

REPORTER AT LARGE

THE AVIATORS

A son's search for his missing father
in an African war zone

Xan Rice

Some men live to fly, and Captain John Wilkinson was one of them. His wife Marie tells a story from early in their relationship when Johnny, as his friends knew him, was a young South African Air Force pilot learning to fly the Hercules cargo plane. 'I love you,' he told Marie, knowing that what he said next would hurt her, 'but you have to remember that flying will always be my first love.' Thirty years later they were still together, and had two daughters and a son, Hilton. Johnny was still flying the Hercules, but in Angola, in a war zone a long way from home.

On December 26, 1998, a Saturday, Johnny woke at first light. The sky over Luanda was pale and clear – ideal flying weather. He worked for Transafrik, an air charter company that flew heavy equipment to diamond mines and food and blankets to many of the casualties of Angola's long civil war. Over the last month the fighting had been especially intense in and around Huambo, a highland city in the centre of the country. Later that morning Johnny would be flying there on a mission for the United Nations.

He showered quickly and put on his fawn one-piece flying overall. His cabin in the Transafrik camp was austere, but he had simple needs. On the shelf were his books, thrillers by Robert Ludlum and the RAF pilot-turned-novelist Gavin Lyall. On a table was the sewing machine that he used to make his own jeans from sheets of denim material. Beside the front door was a row of seedlings that he had carefully planted in Coke cans and food tins.

He was hungry and hurried to the mess. The decorations were still up from the Christmas party of the day before. It had been a rare day off for the pilots, who spent more time in the air in a typical three-month stretch than many commercial pilots did in a year. Johnny's crew was already up and about. Carloa Melgar, a Bolivian, was the flight engineer. Benjamin Montefalcon, one of the numerous Filipinos who worked for Transafrik, was responsible for securing the load. An Angolan pilot, Carlos da Silva, was the first officer. They were happy to be flying with Johnny. He was an old-school pilot who flew with a calculator in his pocket and a cigarette in his mouth, and took notes on the back of his packets of Rembrandt van Rijn 30s. His experience had earned him the respect of his colleagues; his logbook showed 23,000 hours' flying time in the Hercules, more than all but a few other cargo pilots in the world.

His affection for the 'Herc', a four-engine, bulbous-nosed, turboprop aircraft well suited to the short, bumpy airstrips of Angola, was often the source of amusement. After a day's flying, dirty and sweaty from helping the loadmaster secure and unload the cargo, Johnny would remain on the airstrip to talk to the ground engineers about minor adjustments that could be made to the plane.

'Johnny, you can't make love to an aircraft,' the other pilots would call out to him as they hurried back to camp to drink beer under the mango tree.

The company bus was ready to depart. When Johnny first came to live and work in Angola nearly eight years before, the journey to the 4 de Fevereiro airport took twenty-five minutes. But since then a

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third of Angola's ten million people had been officially displaced, with many of them coming to Luanda to escape the fighting in the bush and the provinces. The Mercedes minivan moved slowly on the potholed roads that morning, and it took nearly an hour to arrive at the airport. Once there Johnny chatted to the UN ground staff about the route that he would be flying: south-east to Huambo, to pick up passengers, and then north-east to Saurimo, a garrison town. In the late afternoon he would return to Luanda. The first leg of flight UN806 was expected to be the most dangerous. Huambo was under attack from anti-government UNITA guerrillas, who had claimed the city as their capital. The only way in and out was by air.

Johnny had flown in other African war zones: Sudan, Rwanda, Mozambique and Somalia. He knew how to minimize risks. In Angola, the main danger to planes was from Stinger surface-to-air missiles that were used by UNITA to bring down government aircraft. To stay out of range of the missiles for as long as possible, pilots waited until they were directly above the safety of the airport before descending in a tight spiral.

With da Silva and Melgar performing the pre-flight checks, Johnny went to the cargo hold to ensure Montefalcon was satisfied that the load was secure. Then he settled into his seat on the left-hand side of the flight deck, placing his bags at his feet. Most pilots and crew members carried a single flight bag, usually holding the aircraft manual, various spare forms, condiments to improve the taste of pre-cooked meals and, perhaps, a porn mag or two for in-flight entertainment. Johnny carried a second flight bag containing his Jeppesen aeronautical charts, which showed the optimal approach and departure routes for most of the world's airports.

He adjusted the seat height and rudder pedals so that he had the correct eye position, and put on his headset. After checking with the crew one last time, he eased back on the control column. The Herc climbed smoothly into the air. An hour later it landed at Huambo airport. The UN supplies were unloaded, and ten people attached to

the peacekeeping mission came aboard: three Angolans, two Russian mechanics, an Australian lawyer, a Zambian policewoman, an Egyptian, a Cameroonian and a Namibian. Shortly before noon, the Herc twisted high into the sky above the airport, before levelling off and setting its course north-east. Johnny made radio contact with air traffic control in Luanda to say that he was headed to Saurimo.

Kurt Frauenstein was the first at Transafrik to discover that Johnny's Hercules had disappeared shortly after take-off. The thirty-five-year-old South African pilot had joined the company with Johnny in 1991 and, like some of the other younger crew, regarded him as a father figure. On the morning of December 26, he had left the camp before dawn and flown to Huambo on a Boeing 727 to deliver a consignment of fuel. He was on the way back to base when an air traffic controller in Luanda radioed to ask if he could try making contact with flight UN806. 'At first I thought little of it,' Frauenstein, who now lives with his family in New Zealand, told me. 'Johnny was probably just out of range, as sometimes happened. But when I could not get hold of him either I started to worry.'

When Frauenstein landed in Luanda, he picked up Ross Coleman, an American flight engineer, and flew back in the direction of Huambo. They circled the area where the plane was thought to have disappeared for as long as their fuel load would allow, but could see no signs of wreckage. Later that night, however, their worst fears were confirmed when a spokesman for the UN announced that Johnny's plane had gone down near Huambo.

By the following morning, Transafrik had made no effort to notify the families of the missing crew. Ross Coleman was indignant. An impulsive former navy man who liked to smoke cigars on the flight deck, he had been close to Johnny and he took it on himself to call the Wilkinson home in Kempton Park, seven miles north of Johannesburg. Marie was away spending Christmas with her two daughters in Durban, and it was Hilton, her twenty-five-year-old son

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– and an old schoolfriend of mine – to whom Coleman spoke. Too distraught to phone his mother himself after Coleman’s call, Hilton asked a family friend to make contact with her in Durban.

