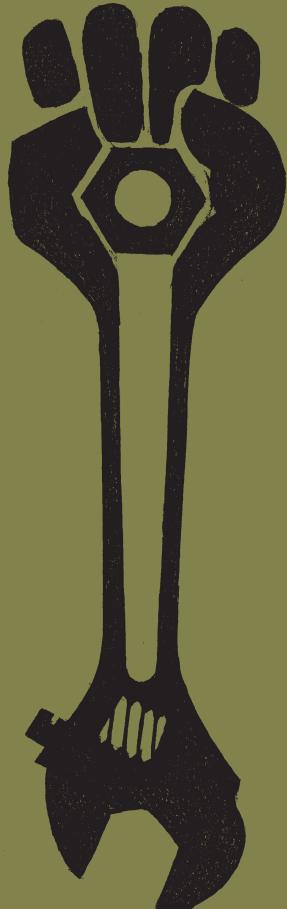


By Niels Nielsen



The Crash Dummy Chronicles: A Serial in Three Parts

PART 1: TRANSVESTITE CRASH DUMMIES FROM HELL

Remember 1965? Remember the neat stuff we had back then? First generation skateboards, with metal wheels (remember how much it hurt when you fell?). Eight-track tape players for your Ford Mustang, with the tank full of real leaded premium gasoline, like wow- 100 octane- for 39 cents a gallon. Pale blue stretch Levis. suede Beatle boots, Instamatic cameras, Carnaby Street fashions: Petula Clark in paisley prints (downtown, downtown), the Dave Clark Five, Dick Clark, Ramsey Clark, Ramsey Lewis, Jerry Lewis, Shari Lewis, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, Playboy Clubs- all this, and Mad Magazine, too. And plastic 8-balls with all the answers inside.

Getting the answers was easier back then, mostly because we were all 13 years old, which meant that the questions on our minds weren't very complicated. Later, drugs would change all that, but for a 13-year-old in 1965, that fortune-telling 8-ball was just the thing. In case you missed out, this particular 8-ball was a plastic paperweight made to look like an oversized black-and-white billiard ball with a flat spot on the bottom so it wouldn't roll off your desk. The flat spot was actually a clear glass window, and the ball itself was hollow and filled with a dark blue liquid. If you picked up the ball and held it against your forehead (so your brain wave vibes could infiltrate it) and then turned it in your hand so the window was facing up, the answer to the question you had in your mind would appear in the window in white italic script after a dramatic pause. It was the Ouija board for the Go-Go generation, made in Japan of course.

The answer messages were molded into the faces of a plastic Platonic solid that floated randomly around in the blue murk. This polygon was just buoyant enough to float up slowly and come to rest with one face against the inside of the window when you held the 8-ball upside down- revealing one of a short list of terse and sometimes cryptic responses: "Yes". "No". "Perhaps." "Reply hazy-ask again later". And my all-time favorite: "You may rely on it."

Naturally, you had to agitate it properly to get the right answer, and everyone had their own technique. Some twisted it back and forth while others shook it violently like a can of spray paint, as if it too had a little marble inside which would roll around in there and dislodge the right answers from the sludge in the bottom. At the time, none of us had the patience even in the shank of an

otherwise dead Saturday afternoon to catalogue the different answers one at a time, preferring instead to toss the 8-ball aside in favor of the most recent copy of Mad- or, better still, one of your big brother's old Playboy magazines that still had the centerfold intact. And none of us had the nerve to smash open one of those 8-balls and get all the answers out in one fell swoop. After all, we were all 13 years old in 1965: short on patience, short on nerve, and in any case a lot more interested in the pictures in Playboy.

But there were lots of people in 1965 with patience enough to plan and nerve enough to follow through. We called them grownups, and they weren't intimidated by the thought of destroying bones to have the marrow out of them. In fact, they methodically destroyed entire airplanes to get the answers out of them. They wore white lab coats, drove Ford Galaxie 500 sedans and worked for the government. Of course, you can't just shake an airplane and wait for the answers to float by the windows one by one. No, you had to do something lots more fun and exciting: you had to crash that sucker at top speed if you wanted all the answers out of it at once. Lots more drama and suspense that way, but mainly more fun, especially if you had a bit of the 13-year-old in you, as do all good engineers in white lab coats.

