

## Tundra

With a distinctive crunch the tires of his Landrover changed from the improvised gravel strip leading up to the General Aviation Terminal at Dar Es Salaam international airport to the cracked and scorched, but quieter pavement of the terminals parking lot. With a quick single motion he pulled up between the faded yellow lines that once were supposed to mark the edge of a parking spot, but, like everything else, seemed to have grown exhausted from the relentless burning heat of the Tanzanian sun. His keys clicked, and his engine sputtered and died. He opened the door and hoisted himself out of the driver's seat with a grunt. He slammed the door a little too hard behind himself, wincing at the loud bang. Wiping the sweat off his brow, he crossed the lot and entered the building across it. Apparently, the air conditioning was going about its business with a lot of clamour but little effectiveness, at least so it seemed as he walked past the aging security guard sitting behind the counter. At least the guard had the luxury of a desktop fan to battle the morning temperatures here, he thought, as he presented his passport for inspection, trying to scavenge for himself a short blast of the fans cooling breeze. He crossed the hall in a few quick strides, hurrying out the back door and on to the apron. On the so-called General Aviation Ramp of the airport he quickly crossed through the aisles of parked private aircraft glinting orange in the sweltering rays of the late morning sun to find his personal plane. He knew exactly where he had to go, after all, he spent almost all of his free time flying. Standing across from a private jet, his tiny Piper Cub wasn't exactly something one would expect him to be capable of bragging of; however, to him, the tiny yellow aeroplane was the world. His heart sped up, and he couldn't help but let a grin creep onto his face as he approached his favourite hobby, the varnished canvas that made up the aircraft fuselage glinting bright yellow in the sun, the tiny aeroplane pointing its nose yearningly toward the endless halls of blue above. The complete airport was awakening from its morning delirium, as ramp activity started buzzing around him and his tiny plane. Already, the air was rising in hazes over the dark asphalt of the runways, causing the barren yellow landscape to look unearthly and hostile, an impression further reinforced by the dark yellow burning ball of sun hanging low and menacing above the ocean to the east. His aircraft rocked as he pushed himself up, hoisting himself into the rear seat over the bloated right tire. Then, quickly, he went about his business, securing the tiny cockpit for flight. Opening the fuel valve, he stepped outside again. With a few strides he stood head on with the tiny yellow aircraft. He took the propeller, gripping it firmly, and spun it five times. Walking to the left side of the aircraft, he gripped through the window of the plane and grappled about above the window, his fingers searching for a switch. As he finally found it he turned it on, listening for the loud click that signalled that he had actually turned the switch. Then, grunting as he shook his arm, he walked back to the propeller. He gripped the trailing edge of the blade firmly with the fingers of both hands, lifted his left leg, and, taking a deep breath, and swung his arms and knee downward, taking a step back as the propeller turned through the ignition points with a series of sharp clicks. Stuttering, the airplane bowed forward, and then roared as the engine came to life. He could feel the propeller sucking up the air around him. The complete craft had come to life, swinging and swaying with vibrations as the engine warmed up. Quickly, he sidestepped the propeller, swiftly gripping the wing struts to swing himself on board the plane, and settling into the rear seat of the small Piper he let his eyes scan across the instruments presented in front of him. Satisfied, he briskly called the tower, received his clearance, and prepared to taxi to the runway. As he pushed his throttles forward, his aircraft groaned and creaked as the engines hum intensified, the open window clattering slightly against the frame as the vibration of the cylinders increased. Finally, with a loud squelching sound made by the oversized low-pressure tires gripping the asphalt, his airplane lurched forward, and taxied out of its