‘When I took the call,’ Marie told me, ‘I said: “Don’t tell me. It’s Hilton.” I thought he’d gone out on the town and had a car accident.’

It did not occur to her that something could have happened to Johnny. He had always seemed somehow indestructible, treating his frequent bouts of malaria as if they were mere colds and always, no matter how bad the mechanical problem, ensuring that his plane and crew returned to safety. Now he was missing.

The disappearance of flight UN806 caused tension between the Transafrik flying crew, who wanted to suspend all operations and go in search of the plane, and management, which, according to Frauenstein, thought the pilots should continue to work. There was uncertainty, too, over exactly what had happened: in the first days, there were reports that suggested the crash had not been fatal. On December 28, Associated Press reported that the downed plane was emitting SOS signals. The next day, Reuters quoted Issa Diallo, head of the UN observer mission in Angola, who said that the aircraft may have landed intact and that there was hope of survivors. Meanwhile, the Angolan government was insisting that UNITA had taken the crew and passengers hostage. All of these conflicting reports gave the Wilkinsons hope that Johnny might still be alive.

At home in Johannesburg, as his mother was preparing to return from Durban, Hilton was desperate for news of the search-and-rescue operation. Had the aircraft been found yet? What of the survivors? He drove to an airport near Pretoria, where Transafrik had an office, to meet Frauenstein, who had flown to South Africa for the day. ‘Hilton was very upset but also very determined to do something,’ Frauenstein said. ‘He seemed like...like a man preparing himself for a mission.’

Frauenstein explained to Hilton that nobody knew quite what was happening and that there was no official search taking place on the

ground. Neither UNITA nor the government forces had agreed to a request for a ceasefire to allow the missing plane to be located, and the continued fighting between government troops and rebels meant that it was considered too dangerous to fly low over the area. But Frauenstein did offer Hilton some advice. ‘I said: “Hilton, you are not going to find out what happened to your dad by sitting here and listening to the news. If you want the truth you are going to have to come to Angola to find it yourself.”’

It was at about this time that I read in the Johannesburg *Star* that a South African pilot named John Wilkinson was missing in Angola. Could it be *that* John Wilkinson? I dialled Hilton’s number. He answered after a few rings and I could immediately tell from his voice that it was his father who was missing – the father whom I remembered as a tall, thin man and whom I had seen smoking a pipe as he sat in his car waiting to collect his son at the end of term. I said that I was sorry, and that I hoped Johnny would be okay. I have never been able to forget the desolation in Hilton’s voice as he said goodbye. His sister Anne-Audette, then twenty-two, has since told me that she had never before seen her brother cry but that at times during the days after the crash he could not stop crying. She loved her father, too, but Hilton’s bond with Johnny seemed to have unfathomable depths. Johnny was more than a father to Hilton: he was a hero, and had been ever since as a young boy Hilton had accompanied him in the Herc on his cargo flights in and around South Africa.

On the morning of December 29, Coleman called Hilton to tell him that a Transafrik flight would be leaving Johannesburg for Luanda the next day. This confirmed to Hilton what he already knew: that he was going to Angola.

He was driven to the airport by his mother.

‘I was crying,’ Marie says now. ‘I kept telling Hilton how much I loved him.’

Hilton seemed excited rather than anxious or fearful. He knew

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A Transafrik Hercules

Angola and its airports nearly as well as his father knew them. At the departure gate, he said a few last words to Marie: ‘Mum, I’m bringing dad home.’

Hilton Wilkinson was thirteen when, in 1987, he arrived at the High School for Boys in Potchefstroom, a conservative Afrikaans town ninety miles west of Johannesburg, where I was also a pupil. Boys lived in three hostels, the smallest of which was Buxton House, in the far corner of the school. At night we fell asleep to the sounds of trains passing nearby. Boys from the other hostels called us ‘the railway kids’.

There were twenty first-year pupils in Buxton and we all lived in the same cramped dormitory on the ground floor. Our beds were a foot apart; you couldn’t whisper without somebody at the far end of the room hearing what you were saying. We were woken every morning at five a.m. to run wind sprints across the rugby field or swim lengths of butterfly in the cold pool. Then we showered, dressed, swept the dormitory and fagged for our allocated senior, making his

bed, shining his shoes, putting out his clothes, fetching tea and carrying his suitcase to school. We lived in terror, knowing that a beating was never far away. You could be beaten for having a sloppily made bed, a dirty collar, for failing to greet a prefect, for forgetting the name of the First XV rugby fullback or for talking after lights out. Hilton fagged for a prefect whose study opened on to our dormitory. He had a fondness for the Bible and the rod. Hilton was very thin and when he was being beaten we sometimes joked that his legs might snap. That was how he got his first nickname: *Wednesday*. When's dey gonna break.

Hilton spoke hesitantly, which led some to assume that he was slow-witted. The truth was the opposite; he had a sharp and mischievous mind. If there was a prank in the hostel or the classroom he was sure to be involved. Perhaps it was because he was so slight and seemed so innocent, but he somehow managed to get away with things the rest of us wouldn't. Our lives were small and sheltered, governed by alarm bells, the routine of mealtimes and the changing sporting seasons – athletics, swimming, cricket and rugby. We had little sense of how South Africa was about to change, of how we were approaching the end of the apartheid years, and that the black men – Sam and Danny and Abe – who served our food, watery Welsh rarebit and cottage pie in the dining hall, would soon be free to enrol their own children at a school such as ours. If we wanted to survive, let alone thrive, in what was being called the 'new South Africa', we were told that we must study hard to obtain a good university degree in what was considered to be a useful subject such as law, engineering, accountancy or medicine.

Hilton had no interest in any of these subjects or in studying to go to university. From an early age, he knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted, like his father Johnny, to be a pilot. He wanted to fly. Even at school he began to cultivate a fly boy image, a construct of romantic imagination. He bought a pair of Ray-Ban Aviators and taught himself to smoke while hunched inside a locker. He wasn't the

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only pupil experimenting with Chesterfields in the lavatories late at night, but his was no simple act of teenage rebellion. To him, pilots smoked, as his father smoked. At night, he would read by torchlight, tales of flight and wartime adventure: *The Great Escape*, *The Wooden Horse* and *The Colditz Story*. His favourite book was Paul Brickhill's biography of Douglas Bader, *Reach for the Sky*. Hilton's mother, Marie, herself the daughter of a career pilot who flew B-24 Liberator bombers for the Allies during the Second World War, understood what motivated and inspired her son. After all, she was married to an obsessive pilot. 'After a few days at home without flying John would become irritated,' she told me. 'He couldn't help himself, it's just who he was.'

