

**“Dear Alice...” An account of a Flying Boat journey from Southampton to Johannesburg.
Pit Stop (Episode 06)**

What follows is the full text of the letter written by Jack Hunt to his wife Alice about his journey by B.O.A.C. Flying Boat (Severn) from Southampton to Johannesburg in 1948. It is a vivid snapshot of life at that time. It is personal, authentic, and of its time, using the language and descriptions of the day. It begins with a short note from Jack’s daughter, Janice, who transcribed his handwriting. Once again, thank you to Janice Kelly and Ian Hunt for sharing their family history to help capture a colourful period of South African history.

-Al Prodgers

I have typed this as written and spelt by Daddy as I wanted it to be an exact copy. There are two words that we just could not make out and are marked (?). There are 3370 words in the letter! Fantastic when you think he had only arrived at the hotel at lunch time.

- Janice Kelly

Fairhaven Residential Hotel

Charlton Terrace

Off Harrow Road

Johannesburg

Saturday June 26, 1948

Dear Alice

Have just arrived at the above Hotel after a lovely trip of which more later

The hotel is quite close to the AECO offices so its convenient. They charge eleven guineas a month all in so its quite reasonable. Its not exactly the Ritz but the beds are clean and comfortable.

Arthur Grant-Dalton one of the AECO crowd met me at Maritime house in Johannesburg. He had a big new American car and drove me with bags and baggage to the hotel. One of the first things he did was to hand me your birthday letter, for which my many thanks take a kiss.

Glad you had a good day at Aunty Ada’s it would help to cheer you up. Its nice baby being so good

Did you get my cable hope you understood and phoned Mr Cosse and Mr Connor to let them know I’ve arrived safely. I might cable Mr Crosse tomorrow as I’ve just remembered you hav’nt his phone number. Before I forget here’s his address.

Its funny here with black boys all around you, they do everything. From what the landlady says. The wives have nothing to do.

Now about the trip. We started off promptly at Seaways (?) Terminal where I met a South African from Durban who was returning home and two Englishmen who were going out on a business trip. We teamed up and kept together throughout the trip. First of all when we arrived at Southampton we had to pass through the formalities of customs which were quite simple, then they gave us a cup of tea and a biscuit. (We had a half way stop on the road to Southampton). Shortly after they gave us the order to embark on the Flying Boat “Severn” we had all been allocated to a seat, funnily enough three of the team including myself were all together in a cabin, the South African worked a swop so we all got together.

In a bit an illuminated sign came on NO SMOKING FASTEN BELTS. The belt was a webbing affair with a buckle which strapped you to the seat. Incredibly this business had to be gone through every time

we took off and landed. The engines started and the plane began to move it taxied out quite a distance then turned into the wind, the engines began to roar and gradually the craft rose bumping a little on the waves Then quite suddenly we left the sea and rose into the air circled the port and that was the last of the old country. We got up higher and higher as we crossed the sea to France. Then the illuminated light went out and we could then smoke (NOT PIPES ONLY CIGARETTES)

We could buy cigarettes off the stewards at three shillings for 50. Liquor also was very cheap. There were three stewards a 1st and 2nd and a stewardess (I've got all the crews autographs for you to see)

Soon we were over France with its patterned fields and took some time to pass over to the Mediterranean. We saw the port of Le Havre about 12.40 and Sardinia at 3.55. They served a lunch in our cabin about 2 o' clock. Soup a selection of Chicken, Ham, Salad, Ice Cream and cherries. Sicily came later at about 5.20pm and we landed at Augusta (which is in Sicily) about 6.00pm. Had to go through customs which was simple, then we were taken to a barrack like place for our bedrooms which turned out to be quite nice, we had a bedroom each

It was hot, I had the fan going most of the time. After a wash and a change we went over to an hotel for dinner, Soup, Fish, Roast Beef, Fruit Salad all very nice. After dinner we went out to see the town, first we had to pass a police barrier and clock out as the island is Italian and only occupied by the British. It was dark by now about 9.00pm but the young Sicilian kiddies were still playing in the gutters. We walked up the main street, very narrow and flanked by houses (no gardens) and shops everyone standing or sitting outside the houses or shops. Every other shop seemed to be a Barbers it was really funny usually the whole front was open and brilliantly lit with electricity. Off the top of the main street there was a fair with swings and a merry go round. One thing that struck us was that even the poorest house had a beautifully tiled floor highly polished with beautiful coloured designs.

