

Chapter 1: I Thought I Was There But I Wasn't

“We’re going to crash into the ocean, and Stephen, when I tell you, go to the back of the plane, kick open the door, and get out!” On August 3, 1964, my uncle Herbert Walker and I were flying a rebuilt WWII twin-engine Beechcraft on a pitch-black night over the west coast of Africa. I asked him how he planned to get out when the water came rushing in, and he said, “Don’t worry about me. Just get the shark repellent and take care of yourself.”

I immediately experienced overwhelming fear, hopelessness, and anger, beyond what words can describe. I lost it, and with a clear picture of my mother at my funeral wearing a black armband, I started swinging my fists at him, screaming, “You’re killing me!” I could not have imagined the events leading up to that moment and what followed.

At two years old, I vividly remember wearing a chocolate-brown outfit and standing with my grandmother across the street from the hospital during the birth of my brother, Michael. I felt great anxiety, resentment, and jealousy. Sibling rivalry is not uncommon, but bickering lasting twenty-eight years is not good. The sibling war had at least one ceasefire in 1949 when Michael was stricken with polio during the epidemic which caused many lives to be lost. He was given a 10 percent chance to live. Amazingly, he recovered. I went to the hospital with Dad to pick him up. On the way home, my brother and I sat in the back seat, and I had both of my arms wrapped around him. That made my dad cry.

Around age five, a fascinating event took place over several nights as I was in bed getting ready to go to sleep. Lights out and wide awake with my head on the pillow, I would look up toward the ceiling and get a clear visual image in my mind’s eye of lots of people moving around and having a good time. Though I couldn’t see any faces, I was aware of much activity and excitement. I had no doubt that the people I “saw” were in a different place than me. My parents never talked about spiritual things around the house, yet I remember saying, “God, what’s going on up there?” Each time this occurred, my curiosity was stirred to the point that I would ask the same question but got no answer. On one occasion, I was so excited and eager to find out that I said, “God, I’m willing to trade my life down here for what’s going on up there!” No reply. I felt no fear when I made the offer, and, if anything, I felt disappointed that I couldn’t join “the party.”

A few years later, I had recurring cold-sweat nightmares centered on a terrible fear of getting married. My parents would have to calm me down and assure me that I didn’t have to get

married. I didn't know where that fear came from, especially since my parents, aside from typical squabbles and making up quickly, seemed to have a regular, content marriage. Fortunately, the episodes finally went away.

My parents planned for me to have an orthodox bar mitzvah at age thirteen to honor my mother's father, who had started a Jewish synagogue in the Bronx. The usual timeframe to prepare is six months; however, they had me go for two years. During my studies, I learned to read and write Hebrew. They also taught many stories about Jewish history. When the rabbi read about the exodus of the Jews enslaved in Egypt, I had a mildly mystical experience when I heard the instructions Moses gave to the people. He told them they had to slaughter an innocent lamb and smear some of the blood over the doorposts of their houses. In that way, the coming angel of death would pass over them. At that moment, I vividly felt a warm aliveness from deep inside me, unlike anything I had felt before. Then I had a powerful impression that there was something much more to the story.



My bar mitzvah, holding Torah

Just before I started high school, we moved to the fine suburb of Roslyn, Long Island. By then, Dad, who had started his own business, was doing very well. For me, it was golf at the country club, a live-in maid, and my own new Chevy convertible. Our neighbors, who owned the legendary Colony Record Shop in Manhattan, invited our family to their son's bar mitzvah. The

impressive guest list included baseball great Mickey Mantle, Sammy Davis Jr. and Billy Daniels, who were starring in Broadway's Golden Boy, and the world-famous Killer Joe Dance Team.

My dad worked many long, hard hours. Mom was often out shopping or at the country club, doing her thing. I guess I needed to find some ways to get attention. The late, renowned Michael Crichton was in my history class, and, fortunately, he said NO when I asked if I could copy from him on a test. Also, an intercom announcement for me to go to the principal's office occurred nearly every week in my homeroom class. Each time, everyone would laugh, wondering how I would get out of it. I usually did.

When we first moved to Roslyn, I shared a bedroom with my brother, Michael. After many protests, I finally got my own bedroom. It had no window shades or covers, and the bright sun would wake me up very early. I complained profusely, to no avail, so I spray-painted the window black. When my mother walked in, she took off one of her shoes and sent it crashing through the window. It was a frigid winter, and I was so upset that I intentionally left my door open, causing the heating bills to go way up—payback. One morning, I was under a bunch of blankets when my mother and sister Carol came in. Mom said, "Oh my God, maybe he's dead."