Between an estuary on the Indian Ocean and a steep hill looking out towards the Outeniqua Mountains is the small town of Knysna in the Western Cape, familiar to many British tourists who have stopped off there on their way from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth on the Garden Route. Many of the most expensive hillside houses are owned by so-called out-of-towners, those who have become wealthy through working in banking or IT in Johannesburg or Cape Town. Warwick Sparg, who built himself a grand house on the hill with a garage large enough to accommodate his Porsche, his five BMW motorcycles, a Harley-Davidson and a pool table made his money as a bush pilot. He is fifty-six, fit and tanned, and wears his hair raffishly long. On one recent afternoon, after picking me up from the local airport, he talked about how he got his start. He began as a pilot for a scheduled airline but the work bored him; he was seeking spontaneity and adventure and so began to promote himself as a pilot for hire. One of his first clients was Wouter Basson, the cardiologist who would come to be known as 'Doctor Death' after he was revealed to have led the apartheid government's secret chemical warfare project. Another client was Billy Rautenbach, a white Zimbabwean close to the Mugabe government, who,

notoriously, was made chairman of the Democratic Republic of Congo's state mining company, Gécamines, at a time when Mugabe's troops were helping prop up Laurent Kabila's regime. But Sparg's most memorable client was a bearded Angolan rebel leader called Jonas Savimbi.

Known to his followers as O Mais Velho ('The Oldest One'), Savimbi had led the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, or UNITA, since its formation in 1966, when it was one of three liberation movements fighting to end Portuguese colonial rule. By mid-1974, independence for Angola was inevitable. Portugal's fascist dictatorship, first under António de Salazar and then Marcello

'It was a peculiar arrangement: a black nationalist warlord leading an anti-colonial struggle backed by a white racist regime.'

Caetano, had desperately held on to the country's African colonies even as France, Belgium and Britain had let theirs go. But in April 1974, Caetano's regime had been overthrown in a near-bloodless military coup. Instead of uniting, however, the rebel armies in Angola had begun to fight one another in an attempt to assume sole power once the Portuguese had gone.

The Cold War made external intervention in the struggle inevitable. The Marxist Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, or MPLA, which had the support of the intellectual and mixed-race elite in Luanda, received military and financial backing from the Soviet Union and Cuba. The United States took the side of UNITA. Also assisting Savimbi was the South African government, which was as paranoid as the Americans were about the Communist threat in Africa, especially in southern Africa, where liberation movements in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and what is now Namibia but was then called South West Africa and was an enclave of the apartheid state, were being supported by the Soviet Union. It was a peculiar arrangement: a black nationalist and ruthless warlord

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leading an anti-colonial struggle while being backed by a white racist regime. 'When you're a drowning man in a crocodile-infested river, you don't argue about who is rescuing you until you're safely on the bank,' Savimbi said later.

As independence came closer in Angola, and the Portuguese elite began to flee the country, South Africa sent troops north along the road towards the Angolan capital in an attempt to prevent the MPLA from seizing power. Cuba, in turn, successfully sent thousands of troops south from Luanda to deter the South African column from advancing further.

On November 11, 1975 the MPLA assumed power, declaring the country independent. In response, UNITA and the FNLA, the third liberation group, came together to set up a rival coalition government, based in Huambo. For much of the next twelve years, Angola was ravaged by civil war, with young, white South African conscripts regularly deployed deep in MPLA-controlled territory, sometimes fighting alongside UNITA and sometimes fighting alone. (The apartheid government denied that its troops were fighting on Angolan soil; a compliant media at home ensured that few South Africans knew exactly what was going on.)

Savimbi used South African airports as the means by which he could travel out of Africa. Whenever he needed to visit foreign capitals such as Washington on fund-raising missions, a South African military plane would fly him from the Angolan bush to Pretoria, where Sparg would be waiting for him in a JetStar II business jet to take him to wherever he wanted to go. 'Savimbi was always the perfect gentleman,' Sparg told me, without irony. 'He greeted the crew as he came aboard and thanked us before leaving the airplane. He always had a white doctor with him, and as the plane began to descend the doctor would hand each crew member an envelope with one thousand dollars inside.'

Working for Savimbi was Sparg's introduction to the war in Angola and soon, using a Malawian passport, since South Africans

were officially not allowed in Angola at the time, he began to operate from inside the country, flying UN officials on various missions. When he saw the potential of being a pilot for hire in a country in which it was too dangerous to travel by road, he set up his own charter service. The work was dangerous – Sparg’s first aircraft had bulletproof material on the floor and he wore a flak jacket when flying into trouble spots – but it was also lucrative.

By the early Nineties, Balmoral, in which he had a fifty per cent stake, was a thriving business servicing the World Food Programme and other humanitarian organizations with its fleet of small aircraft. Whenever he was back in South Africa, on holiday or maintaining his aircraft, Sparg was approached by pilots looking for work in Angola. Some were attracted by the money: a newly qualified pilot would receive a tax-free income of \$5,000 a month. (One of Sparg’s pilots flew with a one-dollar bill taped to the instrument panel. ‘That’s my boss,’ he’d tell people. ‘George Washington.’) Other ambitious pilots wanted to accumulate their flying hours so that they could apply for jobs at large commercial airlines in other countries. Most of them, including the pilot who arrived in Angola with his surfboard, had no idea how difficult and precarious flying was in a country devastated by twenty years of war.

When a slender, smooth-cheeked young man approached Sparg outside the Turbo Prop Service Centre at Lanseria airport on the north-western outskirts of Johannesburg in 1995, there was little to suggest he would be any different from most other youthful pilots looking for work. Hilton was twenty-one. He had completed a year’s military service, but had abandoned his ambition of joining the air force after being told he needed a degree. He had earned his private and commercial pilot’s licences and had had his tuition fees paid for by his father. He had 210 hours in his logbook. He was ready to fly. ‘He was very respectful. He said: “Are you Mr Sparg?” and I said that I was. He said he wanted to fly in Angola. I looked at him and thought: *You are very young and very skinny.* I said to him: “What do

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you know about Angola?” He said: “My dad flies for Transafrik.” I hired him on the spot.’