We could still see signs of the fighting and bombing that went on during the war. As we were tired we turned and walked back to the hotel, had a drink and then turned in for bed. Going to bed was quite a business. The bed is covered with a mosquito net which is tucked in all around, you have to wiggle under then tuck it in again. Gosh it was hot, first I left the fan on, but couldn't get off for the noise so turned it off. I laid on top of the bed but the sweat poured off me after a bit I calmed down and felt drowsy then the mosquito's started up and played a tune all night long, still I did get some sleep and in the morning about 5am a black boy brought me some tea.

After breakfast of fruit, bacon and egg we went back through customs and by launch to the flying boat. Incidentally BOAC have the thing taped properly as every stop there are posh launches officers and a stewardess. We lifted up at 8.45am and until noon it was nothing but miles and miles of water so we started a game of solo, our solo became legend by the end of the trip. You know I don't particularly like playing cards for money but it passed the time on and we had fun. We only played for very low stakes penny for solo two pence for abundance and threepence for the higher calls.

About noon we hit the north African coast and followed it along seeing Tobruk, El Alamein, what they wanted to fight for that dreary waste of hot sand for I don't know. It was shimmering sand for as far as the eye could see.

We approached Cairo about 1.20 and dropped down on the Nile soon after. Went through customs it was a little bit sticky here being Egypt, they are on the lookout for Jews and anyone who might be helping them. They even asked your religion. From the customs shed we had to walk between sentries posted at intervals towards a houseboat where we had a lunch of curried rice, ham, tongue, beef, salads and fruit etc. there was a shop on the houseboat and I bought you a lovely solid leather handbag with Egyptian designs embossed on it for 2pound. You will have to wait until you get here to claim it because of duty etc (I Janice remember the handbag very vividly but can't remember what happened to it, such a shame) we re joined the flying boat and took off around 3.00pm, then over more sand. So we land at Luxor about 5.00pm. It was hotter still here but the crew told us we were lucky because a hot wind was blowing.

We went to the Luxor hotel had a cup of tea (5/- for 4 tea is very dear there) and we engaged a rascally Egyptian guide Mohammed to take us to the ruined temples at Kushak. We went in a rickety (?) Landau pulled by a horse that looked on its last legs. You should have seen the squalor and poverty in the poorer streets it was awful. We were pestered to buy beads, trinkets etc all the way. When we got out into the open (?) it was rough and dusty. After about 4 hours ride we got to the temples. They were wonderful, thousands of years old and marvellous carving and colouring on the walls and pillars. One part of the temple had 134 pillars about 40 feet high and 13 feet diameter. The guide told us all about it and was'nt bad at all. We got back to the hotel for dinner which consisted of soup, salmon mayonnaise, veal, potato's beans and ice cream and coffee. As we had an early call for the morning we tuned in after a drink at 10.00pm. another struggle with the mosquito net, but was it hot gosh I thought it was hot in Augusta but this beat the band. We had Themo's flasks of water by the bedside, the water had to be in those to keep it cold. I could'nt sleep so got up at 2.00am and went outside on the veranda outside the hotel. Although hot there seemed to be more air, it was an experience, all the noises of crickets, frogs etc under a starry sky and a full moon. Ass the first sign of dawn I heard the Mullacks (Muezzin) calling from the tower of the temple or mosque "Allah Allah etc" Some of the hotel porters at the entrance to the hotel grounds got out their prayer mats and did their kneeling and moving of their bodies and arms up and down. I sat there until the others came out about 4.30am and we took off at 4.45am.