So imagine now, if you will, a Lockheed Model 1649A Starliner- the last of the Constellation line- with the familiar TWA markings sprayed over with primer and big red-and-white checkerboard circles painted on instead. This is no jet, it has four enormous 18-cylinder piston engines and equally enormous three-bladed propellers. And you know what? It's time to start one up, so let's watch.

The pilot begins by turning on all sorts of fuel pumps and then jazzes the engines one at a time with generous gushes of pure, 120-octane aviation gasoline- the best gas that money can buy, the surreptitious choice of hot rod street-racers all across the country- and engages the electric starter which swings that huge prop around with stately slowness until all 18 cylinders are charged with a rich atmosphere of raw gas fumes. Then, while holding the start motor on, he switches on the spark for that engine and as the ground crew stands dutifully by with fire extinguishers at the ready, the engine coughs explosively and shoots huge wads of dense oil-laden smoke out exhaust stacks as big around as your head. The cowling shakes violently as if the engine were ready to wrench itself right off the wing and as the propeller picks up speed, the clouds of oily soot float lazily away in the wind and eventually all 18 cylinders- displacing a total of three thousand, three hundred and fifty cubic inches (that's better than ELEVEN Ford 289's!)- come on line with a deafening, cacophonous rumble.

Now THAT is real drama, and you get to watch this show happen four times every time a Starliner gets ready to fly. At night at full power cruise, a pale blue and pink flame 6 feet long flickers out of each of the exhaust stacks, which glow red-hot in the 360 mile-an-hour slipstream. Lots more visual drama than what you get starting and running a jet, especially if you are a 13-year-old with a bunch of airplane books in your bedroom and plastic airplane models suspended on threads over your bed.

The Starliner of our imagination now has all four engines rumbling and grumbling and coughing up an occasional loogie of dirty oil and white oil smoke, but it will not be flying cross-country at night. This plane has had its nosewheel cut off and replaced with a slider grip that rides on a metal rail, straight as an arrow and several miles long, which has been spiked onto the flat and dusty surface of one of those dry lake beds out here in the west that Mother Nature has generously provided engineers to do particularly stupid and fun stuff on- places where the neighbors will not complain about the noise. The rail is plenty long enough to get the plane up to full speed but the slider constrains it to fly along only ten feet above the lake bed, aimed right at the base of a convenient mountainside peppered with big rocks and stunted cacti and slow-motion movie cameras. The engineers in white lab coats who have thus sealed its fate stand around next to their Ford Galaxie 500 sedans not far away from the Spot Marked X. They are waiting for their special Starliner to come boiling out of the heat haze towards destiny and obliteration on this nice sunny morning. Many, many answers will spill out of that plane all at once when it splits open against the steep, rocky hillside and the engineers are right there, at the ready with binoculars and cameras and vans full of remote control and telemetry equipment, to

capture every twitch and twist of the dying airplane.

And what is the payload of this doomed flight? Crash dummies. A planeload of crash dummies wired up for action, the messy details of which will be remotely noted by telemetry and recorded in grainy black and white for posterity by a bunch of high-speed movie cameras strategically placed about the spacious, comfortable cabin of the Starliner. At the moment, things are perfectly calm on board- indeed, a Lockheed Model 1649A Starliner is a most quiet and comfortable airliner- and so as the plane gathers speed, the crash dummies are all transmitting nothing but flat, placid brain wave signals back to the engineers. Soon though, things will heat up when Crash Dummy Airways Flight #2995 connects with the inevitable and the dummies swing into action and do their high-speed dance steps for the high-speed cameras.

(By the way, business was quite brisk earlier this morning at the Crash Dummy Airlines ticket counter. Every last seat on Flight #2995 (leaving Obscurity, New Mexico at 10:19 sharp, arriving at Oblivion, New Mexico at 10:21) had been sold, and so the plane is completely full.)

The Crash Dummy Airways logo- a circular red-and-white checkerboard affair- glistens in the hot desert sun from the fuselage and tail of the doomed plane. Inside, the crash dummy passengers sit peacefully in their seats, each one with a miniature copy of the logo stuck to the sides of its head. Such brand loyalty! The seat belt sign is on, and most (but not all) of the crash dummies are securely buckled in. No snack service will be offered on this brief flight, and it's unlikely that the stewardesses in their natty blue uniforms will have enough time to offer the customary beverage service to the passengers. In fact, there don't seem to be any stewardesses at all in evidence on Flight #2995, an oversight we will discuss later.

