

# AN INCIDENT IN ANDALUSIA



By LOWELL THOMAS



WE WERE FLYING the Moroccan mails, and were on our way from Paris to Fez in an open cockpit, two-seater Breguet. It was after we left Alicante, in Spain, that things began to happen.

Ahead of us is a haze, evidently, a sandstorm. Our pilot, young Paul Noailhat, has on a cloth mask that completely covers his face except for the slits through which he peers. It protects him from the desert sun, and flying sand. Also, it gives him a man-from-Mars appearance.

For an hour or so we fly at seven thousand feet, above the Spanish desert, and then cross a range of barren mountains. We plan to come down for essence at Murcia. But, that city eludes us—for a while. Instead, south of Murcia, just as we are about to fly over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the motor gets tired and starts banging as though it will shake itself loose. We circle as long as we dare and then make a landing in the sand. The pilot hopping out, pulls off his mask, fur-lined boots and flying suit, and strikes off in search of some habitation—hoping to find a telephone, and get

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Alicante to send out a relief plane. My companion, a Latocoere mechanic, who is being transferred from Perpignan to Fez, and I seek the shelter of our lower wing.

Although the desert seems uninhabited, soon people appear, men wearing brown leather aprons, and with heavy curved knives in their hands.

Two hours later Noilhat comes back with news that he found a phone, and that a plane is on its way. In it we hope to fly on to Malaga, then to Tangier, by way of Gibraltar. After that to Rabat, and Fez.

Granada, June 1.

Well, here I am sitting on a balcony at the fabulous Alhambra—of all places. I didn't get to Morocco after all, and at present I am not a bit unhappy about being here on this Moorish balcony. I'm pleased that I'm not somewhere on the Milky Way, strumming a harp.

For months now, while roaming the skyways of Europe, I've spent some time—too much, no doubt—wondering just what it would be like to be in a crash. What would be left of us if the plane went into a nose dive, and the pilot failed to pull us out. Now I know!

When Noailhat returned from his trek across the desert in search of a phone, the three of us stretched out in the shade of the lower wing for another half hour, to

get what relief we could from the furnace-like heat. At two-forty-five we heard the hum of the relief plane, and a moment later saw it circling a mile above. Noailhat seized a pile of fagots he had gathered, held them under the engine, opened a valve, soaked them with gasoline, touched a match to them, and sent up a column of smoke as a signal to let the other pilot know the direction of the wind, and where to land. In the second plane were the chief of pilots from Alicante and a top mechanic. Instead of trying to fix our ship, they switch the mail and all our baggage into their plane, so we can hurry on without further delay, to "Gib", Tangier, Rabat and Fez.

In a few minutes the five of us transfer the mail and Noailhat, the mechanic from Perpignan, and I are in the second ship ready to take off. Our faces by now ablaze from flying across the desert, and from our unscheduled stop in the desert. Andalusia, in summer, is as hot as the Sahara.

### Just In Time

Waving adios to the chief of pilots and his mechanic, across the desert we bounce along a fairly level stretch for a couple of hundred yards. Beyond that are boulders, olive trees, and a mule. Nearer and nearer come the boulders, trees and mule. Still we fail to leave the ground, although we are running with throttle wide open. Noailhat cuts the switch just in time.

Swinging 'round we taxi back. There is a heated discussion in French, with the chief from Alicante. Noailhat insists that he had used every bit of power he has. The chief turns to the Perpignan mechanic sitting in the rear cockpit between my knees, asks him whether it will make

much difference if he climbs down and waits a few days; and, then tells him to climb out. But as he is throwing his leg over the cockpit the chief changes his mind, tells him to climb back, and orders Noailhat to take a longer run this time. Maybe, maybe we'll get into the air. If so, fine. If not—then the mechanic will have to get out and proceed later.

Once more we go roaring over that bumpy stretch of desert. This time with better luck—so it seems, for a moment. Two thirds of the way across the flat toward the olive trees, we bounce into the air and start to climb. My companion from Perpignan smiles and gives a sigh of relief. He's anxious to get on to Fez, and not have to wait over in Andalusia. A second or so later we are three hundred feet or so above the olive trees. But we're not climbing! We start a turn to the right, and there's something about it that tells me we're in trouble. Turning in the air, you always bank either one way or the other. That's one of the elemental laws of travel in three dimensions. But, we are turning flat! And losing speed. A split second later she noses down. The eyes of the mechanic, facing me are wide with terror. He screams. Then the crash. A terrific shock and a roar.

From blazing sunlight we are in a world of blackness. Not a physical blackout. Diving into the desert we had thrown up the earth like the eruption of a volcano. The moment we hit the pilot yells, the mechanic yells, and for all I know I may be yelling too. At any rate, we all have the same thought—that the plane is in flames.

