Little Lessons From History

by Bruce Taylor

CHAPTER 3: A Whale of a Time

I was TPF Systems Manager at KLM from the spring of 1976 till the autumn of 1986: more than 10 years. The first 8 of those years were extremely exciting, challenging and rewarding until the Generalists in senior management got the upper hand. However, we shall come back to the latter point later.

One of the most interesting and challenging things we did in the years from 1976 to 1984 was to successfully install many copies of KLM's reservations and departure control systems for other airlines around the world. KLM had already installed the initial system for Garuda in Indonesia, before I arrived on the scene, and in 1976 they were in the process of finishing the installation at Iranair in Teheran. Hence, I arrived on the scene towards the end of the Iranair project with the cutover imminent. However, the Iranair systems people were still in Amsterdam being trained and two of my people were in Teheran, together with a larger group of TPF applications and user people, finalising the set up, constructing the database and trying to get all the links working. The two biggest problems we had had were sand and mice. The new computer building was in the middle of a vast construction site; one of the Shah's prestige projects on the outskirts of Teheran. It had been immaculately designed and built in record time but, unfortunately, two things had been overlooked. Firstly the doors for getting machinery in and out of the building were too small for the size of the IBM CPU's being installed; secondly, the wrong size windows had been ordered. Hence, when the IBM truck arrived, they had to knock out part of a wall to get everything in, which created a lot of dust and debris. That did not matter too much, since the sand was blowing into the building through all the holes where the windows should have been anyway. None of that would have been a problem either, if they had not unpacked all the crates and exposed everything to the elements. Once all the holes were properly fitted with windows, the wall rebuilt and the building cleaned out, everything was connected up and switched on. It worked, but needless to

say, we had a lot of trouble with the air filters and the air conditioning: things were constantly overheating and switching themselves off or going up in smoke. Next we discovered that there was a thriving colony of mice happily settled under the raised floor of the computer room and they seemed to think the cables a real delicacy. After a few short-circuits, that problem was solved quite easily: we got a cat…

That system for Iranair cutover late in 1976 and ran happily till the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, when it was cycled down and switched off. All the TPF people who did not emigrate, went underground and kept a low profile. After 3 months, when things had quieted down a bit, they regrouped, switched everything on, cycled through about 100 days of file maintenance and the system ran happily for another 20 years under ACP8! In December 1999, with all their reservations successfully converted to being a hosted carrier in the SITA Gabriel system in Atlanta (which is incidentally a Unisys USAS system, not TPF), the world's last operational ACP system was cycled down, switched off and dismantled forever.

Immediately following the Iranair installation, hence in 1977, we did the same thing for Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) in Karachi. Many of the problems experienced were the same, such as ensuring a clean computer room, but here we had a major new challenge. Iran, under the Shah, although an Islamic country to the core, was relatively free, tolerant and westernised. Alcohol was available in abundance and the Dutch could all get the Heineken and Amstel they desired whenever they wanted it and in any quantities they wanted it. With dinner we had a great selection of wines to choose from. In Pakistan that was definitely not the case. In that impoverished and intolerant land alcohol was not available in any form, except that foreign, non-Muslim, registered guests in international hotels could order beer in small quantities (2 quarter litre bottles per registered guest per day)

to be delivered to their rooms and not to be consumed outside of the rooms. Delivery took 1 to 2 hours, but sometimes never arrived at all. Hence, we took to ordering the maximum amount for everyone first thing every day and checking and reordering after lunch time when the hotel staff shifts changed. This beer was of some unknown origin and did not contain much alcohol (how much is impossible to know since none of us spoke or read Urdu), but tasted like beer and was a welcome change from Coke-Cola and tea.

That system at PIA cutover with ACP8, but was later converted by the Pakistanis themselves to ALCS, and still runs in Karachi today, despite all Sabre's efforts to the contrary. Here we come up against the first mention of ALCS, which will figure prominently in a later instalment of this series. For the pedantic amongst you, I classify the TPF family as including ACP, CPARS, CPSIM-E and ALCS, as well as TPF itself. TPF evolved from ACP; ALCS evolved from CPSIM-E, which evolved from CPARS, which also evolved from ACP. There are no operational ACP, CPARS nor CPSIM-E systems left in the world: CPSIM-E died decades ago with East African Airways; Iranair was the last ACP installation (deceased 12/99); Air Algerie and Icelandair the last CPARS installations (both deceased 11/99). The millennium issue ensured their timely demise.

After PIA, we at KLM only installed ALCS based systems at customers. One after the other we did BWIA in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Philippine Airlines in Manila, China Airlines in Taipei and Turkish Airlines in Istanbul. A good time was had by all on these projects and there are tales to be told about each one, but I think I'll reserve that for the instalment on ALCS itself.

Bruce Taylor – Amsterdam, May 2001

COMING IN JULY

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Chapter 4

Join us in July, when Bruce Taylor talks about how the TPF torch was passed from the IPSC to the TPFUG, and how the representitive from Alitalia came to be known as the "inventor of VFA".