

DEPARTURE FROM RIO

By John S. Halbert

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The taxi driver gave several quick glances at the rear-view mirror, frowning. "I believe there was a big accident just now," he said in his accented English.

I turned about and saw in the early-evening darkness what looked like a jumbled mass of headlights and taillights receding behind us as we drove along the divided highway leading out of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the direction of the International Airport. "Looks like we just missed it . . ." the fellow went on.

"We don't want to be late for the flight," I said. Back at the hotel they had told us to get there early, as the lines were usually long. It was starting to rain. "How much farther to the airport?"

"Ten minutes." The cabbie swerved the sedan past a slower-moving truck. Looking out, I saw we were riding past middle-class-looking residences and apartment buildings that looked a lot like what we would have seen back home in some parts of Houston.

A little farther along, I sniffed the air: there was a noticeable burning smell inside the venerable cab. A red light on the instrument panel started blinking and we seemed to be losing speed. I watched in dismay as the driver started working the pedals and the shift lever. Cecilia and I looked at each other---getting stranded in a burning, broken-down automobile in the rain in Rio de Janeiro and missing the flights to Miami and to home in Houston was not on our agenda.

The driver rolled down his window to clear the fumes, letting inside some of the rain. I thought about all the pictures and souvenirs in our luggage from the cruise we had just finished. It was appalling to think we might lose our things if the cab caught fire. The driver found a lower gear and the clattering engine settled into a slower, more sustainable speed. At least we were still moving.

At length, under the rainy sky, the gasping, lurching taxi slushed up to the departure terminal. We paid the driver, who raised the hood and ruefully surveyed his steaming engine. Glancing at the white cloud roiling upward, I guessed something had happened with the radiator.

In a hurry, we lugged our luggage into the vast hall and stopped short---ahead of us was a snaking, four-abreast line that seemed to go for a mile! I knew we would never make the flight if we had to stand there for hours..

Cecilia, always resourceful, (she's from Colombia, remember) motioned for me to follow her. Crossing several of the zig-zagging lines of people (to the frowns of those waiting in those lines), the two of us made our way up to the front of the crowd. I'm not sure how she did it, but in a minute or less we were standing before an airline clerk. "The flight from North America was late and has just arrived . . . they're getting the airplane ready for the return trip," she said, handing us our boarding passes, "don't worry, you'll make all your connections in Miami."

Trying to ignore the people at the front of the line who were fuming at us for jumping ahead of them, Cecilia and I hurried to "Passport Control". The stop was short; they asked only a couple of vague questions, stamped our passports, then passed us through into the waiting area. At the gate, we were surprised to see that we were almost the first passengers who had arrived

for the flight to Miami, which was scheduled for takeoff at 10:30 PM. There were hundreds of empty waiting-room seats, suggesting tht there would be hundreds of passengers on the flight.

We took our places off the cavernous concourse. Looking around, I spotted a big wall clock that read "10:05". According to the boarding passes, the flight to Miami was supposed to start loading right away for a 10:30 departure. But as we sat there, wondering about all this, only a few passengers for the flight were in the waiting area. From time-to-time, one or more would drop into a seat. I remembered the long line we had elbowed through at the ticketing area---quite likely the other Miami passengers were still out there. I glanced at the clock; it was 10:30---time for the departure and nowhere was there any evidence they were ready for us to get aboard. The girl at the ticket counter had told us not to worry about making our connection to Houston. But I was starting to have some doubts about that.

During this time, as we sat fidgeting, I had been listening to a peculiar, disembodied, hollow-sounding voice coming out of a nearby loudspeaker that was droning on with continuous announcements. It sounded so unusual, so strange, I could not even decide whether it was a male or a female voice. After a while, I became so fascinated with the otherworldly-like speaker that I wished I had a recorder to get some of it on tape. "Listen to that voice," I told Cecilia.

My wife cocked her ear, and after listening to a couple of the announcements, she shook her head. "I've never heard anything else like it."

The clock now said "11:20", well past the official time for departure of our Miami flight. By now, the waiting area was starting to fill with people holding their boarding passes; some with hand luggage. A middle-aged woman, a fellow passenger we recognized from the cruise ship, dropped into a seat across from where we were sitting and told us many people had been delayed by the vehicle wreck. "We lost an hour back there in the rain," she said.

"It happened just behind us," I said to her. I took another look at the clock. "Our flight is running very late."

"Maybe it is just as well . . . otherwise, I would have missed the plane!" She surveyed the gathering. "Others are still out there in the line."

It was nearing midnight, an hour-and-a-half past the time for departure, and we were still in the waiting room, that, by now, was nearly filled. Overhearing other conversations around us, the talk seemed to be about their wreck-delayed arrivals. Everyone seemed to be agreeing that it was probably fortunate the departure was running late---otherwise, most of them would have missed the plane.

At midnight, the strange voice was replaced by *another* odd-sounding speaker making the announcements.