Before he had completed his first year of flying in Angola, Hilton was captain on both the Cessna 208 Caravan, a single-engine plane that took nine passengers, and the Beechcraft King Air 200, a twin-turboprop aircraft. His instructor at Balmoral, Graham Woodhouse, told me in an email from Kabul, where he was delivering a plane, that Hilton’s ‘flying ability was well above average’.

The work was intense and exhausting. Hilton flew for up to seven hours a day, five or six days a week. It was nothing like flying school. Many of the airstrips were littered with the wrecks of crashed or abandoned planes. The gravel runways of Angola had been eroded by heavy freight planes and were perilous for smaller aircraft. Hilton learned how to spiral in and out of dangerous areas, how never to trust the Russian pilots when they reported their altitude and positions, and how to remain calm even when the windscreen of his King Air shattered in mid-flight, as it did on one occasion soon after he arrived in Luanda.

But his most important lesson was how to avoid being hit by ground fire or surface-to-air missiles. When flying short distances between airports, the trick was to fly fast and low, just above the tree line, giving the rebels no time to line up a shot. For longer trips it was necessary to spiral up above the airport to get out of missile range. Though Angola was experiencing a lull in fighting when Hilton first arrived in the country, UNITA still had a large stockpile of missiles, as his father knew well. In the early Nineties, Johnny had often flown alongside Don Rogers, an American flight engineer who had worked aboard Hercules aircraft since the late Sixties, when he supported US ground troops stationed in Saigon for the Vietnam War. Immediately before joining Transafrik, Rogers had worked for a small American air charter company called St Lucia Airways, whose main customer was the Central Intelligence Agency. ‘We were contracted by the CIA to fly Stinger surface-to-air missiles

from Kelly Air Force Base in Texas to an abandoned Belgian airfield in Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of Congo],’ says Rogers, who is retired and these days lives in Florida. From there he flew with the missiles across the border to Savimbi’s military stronghold in Jamba, in south-eastern Angola. ‘It did occur to me when I joined Transafrik that I could be taken down by one of the Stingers that I had delivered.’

Sparg was proud of the young man; he saw Hilton not just as a good pilot, but as a kindred spirit in the bush-flying world. ‘Many pilots can only “drive” a plane,’ he said. ‘Hilton could really “feel” the aircraft. I could identify with him. We would drink hard, smoke hard and play hard. But you could not frighten us with work.’

Hilton lived with six other male Balmoral pilots and crew in a house in downtown Luanda, which had armed security guards at the door. The only female in the house was the local cook. While some of the crew members argued over who should have the largest rooms, Hilton was content with the smallest, little more than a storage cupboard beneath the stairway, where he slept sprawled out and naked on a mattress on the floor with the air conditioning on high. The cold air against his skin helped him wake up in the morning, he said, even though he was always the last one to rise, drinking only a Coke, his ‘Black Magic’, for breakfast, before hurrying to the airport. On a Saturday night, the flying crews and humanitarian workers in Luanda usually gathered for a house party or headed out to a pub known as the Pink Palace or to one of the nightclubs on the beach road, where whores loitered.

Sometimes, at Luanda airport, Hilton watched Johnny take off in the Herc, and he would ease back on an imaginary control column, as if mimicking his father’s actions. The other pilots noticed how Hilton had unconsciously adopted Johnny’s body language: the slightly sagged right shoulder, the cigarette hanging on his lower lip. Given their hectic flying schedules, father and son seldom saw each other, except on Sunday evenings, when Hilton would drive a

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Korean-made Rocksta jeep from his downtown digs to the Transafrik camp. It was against company policy to drive alone at night, but a safety rule was not going to stop him from seeing his father. Out at the camp, alone together, Hilton and Johnny talked about flying, just as they had always done at home, to the irritation of Marie and the girls. ‘We would worry about Hilton, thinking that he’d had an accident or something,’ said Riaan Theron, a South African pilot who flew with Hilton at Balmoral. ‘But at two or three in the morning we always heard him come rumbling back in the jeep from visiting his father.’

The Transafrik camp, which was originally built as the Filipino Consulate in Angola, was situated on a dirt road twelve miles south of Luanda, in an area called Corimba near the coastal highway. Most of the 150 staff seldom ventured beyond the nearby village that they named ‘Smokey Mountain’ because of the haze caused by all the cooking fires there in the morning and evening. Some of the Transafrik workers had local girlfriends in the village. On Sundays, a few of the Filipino personnel organized cockfights there and many of the pilots and crew would go along to bet on them, returning to camp with pockets stuffed full of near-worthless Angolan kwanzas. During weekday evenings, if they weren’t flying – Transafrik was a twenty-four-hour operation – the pilots listened to Voice of America or the BBC World Service in their cabins, or sat on plastic chairs under the mango tree, drinking Castle Lager flown in from South Africa or the local Diamond Beer. Back in South Africa, Marie tolerated her husband’s long absences from home even as they strained their marriage. She was concerned that Johnny had begun to drink too much, that on his visits home he was oddly ‘distant’ from her and that, when he wasn’t busy repairing something, he would simply sit in silence in the lounge, reading.

Hilton defended his father when Marie complained of Johnny’s strange silences. ‘He’d say: “Mum, there’s stuff that has happened to Dad while flying that he just can’t talk about,”’ Marie told me one

afternoon at her house near Johannesburg's main international airport. Marie knew that Hilton was at least partly right; Johnny did not want to alarm her by revealing just how dangerous his job could be. While he discussed his more bizarre assignments, such as when he flew pot plants from South Africa to Zaire for Mobutu Sese Seko or when he was arrested in Libya while transporting spare parts for drivers in the Paris–Dakar rally, he never told her how his plane was shot up while flying over Mogadishu. She learnt of the narrow escape only years later when one of Johnny's colleagues showed her a photograph of the bullet-sprayed plane.

After each two-month stint in Angola, Hilton had four weeks at home in Johannesburg. His friends knew when he was back in town because their phones would ring late at night, with Hilton announcing that he was coming to pick them up for a few drinks. He was generous, paying for friends in restaurants; those who refused to accept his generosity would find hundreds of rands left on their car seats the next day. He was an extravagant tipper and loans invariably became gifts.

