

LIFE LESSONS IN CUSTOM CHARTER AVIATION

*Tailor-Made
to Fly*

TRACEY DEAKIN

With Dawn C. Crouch

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

TAILOR-MADE TO FLY
Life Lessons in Custom Charter Aviation
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Published by Hellgate Press
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

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Hellgate Press
2305 Ashland St., #104-176
Ashland, OR 97520
email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Cover and Interior Design: L. Redding

*Cover photos of Tracey Deakin courtesy of
David Hammond Brown Photography
(davidhammondbrown.com)*

ISBN: 978-1-954163-88-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945373

Printed and bound in the United States of America
First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is my true story, as far as I can recollect. I have followed up to make sure the events and persons depicted are as accurate as possible, but still reflect within the prism of time and personal experience. I have worked hard, been extremely fortunate, and it is my intention to encourage young aviators and honor those giants in aviation and aerospace that I met and worked with along the way.

— TD

Life's inspirations are little gifts along the way.
With sincerity, I acknowledge the following
in support of this memoir:

Jim Deakin

Ted Cooper

Brian Mansfield

Gerry Bron

Phil Battaglia

Ken Haas

Mike Whitman

Judith Menichello

Dawn Crouch

Guy Norris

Dave Krisanda

Wing Commander Hugh Charles Kennard DFC

For my wife and family

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Foreword

PEOPLE IN THE AVIATION business, perhaps like no other, are filled with passion and enthusiasm for what they do, and Tracey Deakin is one of those individuals.

Since encountering Tracey's remarkable "can-do" attitude for the first time more than thirty years ago, I have witnessed him use these innate qualities to help pilot a fledgling aviation charter company from the ground up into a leading global organization.

Telling the story of his aviation roots and the growth of Le Bas International in his own inimitable style, Tracey gives us not only a blueprint for how to build and manage a successful aviation business but also a glimpse into the vanished golden era of early large jet and turboprop air cargo operations in Europe and Africa.

Ranging from adventures carrying cargoes of calves over the Alps in temperamental Bristol Britannia freighters during his early days at Invicta International Airlines — a long vanished British charter carrier — to dangerous flights to Africa in elderly Douglas DC-8s, Tracey's tales recall an almost totally forgotten "tramp steamer" age of the aviation business.

Following a roundabout course through flying stints in the British Channel Islands and Datapost in the UK, Tracey then tells us about his unplanned entre to executive aviation and the start of his journey into managing corporate and private charters.

After formative experiences with operators ranging from El Al to Zambia Airways, Tracey's big break comes in the late 1980s with a typically Deakin "he who dares wins" move to the U.S.A. and the start of a love affair with America which lasts to this day.

Working his way into operations in California with the start-up Le Bas company, Tracey's story recounts exhausting round-the-clock

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days to establish credibility and carve out a niche in a highly competitive landscape.

Soaring to new heights, he recounts the company's early major charter achievements like organizing the world tour for British band Pink Floyd, Hollywood "A-listers" and other celebrities.

But while passion and enthusiasm can carry you through a lot, the real test is often how you react when things go wrong. In December 1993 Tracey faced just such a test when a Le Bas chartered aircraft carrying Rich Snyder and other executives of the In-N-Out burger chain company crashed on approach to John Wayne-Orange County Airport in California.

The IAI Westwind was returning Snyder and his group from opening the 93rd In-N-Out restaurant in Fresno but was tragically caught in the wake of a United Airlines Boeing 757 on the approach to the airport. Although tracking the instrument landing system on a normal glideslope and following standard separation procedures, the Westwind suddenly flew into the ground around four miles from the runway, killing all aboard.

Investigations soon showed that the aircraft hit the wake of the 757 when it was two miles in trail and 400 ft. below the United airliner.

Shocked to the core by the event, Tracey led efforts to change standards under which some aircraft are separated from each other on final approach.

At the time I witnessed first-hand Tracey's determination to get at the wake turbulence problem as I helped with his research into the existing standards and with writing letters to the FAA.

As a result of this accident, as well as several similar events between 1983 and 1993, the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), conducted a special investigation that resulted in wake turbulence being added to what the NTSB called its "Most Wanted" list of safety concerns in 1995.

Tracey's actions, amongst others, helped prompt the FAA into a series of improvements — critically including more spacing behind 757s — and wake turbulence was removed from the Most Wanted list in 1998.

Tracey Deakin

The “In-N-Out” accident began an industry changing phase of research and additional safety procedures to prevent similar incidents from occurring again, and it also put renewed energy into Tracey’s passion for improved operational safety.

Le Bas developed the Air Carrier’s Commercial Operating Manual to help maintain higher standards and promoted safety rules and requirements that are now codified into U.S. Department of Transport regulations for air charter companies.