Carol said, "Do you think he could survive under all that snow?"

I then realized that a heavy snowstorm had taken place during the night and covered me, so I remained very still as they were going through panic and guilt, loving every moment. When Mom said, "I'm responsible for killing him; it's all my fault," I stuck my head out of the blankets, and she gasped and turned pale. Soon after, there were shades on the windows.

Smoking pot was the cool social thing to do while I was in high school. So, of course, I jumped in. During that time, I had an emergency appendectomy. When my mom came to the hospital and asked if there was anything that needed to be done for me at home, I asked her to please water my marijuana plants that I had been secretly growing in the backyard. She actually agreed. What a nice mom!

Life then was so carefree that I stayed home and attended Hofstra College (now Hofstra University). Another craze at the time was taking LSD. I did my second trip with some friends, and it was so potent that we all felt like we could completely lose it. I called a psychiatrist friend in New York City who invited us to come over so he could keep an eye on us. It was nighttime. I was driving on the Long Island Expressway when suddenly I let out a terrified scream, "Help, I can only see two dimensions! The road looks like a TV." The thought of crashing flashed

through my mind. Fortunately, my friends were able to guide me off the road so someone else could drive. It was a long and strange night. I never did that again.

At Hofstra, the cafeteria was the place to hang out. I noticed a guy with very long hair who wore the loudest clothing outfits of anyone around. At that time, it really stood out. I was curious to know his story, so I introduced myself. It turned out he was an aspiring actor taking some courses in the drama department. Plus, he was very intelligent. We became friends. I was concerned that this struggling actor did not starve. I would sometimes invite him over to my house to feed him lunch. Once in a while, I would bring him to the country club for some encouragement. We made a little fun bet on the putting green. I won and told him that, of course, he didn't have to pay. He insisted.

One day, someone approached me in the cafeteria who referred to my actor friend and said he noticed I was hanging around with a rich kid. I took offense and said that just because this guy didn't have much money, they shouldn't put him down. Then he asked if I had ever been to his house. I hadn't and assumed from the way he looked that he was living in a little studio apartment. When I asked, he invited me to his home. I was beyond shocked! His family lived in a very exclusive area on the water, with a huge, magnificent yacht right in the backyard dock. On the walls in the house were original Rembrandt and Van Gogh paintings. He told me how much he appreciated that I liked him as a friend, not knowing his family background, which I then kept under the radar.

Throughout college, I had no job, no social security card, no responsibility, and no accountability. I vowed never to work, thinking life was so good, why bother? I also had the ability to socialize easily. I thought I was *THERE*.

My uncle, nicknamed Tailspin Tommy, was a WWII Flying Tigers hero and barnstormer. In his air show finales, he would intentionally crash planes into walls and buildings (twenty-three intentional, twenty-seven total crashes). I idolized my flamboyant uncle. In 1964, Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton of the UK royal family arranged with my uncle to fly one of two rescue mission planes to Premier Moïse Tshombe in the Belgian Congo, where countless people were being killed during the Congo revolutions. It was the summer between my junior and senior years. My uncle invited me to go along with his friend, Joe Walton, who was a private pilot. I was thrilled and thought it would be a chance-of-a-lifetime adventure.

I was living in a bubble, and if I'd had any awareness of reality, I would have caught several clues along the way beforehand and never have gone. A few months before the trip, my uncle took his lady friend and me to an airfield in Blairstown, New Jersey. The plan was that she was going to make her first parachute jump, and then we would all go to another airfield to see an airshow. After she landed, my uncle turned to me and said, "You're next." That was a complete shock, and how I let him talk me into putting on a parachute with no training or warning remains beyond me. I jumped using a ripcord that automatically opened the chute when I got out. The ride down was exhilarating; however, the excitement upon landing lasted only a moment. As soon as I tried to get up, I realized my knee was injured, which turned out to be torn ligaments. That required six weeks on crutches.



My parachute jump—no warning, no training, torn knee ligaments, six weeks on crutches

While waiting for the planes to be upgraded with the required modifications for long-distance travel, something very bizarre happened. One day while listening to my car radio, the announcer said the broadcast was coming from Roberts Field in Monrovia, Liberia. It was eerie and portended life and death situations to follow. I later learned that radio waves could be reflected to earth from the ionosphere by a phenomenon called "skip."

My parents, who were reading about all the horrors happening there, vehemently protested my going. The battle got so heated that I had to be rushed to a doctor with an emergency nosebleed. My parents and I agreed to follow the doctor's advice on whether to make the trip. Unfortunately, he said I was so stressed out from thinking I wouldn't get to go that it would be

better if I went. Soon after, I got a severe flu which kept me down for a week. I had never had the flu in summer. It did, however, likely wind up saving my life.