Hilton had no interest in or knowledge of contemporary popular culture. He was hopelessly, happily, oblivious to it. What interested him was the culture – the songs, the films, the cars – of his father's late adolescence and early adulthood. While most of us were listening to alternative or indie music, he played Elvis songs on the stereo of his white MGB sports car. When he took a holiday to London, the highlight of the trip, he said, was watching the Buddy Holly musical in the West End.

It was a good life, but scarcely a stable one. After Hilton had spent nearly three years in Angola, Johnny had encouraged him to search for a more settled job in South Africa – and a safer one. Accidents were frequent in Angola, and two of Balmoral's most senior pilots were killed when a wing of their King Air had broken off in a violent thunderstorm. For several days Balmoral stopped all

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commercial work, using every one of its planes to search for the wreckage. 'When a colleague goes down that's what you do,' Sparg said. 'You forget the business side.'

As part of the search effort, Hilton was especially affected by the experience. To Marie, and to his friends at home, it seemed as though somebody who always considered himself to be, as he put it, 'bulletproof' had become vulnerable, had begun to consider the dangers of a life in the sky. 'He started talking more and more about his "box party", his expression for a funeral,' Hilton's closest friend, Richard Brady, says now. 'He would say to Marie: "Mum, I want there to be a bagpiper, and he must play 'Amazing Grace'". She hated that.'

In the spring of 1998, Hilton finally left his job. He had enough flying hours and enough money to take his senior commercial pilot's licence in Connecticut in the United States. Back in Johannesburg, he circulated his CV to numerous charter airlines, requesting a job as a cargo pilot. If all went well, he hoped soon to be flying a Herc, like his father, but in South Africa. As he waited for replies, he planned for a bit of fun over Christmas, especially as his mother would be away in Durban and he would be alone at the family house. Johnny had been home on leave in November, celebrating his fifty-first birthday with Marie on December 2 and flying back to Angola a week later.

On Christmas Eve, Hilton took Johnny's old Land-Rover and picked up Richard Brady. Together they drove the short distance from his home to Caesar's Palace casino, had dinner there and gambled until dawn. On their return to Hilton's house, Richard went to bed. Hilton, meanwhile, was dressing for church: like Johnny, he was not especially religious, but the two of them still went to the local Methodist church on Easter Sunday and on Christmas Day, if they were home. At church Hilton, who was still drunk, fell asleep in the pews. The woman seated next to him woke him up when the service was over.

Hilton flew into Luanda on December 29. He was met at the airport by John Nagel, a Balmoral aircraft engineer. In spite of the differences in their ages – Nagel was forty-one and married with two children, while Hilton was sixteen years younger and single – they had become close friends during Hilton’s time in Angola. As soon as Hilton cleared customs, he and Nagel set out on the road, driving all over Luanda as they searched for anyone with information about flight UN806. After making enquiries at the Transafrik office, they went to Johnny’s camp. Their best hope for information was the United Nations, which had a special department that controlled air operations in Angola. Nobody seemed to know much at all – or at least, if they did they weren’t saying.

Hilton returned to the airport, asking the pilots on inbound planes if they knew anything. Then they met Frauenstein, who had just returned from Huambo. He explained how he had persuaded Transafrik to let him take a Hercules to Huambo to see if he could convince the Angolan army to escort him to the crash site. The fighting in the area made it impossible. As he and his translator slept in a UN camp overnight, they could hear the shells falling nearby.

‘Hilton was level-headed, but emotional,’ said Nagel, who is back working in Angola, this time for the state oil company Sonangol. ‘He kept saying that if his dad survived the crash, he would get out as he was not the type of guy to piss off his captors. But he was realistic. He also knew that the longer we spent without news the less chance there was of finding Johnny alive.’

Hilton was not the only one who had flown into Luanda to help with the search. In Nairobi, where he was on a temporary assignment, Ramon Dumlao had heard about the crash. A fifty-five-year-old Filipino, Dumlao had been with the company for fourteen years and was Transafrik’s chief pilot. He and Johnny, his deputy, liked each other. Dumlao was just a few months away from retirement, and the easy option would have been to stick to his holiday plans when news of the crash reached him. Instead, he

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phoned his wife to say he would not be able to spend New Year with her and their four children in Manila, and returned to Luanda.

There were no New Year's celebrations in the Transafrik camp. Five days had passed since the crash. The mood was one of desolation. Whatever their individual differences, the flying crews regarded themselves as one big family – and now four family members were missing.

Hilton had asked Balmoral if he could borrow a small plane for a search-and-rescue mission. The answer was yes, but he would have to wait a few more days. Hilton was becoming exasperated: he had been in Angola for three nights already, and had not made it out of Luanda. Then an opportunity arose. Dumlao was asked to fly to Huambo and back on a routine mission for the United Nations. Flight UN806A was due to depart on Saturday January 2, 1999, exactly a week after Johnny had flown into Huambo.

Ross Coleman was listed as the flight engineer. He spoke to Dumlao and they agreed to smuggle Hilton on board. They told Hilton that, on the way back to Luanda, they would fly low over the area where Johnny's plane had gone down. The aircraft was to be a Hercules, which had a large viewing area from the flight deck. Hilton called his mother in Johannesburg to tell her the news. Though she did not realize how dangerous the mission would be, Marie was happy, even if she didn't share her son's optimism about finding Johnny alive. 'I did not have much hope,' she says now. 'It had been a week already. We'd heard nothing. There'd been no leads.'

After Jonas Savimbi was shot dead on a riverbank by government troops in 2002, peace had come quickly to Angola. Five years on, the stability, and the booming oil prices, have created huge wealth in the capital Luanda. But most of it is controlled by a small elite within or close to the MPLA-led government, who can afford to live extravagantly in what has become one of Africa's most expensive cities. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people subsist in squalid

shanty towns. Walking along the Marginal, the city's seafront drive, one afternoon last winter, I counted six new Hummer 4x4s. One of them was parked next to the pavement; a man with stumps for legs lowered himself on to the tarmac and urinated against its wheel.

For Transafrik, peace meant a decline in business. As the inland roads were cleared of landmines, lorries began to do the work that the Hercs and Boeing 727s did during the war, but at a considerably reduced cost. In September 2006, the company shifted its headquarters to Entebbe, in Uganda, closer to the lawless eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where a huge humanitarian operation remains ongoing to this day as rebel groups continue to ravage the local population. The Luanda office had not closed completely by the time I arrived there during the winter of 2007.