We all three jump at the same time. Dive would be a better word. Head first from that open cockpit. Never in my life,

except maybe one midnight in Berlin when a machine gun started spitting, did I move with such speed. Scrambling to my feet I stagger a few yards to get clear of the plane, expecting the fuel tanks to explode. But the pilot and mechanic stay where they fall. Judging from their groans they can't get up. While the engine makes unearthly noises, death gasps, gasoline pouring from the tanks, in cataracts. Luckily they don't explode. Probably because the pilot switched off his ignition the moment she nosed over. This was not his first crash.

I got to Noailhat first. He had been in the front cockpit, the 'golden chair', right behind the engine, so I imagined he'd be in worse shape. He was holding his head. I pulled the mask off his face and saw a bulge on his forehead. He was also clutching his chest, as though he might be injured internally. After hauling him out of range of the gas tanks in case they went up, I picked up the mechanic, who also seemed to be in a bad way, with blood streaming down his face.

In a few minutes, the crew of the relief plane reach us, from where they were a quarter of a mile away.

As each minute passes, the mechanic, who had been sitting in the rear cockpit with his knees interlocked in mine, grows weaker and weaker and his face begins to puff up; both eyes swollen shut. I stretch him out in the shade of one of the smashed wings. By now the gasoline has all run into the sand and there's no longer danger of fire.

#### Counted His Own Pulse

For the first five or ten minutes after the crash I felt no effects. Apparently no bones broken. I had been too busy, to think of anything but my less lucky com-

panions. But now that the airmen with the other plane have gone off in search of water, things begin to swim before my eyes and I crumple too. Sven Hedin, in Stockholm, had given me a copy of his 'My Life As An Explorer', and the night before, in an estaminet near the Marseilles aerodrome, I had been reading the chapter on where he lost his way in the Central Asian Desert of Taklakaman, and of the days when they struggled across the sand-dunes without water and food. How he had lost hope of getting out alive, and as he grew weaker and weaker counted his own pulse as a scientist might watch the development of some laboratory experiment. I do the same, and find it doing the 'double-quick', almost too fast to count. Then the aches and pains start to develop. But, I also feel a glow of exhilaration. In fact, I am hilarious, and want to laugh, laugh in the idiotic way that I had on another occasion, when gas knocked me out on the Italian front. Yes, when I look at the plane and see how wrecked it is, I want to do a Highland Fling. It seemed incredible that any of us could have gotten out of that one alive.

The shock had smashed the tail assembly and broken the fuselage as you would snap a stick over your knees. The wings crushed and twisted. The undercarriage and wheels flattened as though there never had been any. The mail and baggage compartments, shaped like torpedoes and suspended from the lower wing, smashed to smithereens, As for the Moroccan mails, they are scattered over the desert. The propeller seems to have vanished into thin air. (Expect a piece about eighteen inches long that I still have on the wall at home). Even the engine is broken in two. Every part of that World War I

Breguet wrecked except the two cockpits.

Providence had smiled on us. When you go into a nose-dive at three hundred feet, generally you are for it. I probably would have danced for joy, had it not been for my companions.

While waiting for the water, I took snapshots of the crash. I had been holding my Graphlex camera, so it suffered little from the shock. But the pilot and mechanic were looking so miserable that I didn't take any pictures of them.

When water arrived we poured some of it down the throat of the mechanic, who now was unconscious. A motherly Spanish peasant woman moistened her apron and held it against his forehead and washed the blood off his face.

We piled the scattered mail in a heap. Then in a springless Spanish cart, drawn by two ponies, we were hauled across the desert to the little town of Alcantarilla in the Province of Murcia, about fifty miles inland from Cape Palos and the seaport of Cartagena. I had ended my jaunt from Paris to Fez in a valley between ranges of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in Andalusia.

In Alcantarilla they took us to a little Spanish inn called the "Hospedaje y Casa de Comidas," where they gave us cognac and a bed. Several Spanish doctors came, dressed my companions' wounds, closed

their shutters to darken the rooms, and forbade anyone to enter. The doctors said they were sure they would recover shortly and would be well taken care of at a local hospital. It was so hot in Alcantarilla, I found it difficult to sleep. So I caught a night train for the mountains.

Ever since reading Washington Irving's *Alhambra*, as a youngster, I had wanted to visit the romantic, Moorish city of Granada. That dream comes true, unexpectedly, thanks to our little incident in the desert. As I tossed sleeplessly in the heat at the 'Hospedaje y Casa de Comidas,' in Alcantarilla, I had visions of sitting beside a Moorish fountain in the Court of the Lions, with breezes blowing in from the snow-capped mountains and a languorous Andalusian beauty strumming a guitar. Here I am in Granada, at the Alhambra. No maiden with a guitar. But, it's a wonderful world.

Some months later I had a letter from Noailhat. He had recovered and all but forgotten the crash. The mechanic okay too.

Since then I have flown 'round and 'round the world more times than I can remember, but the nearest I came to joining Gabriel's Squadrons—or joining the kiwis in Hades—was that Latocoere flight from Paris to Fez with the Moroccan mail.