



‘Jesus wants me for a sunbeam.’

“You take over,” he said casually, as if it was part of my normal working week. **“If anything happens, let me know.”** He leaned back, eyes closed for a nap. I gripped hard onto the co-pilot’s controls, looking into the blue yonder, panic stricken! What if another plane comes into view? What if I can’t keep level? ... What if? ... What if?



‘Sir Tom’ was an ex-World War II fighter pilot, now

in his fifties and reduced to flying single-engine aircraft around Australia’s interior. But at times his old Battle of Britain days seemed to kick in, as we flew here and there, me looking on from the co-pilot’s chair, wondering what on Earth (and in the sky), might happen next.



This time, not long after our association began, we were up and away, heading towards the Far West of South Australia. Tom had suffered a late night, so once we had climbed out of Adelaide through wispy clouds, to reach our cruise height in a clear sky over blue sea, he decided to take a siesta, leaving me in control of the single-engine beast.

Looking back to those early days, I soon got over the initial jitters, and before long the relatively meagre abilities required to keep a plane on the straight and level became second nature. Apart from the occasional bump from a bit of air turbulence there was really nothing to worry about, so no reason to wake my slumbering boss.

A few days later, on another early morning ride, we were to be found - like partners in crime - scooting over the water, at a height dangerously close to the waves and slightly below the level of the adjacent cliffs. Our flight plan tracked along the 150-mile western coast of South Australia's Eyre Peninsula.



"I love shark-spotting in the morning," he yelled above the engine's roar, mimicking Robert Duval from the film *Apocalypse Now*, with his infamous line: *'I love the smell of napalm in the morning'*. This was followed by a brief chorus of *'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,'* as we descended even closer to the breaking waves. The lapse into song proved two things: first he couldn't sing, and secondly, he eschewed religion. This momentary view portrayed Tom at his carefree best, and up for anything, but over time I came to realise that underneath the bluster lay a very dedicated and trustworthy soul.

However, on this day and at the same time as Tom was singing the delights of the Great White Shark (in wait) below, along with praises to The Devine above, I was busy trying to keep the eggs-and-bacon dish I had downed a little while before, inside my stomach. In the end we spotted quite a few sharks, but the breakfast did not remain in my gut.



"You can clean that mess up before we refuel and head for Adelaide!" After barking at me, he marched off towards the airstrip office. With Tom it was often an uphill learning curve, but it was nearly always an inspirational ride, and simply a matter of time before I began to catch on to his quirks and adjust my behaviour accordingly.

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