

FEBRUARY 1971

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Wednesday, February 3, 1971

Over the Isle of Man

Hello Folks: (family, co-workers, friends)

Today's my birthday. Somehow my mind tells me I should feel older at my age than I actually do. Fortunately, except for some stiffness in the knee joints when I squat down at a home project too long, I feel as good as I did 20 years ago. I hope the feeling never passes!

It's just 4 a.m. New York time, but we're only 40 minutes away from touchdown at London, where it's 9 a.m. local time. The flight is running faster than usual, according to the Captain, and we measure now just 6 hours from the starting gate at Kennedy Airport. Which all means we expect to arrive 20 minutes earlier than scheduled.

Between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m. here in this speck of space, almost 1/4 of the whole day was created. The horizon at 3 a.m. was just a thin red line glowing above the silhouette of the right wing. I had slept fitfully since about 11:30 p.m. after leaving New York and periodically checked to see when the first signs of dawn would come. In the 60 minutes since 3 o'clock the sun has risen well up in the sky, to near mid-morning position, and the solid cloud cover below us has changed from a dark mantle to a snow-white smoothly rumpled sheet. Very soon we should be dropping down through the clouds, on the descent approach to London.

For Ed Quinn and me the earlier part of the trip was uneventful. We had a new rental car, a Sebring Satellite, to "tool down" to New York with. Traffic was light until we crossed the George Washington Bridge into New York City. Then it was "stop and go" in 5:30 p.m. traffic, and on one of the "go" signals we missed the turn for the Triboro Bridge and the road to Kennedy. But I got off at the next crowded exit and drove by the seat of my pants through Bronx streets to an alternate ramp for the Triboro Bridge. Only at Kennedy did we really get confused. New York City always puts the directional signs at the very point where you're supposed to turn (which was true for our earlier error). Unless you're duly excepted as a blind old lady driver who's dragging her heels along the pavement to hold to a snail's pace, you're bound to miss your turn. It seems as if Ed Quinn and I, having many poorly labeled turns to make to find the Avis car rental agency, drove around the Kennedy maze about 6 times. But on each pass (I was the driver) I learned one more of the proper paths to take. Finally, at 7 p.m., we dropped off the car and got a free Avis lift to TWA (I forgot to turn in the car keys and had to call Avis for instructions). We ate dinner after checking in at TWA, and I was inwardly pleased (for GE, not myself) when I found that TWA didn't notice my excess baggage weight of more than 30 pounds. They could have charged me around \$1.80 to \$2.00 a pound if they had observed the additional weight. Something like \$60 to \$70 extra flight fee!

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There aren't very many people on this flight -- plane is probably only 1/2 filled. But, after several hours on TWA I know why the eternal travelers, Andy Levada and John Hilpman from GE's International Sales Division, prefer the Dutch KLM Airlines. That was the carrier I took on my last trip to Europe, and now I too can agree that KLM is much superior in service and facilities. (We just broke through the overcast over London -- it's been announced the temperature here is 58° F.).

--- Touchdown at 10:38 a.m. local London time! Dry here, but very overcast ----

Back to New York (mentally) for a moment. The plane was a "707" -- to inform my children, who wondered if it would be a 747. Ed Quinn and I wondered which of the passengers, if any, would be "riding shotgun" against hi-jackers. I told him the "good guys" always wore a white hat. But we didn't see any stetsons, so are not sure we had a security agent aboard. At the plane ramp, however, there were double security measures. Each passenger had to pass singly through an electronic weapons detector "gate." Ed and I both caused readings above some normal level, so we were taken aside and asked to surrender any keys, pocket knives, etc. Ed was frisked, but I was simply asked to open my suit jacket wide. When the security man saw my 5 pens and pencils in a pocket holder, metal belt buckle, leather key case, etc., he figured he had the explanation for my "high reading," so passed me through.

Hotel Westbury, London. Ed and I are secure in our hotel rooms now, at 6:00 p.m., waiting for Levada and Hilpman. We passed through airport customs and money exchange operations quickly, and hailed a cab for London. Wildest taxi ride I ever had! The cabbie, a young long-haired fellow, knew the width of his cab to within fractions of an inch -- and he used that knowledge to squeeze between parallel and oncoming traffic with regularity and complete abandon. Near London we came upon double lines of traffic upwards of 1/2 mile long, waiting to pass through an unusually popular crossway (intersection). This fellow charged up the thinly used lane of oncoming traffic, to pass by hundreds of patiently waiting queued-up drivers of more timid or law-abiding nature. When a bus or car coming in the opposite direction threatened our safety, the cabbie squeezed over into the waiting line of cars, completely unabashed by his game of one-upsmanship. But he saved us probably 1/2 an hour delay, which we needed because at the hotel a message was waiting from Andy Levada telling us to get over to the Libyan Embassy to have our entry visas processed. The deal takes 2 days, and the embassy visa office closes at 12:30 p.m. Since it was 12:20 p.m. when we got the message at the hotel, I called Levada at the local GE office. He suggested phoning the embassy to see if they would wait till we got there. I tried it, and it worked -- so we zipped over to the Libyan Embassy, paid our fee, left our papers and passports, and were told we could pick them up tomorrow.

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On leaving the embassy, every taxi we hailed was busy, so Quinn and I walked back to the hotel -- about 3 miles. On the way we skirted Hyde Park, famous locale for free speech and self-styled orators, and steered our way by Buckingham Palace. We stood for a few minutes to watch the Queen's guards, in their big bearhats or shakos, walk their posts with British snap and precision. We strolled along Picadilly, and famous Bond Street -- the home of men's fashions, with its plush haberdashers' shops. And we stopped, thirstily, in a wayside pub or bar to hoist a Guinness's stout (dark beer) and rest for a moment. Back at the hotel finally, we had a small snack of lunch (at 3:30 p.m.) and retired to our rooms to shower and shave -- our first chance today. And I then turned back the bed covers and crawled in for a nap. I had only a few fitful hours of sleep in the last 24 and felt exhausted. I slept for 1-1/2 hours, have now awakened, have brought this letter up to date, and am waiting to hear from Levada/Hilpman.

Will get in touch with you all again.

Regards and Love

Frank (Dad)