Pimentel Araújo, the general manager of Transafrik, continued to live in the city and I had come to meet him. We drove to his office located in an old, white shipping container, decorated with maps and model planes. Araújo has neat, thinning grey hair and rimless glasses. His parents were Portuguese but he was born and raised in Angola, and was one of only a few thousand whites who stayed on after independence.

In the year before the MPLA took power, more than 300,000 Portuguese, over ninety-five per cent of the white population, fled the country. Those who left did so by air, but not before packing their belongings in giant crates that were piled up at Luanda's port creating, as Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote in *Another Day of Life*, his account of the last days of Portuguese rule, a new wooden city within a city. 'Now it was spread out at the very edge of the sea, illuminated at night by harbour lanterns and the glare of lights on anchored ships. By day, people wound through its chaotic streets, painting their names and addresses on little plates, just as anyone does anywhere in the world when he builds himself a house... It was carried off by a great flotilla with which, after several hours, it disappeared below the horizon. This happened suddenly, as if a pirate ship had sailed into

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the port, seized a priceless treasure, and escaped to sea with it.’

Araújo remains nostalgic for the days before the Portuguese left. ‘Before, back then, Luanda was such a beautiful city. Now,’ he says, with anger, ‘it is shit. Before independence, all the public servants were Portuguese. When they left, there was nobody trained in how to run the country. I found a job in a bank. You learned by making mistakes – there was no one to teach you.’

He soon left the bank to work for TAAG, the national airline, and then, later, took a job with Transafrik, when it was set up in 1984. I asked him about Johnny. Araújo looked to his bookshelf for the company’s guide to flying in Angola, which described the various airports, runways and flying conditions. The guide was given to all new members of crew. ‘Johnny wrote it for us, and we still used it long after he was gone. I am not one who says somebody had great qualities if they didn’t. But he was a good man. He was focused on flying and never complained. In the end he was very unlucky. He was in a bad place at a bad time.

‘When news of the crash became known, our pilots wanted to search for their colleagues. I had to stop the other pilots going to look for the plane straight away. We had heavy aircraft so it was too dangerous to be flying low. But it was hard to explain to the crews. They lived together and flew together. They were here for the money but they developed strong feelings for one another.’

Huambo today has little of the claustrophobia, squalor and chaos of Luanda. A truck collects rubbish. Workers in reflective bibs repair the roads. Women sweep the streets. There are hawkers on foot everywhere. An old man with a school satchel offers you a fistful of pens. A woman balances a basket of bread rolls on her head; another pushes a wheelbarrow full of toiletries. Girls sell the fattest strawberries you have ever seen. A boy rests on a bench, his merchandise, dozens of pairs of orange-handled scissors, hanging from a string around his neck. It is not difficult to see why the Portuguese called the city Nova

Lisboa. The streets are wide and the houses and buildings, even though many of them are run down with bullet-scarred facades, are recognizably European in architectural style. Opposite a square, where old men sit talking on park benches, is a large, pink, colonial-style building, the headquarters of the MPLA. There are two signs outside.

PAZ
 PARA SEMPRE
 UM SO POVO
 UMA SO NACAO.
 (Peace for all, one people, one nation.)

MPLA
 E UMA
 BARREIRA
 INTRANSPONIVEL
 (MPLA is an impenetrable barrier.)

A few blocks down is the UNITA office, on the second floor of a corner office block. There are no slogans, only a fluttering party flag on which is depicted a black cockerel against a red sunrise. There is no doubt as to who won the war.

In 1991, UNITA and the MPLA agreed to contest an election, during which both parties campaigned hard. At rallies in support of Savimbi, officials shouted, '*Nosso galo?*' (our cockerel), to which the crowd roared, '*Voa*' (it flies). But the cockerel never flew, and, instead, scurried back into the bush. Savimbi rejected the poll results, which saw him losing narrowly to President José Eduardo dos Santos, and returned to doing what he did best – fighting a ruthless war. In January 1993, UNITA attempted to seize Huambo, laying siege to the city for fifty-five days, pummelling it with mortars and gunfire. As many as 10,000 people died during the siege, many of them from the very same Ovimbundu ethnic group that provided UNITA with its core support, before Huambo fell. Less than two years later, it was

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back under government control. South Africans had been dragged back into the war, although this time it was a private army, Executive Outcomes, fighting there rather than the national force.

On January 2, 1999, a Saturday, Hilton woke at first light. The sky over Luanda was pale and clear – ideal flying weather. He showered quickly and put on his pilot’s uniform. Under his white short-sleeved shirt was a money belt containing \$5,000. If he saw the crash site and the plane appeared intact he would ask Ramon Dumlao to return to Huambo and drop him off at the airport. If he could make contact with UNITA, he was sure he could buy his father’s freedom. He had breakfast with Nagel, and they argued. Nagel knew how desperate Hilton was to find his father, but he wanted him to pause, to be patient, to wait a few more days. An agitated Hilton would not hear of it and so, reluctantly, Nagel drove him to the 4 de Fevereiro airport. Dumlao and Ross Coleman were there, together with the Filipino loadmaster Bernabe Vicarme and an Angolan first officer. The five of them boarded the Hercules, though the manifest showed only the names of the official crew. Hilton was an illegal passenger.

After landing at Huambo, they picked up four UN passengers, three Angolan men and a Namibian, and loaded two Toyota Land Cruisers into the cargo hold. Shortly before three p.m., flight UN806A took off for Luanda, but instead of climbing quickly to 20,000 feet, the plane flew low towards Tchikala-Tcholo hanga, as Hilton would have wanted.

At home in Johannesburg that night, Marie Wilkinson waited for her son to call. But he did not. Perhaps he had arrived home late, she thought, or had nothing to report. Perhaps he was still in Huambo. *He’ll speak to me in the morning.*

After a disturbed night, Marie called Nagel at home in Luanda the next morning. She asked if her son was there with him.

‘I said: “What’s going on? Don’t tell me something has happened to Hilton?” When he said yes, I just went crazy.’

As I had dinner in a small roadside restaurant near my hotel in Huambo one evening in late August last year, I thought back to January 4, 1999, when I read with disbelief a story in the *Star* about a second United Nations plane that had gone down in Angola in the same part of the country as the first. Again, the name Wilkinson was mentioned. This time, it was Hilton Wilkinson. He had been on that second plane and, like his father, he was missing.