Beyond the critical aspect of safety, Tracey’s inspirational charter story also embraces a vast range of experiences from organizing humanitarian aid and disaster relief missions to helping with movie shoots and flying large groups to remote islands to witness rocket launches.

Whether he’s dispensing lessons on how to treat customers, improving safety or simply amusing us with anecdotes, the bottom line is Tracey’s aviation life has — and continues to be — fueled by passion and an infectious enthusiasm that leaps out at you from these pages.

Tracey is also irrepressibly positive and through his story reminds us that both optimists and pessimists contribute to our society. In particular — to use the well-known quote, as applied to aviation — the optimist invents the airplane and the pessimist the parachute.

*Guy Norris, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA
January 2023*

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CHAPTER 1

Tailor-Made to Fly

“Lovers of air travel find it exhilarating to hang poised between the illusion of immortality and the fact of death.”

— Alexander Chase

IN MY MIND, AVIATION and aerospace are magic. I’m Tracey Deakin, a founding partner of Le Bas International, one of the world’s premier private air charter companies, and I stand on the magic of history. People, destinations, the Wright Brothers, technology, everyone who got us to where we are today.

I never forget where it all started, where it all came from because if it wasn’t for all those pioneers of industry — KLM, Silver City, Imperial Airways (before British Airways), and Pan Am — I wouldn’t be here, and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.

In the early days of air travel, passengers had to be enticed to board an airplane. Flying was high adventure, a risky undertaking. Plane travel was pretty frightening. They were going up in these jalopies that were tied together by string, paper, and canvas, but they did it.

Commercial plane travel progressed, and as more people traveled, competition flourished because air travel became safer. At least, that’s what we tell ourselves.

But when you really think about it, airplanes are like leopards. They’re very beautiful. Totally exquisite. They’re a work of science and technology, even a work of art, but if you get them on a wrong day, that claw will take your face off.

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So initially, the only way to get people on board was to offer an experience.

People were enticed by hospitality and comfort. Stewardesses were uniformly beautiful, and stewards dressed up like butlers. The initial way airlines attracted passengers was to offer first-class service. But excellent customer amenities needed one more tangible benefit to allow commercial air travel to take off. Pun intended.

What was the real value offered by aviation? One word: Speed.

Travel time from London to Paris was cut from a day and a half to one hour and forty-five minutes.

Tech is clinical. Tech is state of the art. Tech has no character. Technology drives innovation.

But last I looked, we are human beings, and we need hugs, smiles, and pleasantries. Technology is good, but not at the expense of human interaction. Think back to early cross-country train travel in America. Pretty wild. You could get stranded, held up, whatever, but the lure for passengers was to offer upper-end service.

People used to get on ocean liners to come across to America. It would take four or five days to do that, but it was the quickest, most straightforward way to travel the distance at that time. So, what are all the passengers going to do in these ocean liners?

The cruise lines created the means for social interaction. Passengers could meet other passengers. They offered dancing and a theater. They prepared elaborate and delicious food onboard. Otherwise, the passengers were not going to get on the ship. What if the owners had said, “We’re going to float you across the Atlantic, and we’re only going to give you a sandwich?”

That’s not going to happen.

Rich people are often the first to try new technologies. Why? The wealthy travel in style because they have the money to do it. Why is Richard Branson doing what Richard Branson is doing? Because he has the money, but he also has the desire to make it happen. He has the means to make his vision realized. But notice that he’s working with other people all the time to create opportunities, com-

Tracey Deakin

munity, and jobs. All because of Richard's initial ambition and imagination.

If it weren't for the visionary, the secondary would never happen.

Now, people get on commercial airplanes with chips and sandwiches. They sit down, and boom, they're fast asleep! For most people, traveling on an aircraft is no longer an experience. It's more like a bus service, and most people dread it.

On my end of the business, as a purveyor of aircraft charter, we still provide that original high standard of service. The one constant about aviation, about aerospace, is innovation, and it's wonderful. There's not a single day that you don't get up and somebody has invented something new and different. So many people all around the world are innovators. But again, I believe the most important thing is the client.

I think of the influence of my father. As his prodigy, I became the person I am. A salesman. I'm a purveyor of services. So, when something happens at Le Bas International, no matter if we're rescuing people, delivering goods, orchestrating a musical tour, carrying an elephant, or transporting someone in the public domain, I think, "Woohoo. Did it. That went well." And I feel a buzz. Always.

There's not a place on the planet we haven't been. We've had some of the most loved presidents, entertainers, sports personalities, and private individuals as guests, our customers, for the last five decades. I get a lot of satisfaction from a job well done. I think the buzz I feel is just the human condition celebrating itself and knowing it's shared something and done some good.

