

September u3a Meeting: Sextant to Sat-Nav 2 with Peter Griffiths

At the u3a Meeting on Wednesday 9th September we had a return visit from Mr. Peter Griffiths, a former pilot for BOAC and Cathay Pacific, who gave his talk 'Sextant to Sat-Nav', 45 Years in Aviation (with a fear of heights!). This was Part 2, Part 1 of the talk was given in May 2025.

Peter opened the talk by asking the audience if anyone had a fear of heights. He explained that he first discovered his own fear while travelling in lifts on the outside of tall hotels. However, he had no similar fear while flying a plane at 40,000 feet! He went on to say that, statistically, flying is the safest form of transport and that you would have to fly every day for 107 years before having an accident.

He then showed films of planes landing on the runway at the old Kai Tak Airport in Hong Kong, which involved a complicated approach which not every pilot got right.

A lot of global freight is carried in the holds of passenger planes, but some dangerous goods such as lithium batteries must be carried in special freight planes. Peter then showed pictures of these large planes which also carried live cargo, such as racehorses, around the world. Large animals such as whales, dolphins and turtles were also sometimes carried, but they drew the line at giraffes!

During Gulf War 1 (1990-91) airlines were directed over Russian and Chinese air space, avoiding the Middle East war zone. Peter had flown a special mission to the Gulf carrying what appeared to be tank spares. They were almost shot down due to call sign misidentification but after landing safely they wanted to unload quickly and depart. This was not possible as only one unloading lift was available. After several hours they found they were now too light to take off as these planes worked on a delicate weight balance calculation. When more fuel was added as ballast, they were able to fly to Karachi where a new crew took over.

Due to the success of that mission, further flights were commissioned from Cathay Pacific, and a special white painted plane was used to deliver supplies. All pilots were issued with protection suits against biological weapons but fortunately these were never needed.

Peter showed more images of freight planes, such as the Boeing Dreamlifter and Airbus Beluga, which could carry items as large as plane wings and fuselage. Peter said that the crossroads airport for much global freight is Anchorage Airport, Alaska. Many towns and villages in Alaska still depend on small planes for supplies and communication. Peter often used these to go fishing during stopovers, with the added excitement of watching out for bears who were also fishing!

At age 55 Peter moved to work for NetJets, a company which hired out private jets to individuals. These could be rich sportspeople, diplomats, celebrities and on one occasion ex-President Bill Clinton, who managed to set fire to some upholstery with a cigar! There was no danger to the plane but the damage cost \$250,000 to rectify.

Peter was still not ready to stop flying and his final flights were for independent owners. He recalled flying Bjorn Borg and John MacEnroe to a senior tennis tournament and said they seemed quite pleasant people. He then closed the talk with some cartoons and invited questions from the floor.