

The Bombayment Method

As you'll see, it's smarter to check your temper before you check your bags.

Memoir by Reg Potterton

There are only five people in this world who know what happened to that lost airline baggage in the Montreal winter of 1958, and I'm one of them. I have no idea where the four other people are today; out there somewhere, I trust, swarming around in the great plankton; gone to convents or madhouses, who knows? It was a long time ago, and when it was all over, we five went our separate ways, never to meet again. It was as if our only common destiny was to come together in those months for the sole purpose of carrying out the deeds I am about to relate.

We were employed by an airline that was in those days British Overseas Airways Corporation, and we were known as passenger handling agents. It was our job to check the people when they came to the dismal sheds that then constituted Montreal International Airport, Dorval, Quebec. We tore out their tickets, weighed their bags and gave them their boarding passes. Many of the people we met were very badly designed. We not only had to cope with them, in their surly thousands, but we also, after work, had to face the frightful drive back home across the dread frozen wastes of the suburban tundra.

The winter was a few weeks old when we devised the system of baggage handling that became known as the Bombayment method. The first recorded example occurred on a December night when all five of the original instigators were on duty together. Apart from myself, there was Glitz, a Hungarian who was fluent in no known language, including his own; Glare, a ginger-haired angry lady from Belfast; Siggie, a sagacious Iraqi Jew with expensive fingernails and beady eyes; and Arne, a 45-year-old crippled Belgian. Arne drew attention to himself on his first day at work by strangling a chicken that an old Portuguese immigrant had tried to smuggle in with the rest of his belongings. It was then (and may still be) the practice for immigrants to Canada to arrive with ducks, geese and even the occasional pig; and Arne, for reasons of his own, volunteered his services as livestock executioner to Canadian customs. It was said that he once shot three ducks in a pillowcase with a .357 Magnum, though our supervisor, Scrowston, a laconic figure who sported a well-tailored uniform and an Enola Gay Bombardier's cap, had dismissed that as gossip.

"The guy's OK," Scrowston growled. "He just likes to fool around is all."

Scrowston was found of standing tall in doorways, surveying the world through narrowed eyes, in the manor of a man about to embark on a dangerous mission. Only those who know him understood that he was, in fact, a fantastic incompetent whose air of executive command failed to disguise a mind that long ago had locked itself away from intrusion of reality. We loved Scrowston because he could approach a dithering old dear as she fumbled for ticket and passport, loom over her in his hat and spurious aviator glasses and bark: "OK, Granny, let's get this show on the road."

To Scrowston, an old lady, passenger or not, was a P.T.P.B., Post tampon pre-burial, and it is a mark of his abiding innocence that he use the term with affection.

On the fateful night of our first Bombayment, there was a full plane, a turboprop Britannia, to check in for a transatlantic flight to Manchester and London. It had been delayed several hours because of ice and hopelessness, and many passengers were cold and tired. Heavy-duty whining was much in evidence.

It often seemed to us that of all “difficult” passengers, the nastiest were my countrymen, the British. Perhaps it was because so few of them flew in the Fifties, and many who did seemed to think it meant they had been divinely touched; others suffered from the delusion that they knew their “rights.” Regrettably, they were prepared to behave rather badly to demonstrate that knowledge.

Our first Bombayment was a gentleman who thanked God for England, quite loudly, while dumping his bags on the counter scale. He was returning to Manchester after a business trip. He didn’t like Canada, it was too cold, the people were unfriendly, the prices outrageous, the manners disgusting, the cars too big, the houses too hot. There were no pubs, no proper food, the bank had cheated him on his foreign exchange and the French-Canadian taxi driver had refused to speak English to hi. However, he confided, he had managed to pick up some interesting samples of Canadian manufacture – those were in a case marked URGENT – and he was certain the market back home would be most receptive. Other than that Canada could get stuffed.

Siggie was standing next to me at the counter while the passenger aired his views. Siggie liked Canada, possibly because he felt it was better to be a Jew in Canada than it was to be a Jew in Iraq.

“I’ll look after these,” Siggie said, removing the Manchester passenger’s bags from the scale. There were no conveyor belts at Dorval in 1958. Baggage was usually tagged on the scale, taken into the office and loaded onto cards at the back door. I was a little surprised, therefore, to find Siggie – after the Britannia had finally taken off – sitting in the back office, poring over the Official Airline Guide International Edition, with the Manchester passenger’s baggage at his feet.

“What are you doing?” I asked, always eager to acquire something from Siggie’s vast found of wisdom.

“That man was an asshole,” he explained. “I am sending his bags to Bombay.”

“But he’s going to Manchester.”

“Agreed, he i s, but not his bags. Let’s see. I can get them on tomorrow’s Canadian Pacific flight to Lisbon; from there they go to Naples. Naples, Cairo. Then Istanbul via Tahiti. Karachi, I think, then Naples again. Hold them there for a week, then Bangkok via Tehran. Bangkok, Sydney, Tokyo, then back to London and a short stopover in Manchester – just in case they’re homesick – then off to Rio de Janeiro, a quick dash to New Zealand, back to New York through Paraguay, then Reykjavik, Naples again and Seattle. I still have to figure a way to get them to San Juan. If they didn’t get stolen after three passes through Naples, the Puerto Ricans will get them first time. Puerto Ricans eat suitcases; did you know that? To qualify for a baggage handling job at San Juan airport, it is necessary to have served at

least 15 years in a maximum security prison. So. If his bags survive Naples and San Juan, they should make it to Bombay in about two year.”

