

THE L - O - N - G D - I - S - T - A - N - C - E COMMUTE

George Finlay spent 15 years in the RAF flying the F4 and Tornado F3 fast jets in an air-defence role then instructing on the Hawk.. Now he is a commercial pilot transporting you and I to our holiday or business destinations all over the world. That involves rather a long journey to his “office.”



Nice wee place Gargunnoch. I'd never heard of it until we moved here. Like many newcomers to the community I commute to work. For the past 5 yrs I have journeyed to London about 40 times a year to report to work flying Jumbos for British Airways. Come with me on a typical trip. Let's go to Chicago!

0645 Time to get up to prepare to set off. Seems like I only got home yesterday (I did!). This is a reasonably late start. I am aiming to catch the 0915 Edinburgh to Heathrow flight. Ideally I would be going for the 1015 flight but I only travel on a space-available basis so it is prudent to have a flight in hand. Pilots arriving late impress neither passengers nor employer! Must make report at 1340 for a 1505 departure.

1100 Baggage hall at Londow Heathrow. There is a captain also waiting to collect his luggage. “Hi, where are you off to?” Chicago! Turns out Graham was also on the Edinburgh flight. He lives in Barnton. I had seen him commuting before but had never met him properly. Nice guy- good! Life at BA is a sea of faces. There are more than 900 pilots on the 747 fleet. I was 18 months on the line before I flew with a pilot for a second trip!

1200 I arrive at Compass Centre – our crew report facility. Time for personal admin – book a few more tickets for the commute, check the flight operations notices for amendments to Standard Operating Procedures, security updates and any other downroute info, remember to submit leave bid etc. I have a high rate of bumping into “mates” today – all ex-RAF pals. There are so many now at BA and only very few still in the mob. Great to see weel kent faces amongst the sea.

1340 Briefing time. Graham agrees to give me the outbound sector. I am very happy with this, as it is a lovely sunny day at Heathrow and will be most pleasant for my “walkround” or external aircraft inspection. When it is “my” sector I fly the aircraft and make all the decisions while Graham, although still captain, performs the duties of non-handling pilot

Operations staff approach us with less good news. Weather

forecast for Chicago is not great. 10 inches of snow on the way but it should be after our arrival if

we go on time. Let's look at the local diversions. Detroit, Fort Wayne, Toronto? All similar forecasts. New York is good. Let's take additional fuel for a diversion to New York. 95 tonnes please! That will take the pressure off. The trouble with snow is that you can't tell whether there will be runways closed for snow clearing or not and what sort of delays will be incurred. And Chicago is one of the busiest airports in the world!

1350 Through BA security and onto the bus. Here we meet the cabin crew. Our standard complement is 15. I recognise Gordon the cabin service director (CSD) and one other. The passenger load is not strong –about half capacity. Most passengers are from this side of the Atlantic. It's the war you know – the Americans have already stopped travelling to a large degree. We are soon to reduce to 1 Chicago flight per day from our current 2.

1415 We arrive at our aircraft G-BNLN, call-sign Golf Bravo November. Up to the flight deck to check that security check certificate is complete and then everyone re-checks his or her own working area. I then check the aircraft maintenance log for defects and history before going for my walkround.

Graham security checks the flight deck and sets up the aircraft systems. Back to the flight deck I load the Flight Management Computer (FMC) with the route, forecast winds and take off parameters. Graham crosschecks all this for any errors I may have entered. The dispatcher presents us with the final load sheet for acceptance and an appropriate power setting for take



off is calculated and entered into the computer. Today our takeoff weight is 305 tonnes. As our maximum takeoff weight is 398 tonnes and Heathrow is long, at sea level and not too hot we can reduce thrust by 25%. This still leaves ample performance for a safe take off whilst significantly reducing engine wear.

As we are expecting no more visits from the ground staff, the flight deck door is now locked. It will remain so until we are on stand in Chicago in some 9 hrs. We shall open it to admit the cabin crew with our refreshments or to discuss any problems the CSD is having. For our own comfort there is a toilet inside the flight deck and indeed a bunk area for use when we have relief crew on longer sectors. The longest flight that I have completed is 14 hrs to Buenos Aires.

1505 Off stand on schedule. Engines start, final checks then



taxi out to the runway. Cleared for take off. Start the clocks, set power. Power set. 80 knots. V1. Rotate. We are doing 160 knots and I pull back on the control column. As we climb away Graham calls "positive rate of climb" and I instruct him to raise the undercarriage.

As we accelerate we retract the flaps and complete the after take off checks. I continue to fly the aircraft to 8 000 ft and engage the autopilot. I closely monitor its performance until we are established at cruise altitude. After level-off we call for Oceanic Clearance and complete loading the FMC including our expected arrival into Chicago.

Today our route is fairly far south so I will miss out on my favourite view of the mountains and glaciers of Southern Greenland. I order lunch then, if only I could, mentally press the fast forward button...

2250 An hour to go. Chicago weather seems OK. Visibility 6 miles, 3 000 ft cloudbase and light snow. No mention of degraded braking action. Down the hill for a radar vectored ILS - a radio beam indicating the runway centreline and glidepath. Weather starting to deteriorate. Still in cloud as we pass 1 000 ft. We see the runway lights at 600 ft and decide to land. There is a covering of snow on the runway. Stopping is no problem with our autobrake antiskid system. Taxiing

however is a little tricky. At anything above 5 kts the aircraft only wants to go in a straight line!

2400 (1800L) Job done. Aircraft is on stand and the shutdown checks and paperwork complete. Another crew will be out in 1 ½ hrs to take this one home. I will do the same tomorrow. The only thing between me and my bed is immigration, baggage reclaim, customs, a bus journey, hotel check-in and last of all a sociable drink! Graham wants to go to the Blues Bar round the corner (it is important to indulge of the local culture!) As it is snowing outside we settle on the hotel bar and slink off to bed at 3am or 9pm depending on how you look at it.

0300L I am awake! Of course I am – it is 9 in the morning to Gargunnockians and therefore my body clock. I look out side to see that despite 8 ins of snow having fallen since our arrival the streets are clear and there are 6 guys within my eyeshot clearing the sidewalks with snow blowers. Revelation – the city is going to work totally in the morning. I am impressed.

0800L Venture out for breakfast. Bloomindales is across the street and does a good breakfast. I can resist its other temptations (unlike my wife!), but this is Michigan Ave's "Magnificent Mile" with all the shopping anyone could possibly want.

If it was warmer I could cycle 2 blocks and then head up the lakeside for miles but I resort to the other great time filler of attempting to read every book in Borders bookshop. Cheap and entertaining!

1400L Retire to bed for a pre-flight nap. Hope to get 2-3 hrs sleep prior to pick up.

Return sector is a similar procedure. Only it is hard as I am going to work at 1 in the morning body clock and it is dark. The one thing to look forward to is the chance of seeing my old pal – the Aurora Borealis. Some nights it seems to be within your grasp just through the window. Tonight it is low in the sky and looks distant.

We make checks on in London at 1030. I catch the 1255 flight back to EDI and am home by 1515 just in time for the girls coming back from school.

That was 55 hrs door to door.....

Hope you enjoyed the trip!