The planes required several months to rebuild. In order to fly long distances over water, the eight passenger seats in the cabin were removed and replaced with four 55-gallon drums for fuel. So, Lord Malcolm, his son Niall, and Ina Blitz, a girl I had arranged to go, left a week before us on the other plane. Our first stop was Gander, Newfoundland, and we landed at night with one engine out. The front strut (shock absorber) was damaged and took a few days to fix. When I was told that we would sleep on a metal bench on the airport hangar floor instead of at a hotel, I realized the trip would be very different from what I had imagined.

The next stop would be an eleven-hour trip over the ocean to the Azores in the Atlantic Ocean. After all the cabin gas barrels were filled, a gas leak occurred. While Joe Walton was working on the repairs, my uncle said to make sure there were no sparks; otherwise, we'd all be blown sky-high. More reality was setting in. Even with full reserve tanks, we were still below minimum fuel reserves. We learned that Lord Malcolm had chosen to go via Greenland and Iceland, which required much less fuel. I appealed to my uncle to take the same route; however, he took stubbornness to a new level and insisted on the way he had planned. We left in the dark in a no-visibility storm. The plane was so overweight that I had to move from my seat in the back and completely drape myself over the gas cans in the pilot's cabin.



Joe Walton is fixing a dangerous gas leak before our long ocean trip. The cabin seats were replaced with barrels of fuel.



The plane was so overweight at takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland, that I had to move from the rear seat and drape myself over fuel barrels!

Even then, we used all the runway to barely get off the ground and couldn't climb over 700 feet. Suddenly, all five of our radios went out, and Joe and I were told that it was all over if they didn't come back on by themselves or if we got blown off course. Surely my uncle knew what to do. Words can't describe my hopeless feeling when he said it was beyond his control. Joe, an experienced pilot, insisted I go up to the copilot seat so he could go to the back to take tranquilizers. Death was staring us in the face. After five-plus very long hours, my uncle attempted to call a radar ship (Ocean Station Delta), and, to our total shock and amazement, the radios spontaneously came back on. They confirmed we were still on course and wouldn't die. Escape From Death #1.



Me flying copilot between the Azores and Canary Islands in the Atlantic

We never found the radio problem, and we encountered no issues in the next two stops (Canary Islands and Dakar). However, in another no-visibility storm between Dakar, Senegal, and Monrovia, Liberia, we lost all the radios again, and this time they did NOT come back. We flew five and a half hours using the compass course of our pre-flight plan. We did not know where we were or anything about changes in wind direction. If there was no cloud break or we drifted into a mountain, life was over. I was terrified. With zero visibility, we descended to 3,000, 2,000, 1,000 feet. Fear overwhelmed me. We had about one minute to find out if we would survive. In a surreal moment, we broke out of the clouds at 600 feet in direct line with the runway of Spriggs Payne Airport on the outskirts of Monrovia. In those conditions, the odds of that happening were virtually zero! I desperately wanted to land and recover; however, my uncle continued flying for another twenty minutes to land at Roberts Field International Airport. That airport was the very place from where I had strangely heard the radio broadcast in my car before the trip. Escape #2.