I was born in 1956. My parents were incredible people, but in the post-war United Kingdom, you were brought up to be the stiff upper lip, British gentleman. My father was just such a gentleman. He looked like David Niven, very suave, and absolute. As for me, when I was growing up, I was born with clubfeet. Nobody's fault. Genetics, that's just the way it was.

As I grew, I had to undergo orthopedic operations at progressive

intervals. The Royal Sea Bathing Hospital in Margate was an old place, one of the first orthopedic hospitals in the world. The Quaker physician Dr. John Coakley Lettsom founded it on 2nd July 1791. The building was made of stone, not regimental, but ancient-looking. The grounds looked like something out of India, with big courtyards and grassy areas.

When I was three years old, I was a patient there for a good year. Both my feet were in plaster. My bones were broken, and I had steel things put through my toes to bring them out. I had a second operation when I was seven or eight, and that time, I was in the hospital for about eight months. As you get older and grow, the surgeons have to continually correct your bones. I had a third operation when I was about fourteen.

So, where am I going with this?

I was school age, and at that time, parents who wanted the very best for their children were expected to send them away for their education. When I was five, I went to boarding school, and I wasn't seen as exceptionally bright simply because I had spent so much time in hospital. I had ideas, but I couldn't excel. The reason was that I was absent from the classroom. I missed essential building blocks, so all the other kids were ahead of me. I was out of the curriculum. I was out of step with everybody else.

But in every negative, there's a positive, and I always look for the positive. I admit that it takes years of practice, years and years and years of practice to make your mind think like that.

At Bethany School in Goudhurst, Kent, I would sit on a wooden bench built around the trunk of a young oak tree beside the gymnasium on summer evenings. I felt the wind, listened to the stirrings of the leaves. In the distance, other students played football or studied for exams. I could see them, but my attention was elsewhere.

I watched the sky.

In the fading light of sunset, I would first hear the airplane, then see it descending, not fast but slow, with the power pulled back. Then, finally peeling off, the VC-10, arriving from wherever, would head toward London to land.

Tracey Deakin

Where did the planes travel from? Where would they go next? I asked questions that took me outside of myself. I knew my limitations only too well, but these first experiences observing flight left a deep and lasting impression. There was a world outside of me, away from the hospital and apart from school.

I was seven years old when I went on my first solo flight to visit my sister. She was fourteen years my senior, and lived in Libya, just after Gaddafi assumed power.

As I boarded the plane, I was not treated as a child but as an honored guest. Taking my seat, I stared from the window at the myriad of blue lights striping the taxiway. Those blue lights shone over and above the dim overhead illumination inside the cabin.

When I used to watch the planes from my favorite bench at school, I had heard the sound of the plane's engines turning to land. But sitting inside the aircraft as a passenger, I felt the engines turning on the VC-10, and the sound surrounded me.

During the flight, I was invited into the cockpit, and I can still see the crew and instruments as clear as if I were standing there today, the co-pilot, the captain, and all these dials in front of them. I can picture the exact view looking out the cockpit window.

"Welcome aboard, young man. What are you doing? Where are you going?" The captain showed me around the cockpit and asked, "Would you like to do this one day?"

I replied without hesitation, "Wow. Can I stay?"

My break into aviation was born from my curiosity about Manston, the airport near my home. My family lived in Ramsgate, a small town on the southeastern coast of England, about one and a half hours from London.

Manston has a hundred-year-old history, but it is best remembered as a World War II airport in the Battle of Britain, and a big station for the U.S. Air Force. Imagine the airport, fresh from the second World War, built and maintained as a military installation. Manston was a massive airport with nine thousand sixteen feet of runway.

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But just after the war, Manston wasn't busy at all.

Airplanes used to come by, but fairly infrequently. On the weekends sometimes, it was totally quiet. A seagull making an approach on the runway was the important event of the day. It was like, "All right. Here we go. You can do it."

Invicta International operated out of Manston. The company had its own airplanes, the Bristol Britannia, or as they were called, the Whispering Giant of the 1950s, a lovely airplane. One of my favorites.

Hugh Kennard, the gentleman who started Invicta International, was Wing Commander Kennard during the Battle of Britain. He was in charge of the Polish Air Force, and those pilots were crazy flyers. He wanted them to be all together. Don't go anywhere you shouldn't. Don't take unnecessary risks. British, upper lip, remember? The only problem was that's not the way the Poles operated.

As soon as these pilots saw trouble, they would go after it like bees to honey.

"Guys, get back here!" Hugh Kennard would try his best to stop them.

