consultant in airline safety matters.

I had been becoming increasingly concerned about the design of modern flight decks and the way the pilots were expected to rely on the electronic displays to show the action required if systems malfunctioned. Furthermore, in order to get the best economically out of an aircraft there was no direct connection between the pilots' controller and the flying controls; computers interpreted the pilots' requirements and moved the control surfaces to get the best performance out of the aircraft. Of course the pilots could practise all the likely emergencies on simulators but it was always the

unexpected malfunctions that concerned me. I was visiting airlines explaining to the pilots some of these issues and also attending conferences and often presenting papers where these matters were discussed.

I went to the Royal World Airlines web site and found the flight details of RWA 573. It had taken off from Sydney at 0930 local time and had been due in at 2230. There was no other information on the web site.

I thought about the conversation I had heard with air traffic. The voice sounded very familiar. I felt I should have recognised it. Perhaps the voice, presumably the Captain, was a member of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, as I was, and we had met.

It was puzzling that the aircraft had been allowed to land at Heathrow. The standard Air Traffic Control instructions were to divert all hijacked aircraft to Stansted. Not that there were any hijacked aircraft these days. Security was always far too good. I wondered again how the hijackers had got on board since the Sydney security was extremely tight. It was going to be important to discover not only why the accident happened but how the breach of security occurred.

I heard the news of the accident being reported again on Radio 5.

*“Further details have emerged on the accident to an aircraft that occurred trying to land at Heathrow. The weather was extremely foggy and very icy. The aircraft was an Independent Transport Aircraft Company 798 belonging to Royal World Airlines flying non-stop from Sydney to London, flight number RWA 573. There are believed to be about 500 passengers and crew on board. The situation is confused because it is understood there was a hijacking alert coming from this aircraft. There are reports of considerable loss of life at the scene of the accident.”*

The news reader had said that the aircraft belonged to Royal World Airlines and was one of the new super jumbo four-engined Independent 798s. I knew the aircraft fairly well because I had written a technical article on it for the Financial Times when it was first certificated. It had a maximum capacity of about 750 people when flying on the Sydney-London route against the normal headwind. It was made by the Independent Transport Aircraft Company, ITAC, based near Seattle and could carry over 1,000

people when flying short distances with the maximum number of seats, a fact which I found slightly disturbing imagining the understandable panic if there was ever a need for rapid evacuation.

ITAC was a relatively new airplane manufacturer started by ex-Boeing engineers and marketing executives. As the competition from the European Airbus company had increased, Boeing had found it harder and harder to compete. The launch of the new Airbus aircraft had accelerated the decline of Boeing in the commercial airliner market and the firm had had to lay off a considerable number of engineers in the Commercial division of the company. These engineers, realising that the Boeing overheads were crippling the company, had persuaded some venture capitalists in the State of Washington, many of whom had made a lot of money locally out of Microsoft, to start the Independent Transport Aircraft Company. The new firm had managed to get a lease of some ground on the airfield at Everett, where the large Boeing aircraft were assembled, and had built a huge new hangar. The design office was in a rented building in Renton near the Boeing facility and nearly everything was subcontracted so that all the parts came together for the first time at Everett. The headquarters of the new company was in Kirkland, just north of Bellevue. Almost every facility they needed was rented to avoid the need for excessive amounts of capital and this was made possible because of the surplus capacity available in the United States commercial aerospace industry. This technique really kept the costs down and Boeing were having a hard time competing with the new company. Even Airbus in Europe, with the subsidized launch costs from the various national Governments concerned, was feeling the strain. This was the first major accident to an ITAC manufactured aircraft and would be an enormous blow to the company.

It was 11.30 by now and I was feeling tired but it was difficult not to stay up and listen to the details of the accident unfolding; however I had just decided that I had better go to bed when the phone rang.

“Peter, Jim Akers here.”

Jim was the aeronautical correspondent of the Financial Times and it was thanks to him that the FT had commissioned me to write the article on the 798 some months earlier. “Hope I didn’t wake you up. Have you heard the news?”

“Yes, Jim. I was actually listening to the aircraft talking to RWA Ops as it was coming in. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing on the hijacking.”