In the years that followed I would always feel uneasy when I heard or read anything about Angola. For me the country had become synonymous with Hilton and Johnny – a haunted place, a place of war and loss. When I told people what had happened there to a father and son they just shook their heads. Could that be true? It was, I assured them, but I knew only the basic facts, the beginning and the end: two planes falling from the sky within a week of each other. From time to time I would search the Internet for more information, but I could never find anything new. I promised myself that one day I would travel to Angola to discover what had really happened to my schoolfriend and the father he called ‘Pops’.

In Huambo I was met that morning at my hotel by a policeman to whom I had been introduced by a stocky, jovial Afrikaner named Waal de Waal, who had served in Angola as part of the South African special forces. A friend of the policeman would act as my driver and guide, and shortly after six o’clock he pulled up in a white Toyota Land-cruiser. We drove east out of the city and the road turned to dirt, with occasional islands of tar in the middle. As the pale sky brightened to blue we passed an old factory shorn of its roof and women washing clothes in a river. After forty-five minutes we arrived at the village of Tchikala-Tcholo hanga. We turned left, and drove in the direction of a Catholic church that was being rebuilt by workers perched on wooden scaffolding. A UNITA flag was flying. We were looking for a local headman called Matias Nhang a. He controlled the area when Johnny’s plane came down and we needed his permission to travel freely to the crash site. Nhang a’s hut was empty, but he soon

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returned from a nearby field. He wore a dirty cowboy hat and a faded black nylon jacket on which was written HARLEY OWNERS GROUP, LIVE THE LEGEND, 1983. He brought some chairs from his hut, gesturing for us to sit.

De Waal had warned me when we met in Pretoria that Nhangas would expect some sort of gift. I took a framed photograph of Nhangas that de Waal had taken. Nhangas was delighted. We could visit the crash site, he said. Before we left, I asked him if he was in the area when the first plane crashed. He nodded. 'All the people of the village were hiding in the bush because of the war,' he said, speaking through a translator. 'We saw the plane, and there was a big noise. We saw fire. It crashed and there was too much smoke. The ordinary people could not go there, only the soldiers.'

The soldiers were from UNITA, he said.

'They looted the plane and cut a tree to cover it. There was a big hole in the ground. The soldiers were very happy to have shot the plane. They thought it belonged to the government.'

On the far side of the village a team of men wearing overalls and long see-through visors were clearing landmines from an open field. We drove on and soon turned right on to a track, heading towards a shallow green valley. At a rocky outcrop, we turned left, drove on for another hundred metres and then stopped. My driver, Amocachi, led the way on foot. The soil was soft. The wind was blowing strongly now, enough to cause a shiver. There was no human habitation in sight. I heard a rustle, like tinfoil crumpling. I looked down. It was a piece of tough metallic fabric.

'This is the place,' said Amocachi.

In front of us was a crater, several metres wide, which had been recently filled in. Sticking out were pieces of charred metal: rods, springs, cogs, a tangle of wires. I picked up a small piece of metal. There was writing on it.

SINGER
VAP AIR DIVISION
VAPRO CORPORATION
CHICAGO, IL.

Nearby was a seat belt buckle and a piece of white plastic that said FIRST AID KIT. These were the remains of flight UN806, Johnny's flight, but they could just as easily have been another relic of war.

Amocachi and I left the crash site and rejoined the main dirt road, passing the rusty shell of an abandoned tank and driving through groves of eucalyptus trees. In the clearings, the grass had been burned crisp and black. The smell of fire lingered. As we emerged from a dip, an old farmhouse came into view. Amocachi parked on the side of the road. We had driven twenty-four kilometres. I got out of the car and saw the charred carcass of a 4x4 vehicle a few metres away. It was one of the vehicles that the second downed plane had been transporting. In the field nearby was a large, shallow ditch. Reeds were spouting out of it, amid which were large chunks of burnt and twisted metal: the debris from flight UN806A. So this was where Hilton's quest for his father had ended. There was no grave marker or plaque to indicate what had happened here. I spoke one word, the name of my lost friend.

Near the farmhouse the workers were having lunch. One of them came over to talk and we sat down together on a fallen log among the trees. His name was Domingues Satula and I asked him what he knew about the crashed aircraft. Like Nhanga, he spoke of how he was hiding in the woods about a mile from here on the afternoon of January 2. Was this possible or was Satula merely trying to be helpful? Even if he had been here in January 1999, I was not sure whether to believe that he had merely been an innocent spectator or whether he had been on active duty for UNITA. During the war this was staunch UNITA-controlled territory, and most men of his age would have been conscripted into the rebel army.

Satula told us that the government had been using fighter planes

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and helicopters to attack UNITA positions in the area and there was intense fighting all around. 'There was much fear when we saw an aircraft approaching,' he said, speaking in Umbundu, the Ovimbundu language.

At the time, UNITA was using the farm as a defensive position; among the trees I discovered old trench lines. On top of the hill were the foundations used to secure the anti-aircraft gun that lined up the Hercules in its sights as it flew low over the field, searching for the wreckage of Johnny's plane. I thought of Hilton and how he must have been feeling that afternoon as he peered down from the viewing area of the Hercules, so anxious and yet perhaps still so hopeful. Or had he already begun to accept that his father was gone, that he would not be bringing him home after all?

Satula said that he saw the Hercules catch fire in the air after it was hit. As it descended it burst apart, spilling its cargo, before impacting with the ground. 'It was a time of war,' he said softly.

I asked if he knew that one of the dead was the son of the man piloting the plane that crashed near Tchikala-Tcholo-hanga. 'Yes, we heard that later,' he said. 'We are sorry for that.'

Under guard from the Angolan army, a team of UN air-accident investigators spent two hours at the first crash site on January 9, 1999. Sixteen days later, UNITA allowed the team to spend an hour at the location of the second crash site. They found close similarities in the way that each wrecked plane had been plundered and then covered with branches and leaves. The voice recorders and black boxes had been neatly removed from both planes.