They were like, "No! We need to be where the action is!" And they were off and gone, so he used to have to follow them, corral them all, and haul them back into formation again.

He was shot down three times and survived.

Before Hugh Kennard started Invicta International, he had a company called Silver City. He started Silver City with a gentleman by the name of Freddie Laker. He did a brilliant job at it, and the two were partners for a while before Hugh Kennard founded Invicta International and Freddie created Laker Airways. Laker Airways was the very first airline to operate DC-10s between London, Gatwick, and the States. He was the first to offer low-cost, get-on-an-airplane with service, back-and-forth to the United States.

I was fascinated by the Manston airport, but there was one slight problem.

I was meant to go into my father's business. I was supposed to be a tailor.

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Deakin & Sons of Canterbury was founded by my great-grandfather in 1856. My father managed the two stores: one in Canterbury and the other in Ramsgate. My older brother went into the business.

In the last century, one of the most critical facts of everyday life was that everybody dressed in suits. Suits were king. It didn't matter what you did or who you were. Whether you were a Spivey, a cleaning person, a taxi driver, or a horseman, you were expected to dress properly in uniforms. At the time, suits were all handmade and considered an essential ingredient of a successful public persona. If you weren't dressing smart, you wouldn't be walking through the door.

The Ramsgate and Canterbury stores used to do a lot of business in aviation uniforms for pilots. My father fashioned a hat for me to the exact specifications of the ones made for the pilots for that first flight of mine. I wore my hat, complete with a pilot's badge on it, to fly that day.

The summer I was fifteen was idyllic. I had a canoe. I was down at Ramsgate Harbour every single day to take the canoe out in the ocean. Every single day, I was out there paddling and having the time of my life. Absolutely fantastic.

But in August, I left the canoe, summer, and school behind. My father sent me to Simmonds of Tonbridge to apprentice as a tailor. I went to this shop to learn what was expected of me, and from the start, I felt like a trapped bird.

These were older gentlemen who worked there, some ex-military, the type of people who have served. The highlight of my day was when they sent me up to the stock room to go and find something. I jumped to it, "All right, I'll get it down there in two seconds." That was fun. Everything else was . . .

I worked, and had a room at a boarding house there, but I wasn't getting paid anything. They were all nice people, but I struggled with it. I had this vision . . . I could see myself being on an airplane in Egypt. I could see myself, much like the movies, being elsewhere.

On the weekends, I used to go up to Manston Airport and Invicta

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International's operations building. I'd walk in there and just have a look around, and I used to talk backwards and forwards with Steve, the operations manager for Invicta.

An old World War II Nissan hut building served as the operation center. Out in front was a big concrete ramp, with grass and the main runway up to the left. All the airplanes would come in there to taxi to a stop, and they used to push them back with their nose facing outwards toward operations, all the way down the ramp.

The operations office was expansive, with giant windows that looked over the whole airfield. The ramp was in front of you. A large desk ran along the wall and wrapped around the corner. The crews used to come in directly from their flights or to get their briefing. A telex was a vital piece of equipment.

Everything was interesting to me. The technology. The smell. The stories and information. Where the pilots were going, what interesting people they met, where they were taking people, who were they going to see. How does all this get put together? How do they make money? How does the fuel get in these things? All of that stuff.

I traveled the tight circle between my apprenticeship and my home until one weekend. I happened to go by Invicta's operations office, and I was just about to ask, "What's the possibility of ever getting a job here?"

But before I was able to get the words out, Steve said, "You know, we're actually looking for somebody as an Ops Clerk. Would you like a job?"

On my way back to Tonbridge, I was walking on a cloud.

As a side note, I have high hopes for the future of Manston. In fact, after being closed recently, the airport has just been given permission to reopen again. Through the work of many other people and myself at the Save Manston Association, the airport will hopefully come back to life soon.

I have a vision that Manston will become an important hub fifty years on from now. By that stage, cars will be autonomous, as well as buses, ambulances, trains, and airplanes. And so, there will be no airport parking. No need for any shops. You will just turn up, get on board, and go.

But airports will still be needed in the future. No question.

Currently, all three London airports are so chock-a-block that they consequently raise passenger fares because there's nowhere to land. Then they've got all these cargo airplanes. Cargo is a monster nowadays with Amazon and things like that.

I see Manston as a diamond in the rough. I believe you've got to look fifty years ahead. Not twenty-five, but fifty years. Otherwise, you will run out of space.

Because what so often happens with airports is that two or three years after one is built, everyone decides it's not big enough. So, they renovate the airport again, causing all amount of trouble and congestion.

Long-term planning must be considered. I call it "Full Circle" because of my love of aviation, what it gave me, and my respect for the people I met and worked with there.

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