“What do you mean? You actually heard the aircraft talking to the ground?” Jim was a newsman through and through. I think he felt he had struck oil. “What happened?”

“Well, apparently the hijackers had asked for some prisoners that they wanted to be released and taken to the airport, ready to be loaded on to the aircraft. It was then going to take off again for Karachi.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I just heard the aircraft requesting confirmation that the prisoners would be available and that the refuelling arrangements were in hand.”

“Was it confirmed?”

“The refuelling was. The Captain said that he had been told to remind Ops that the aircraft would be blown up if there was any delay to the carrying out of the hijackers instructions.”

“Peter, perhaps that was what actually happened? No wonder the aircraft crashed.” Jim paused. “It was Category IIC weather wasn’t it? That must have made matters worse.”

“Yes it was. The MLS was out of service and the aircraft was using the Galileo satellite system to make the approach.”

“What do you make of it all?”

“I don’t know. We shall have to wait until AAIB investigates the matter. The real issue at the moment, Jim, is what is happening at the crash site? How bad was the accident. How many people have lost their lives?”

“You’re quite right.” Jim sounded slightly chastened. I think he realised that his curiosity for the cause of the accident had got ahead of the mayhem and carnage that must exist on the A30. “I understand that there are some survivors, Peter.”

We didn’t carry on much longer. I guessed that Jim, having listened to me, wanted to update his article on the accident in the FT.

Radio 5 was talking about the accident again. It sounded as if the soccer had been kicked into touch and the accident had taken over. The announcer said that the situation was completely confused because apparently some terrorists had somehow got on

board the aircraft with weapons and overpowered the crew. The story was that the hijackers had been planning to get the Government to release some prisoners, believed to be from al-Qaeda, and then to take-off again for somewhere in the Middle East. They were going to blow the aircraft up on the ramp at Heathrow if their orders were not obeyed. Consequently, the police, army, and fire services had all been alerted, ready for the landing.

The point was made that the accident couldn't have happened at a worse time. The roads had been very busy as it was the Monday night at the end of the Christmas/New Year holidays and people had been returning to start work the following day. Making an approach to Heathrow, the aircraft had apparently dived into the ground before reaching the airport. The visibility had been reported as less than 30 metres. It had crashed on the road causing a lot of casualties, not only in the aircraft but also to people travelling in cars, before sliding into a new cargo shed just beside the road and to the left of the approach lights; this had caused the whole front of the aircraft to concertina, but it wasn't clear whether there had been an explosion, either before or just after the impact. There were several hundred people in the aircraft, the exact number was still being investigated. It was clear that a lot of the passengers had been killed though apparently there was a significant number of survivors near the back of the upper cabin who had either been thrown clear or had managed to scramble out of the wreckage. Nearly all the survivors had had to be taken to nearby hospitals. Work had already started in identifying the victims.

The news reader went on to say that it was probably the worst air disaster ever in the history of UK aviation, worse even than the accident to the Pan American 747 at Lockerbie many years earlier, though of course not to be compared with 9/11 deliberate wrecking in New York.

The newscaster explained that because all the Heathrow rescue services had been on stand-by in the airport next to 27L runway, it had taken only a few minutes for the crash crews, fire engines and police to get to the crash, though they were hampered by the appalling visibility. The rescue teams had been working non-stop, assisted by the armed services who had been drafted in to help, but everything was complicated by the fog which was still very thick. Things were made even more difficult by the need for the security

forces to cordon off the area and check for weapons and bombs. Even the survivors had to be security checked which made things harder for the ambulance crews and the hospitals. It was going to take a long time dealing with all the injured. The Air Accident Investigation Branch inspectors, AAIB, were already on the spot looking for the crash recorders and examining all the wreckage and they were getting specialist help from the security experts who had apparently appeared on the scene from nowhere.

I switched the radio off. It was well after midnight. I went to bed and went straight to sleep. It seemed only moments later when the phone rang, waking me up before I was ready. I stretched out, rolled over and lifted the phone off its hook. Even after four years it seemed strange not to feel Diana's warmth on the other side of the bed. I sensed through the curtains that it was still very dark outside.