At 5.30 they served breakfast on the plane prunes, bacon egg and tomato. More sand unending miles of it. Then Khartoum at 8.45 left the boat and went into a hut and had a drink and biscuit, nothing to see as it's a distance from the city of Khartoum. We rejoined the machine and took off about 9.45am, had dinner on the plane Chicken Salad, Apricot Flan, Cheese and Biscuits, Fruit. The scenery was a little better but mainly uninteresting.

We landed on Lake Victoria at Port Bell about 5pm and were taken by bus to Silver Springs Camp at Kampala. The camp was in a lovely situation surrounded by trees, it had lovely flower beds palms etc. The chalets were brick build with single bed, wash basin (hot& cold) bedside table and lamp, fruit in a bowl on a small table with cane chair a corner wardrobe. The windows had no glass but were covered with fine netting. Curtains were fitted. The bed had the inevitable mosquito net but it was a more sensible type, plenty of room and easy to get in and out of. After a wash and change we boarded a bus and were taken to the Imperial Hotel Kampala.

As it was still too early for dinner two of us went a stroll round the town of Kampala it was quite a modern township being the capital of Uganda. The roads were well lit with modern fluorescent lighting and there were some quite respectable shops and lovely houses. We returned to the hotel and I bought a native statuette carved out of hardwood from a stall set out on a green in front of the hotel (I Janice remember it as a very slim carved figure holding a spear) the hotel was a lovely place and we had a nice dinner of Soup, Fish, Beef, Jellied Fruit, Coffee. We finished up with a drink on the veranda and then back to the camp to bed. By the way it was here we saw our first natives, its marvellous how the native women balance the water pots on their heads. It was fairly hot but nothing like the previous night's so I slept very well. I got up at 6.00am and had a walk round, back in time to see a black boy putting my breakfast of Bacon and Eggs on the table. After breakfast we climbed on the buses which took us to Port Bell.

The plane took off about 8-5am (8.05). Then over miles and miles of jungle, you could see the native huts at times. Mostly for the first time our view was obscured by clouds we had to fly high because of the bumpy conditions below. The sky cleared however before we got to the Victoria Falls. We saw it a long way off as a cloud of steam. We circled the Falls and it was a little disappointing being different to what I imagined. The Zambezi tumbles over a wide ledge into a very narrow gorge so you cannot see the bottom for the mist which constantly rises. We landed on the Zambezi about 3.00pm went through customs and then by bus to the Victoria Falls Hotel. We washed changed hired oilskins and set out to see the Falls before dark. We climbed on a trolley and natives pushed us to a spot near The Rain Forest, so called because of the constant rain which falls in the trees. The rain

being of coarse the spray from The Falls. On the way we got some good views of the Falls its incredible. The huge mass of water and the thunder it makes in falling. The sun playing on the mist makes lovely colours and rainbows. We decided that we would like to go to the bottom of the gorge and see the river so down we went along a steep path through the jungle. Talk about Adventure Unlimited it wasn't in it baboons were there as well. When we reached the bottom it was well worth it the water swirled around and made a huge whirlpool, they call it The Devils Bowl. High up either side of you the walls of the gorge rise covered with trees and ferns, they seem to climb miles. We climbed up again and at the top had a rest in a little hut. While we were there a native came up with six baskets one on each end of a pole carried on his shoulder. He came up to me and said " I sell everything" I asked him to set his stuff out and bought a queer little carved wooden bird for 3/6 its very neat and heavy.(Janice .. this queer little bird lives on my lounge window ledge) the others bought something and afterwards we walked back to the hotel with a little native boy carrying our oilskins. Being thirsty we found the bar and incidentally the crew of the Flying Boat. As it was our last evening together that started it. I lost count but not my senses, fortunately we were called to have dinner so we made up a party. The dinner consisted of Grapefruit. Beef and Yorkshire pudding, Ice cream and coffee. After dinner back to the bar and it started over again again. I was saved by the bell. The bar closed at 10.00 so we all adjourned to a lounge sat around and told yarns and sales!!!! We got to bed about 11.30. this time it was lovely and cool it was a real treat getting into bed properly and having a real good sleep.

