

Flight SF288 en route Sydney to Darwin - 22nd January 2035, 8:07 PM.

Steven Walker sat comfortably, the adaptive gel seat hugging his lanky frame with ease. Engrossed in a fantastical virtual world, Row 22 Seat 5B of the packed, aging Airbus A320Neo might very well have been his own apartment. His entire attention remained focused as he acted the part of the CEO of DeyerTech Industries, a top ten electronics multinational conglomerate. If only it could be true, thought Steven, as he traded companies as fast as his opponents could keep up.

Like most people, Steven knew he worked a boring job and probably would for his whole career. Building diagnostics technicians did little more than order repair bots about. Gone were the days of working with tools and actually fixing things. The top five percentile worked in computers where the big money flowed.

Steven had done well at school; although not quite well enough. Like most of the workforce, computers told him what to do and how to get it done with maximum efficiency. Autobots, toaster-sized repair units, performed the hands-on work. Their larger cousins Poolbots, named after the brilliant inventor Fredrick Pool, tackled heavy lifting. Fast, clean, affordable, and offering minimal risk to human injury, automation had become the way of the entire civilised world.

Abruptly the holographic three-dimensional projection before Steven froze, replaced by Roberto, FlyExpress' in-flight; overly chirpy automated Steward. A flicker of irritation crossed the twenty five year olds face as the avatar spoke.

"Sorry to interrupt your game, Steven."

Steven frowned "What do you want?"

"Oh, forgive me. We're going to land soon and it's time to stow your console, if you would be so kind. I noticed you were out-trading your competitors. You're well-skilled at market economics and well deserving of a CEO role."

"Fine" said Steven, sounding anything but happy, regardless of the compliment.

The hologram smiled. "Thank you. We're approaching a low-pressure thunderstorm and may encounter turbulence as we descend. At this time we anticipate touchdown to be 8:21 precisely and begin disembarkation at 8:30." Roberto read Steven's face, body language and breathing, deducing only impatience. He had more to say and yet thought it prudent to conclude the interaction "FlyExpress values your cooperation." The hologram promptly disappeared.

Steven checked the mark point on his game and pressed the sequence to close out the session. He dropped his nine inch touchpad into the seat pocket and sat back. His father Peter would be at the terminal already, no doubt watching the flightboard while drinking a coffee and tapping his foot. Every few minutes he would check his archaic wristwatch. It had been five years since Steven had last made the trip and the visit felt overdue.

"Roberto, give me rock, a classic. Loud."

A shimmering energy dome shrouded Steven's head, suppressing all sound. A second later an old time AC/DC favourite assaulted his ears. The elderly lady in the next seat continued to chew her lollies oblivious to the music.

Darwin Airport - Control Tower North - 8:16 PM

The blip on Paula Healey's interface changed from yellow to green and she promptly said, "That's it, we're green. All done."

"My board's clear too. I'm driving, want to hit Mac's?" asked Stuart Racovalis as he rocked back in his chair.

"Yeah why not? Frank?"

Frank Tan looked up from the operator's manual he had been skimming through on his terminal. "Fine by me. ... I feel like a whisky."

"You always feel like a whisky, and then singing," replied Paula with a grin. "Great. Jump over and close out then on my mark." They each switched to the administrator's screen as Paula counted down "three....two...one... go."

Placing their palms down onto the touchscreens a female voice through the PA system said "Third shift North Tower, flightboards cleared. You have ten minutes to exit for a safe transition. ... GlobalAir thanks you for your continued service. Have a nice day."

The lighting changed from yellow to a deep red as the end-of-shift music began to play.

"Yeah yeah feeling's mutual," replied Frank as he stood and pulled on his thick jacket.

"I still think I saw something, for a second," said Stuart, referring to a disturbance on his terminal earlier in the shift.

"I told you to log it. Could be a fault with your unit," replied Paula. As Shift lead she had to

answer for all the actions of her team and any potential outcomes.

"I know but it was so quick. I promise I will if it happens again. It's probably the bloody storm affecting the sensors. You remember last year?"

Frank interjected "Yes we all do, you don't need to go over it again."

A little injured, Stuart replied, "Four planes all coming in on the one heading for East 2. If it wasn't for the different heights and predicative logic of GlobalAir's..."

"Leave it Stu. ... Come on, first one's on me," said Paula. She extracted her scarf and handbag from her locker.

The trio moved to the lift, again placing their palms on the flat metal reader. A few seconds later, the lift chimed and the doors opened. They stepped inside as Stuart continued to grumble.

Like most lift journeys, the fifteen seconds proved uneventful. The doors parted and they walked out into North Towers' spacious atrium. The next shift stood with their backs to them, looking out through floor to ceiling reinforced plexiglass. The military-grade material was bulletproof, shatterproof to one tonne of compressive force and most important of all weatherproof. Outside they could see distant trees leaning over as wind and horizontal rain frantically danced about. Heading outdoors appeared decidedly uninviting and yet the warmth of Mac's Bar and Grill nevertheless appealed.

"Hey Guss, Trav, Zoe," said Paula causing the night shift crew to spin round.

"Wicked storm," replied Travis Munroe the youngest of the night shift at twenty six.

"Anything we should know?" asked Angus Ethridge, shift leader.

"Nah not really. Same as usual apart from the weather. We've got six coming in over the next hour."

"Right, who has the ball?"

"South for now, although we put four on hold for you. First was twenty five out when we closed."

"Great. Well, no time like the present, come on you two," said Angus as he moved purposefully toward the lift.