parking position. The tires constantly groaned, filling the clattering cabin with a cacophony of different noises. In his peripheral field of vision he could see the rough texture of the asphalt taxiway pass below his aircraft, occasionally broken by the different colours of the stripes marking the taxiways, generally giving the impression that the taxiway was moving, not the aircraft itself however. The view over the nose of the aircraft was naturally limited, with the open cowling of the engine bobbing up and down, thus taking up most of the windshield. What little was left was covered by the brightest, most stinging light blue one could imagine. With every turn of the taxiway his aircraft groaned and leaned to the side, the wings dipping as he taxied over the pothole riddled, wavy ground. Every now and then he could hear the crunch of gravel below his wheels, indicating that the taxiway was littered with little stones. Finally, after what felt like ages taxiing, he finally reached the runway. Here, he clamped the brakes, taking great care to draw his stick full back in order to prevent his aircraft from nosing over. The wires purred softly, scraping against the aircraft's fuselage as they were pulled to the stops. Then, the aircraft came to a stop, softly rocking forward as it came to a complete standstill. His feet still standing on the brakes, he softly advanced his throttles until the quivering red needle of the tachometer gave a reading of 1500 rotations per minute. Then, he pulled the round knob connecting to the carburettor heating in order to verify its operation. With a slight click, the knob slipped into the on position, causing the whole aircraft to rattle as the engine started to run rough and the power decreased. Satisfied with its operation, he shoved the knob back into the closed position, and conducted the other required checks. Then, finally ready for take-off, he called the tower and swiftly turned his plane on to the runway. Before the tires had come to a stop he firewalled the aircraft, giving it full power for the take-off. The tires made a floppy sound as they started to accelerate against the resistance of the asphalt runways surface. The whole aircraft began dipping with the runways slight undulations as the engine roared and spew out its power reserves in order to accelerate to take-off speed. The cowling shook violently, and he could feel the vibrations in his stick. Finally, the plane's tail lifted, allowing for better visibility over the nose. Now, the aircraft was beginning to translate its weight from the wheels to the wings and the take-off roll smoothed out as he watched the yellowing grass whizz by the side of the runway. Slowly, gently he drew the stick back, and looked to the side just in time to see the runway fall away below him as he slowly climbed away from the airport. Focusing on the view that was unfurling in front of his aircraft he gasped: The city of Dar Es Salaam was unfolding below, nestling against the sea, surrounded by yellow fields and plains that seemed to stretch endlessly below his tiny plane. Exhilarated, he could feel the happiness of flight creeping in. Despite all his years of flying, he still found every flight to be a new and interesting experience filled with beauty, fun and relaxation. Quickly, he drew back his throttle in order to prevent the engine from over-revving. Normally, he would have to turn on the heater for the air the engine took in, as otherwise ice could form in the engine, causing it to seize up and die. At 30 degrees centigrade of outside air temperature however, there was no necessity for this measure. As the cabin was beginning to feel hot he unclasped the door, opening it for ventilation. He could feel the rush of air come up, entering the cabin and exiting it through the open window on the other side, a welcome way to keep himself cool on such a morning. Slowly, as he was passing over the last buildings of Dar Es Salaam he scanned the horizon, trying to squint past the rich turquoise ocean unfurling its vast stretches of dark blue depths below him. Yet, for the moment his destination remained out of sight.

That meant that he would have to make use of the magnetic compass installed prominently on the centre of his dashboard, trying to maintain a heading due east toward the open ocean. By now, he could turn off his radio, for the rest of the flight, he would no longer have to talk to anybody, as he was currently leaving Tanzanian national airspace, so it was better to try to preserve the batteries of the handheld radio set that represented his only connection to air traffic control.

With the Piper Cub that he was flying being a placid aircraft that usually required little correction once she was set up for cruise (some people said that once she was pointed where you wanted to go no attention was required, however he found this to somewhat downplay the still very challenging task of piloting the beautiful light aircraft he loved to fly, which was one reason for him to rarely use this expression) he could now lean back and scan the horizon for the first break of green that would signal the upcoming landfall. He liked the soothing, simple hum of the engine against a background tapestry of rushing wind and air, with the breeze from the open window tickling his face. Together with the reflexes of light off the yellow cowling in contrast to the dark blue ocean specked with tiny wave crests and the now light pink clear sky, the scene was of truly endless beauty.

His eyes strained against the red sun hanging low in the sky as he squinted against the horizon in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the land he sought. Then, as he shielded his eyes from the glare with his hands, he could make out the faintest yellow lining of the horizon, which grew in size every second, until at last he could make out the silhouette of one of the two main Islands of the Zanzibar archipelago, Ujunga, shrouded in the early maritime fog, glinting black against the pink backdrop of the sky and in stark contrast to the pale turquoise ocean ahead of him. Then, peering over the aircraft's nose, he could see his destination: An apparently desolate sandbank off the shore of Ujunga, turned a pale yellow by the wisps of fog skirting its perimeters.