A closer look reveals that some unfortunate crash dummies do not have seat belts, and that some of the buckles in use are of a nonstandard design or differ from one seat row to the next in how the belts are affixed to the seat structures and so on. But of course this whole event is supposed to be a scientific experiment, a fact which explains the presence of high-speed movie cameras bolted stoutly in place here and there in the cabin, and the loosely-looped bundles of accelerometer wires that connect a few select members of the passenger contingent to heavy black boxes in the coat closets. The crash dummies obviously don't know it just yet, but they are soon going to furnish big piles of answers in a really big hurry to the engineers in their white lab coats, who by remote control have just finished closing the engine cowl vents, retracting the flaps and trimming out the controls for level flight. Flight #2995 has now attained its assigned cruising altitude of ten feet as it streaks across the lake bed. Its overtaxed engines, howling at maximum power, spew oil mist and flaming-hot exhaust as their huge shiny propellers flash and glimmer in the sun and claw furiously at the thin hot air and kick up swirling clouds of dry desert dust.

All that remote control assistance from the engineers on the ground means a very light workload today for the flight crew up front in the cockpit. They too are crash dummies of course, sitting firmly strapped into their seats, staring out the windscreen with sightless eyes and facial expressions of boredom and easy unconcern. See that? Some test engineer with a particularly oddball sense of humor has apparently taped the pilot's gloved hands to the control yoke. Its slight movements, commanded by the engineers back in their white telemetry vans, move the crash dummy pilot's arms back and forth a bit to produce the entertaining charade that he is in fact flying this plane himself. Very funny. The copilot, radio operator, and flight engineer- all of them crash dummies, hand-picked for this difficult mission- ignore the joke and sit in their seats with limp arms dangling, unplugged headphones smushed down over their natty blue Crash Dummy Airways flight crew caps. Sorry- a little more oddball humor there. Very little.

All the crash dummies look so similar- could they all be related? Members of the same tribal clan perhaps? Well, in a real sense, they were all struck from the same mold: stylized mens' wear mannequins of plaster and plastic with undeveloped, rudimentary facial features; bald, matte-finished heads, some sporting what

look like electroencephalograph electrodes glued onto their blank foreheads. They could pass for extras in a cheap science fiction movie, one of those oldies in which all the aliens are made up and costumed to look alike and the sexual differences between the males and females de-emphasized to provide contrast between them and the real humans in the film. No need for that here, though. This is not cheap science fiction, it is expensive science fact, and every role in this short feature is played by a crash dummy. The heroic lead, the love interest, the heavy, the villain, the comic bit parts, the extras, the walk-ons, even the cameo appearance by the Albanian Minister of the Interior in a badly-cut tweed suit- all are played by crash dummies. (Did he say Albanian?)

It's just as easy to imagine them as the sleep-walking zombie clones of an evil doctor with a heavy Slavic accent, a smudged white lab coat, weevil-infested eyebrows so bushy that by working them up and down he can brush lint off the inner surfaces of his thick eyeglasses, a Wartburg (the iron curtain equivalent of a Ford Galaxie 500 sedan) parked outside his mountaintop redoubt, and the obligatory lisping hunchback assistant, who has built a small army consisting entirely of haberdasher's dummy representations of himself (the master race archetype!), dressed them in standard-issue jumpsuits sewn from various thicknesses and grades of flame-retardant fabric, assembled them hastily in a remote corner of a remote desert for a quick ride on an "unscheduled carrier" which the evil doctor will deliberately crash into a mountainside by remote control and thereby breathe sudden life of a sort into these his creations, who will then boil forth from the split-open wreckage fully realized and ready to lay waste to civilization and conquer the world in the name of the evil scientist's native Albania. But no. There's no point in ascribing to evil that which can be adequately accounted for by scientific curiosity, which will be suddenly satisfied any moment now when Flight #2995 arrives at its destination. (Did he say Albania?)

