

# THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE FLIGHT

For us white-knuckle fliers, there's no replacing propellers and open cockpit doors. / by Peter Desbarats



*Desbarats: a preference for the barnstorming romance of commuter planes over the sterility of jumbo jets*

I'm writing this column, as I sometimes do, on my laptop computer at about 12,000 feet somewhere between Toronto and Montreal. For white-knucklers such as myself, the laptop computer is the greatest invention since Scotch, tranquilizers, hypnotism and Via Rail for the treatment of fear of flying. By typing my way through the stratosphere, I've almost been able to forget at times that I'm trapped in a heavy machine supported at an impossible height by the same human ingenuity that produced the faulty axle bearings and power-window motor in my car, the much-repaired washer and dryer in my basement and the upstairs toilet that flushes forever unless you joggle the handle just so.

In fact, my aerophobia, if there is such a word, has grown apace with aircraft technology. I must have been about nine years old when my father treated me on my birthday to my first plane ride from the old airport at Cartierville in suburban Montreal. I was entranced as the tiny aircraft carried me over my miniature neighborhood, with the pilot helping me to find landmarks.

By the 1960s, when I started to fly regularly across Canada and overseas, Air Canada and Canadian Pacific were replacing turboprops with the first generation of jets. The farther I got from the pilot, the less I liked it. By the time the jumbos went into service, I was boarding most flights in a state of resigned, passive funk, clutching my

laptop computer like a security blanket. Even the computer failed me at times and I would sit back from the keyboard, listening to the wings creaking, the rivets popping, the control cables snapping, and imagine, as I'm now doing, the rescuers recovering the microchip from my computer amid the wreckage on the ground and discovering, still locked within it, this (gulp) last column.

Today, I can laugh a little at myself, because I am writing this not in a jumbo but in a Dash-8, with real propellers and pilots. A few hours ago, I was flying in something even smaller between London and Toronto and almost enjoying it. I didn't even bother to unzip the computer from its case as the little Saunders sped through the dawn. On just such a morning, Lindbergh....

The flimsy door between the passenger compartment and the cockpit was open, as it often is on these flights, and I could have sworn that the pilots were enjoying themselves as we clipped the cloud tops north of Hamilton with a sensation of speed that is lost entirely in a jumbo at 30,000 feet.

I'll admit that, at the outset, I approached City Express with trepidation last fall when I learned that a television assignment in Montreal and a complicated sponsorship deal between City Express and the PBS network would force me to use the airline every few weeks. Even the name made me suspicious; it sounded too much like

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Federal Express. I half-expected the new airline to wrap me in brown paper, label me and send me to Montreal by cargo plane overnight.

My introduction to the Saunders, the little turboprop that City Express flies between London and Toronto, was hardly reassuring. The emergency procedures card in the pocket of the seat in front of me stated that the plane was made in Gimli, Manitoba. The last time I had been in Gimli, north of Winnipeg, was to do a television feature on ice fishing. I hadn't noticed, at the time, that the Icelandic-Canadian residents of Gimli were all midgets but they must have been if the Saunders is their idea of a passenger jet.

Inside the Saunders are two lines of single seats. The ones to avoid are near the centre of the plane, perched atop the main wing strut. You can identify these seats because they're higher than the others and because the people sitting in them look like Quasimodo when they disembark.

Many passengers have been heard to ask, on flights to and from Toronto, "Where is the toilet on this plane?" City Express flight attendants have a

favorite answer: "Twenty minutes away, in Toronto [or London, as the case may be]." But it isn't literally true. There is a tiny cubicle with a lidded bucket behind the miniature galley at the back of the plane and passengers in dire straights have been known to try to use it.

Despite all this, and strange as it may seem, I've become attached to City Express and the Saunders. They may not be the last word in airline travel but that isn't necessarily a disadvantage in an era when the last word tends to be a computerized voice telling me and 350 other passengers that our wide-bodied jet is now available for boarding, delayed because of mechanical problems, out of gas, or whatever. City Express is human, if nothing else.

It is a counter clerk in London, during the Air Canada strike, trying to figure out, with a pocket calculator, if we are overweight, then telling Mayor Tom Gosnell, the last passenger to book in, that he's over the limit and will have to stay on the ground. ("Oh my God, you mean I've just bumped the Mayor?" she gasped a few moments later. After a few more sessions

with the calculator, she stuck to her decision, and the Mayor accepted it with unusual grace.)

City Express is peering down the length of the passenger compartment and over the pilots' shoulders at the approaching runway of Toronto Island airport and noticing that one of the pilots is a pretty woman with long brown hair.

And City Express is the terminal at Toronto Island, looking as if it were imported from a prairie airfield of the 1930s or a fighter base during the Battle of Britain. In fact, there's a plaque on the wall that commemorates the Norwegian airmen who trained there during the Second World War. Something of their spirit still clings to the terminal and to me as I walk past the Saunders on the tarmac, put away the white silk scarf and goggles of my imagination, and prepare to board the Dash-8, monstrous and modern by comparison, for the last leg of my flight to Montreal.

As we lift smoothly from the runway, past a breathtaking panorama of downtown Toronto, I notice that the door to the cockpit is closed. I quickly take out the computer and begin this. ■