We were called at 5am an hour earlier than schedule, we had a steward on board who had to catch the Flying boat back to England, they were short as one had gone sick. They brought us a cup of tea and then of we went by bus back to the river. The flying boat breakfast of fruit bacon and eggs toast etc was served on board. We took off about 7.30am and circled the Falls and once more over the jungle then the bare scrub to land on the Vaal Dam at about 11-10am. After going through customs (they charged me duty on the camera and glasses, handbag 15/6 in all) we boarded a bus which took us to an hotel for lunch and what a lunch oh boy

About 12.30 we boarded the bus for J'burg, it was very interesting in places. Eventually we arrived at BOAC Maritime House disembarked and almost immediately I heard my name being called by the Stewardess who introduced me to Grant- Dalton. So that's the trip Sweetheart its been an experience I wouldn't have missed for all the world it would have been nice to have had you and the children with me but it couldn't be.

Show this to Valerie Keith. Mum and Dad Harriet and Dad its been too long to repeat.

Life on board the boat was very pleasant especially being teamed up as we were. Now and again we would stop playing cards and go upstairs to the bar and have a drink while chatting and looking out at the scenery below. The seats in the plane were in pairs each side of a table. If you want to do you can move levers and the seat slides down into a semi reclining position. Adjustable ventilators blow air on you. There are switches for individual reading lights and a push button to call the steward. Every time after take off the Stewardess brought round glucose sweets and library books. We all were provided with maps of the route cotton wool for our ears a notepad envelopes etc.

Amongst the other passengers was a mother with a baby in a Karriecot. She was the wife of the Commander of our Flying boat, home to spend some three months with her parents. They were there at the Vaal Dam to meet her. The baby a little boy dead spit of his Dad was a gem, he never muffled just laid there and cooed. In fact the only time he cried (for me to hear him) was when I helped him to stand up by holding his hands. The crying came of course when I put him down again.

Another couple had a little boy about three with them (and one to come by the signs) the little boy and his mother were awfully sick every time the aircraft came down, due to the sudden drops and bumps caused by the currents rising from the ground. Normally of course the aircraft flies above this

condition but must pass through it to land. A couple with two babies joined us at Port Bell, they were'nt as bad but had a little trouble. I must say all the kiddies were very good, they didn't worry us a bit.

I seem to be going on like an Eddison Bell record but I know you'll like it.

Have just found out all my laundry done for 2/6 a week. They have a tennis court and when I looked in just now there seemed to be a card party on in the lounge. I'm not joining in tonight want to get to bed.

Will try to post this six o' clock on Monday from AECO office

Expect to have a look round J"burg tomorrow hav'nt seen anything yet

Give my love to Keith and Janice and you my dear sweetheart hug yourself tight for me. Ill try hard for you and as soon as possible get you with me

I have sent you Keith and Valerie Postcards from the various stopping places but they'll take some time to reach you.

Love to all at H

Jack

Sunday

Had a good nights sleep, coffee this morning per black boy to wake me up. Lovely day walked into the city this morning bought a paper Sunday Times, it has 32 pages plus a comic (coloured) for the kiddies and costs a 3d. It has quite a lot of home news including such things as the quads and the Welsh murder case. Makes you feel quite at home.

Yesterday on the bus between Vaal Dam and J'burg the radio was going Webster Booth and Anne Ziegler were singing then we heard London BBC giving the Test Match report.

Eats are very much like home but more of it. The bread however is terrible, they have no white flour.

I have written notes to Mother and Dad Valerie and Keith so am now going to have a siesta after a fat dinner of turkey.

Love

Jack