

JAMES HERRIOT – A CLOSE SHAVE!

In August 1963 Author and Vet Alf Wight was persuaded by his assistant at the time, John Crooks, to embark on a foreign trip to Istanbul, Turkey. His previous trip to Russia had been interesting but this one seemed to offer a bit more of an exotic flavour with the promise of some luxury and sightseeing. In his book *'The Lord God Made Them All'* he describes this trip, accompanying 40 pedigree cows and heifers that were being exported. However, his romantic notion of the trip did not quite turn into reality and as it turns out it risked his life. At the end of the story Alf says that he had heard some months later that the fault-ridden aircraft they had travelled on had crashed into the Mediterranean but that he had had no success finding out if it was true. That intrigued me and I wanted to find out more. This is what I found:

First, a little about the aircraft itself. It was a Douglas C-74 Globemaster, the largest conventional aircraft at the time. Designed and built in the USA it was based on the need for a long-range military transporter. It had a unique internal overhead hoist which could lower and raise a section of the cargo floor to assist loading. Ideal for hoisting the cattle on Alf's trip. The first C-74 came out of production on 5th September 1945 just 3 days after the end of World War 2. In the end only 14 were built for the US Airforce and used in the Military Air Transport service (MATs). It was too late for the second world war but did see service during the Korean War. All 14 were retired in 1956 but three were then purchased by a company called 'Aeronaves de Panama' a subsidiary of 'Air Systems' in Panama. They were reconditioned and assigned to transporting large herds of cows and calves from Denmark to Iran on instructions from the Shah of Iran. That then extended to other cattle transport contracts to and from other destinations.

One of these three aircraft was Globemaster HP385 (AF 265404) which has been given the name 'Heracles' after a Greek god known for strength, courage and adventure. Heracles, both the legendary god and the aircraft named after him, both came to an untimely end.



Brand new Aircraft 265404 undergoing tests. Later after release from military service the aircraft was named 'Heracles'



Here is the aircraft (HP385) is at Heathrow in March 1963.



'Heracles' pictured in June 1963, just two months before Alf's trip on this aircraft.

Alf describes the aircraft's rather tatty state in detail in his book. Worn tires, faulty undercarriage etc. and indeed there was an alarming engine fire during his journey to Istanbul resulting in the aircraft flying on three engines for the last part of the journey. These were ominous signs but despite this Alf and the two cattlemen with him decided to travel back to Copenhagen in the three-engined aircraft because they couldn't get any other means of transport home. I can only imagine that Alf's air experience as a trainee pilot during the war gave him the courage to get into that aircraft for the return journey because the risks were high as later events demonstrate.

Two months after Alf had returned safely, On 9 October 1963, Heracles was delivering cattle to Cairo. In darkness that night Heracles sat on the runway at Marseilles airport. Here is a report of what happened next:

HP-385 made a refueling stop at Marseille-Marignane Airport during a flight to Cairo, Egypt. The aircraft took off at night on Runway 14 at Marignane, the crew having misunderstood the ATC clearance, which was for Runway 32. The pilot missed the indicated turning point on the exit path and made a sharp turn 2 miles further to correct this mistake. When entering this turn the aircraft lost a lot of height and hit a hill at an altitude of 800 ft (244m), about 8 miles (13 km) from the airfield. It crashed only 15-20ft (5-6m) below the summit.

Another report states similar:

The aircraft was engaged in a cargo flight from Copenhagen to Jeddah, carrying six crew members and 30 cows. After a refueling stop at Marignane Airport, the crew was cleared for takeoff from runway 32. By night, the crew mistook the runway and started the takeoff from runway 14. During initial climb, it is believed the aircraft encountered difficulties gaining height when it struck a hill located near Gignac-la-Nerthe, about 5 km south of the airfield. The wreckage was found less than 10 meters below the summit and all six crew members and all animals were killed.

Soon after this accident, the Danish aviation authorities revoked the cargo licence and imposed a flight ban on further commercial C-74 sorties.

I was not able to verify who the six fatalities were, but the likelihood is that is included the four crew that Alf flew with who were mentioned in the story. They were:

A Danish man called 'Karl', whom Alf got on well with.

Captain Birch, the 6ft 4 senior member of crew and the aircraft operator.

'Ed', Co-pilot +navigator, An American in his 20's.

'Dave', Engineer, Also an American in his 20's.

Two others perished – most likely a Vet and stocksman?

30 Cattle also perished.

Alf closes his story by saying that he "*clung to the hope that the terrible news he has heard was wrong.*" Sadly, it was true. Alf had in fact had a very close escape and fortunately went on to be the author we all know love and whose books inspired the film and both TV series.

Roger French