Frustration was setting in---there seemed to be a general agreement that by now, most of us would miss our connections when we got to Miami.

After what seemed an eternity, at about 12:30 AM---two hours past the time we were supposed to be departing, the mysterious voice called our flight number for boarding. The weary passengers, following the directions of airline personnel (who looked harassed), formed a long line that led to the outside. On the pavement, glistening-wet in the floodlights, awaited a 'Boeing-767' of the United States-based airline. In a few minutes, we found our seats on the left-side of the cabin near the rear of the airplane. I had the window seat; Cecilia was in the aisle seat.

At length, we heard a distant door slam shut, the lights blinked and with a lurch, the airplane started rolling backward. I knew that they usually push big airliners a certain distance back from the gate, turn the plane in the direction it will taxi and disengage the tow tractor for the engine start. This time, we kept going and going across the apron, onto a taxiway and into the night---all

in reverse. "This is the longest 'backwards-push' I have ever seen," I told Cecilia.

Finally, the rearward roll stopped. There came a rumble and a whine as the engines came up, and at long last, we were moving forward. The lumbering aircraft swayed out a taxiway into the darkness, past little orange and purple lights that marked the way.

The "767" turned onto the runway. Below my window, in the runway lights, were broad, white-painted lines that defined the end of the runway. To the left, off to the side, I spotted a small, lighted yellow structure that looked like some sort of maintenance shed.

For long minutes we sat there, the whining jet engines idling, while I surveyed the lines on the runway and the little building. "Why are we not taking off?" I wondered. More minutes went by---by now, if the airplane was following the usual pattern, we should have already been airborne. Instead, we were sitting here, going nowhere. Was something the matter?

There came a sudden buzz from an overhead speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking . . . we are returning to the terminal . . . the maintenance people forgot to load our fresh water, *and we have to have it!*" I thought he sounded sheepish; nearby passengers looked around at each other and grinned.

There was a roaring of the engines and the airplane turned back onto the taxiway. This time, the aircraft plowed along at a breakneck pace; the little lights zipped past underneath the ends of the wings.

In scant minutes, the airplane squealed to a stop. Looking out the window, I spotted, cradled on a cart pulled by a tractor, a cylindrical object about ten feet long that looked like what I had seen in a picture of an atomic bomb. I guessed it was our water.

The "bomb" disappeared out of sight to the rear. There came some thuds that I figured were caused by the grounds-crewmembers loading and connecting the tank. The now-empty cart reappeared and in a hurry the tractor tugged it off to the side.

The engines came back up and again we were moving. This time, there was no slow roll-out on the taxiway---the pilot seemed to be bent on getting back to the takeoff point as soon as possible.

Without even slowing, the huge airliner swung onto the runway and the engines went to full power. In a flash the little shed and the white painted lines dropped out of sight behind us. As the airplane continued its stately advance down the runway, after some seconds I began to realize we were not gaining speed at very fast rate. From considerable experience in airliner takeoffs---even wide-body takeoffs---I knew that after about forty seconds, the nose of the airplane up forward would rise, the rear of the plane where we were situated would drop, then the wheels would leave the ground with a series of thuds. But the time for that was long past, and we were still on the pavement, grabbing more and more of the runway every second. Then I saw painted white lines race underneath us. *We were at the other end of the runway going full speed---still on the ground!*

Then came the drop, the wheel vibrations ceased, and at that instant the end of the runway shot past underneath the wing. With a start, I realized we had left the ground at the very end of the runway! After some seconds, I could still see scrub marshland illuminated by the landing lights, then black water shooting past just underneath the wing,. We barely were flying above the water! *What was the pilot doing?* I knew that this airport was surrounded on several sides by water, backed by hills---if we were flying *this* low, there was every possibility we could ram full-tilt into a hillside!

The captain's laconic voice scratched out of the overhead speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, we apologize for the delayed departure to Miami . . . we will exert very effort to make-up some

of the lost time . . . we will fly over Brasilia, Manaus, Caracas, and up the island chain to Miami. Our flying time will be eight hours---"

Well, at least he *sounded* confident. But I was still wondering about whether or not we were still "on-the-deck" as we had been for some time after we had taken off.

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We made it to Miami without further incident, arriving there in mid-morning. I slept through most of the flight.

But the airline people had been overconfident about us making our connection to the next flight. As it turned out, we---and most of the other passengers---missed our connecting flight and had to wait several hours in Miami for another plane to Houston.

While Cecilia and I were in the Miami departure lounge, we struck up a conversation with another couple from Houston who had also been on the cruise with us. The subject came around to the strange-sounding voice on the loudspeaker back at Rio's airport. "Wasn't that the most weird voice you ever heard?" the man said, "I even got out my recorder and got some of it down!"

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After we returned home, I later spoke with an airline-pilot friend about the long takeoff roll at Rio de Janeiro. He told me that the 767 was likely overloaded and it was a miracle we had not crashed!