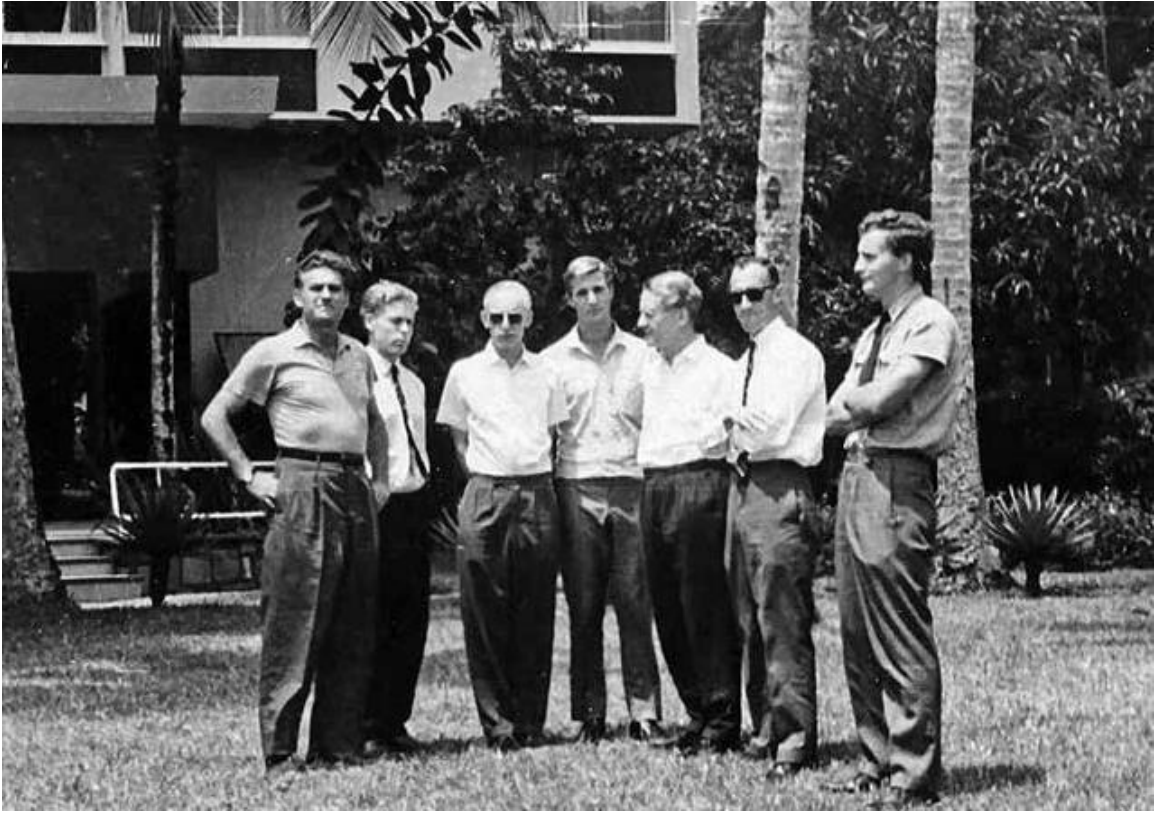
In the airport tower, we were told that Lord Malcolm's plane had left from that airport a week earlier, was missing, and had assumably crashed! While reviewing Malcolm's flight plan, my uncle saw 13,000-foot Mt. Cameroon (usually covered with clouds) on the tower's map that was NOT on our map. Then he told me that the next day he had planned to take the same route to Douala, Cameroon, and we probably would have had the same fate. If my uncle hadn't chosen to land at Roberts Field, we would not have known until it was too late. I had to be rushed to the infirmary for tranquilizers to calm my fears and guilt! We stayed overnight, and a man who heard about what had happened invited us to be guests in his home. He had a television, and

some kids from the neighborhood came by to watch one of the first available programs in the area. They were so cute and fascinated by what they saw that I felt a momentary break from all the stress. Then an adult neighbor came in. He pulled my uncle and me aside to warn us that our host was an escapee from the Nazi regime. My uncle and I took turns staying awake all night. I couldn't make this stuff up! Escape #3.