Stuart offered forth a nervous "Hi" as Zoe approached. For weeks he had been meaning to ask her out, and yet never seemed to find the right moment. He had thought about it an awful lot though."

"Hi yourself," replied Zoe as Frank, her uncle, shook his head.

Zoe high-fived Frank as they passed and said "I left the lasagne in the microwave; don't forget to eat it this time."

"Sure ... try not to wake me when you get in. I'd prefer to sleep through the worst of it."

"Snore is more like it," replied Zoe under her breath. Travis heard and stifled a laugh.

Angus looked on impatiently as Paula, Stuart, and Frank waved good-bye. One at a time, they moved through the secure, rectangular corridor entranceway. A reinforced titanium airlock, the mechanism verified their IDs against individual biometrics. Paula huddled with Frank off to one side, waiting for Stuart to exit. The trio carpooled each day as they lived a few streets apart.

As Stuart emerged, Paula looked past him, noticing two lights appear amid the gloomy dark sky. They rapidly become more prominent and she frowned.

"What is it?" asked Stuart, yelling to be heard over the storm.

"Inbound. On approach 2 West. Weird."

"How?" asked Frank, unrecognisable, his parker all but obscuring his entire torso.

"We cleared remember? Nothing coming in for at least twenty plus minutes," replied Paula.

"That makes no sense," said Stuart in confusion.

"We can't stay out here, we'll be drowned rats in a few minutes," said Frank.

The side of the protruding entranceway offered little protection from the elements.

"Hang on, I want to see it land," replied Paula. Her voice allowed no room for argument.

A moment later, the bulk of the plane seemed to materialise from the darkness.

Paula squinted and said "Looks like a 320 by the size and shape. Not sleek enough to be anything newer."

"It's fighting the wind; look at the angle. Has to be at least 35 degrees for wind shear," said Stuart.

"Vector's right though. You've got to give GlobalAir credit, no human pilot could make the adjustments necessary to land in this," said Frank.

Steven felt the many bumps and bounces as the turbulent air assaulted the plane. Seated

behind the wings, he glanced a little anxiously through the window and could see the wingtips bouncing about. His neat ginger goatee looked silver in the reflection. His eyes were soft, so very much like his mother's. The long, angular, and yet pleasing face, projected a near double of his rugged father, albeit younger and not so beaten by life.

Roberto appeared simultaneously at every seat; soothing the passengers, declaring all to be well. Steven left him on mute, more interested in the music. Behind the calm façade of the Stuart, the segmented flight system worked at full capacity to maintain a safe approach.

Safety came first in all situations, no exceptions. Real-time threat assessments were handled by another onboard, clustered pair of processors officially known as a KL266A3, or an EmptorBox by technicians. Originally designed twenty years ago for military use by drone fighters, the technology eventually made its way to commercial aviation.

Roberto knew the hardware well, having been integrated for over six years now. KL266A3 kept an eye on every action Roberto and the main flight computers took, always logging, double checking, and reporting back to Australian Central GlobalAir systems, which in turn provided daily updates to the Europe Star main server facility in Dijon, France.

The actual flying happened remotely. Central directed the FlightBox via a constant stream of data. Within a nanosecond, every individual component of the aircraft could be finely adjusted as required. Any and all variations were dealt with swiftly and delicate precision. The computational power of Central, combined with millions of real flight data logs plus billions of previously mapped scenarios, meant little if anything ever went wrong. Where necessary, the FlightBox would communicate with Roberto's processor and he relayed relevant information to the passengers in a polite, calming manner.

After eleven years of faultless service, GlobalAir had only two years ago declared flying the safest method of travel, regardless of the never-ending terrorism threat. The only exception to this rule remained hardware failure, especially from poor maintenance. Not once had a flight recorder indicated a GlobalAir system fault. No individual had ever hacked the GlobalAir system as it continuously modulated encrypted pathways using a complex algorithm only known to Boris Dragnovik, mathematical genius and system creator.

The wheels dropped tantalisingly close to the runway when suddenly the engines shot back up to full and the nose lifted. Landing aborted, the plane roared back into the sky. Grey, rolling clouds quickly absorbed the fuselage. Only an eerie sequence of dimmed running lights gave any evidence the plane had been there at all.

Paula watched the shape disappear, confused by the abort.

"Can we go now? Please?" asked Frank loudly and a little hotly.

Paula hesitated. Call it woman's intuition but something felt wrong, very wrong. "How did it look to you, Stu?"

"The approach seemed solid, considering the conditions. Well controlled I'd say. Who knows, maybe the systems noticed something we missed. Maybe a peaked crosswind?"

"Not likely," replied Frank, "she hung for five seconds less than ten feet off the ground, or I'm not Zoe's uncle. That's too late and too low to adjust for a crosswind. I reckon this storm's going to hang around for the whole god-damned night. Look, besides which, I simply don't care. We left with a clean board and its Guss' team and South's problem to deal with

now," before leaning into the wind and walking purposefully toward the car park.

The pair followed and soon Stuart had the car hurtling along various backstreets of Darwin. He never once broke the speed limit and yet, in the wet conditions, managed to thoroughly enjoy the journey. More often than not the small electric car slid sideways rather than maintain a forward heading.

Sitting in their regular booth at Mac's, the heating and their drinks began to sooth the trio. Stuart stuck to synthohol; he couldn't have any alcohol in his blood and drive home. Paula nursed a beer while Frank got stuck into the Scotch.

"This is more like it," said Frank, grinning at the barmaid as she brought another round over.

Paula had retreated within, turning the strange, aborted landing over and over in her mind. It niggled and she fought the urge to call Angus for more information. By Frank's third drink she didn't have to. Angus called her.