The official UN inquiries into the crashes have never been made public, but I have spoken to some of those who are familiar with their contents. A piece of audiotape belonging to flight UN806 was recovered. It revealed two loud bangs. The first, the UN inquiry concluded, was a surface-to-air missile hitting the plane at about 18,000 feet. The second was the plane impacting the ground. The depth of hole indicated that Johnny's plane had spiralled nose first

into the ground at tremendous speed. Everyone would have been killed immediately. There was no effort made to identify which group had fired the missile, or to apportion blame, but the balance of probabilities suggested that it was UNITA.

Evidence gathered from the second site showed that Hilton's plane had been hit by artillery fire, almost certainly UNITA's. Dumlao had attempted to make an emergency landing: the flaps were down on the aircraft's wings, and the landing wheels were out. A fire had started when the plane was hit and this caused it to break up in the air. The tail section, riddled with bullet holes, was found on a hilltop adjoining the field. The entire passenger section was destroyed. The likelihood of anyone surviving the crash was remote. The inquiry found that a breakdown in relations between the UN and UNITA meant that Savimbi's generals had not given their clearance for the flights. UNITA has never accepted responsibility for shooting down either plane.

On February 9, 1999 Marie Wilkinson flew to Luanda with her daughters to attend a memorial for the victims of flights UN806 and UN806A. They stayed a night with John Nagel's family and a night at Johnny's old cabin at the Transafrik camp. The ceremony was held at the UN headquarters in the capital. Relatives of the victims flew in from all over the world. The elderly mother of one of the Russian mechanics gripped Marie's hand tightly throughout the service, muttering angrily.

For Marie the service provided little comfort; if anything, being around the families of the other crew and passengers made grief even worse. 'As the captain's wife, you feel some sort of responsibility because he was in charge of the aeroplane,' she told me.

On her return to South Africa, Marie organized a second memorial service for her husband and son. A bagpiper played 'Amazing Grace', as Hilton had requested for his 'box party'. His friends drank too much and fondly recalled his eccentricities and

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pranks. Later, Marie cleared out Hilton's room, and gave away many of his possessions, including his cherished Brno rifle, given to him by Johnny when he left school. She sold the family home, moved into a small apartment in a gated compound in a nearby suburb and found a job in the export department of a chemical company. And she tried to dim the world by drinking a bottle of wine each night. 'Losing a husband is one thing, but losing a son is totally something else,' Marie said. 'I had tremendous anger. And I knew that John and Hilton were still rotting in that godforsaken place.'

During her loneliest moments she would listen to Hilton's voice, locked inside a tape on the telephone answering machine. Callers to the Wilkinson home can even today hear his gravelly greeting: 'Hello there. This is the Wilkinson residence. Please go ahead after the tone and have a good day.'

One afternoon in November 2006, Marie Wilkinson took a call at work. She was asked if she was related to Captain John Wilkinson and Hilton Wilkinson. 'My immediate thought was: "They're alive!" It seems crazy but I had always imagined that I would see the two of them casually walking into the house one day.'

The call was from a woman at South Africa's Department of Foreign Affairs. She told Marie that the UN had, finally, begun formal attempts to identify the victims of the two air crashes and that what was required were DNA samples from the victims' relatives.

The UN teams arriving at the crash sites in January 1999 had collected human remains and sent them to the South African Police Service's forensic science laboratory in Pretoria. There, DNA profiles from twelve people had been collected from bone fragments but nothing more had been done to aid the process of identification. In 2004, with the war in Angola at an end, a Norwegian medical doctor named Christen Halle was asked to investigate the case by the United Nations. He decided that both crash sites should be exhumed and the human remains found there added to those already being held in

Pretoria. In October 2006, after more than a year of planning, a specialist recovery team flew into Huambo, one of its members being the old Afrikaner military man Waal de Waal.

At the crash sites, numerous human bones were discovered, the largest being a femur nine inches long. They were placed in a body bag, which was covered with a United Nations flag and flown to South Africa.

Finding and then contacting the families of the victims was problematic. In the Philippines, appeals went out on national television. In Bolivia, national radio was used. By February 2007, twelve sets of relatives of the twenty-three victims had been located. Most of the families not traced were Angolans. The Angolan government had little interest in the project; to this day it has refused to give consent to a UN memorial stone being laid at each crash site.

Marie gave a blood sample for her son, Hilton; her daughter Judith for John. When the results came back there were six positive matches. The Zambian policewoman, the Namibian army officer, the Bolivian flight engineer Carloa Melgar, Ramon Dumlao and his fellow Filipino Bernabe Vicarme. And Hilton.

From Marie Wilkinson's house in Johannesburg it is a short drive to the Pretoria highway. Heading north, the international airport slips by on the right, and then you pass through miles of yellow veld, small factories and new housing developments in the distance. Eventually, you reach the Pretoria East cemetery. Inside, the trees are bare and the dry winter grass crunches underfoot. Men in overalls fill in a grave, shovelling soil; mourners in black leave the cemetery and walk slowly towards their cars.

The marble and granite tombstones are set out in neat rows. Most are engraved with biblical verses in Afrikaans. Headstone K473, erected in April 2007, is not. Instead, there is a flight number, UN806, and a date, December 26, 1999. Underneath are fourteen names; the sixth down is John A Wilkinson. A second row of names

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is listed opposite the first, beneath another flight number: UN806A, and a second date, January 2, 1999. The fourth name from the top is Hilton Wilkinson. It is his remains that are buried a few feet beneath. At the bottom of the tombstone is a single line: THEY DIED FOR PEACE IN ANGOLA.

That may have been true of Johnny Wilkinson, perhaps, but of Hilton?

I recalled my recent flight out of Huambo, where I'd seen a crew member wearing a black peaked cap that said TRANSAFRIK: HERCULES. We chatted and he told me his name was Jaime Oliveira. He had been a loadmaster with Transafrik until quite recently. On Christmas Eve 1998, he had flown with Johnny – two days before the crash. He invited me to his flat in downtown Luanda, and told me of how he had seen Hilton at the airport the day before his final flight. Oliveira recognized him because he had flown as a passenger on one of Hilton's Balmoral flights a year or so before. They talked briefly about the missing plane. Hilton was 'calm and very determined', not at all despondent.

'The son was a young man,' Oliveira said as we sat in his cramped living room, facing a wooden bar-counter on which stood a bottle of whisky and a replica of a Transafrik cargo plane. 'He had a career. But he came back for his father.'

He looked at me with sad eyes.

'The son came, and the son died.' ■

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Jason Cowley talks to Xan Rice