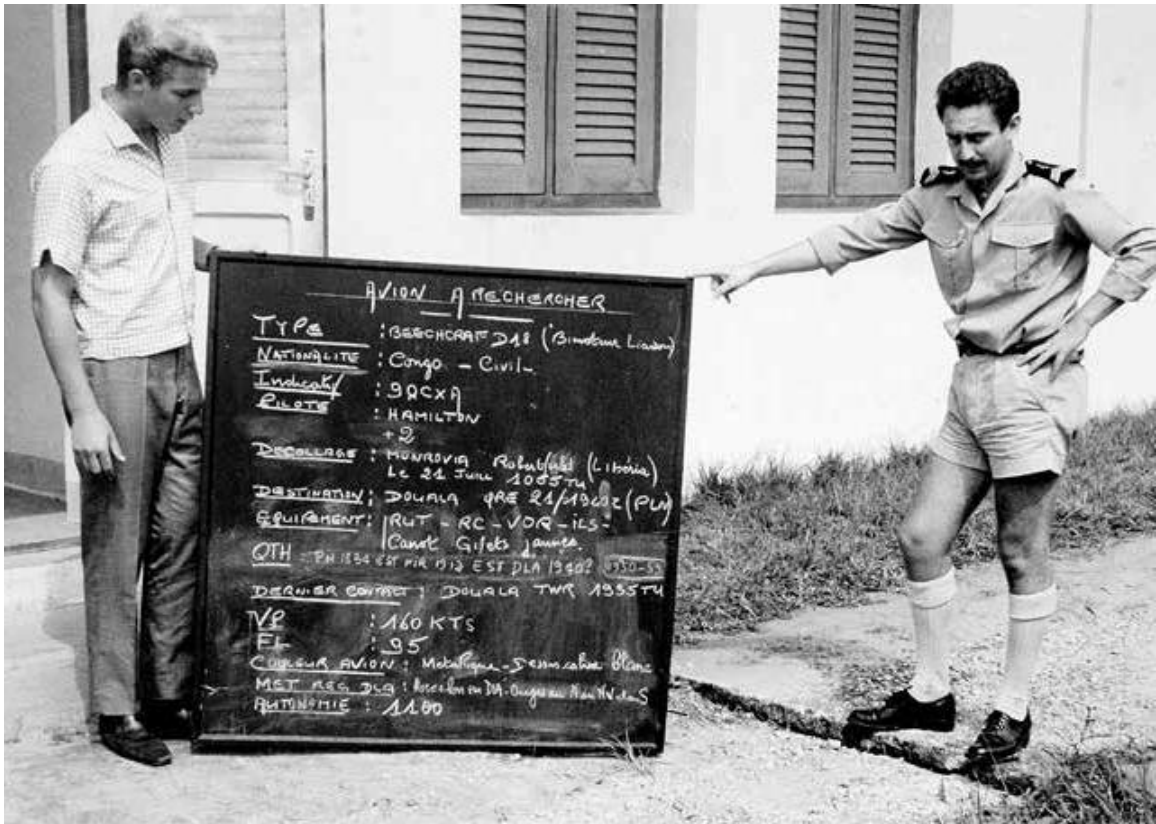
Joe Walton's final destination was Monrovia, so then it was just my uncle and me. We changed our plans to go further down the coast to avoid Douala. It was nighttime as we approached Libreville, Gabon. The tower attendant told us the airport had closed without warning and that the nearest open airport was Douala. We asked him to shoot up red flares, which we never saw. My uncle confirmed what I already knew—we didn't have enough fuel to get there and were going to crash. That's when I lost it and started swinging my fists and screaming. I was out of control when words unexpectedly came up from deep inside me: "God, if you get me down from here alive, I'll do anything you want!" I had no idea where that came from or who I was talking to.

To my complete surprise, the clouds parted like the Red Sea. In the middle of my uncle trying to contain my hysteria and fly the plane, I did a double-check on the five empty gas tanks, and when I turned the dial to the last one, the gauge moved a little, which gave a glimmer of hope. It was all a blur. We touched down in Douala on fumes, and as soon as we landed, the storm clouds returned. We were then informed that was the first cloud opening in two weeks! I kissed the ground with copious tears pouring down my face. Although I sensed something beyond had happened to save our lives, I was in deep shock. Escape #4.

In Douala, we met Malcolm's brother, the Duke of Hamilton, and two other family members. They were part of a search party for the missing plane, which sadly was found two years later. We then flew to our final destination, Leopoldville in the Congo. Just to add a little drama as we were landing, my uncle cut in front of a plane riddled with bullet holes in the engines. He was angrily scolded by the tower attendant. Welcome to the Congo! By then, I was a basket case and declined the invitation to meet with Premier Tshombe.



Search team for Lord Malcolm Hamilton's missing plane: Uncle Herbert (left), Ambassador Edward Warner (3rd from left), me (center), Duke of Hamilton (on my left), and other family members



Details in French of the plane search



Uncle Herbert meeting with Belgian Congo Premier Moïse Tshombe



My uncle and me in the Congo with workers from Sabena Airlines

After returning home, I learned that the search story was all over the international news, and my parents hadn't known if I was still alive. Then came my gut-wrenching call to the mother of the girl I had sent on the other plane to say that her daughter wouldn't be coming back. I don't think I even realized at the time how much it affected me that I lived and she died. The toll of these horrific events started a nine-year downhill spiral in my life.

Nephews of Lost Peer Search Cameroon Peak

Special to The New York Times

DOUALA, Cameroon, Aug. 13—Two nephews of the missing Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton set off to scale the 13,350-foot Cameroon Mountain today with fading hopes of finding a trace of their uncle's plane. It disappeared more than three weeks ago on a flight to the Congo.

Diarmaid Douglas-Hamilton, 24 years old, who is enrolled at Harvard Graduate School this fall, and his brother, Iain, 21, an Oxford student, left their base camp at Buea this morning. They were led by an African guide and four porters.

The 55-year-old former Conservative Member of Parliament was an accomplished pilot with more than 7,000 hours' flying time, most of it with the Royal Air Force. During World War II he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He recently lived in the United States at 25 Ives Road, Hewlett, L. I.

Also missing are Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton's son, Niel, 22, who was copilot, and Joy Blitz, a teacher from New York who was hitching a lift.

August 14, 1964 *New York Times* article (one of many) about missing plane search