As his destination was now in plain sight, he drew back his throttles even further in order to descend his aircraft with the purpose of a landing to be made. The tiny Island that only peeked above the water's surface was only visible at low tide, and even then difficult to reach due to the rocks and reefs making navigating the waters surrounding it hardly possible even at high tides. The length of the Island was perhaps a maximum of five hundred feet, no more than two hundred yards, too short for almost every type of aircraft to land on, even if a normal runway had been present on this tiny formation. However, its surface consisted solely of wet and coarse sand, a surface which was treacherously riddled with tiny dunes and shallow pools, making it impossible for any aeroplane equipped with normal wheels to attempt a touchdown on this sandbar.

His aircraft however was equipped with a special type of tires referred to as "Tundra Tires". How the person who had invented this type of tire had come by this name was still not understandable to him, the arctic tundra with its frozen ground offered a great many natural Runways to Pilots of light airplanes, and over many years even the large jets designed by Tupolev or Antonov and operated by the soviet airline Aeroflot had been forced to land on the unprepared frozen Siberian tundra, and these aircraft, though made of a rugged build, were certainly not equipped with any sort of specialized tire. Indeed, as the Tundra was covered in snow most of the year a skiplane would probably be suited better for operations in such latitudes, however, the inventor of the tundra tires was right about one thing: The huge, low pressure tires hugged the ground on touchdown, gripping it firmly with a large area, hence allowing the aircraft to decelerate quicker and softer on very rough, soft, wet or slippery surfaces. It was to some extent even possible to "extend" runways adjoining to water surfaces, as an aircraft so equipped was capable of "skipping", as bush pilots called it, over the water. Technically, their large, grooved surface allowed the aircraft to facilitate aquaplaning as a means of continuing across water surfaces at high speeds, thus "stretching" runways next to lakes, rivers or the ocean. At the same time the high drag of the water facilitated a quick deceleration after touchdown, allowing this technique to be used effectively during landings, when pilots are often seen to touch down on a lake or river in a remote location only to "skip" on to a beach, often only the size of the aircraft, and come to an instant stop after a short "roll" across the water.

Even though it was not necessary for the pilot to make use of this feature as the Piper Cub allowed for short landings within distances far shorter than the five hundred feet offered by the sand bar, he still wanted to make use of it in order to remain current at its execution and also to add a safety

factor: The earlier he could come to a stop the more room he had to decide if he wanted to complete the landing or “go around”. On the other hand, however, he had little to worry about, as he had performed this very approach and landing several times already. The little sand bar was perhaps one of his favourite “hideouts” around Dar, and he loved the flight to this isolated and quiet place. Meanwhile he had come up abeam the isle, so he turned his aircraft to the north so that with the island just below his left wing and Ujunga to the east of his aircraft he could descend easily to an altitude that would allow him to make two sharp left turns and would allow him to line up with his so-called runway. The wind was almost negligible, blowing at a low speed from the south, so he did not have to fly at any significant angle to the sand bar in order to counter wind drift. The sea below him had transformed into a quilt of different coloured patches indicating the zones of varying depth found at this distance to the shore. It made for a mysterious and intriguing pattern of lighter and darker blues arranged about the sand bar, glistening in the now rising sun and harmonically blending in with the light blue sky. Within no time, he had reached a sufficient distance to the sand bar to turn in line with his runway. Cutting his throttle, he started a sharp descending left turn toward his landing zone. The Piper Cub was, despite her looking like a very clean light aircraft actually pretty draggy, so she dropped at a death-defying rate toward the calm ocean beneath. He was aiming for a touchdown spot just a few metres short of the beach in order to test his “skipping” skills. He could hear the air rushing past him as he leaned his head against the left side of the cockpit, trying to get a good view of his landing area as was possible by any means. Quickly, the glistening turquoise started rushing up towards him, and he slowly but surely drew back on his stick in order to arrest the descent in a manoeuvre commonly known as flare. This time was one of the rare occasions on which he managed to execute this manoeuvre almost perfectly, with his sink rate just about zero as his huge tires dipped into the ocean. Immediately, he felt a distinctive kick in his stick as the aircraft's nose sharply lurched forward due to the rapid deceleration. For only a few seconds he had to haul the stick back with all the force he could muster to prevent the aircraft from nosing over, until the aircraft suddenly had the solid ground of the beach below its wheels. He let out an audible oof as the aircraft jabbed upwards heavily as the wheels hit more or less solid ground. He turned off his magnetos with a loud clanking noise just as he came to a stop on the wet sands. His engine coughed, sputtered, clattered and spew out a cloud of smoke as it came to a stop on the tiny island. Just as the aircraft settled back into its normal position on the ground, he leaned back, grinning: Nothing was better than an off-airport landing in the midst of the ocean!

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