"Peter?" It was Mandy, her voice vibrant, urgent, catapulting me from deep sleep to extreme awareness. "There was a terrible accident last night. An aircraft landing at Heathrow crashed on the road outside the airport. I've just heard the news on the radio. The passengers included the Foreign Secretary and two or three of his staff. Apparently the aircraft had been hijacked in some way and all the emergency services at the airport had been alerted and were waiting for it to land. Did you hear about it last night on your way home?"

"What time is it? I've only just gone to sleep."

"It's alright for some! It's 6.30 already. I'm on the platform waiting for the train."

"Mandy. Yes, I did know about the accident. I was listening to the VHF in my car. But I didn't know about the Foreign Secretary." I told her about my journey home and the Jim Akers telephone call.

"Look I've got to dash. The train is coming. I'll call you later. Bye."

There was what might have been a perfunctory kiss and she was gone. I rolled over and switched on the radio, the announcer was just giving the headlines. There was to be a statement on the accident by the Prime Minister on radio and TV at 9 o'clock. Telephone numbers to call were given out so that worried families could find out if their relatives were on board, whether they were in hospital, whether their bodies had been found or if they were still missing. These same families might well be needed to help in

identification so it was very important indeed that all people who were concerned rang in.

Listening to the news reader, it was clear that the Police, the British Airports Authority, the Fire Services and the local hospitals had all done a marvellous job dealing with the horrendous problems caused by the accident. The Police had set up an Accident Operations Room, conceived and planned several years previously by the Department of Health and Safety with the help of all the local authorities, the British Airports Authority and the rescue services and it seemed to have been extremely effective. Less immediately obvious to the uninitiated was the speed with which Air Traffic Control had reacted. The announcer said that Heathrow was now open again using the northern runway but that the weather was still very foggy.

The rest of the news followed and then the producer went back to the accident story. In the middle of the night one reporter had managed to find a survivor who had received only minor injuries though the reporter remarked that the man had a bandage on the side of his head. The man sounded dazed and it seemed to me that he should have been in hospital, not talking to the reporter. I always felt that no-one should be expected to give an interview in such a situation but the reporter clearly had no such reservations. I wanted to switch the radio off but the survivor's description was so graphic and heart rending that I found myself listening.

"The flight from Sydney was fine." The man sounded very hoarse. He coughed. "I was sitting in a window seat in the middle of Upper Class. We could see the ground most of the way and then the stars as it got dark."

He stopped again and we could hear him spluttering. Why he carried on I could not imagine. Perhaps talking about what had happened helped him.

"I heard a strange noise up front like a muffled explosion of some sort and then about four foreign looking people got up and went through the curtain. Almost immediately afterwards the Captain announced that the aircraft had been hijacked and that no-one was to move from their seats. He said that we were going to land at Heathrow and the situation would then be sorted out."

There was a pause and the man started coughing uncontrollably for a few seconds. Surely this interview would be cut short. I found

it hard to be believe that, apart from anything else, the security people would allow the interview to be heard. The survivor tried again.

“We were told to remain in our seats, I could see everyone around was as worried as I was. Two swarthy looking men with beards appeared at the front of the two aisles carrying what looked like pistols of some sort. Then cabin staff appeared from the galley behind us and tried to quieten some of the passengers who were panicking.”

Another long pause and sirens could be heard in the background. The man seemed to pull himself together.

“No more announcements were made. The cabin staff made certain we were strapped in for landing. Everything was very smooth. As we descended, I heard the landing gear go down and then we suddenly went into cloud. Then, just before the crash I saw some lights, caught a glimpse of a house incredibly close, then a car and an enormous bang.”

We could almost hear him shudder. He coughed again, this time very loudly. I was certain that that must be the end of the interview but somehow the man struggled on.

“The next thing I knew I was lying on the side of the road.”

Apparently someone had helped him into a nearby house immediately after the crash. As he told his story he could be heard bursting into tears. It was appalling. Nobody should be subjected to that sort of interview. The interviewer started to say something but I had had my fill and I switched off the radio but not before I heard his last few words which I found it impossible to blot out.

“I could hear cries for help and frightened shrieks of pain from the wounded and the ringing of mobile phones. There were flames coming from what I took to be the wreckage. It was like a nightmare. Everything was in fog. I could smell burning and there was ice on the ground. I felt numb, lying on some grass. I thought I was in Hell already.”