

# A higher calling

*When you're Chief Test Pilot for BAe Systems you've got one of the best jobs in aviation – but **Derek Reeh** chucked it in to fly for the Mission in Africa*



'We're in the wrong place!' Not exactly the words I'd expected to hear from my first passengers after completing a safe, albeit indifferent, landing at the Samburu South airstrip in the shadow of the 17,000ft twin peaks of Mount Kenya, some 100 miles north east of Nairobi. My first reaction was, 'You're having me on'; my second, on realising that they were serious, was 'How could this have possibly gone wrong?' When it had been allocated to me a week previously, the trip had appeared very straightforward – fly to Samburu, drop off six passengers, wait two or three hours and then bring one of the passengers back to Nairobi. Even though this was a simple, uncomplicated task I had prepared for it ultra-diligently. After all, it was to be my 'first solo' without the benefit of another experienced pilot sitting next to me. I checked my destination; made sure (several times) the co-ordinates had been correctly plotted on the map and the fuel accurately calculated; loaded the GPS the day before and again confirmed the correct destination co-ordinates – what could possibly go wrong?

I arrived at the MAF hangar at 6:30am to pre-flight the aircraft. My passengers arrived at 7:20am. They all worked for World Vision – a major worldwide Christian charity with a very

strong purpose of supporting children in the developing world: one was Tim Andrews, the Kenya Project Director of World Vision, who was hosting the President of World Vision Korea, Dr Sam Park. I was taking these two VIPs plus their staff to the opening of a new school: part of a 15-year, \$3,000,000 regional development programme funded by World Vision Korea, in Lorroki – an area in the Samburu district of Kenya. The weather in Nairobi wasn't great, broken cloud at 1,000 – 1,500 ft above the aerodrome. After a careful passenger briefing, followed by a prayer asking God to help us as individuals to be worthy of His service, we were airborne shortly after 8:00am. Most of the flight was in cloud, but as expected the weather started to clear approaching the destination and, during the descent, we saw the impressive sight of Mount Kenya 15 miles away on the left side of the aircraft, with its peaks hidden in an overcast sky. By landing, the sun was shining – and then my passengers spoke...

Why we were where we were wasn't as important as determining where the World

Vision team wanted to go and whether we had the fuel to get there. Fortunately, Samburu South is the airstrip for one of Kenya's major game parks – there was mobile phone coverage. A few frantic phone calls between World Vision staff determined that we needed to be in Maralal Kisima, an airstrip some 60 miles to the north-west and in a different part of the Samburu district. A call on the HF radio back to MAF's operations department determined that, if needed, I could get fuel on the way home at Nanyuki, an airfield about 70 miles north of Nairobi.

Arriving at Maralal, 35 minutes late, my VIP passengers were met at the aircraft steps by a high-powered team of

Kenyan dignitaries – the MP for the area (who is also a government minister), the District Commissioner plus a host of local officials and leaders. I had imagined that I'd be left to wait by the aeroplane. However, I was 'kidnapped' ('come on pilot, you come with us' – for the rest of the day I was 'pilot') to go with the VIP team to the school opening. We then embarked on a nine-mile drive, starting on rough roads which deteriorated to even rougher tracks, and then across country, before arriving at the school building set on an isolated ridge surrounded by rough pastoral land inhabited mainly by herds of goats. Approaching the school we were greeted by a host of schoolchildren, varying in age from about 4 to 11, dressed in British-looking school uniform. They formed an aisle, which we walked through, as they sang to us in the local Samburu language.

The new brick-built school building had two large classrooms, equipped with wooden desks, and an office. The roof was of corrugated iron with large water collection tanks, fed by guttering and pipes, at two

*'You have to expect the unexpected, and then deal with the new situation appropriately and safely'*

## Change and challenge

Armed with an aeronautical engineering degree Derek Reeh joined the RAF and flew Jaguars on an operational squadron, later becoming a test pilot. In 1985 he joined BAe Systems and was involved in development work on several aircraft including the Tornado and the Typhoon. He was appointed Chief Test Pilot in 1995 and Director of Flight Operations in 1997.

In 2004 Derek felt compelled to make an immediate radical change in his life, and to use the skills and experience he had gained in 30 years of professional flying to help people in the developing world. The Mission Air Fellowship recruited him as a pilot based in Nairobi.

Going from agile, supersonic military aircraft using mile-long tarmac runways to flying GA aircraft into rough fields was, he said, a serious professional challenge. Moving from a comfortable English village to one of the poorest parts of the planet also has its share of challenges for Derek and his wife Janet, a teacher.

corners. The children all live in small communities in the surrounding area and it looked as though most of the parents, mainly clothed in Samburu tribal dress, had come to support the event. There were ceremonies of ribbon-cutting and tree-planting, followed by two hours of speeches by the VIPs. All the Kenyan officials, especially the government minister, encouraged parents to send their children to school. The school statistics tell an interesting story: in the nursery age group there are 85 pupils (47 boys and 38 girls); by year five, this has plummeted to only 13 (10 boys and 3 girls) – daughters are often sold at the age of 11 in exchange for goats and cows, an illegal practice in modern Kenya, but a cultural norm that is difficult to change. Tim Andrews, in his speech, outlined the purpose and mission of World Vision: 'our vision for every child – life in all its fullness', which means in practical terms the opportunity for education, clean water, medical treatment, and proper nutrition. Dr Park gave a stimulating speech on the benefits of education, citing his own life as an example – an orphan who was forced at the age of 14 to be a child soldier in the communist North Korean army during the Korean War of the early 1950s. He escaped, was a 'street boy' in Seoul, before being saved (both in a spiritual and bodily sense) by the work of US missionaries. I felt so privileged to

*Former Head of Flight Operations for BAe Systems Derek Reeh now loads his own Caravan on remote dirt airfields – and loves it*

see at first hand the work of one of MAF's major mission partners and be part of MAF's facilitation of their life-changing work.

Towards the end of the speeches it started to rain torrentially. No immediate problem, until we started to drive back across country when our 4x4 got stuck in the mud – a good time to stay close to the VIPs. We were finally rescued after 30 minutes of pushing and shoving in the mud. Back in Nairobi, I now own a little bit of Samburu – the mud on my boots and trousers.

I had expected a very simple first solo operational flight. I had planned everything down to the smallest detail – or so I thought. What actually happened was totally unexpected, but just confirms that mission aviation is no different from any other part of aviation. While professionalism demands that you think beyond the simple confines of the flight, you can't plan for every possible contingency – you have to expect the



unexpected, and then deal with the new situation appropriately and safely.

Finally, why did we fly initially to Samburu South and not Maralal? The World Vision staff member who made the flight booking with MAF Kenya Operations had fixated on the word Samburu – he got what he asked for – unfortunately, it wasn't what he wanted. Nevertheless, the VIPs arrived where they

needed to be, and the ceremonies went ahead as planned. While it wasn't what I would have asked for, the misunderstanding certainly made it an exciting and memorable 'first operational flight'. ■

*\*You can contact the Mission Air Fellowship on 01303 850950. See their website at [www.maf-uk.org](http://www.maf-uk.org)*



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