And that’s how it all began. How easy it was!~ All one had to do, in that simple age of airline travel before the days of the terrorist jet set and baggage security check, was to add enough connections tags, correctly filled out with flight numbers and destinations, and off went the consignment, out into the great void of the wandering suitcase.

Our job took on a new and greater dimension. One was no longer helpless in the face of snarling travelers. One did one’s duty quietly, politely, effortlessly, bending in the path of every ill-mannered blast that came our way from the other side of the counter.

“London madam?” to a screeching fiend whose ranting’s would have moved a saint to a state of kill frenzy. “Certainly, madam, of course. We’re sorry about the delay; yes, I agree, we’re all totally useless. Have a pleasant flight.” And into the back office went the offending baggage, with the pregnant sentence, “Bombay, please, and a four-month stopover in Valparaiso.”

We refined the method, crudely but effectively. A “Neapolitan random six-pack,” for instance, meant the bags were to be shuttled in and out of Naples six times, to and from any ports of inconvenience. A “three-way Communist no-hoper” was a triangular route through airports in the Eastern bloc, all of them being in accessible or difficult of access from the West. Such a routing could also excite the curiosity of Western security services, especially if bags that were sent to the land of the Red Menace passed through the US transit pint en route.

I should point out that while we Bombayed only those found to be thoroughly guilty, we did so without the stain of racial or national prejudice. True, we had to restrain Arne, the Belgian, from checking the German passengers – contrary to the rules (which allowed us to Bombay only those individuals who gave us no reasonable alternative), Arne insisted on goading Germans, and we simply couldn’t have that.

Our brief was simple: a passenger would arrive, one of about 80, and cause trouble. A little trouble was, of course, part of the job; but when it went too far, Bombayment was the inevitable punishment, not subject to appeal. Siggie was the arbiter.

“To Bombay or not to Bombay, that is the question,” he once said in considering a borderline case; and that was the phrase, suitably illuminated, that we pinned to the staff notice board.

Possibly, Scrowston had a vague idea that something was going on during those months, but if he did, he many have thought that whatever it was kept us out of more serious trouble. We no longer monopolized the public-address system, for example, announcing the departure of fictitious flights to other planets, or filling the terminal at three A.M. with the recorded sounds of steam locomotives and roaring lions.. But we occasionally let the Hungarian, Glitz, have the microphone, and he would babble happily on, to the mystification of all within earshot.

Clare, our angry lady from Belfast, helped bring about our downfall by sending the Vatican delegation’s bags to Russia. It was a clumsy attempt and definitely improper within the approved framework of

Bombayment procedure. One of the priests accused Clare of shortchanging him on some dollars he converted at the counter. After he left, she fell into a rare fit of frothing hysteria and complicated the matter by paging the priest over the P.A. in the following manner; “Will the papist son of a bitch who called me a cheat and a liar come back to the BOAC desk for a kick in the balls?”

That is not the kind of approach that lends itself to a dispassionate assessment of a candidate for Bombayment, and whatever the merits of the case, Scrowston evidently felt constrained to take a tough stance by calling Clare into his office. “Hey baby,” he said, you’re a little over the falls here. These guys are OK, you know.”

But Clare was not to be admonished or appeased, and so it came about that she sent the clerical baggage winging its way to Moscow, via New York, where, according to the legend, it was towed out to see past the Ambrose Light and blown up by vigilant officers of the U. S. Customs Service.

The advent of silicon chips and the deployment of programmed human beings throughout the airline industry have no doubt made it impossible to develop the state of the Bombayment art to its greatest potential. Since those distant days, I myself have been Bombayed a few times – or at least fallen victim of monstrous inefficiency. I must say, in humility, that I have never given cause for deliberation Bombayment; we pioneers of the method are too wily to push too far.

Knowing where to draw the line when checking in while in a bad mood is the key. Remember, these are two kinds of airline passengers – who is Bombayed by mistake and he who is Bombayed because he deserves it. Whenever I have been a victim, I have merely waited for the situation to change, standing by with the wry inner smile, content to let the process work its weary way.

“You’ve sent my bags to Hanoi? That’s wonderful.”

Patience is the secret.

I have learned that Siggie spoke the truth about San Juan airport – well, perhaps he embellished it a little; but personal experience over the past few years lead me to believe that my old friend was not far off the mark when, during a lecture on further refinements in Bombayment, he spoke to us about the achievements of our contemporaries down there in the carefree Caribbean sun of Puerto Rico.

“The best thing to do with your bags when you check in at San Juan is to go out to the parking lot before you check in and set fire to your bags. Those guys are artists, I’m telling you. I take my hat off to them.”

What more fitting way to conclude this memorial than with a compliment from the master, and with his warning too:

“So remember, if you go through San Juan, two things – be nice and travel light.”

How true, even today. And not just in San Juan.