Meanwhile, the plane draws nearer to its very final destination, zooming across the desert at three hundred miles per hour, yearning as it does to break loose from the nose rail and fly off to a more happy destination. However, the engineers in their white lab coats will not be denied. The nose rails hold fast, and Flight #2995 remains on course and on schedule. Seen head-on from the hot-as-hell hilltop where it will hit, the Starliner comes swarming out of the heat waves ahead of a billowing cloud of lake bed alkali mixed with bluish smoke from its seriously overheated engines, bellowing their guts out at maximum overboost with cowl vents shut tight for minimum drag. Far off in the distance at the beginning of the rail you can make out the fuel trucks and the moving van that served as an airport shuttle for the crash dummies, while close by you can make out the cameras on their heavily-braced tripods amongst the cacti and, off to one side, another group of vehicles. With a pair of binoculars you could pick out the Ford Galaxie 500 sedans.

Cut back now to the interior of the main cabin and its full load of crash dummies. Do you see any baby crash dummies? Any screaming toddler crash dummies? Any grade-school crash dummies dressed like Leave-It-To-Beaver, glued to the windows to watch the propellers spin and the landing gear and flaps go up and down? How about pimply-faced, pubescent, sullen, callow, eye-rolling rude 13-year-old crash dummies carrying copies of the Dave Clark Five's Greatest Hits album? Do we have a single example of a hip, in-crowd crash dummies wearing Jade East aftershave and a paisley shirt with a turtleneck dickie and a swinging medallion, pale blue stretch Levis, and greenish suede beatle boots, reading essays by Ramsey Clark in Playboy Magazine, who would much rather be driving to Malibu in his own 289 V8-powered 1965 Ford Mustang convertible with the top down and a big surfboard resting in the back seat and a thankful of 39-cent-a-gallon leaded premium gasoline with "I'm In With The In-Crowd" by Ramsey Lewis playing on the 8-track tape deck? Or any overweight, backslapping, dimbulb Rotarian sales rep crash dummies from Cleveland wearing polyester dress shirts and skinny black neckties without a trace of irony and tapered slacks and buckettop dress shoes with Corfam™ artificial uppers, drinking Fresca diet soda from deposit bottles with lever-action bottle caps, no opener required? The very same ones who held up the Crash Dummy Airways check-in line by flirting shamelessly with the cute blonde ticket counter attendant earlier this morning because she reminded them of Petula Clark?

Sorry, no. They're all dressed alike and they all look alike. Standard issue, male, 1965 model crash dummies, each of them very much behind the 8-ball on this particular morning, including the cheap suit trade delegation from Tirana sitting in the back of the plane smoking inferior cigarettes, on its way to negotiate the purchase of another obsolescent cement plant from the Red Chinese with which they can build more coastal fortifications to fend off the growing threat of the NATO invasion that the Albanian authorities have been propagandizing about to the oppressed masses for the last five years. (Tirana? Isn't that the capitol of Albania?)

And neither are there any female crash dummies on this flight, although it is easy to imagine what one might look like: the features of a wig stand, a hint of eyelash, not quite so ruddy a visage as her male counterparts, miniskirted (after all, this is 1965) with a tastefully plastic hairstyle copied from the label of a bottle of Breck Shampoo... but no. It may be true that life imitates cheap art, but it is not necessarily true that the Gary Larsen Far Side Universe (in which bent-on-revenge crash dummies bearing the Crash Dummy Airways logo entrap white-lab-coated engineers in 1965 Ford Galaxie 500 sedans and hurl them head-on into brick walls for fun) must necessarily contain sanitized wood-and-plaster simulacra of Petula Clark. Besides, unbeknownst to the other crash dummies on this flight, it turns out that a certain white-lab-coated test engineer with a particularly oddball sense of humor is responsible for the bra and fishnet pantyhose that one of the crash dummies- heavily instrumented and without a seat belt- is wearing under his fire-retardant experimental jumpsuit.

Anyway, time is running out for flight #2995. In seconds, the plane will come to the end of the guide rail and enjoy a fraction of a second of free flight before it strikes the mountainside with horrific force, high-speed cameras blazing. High time for one of the crash dummies to make his move. Think of it: a crash dummy hijacker releases his experimental seat belt buckle to race forward to the flight deck, brandishing an empty plastic squirt gun, to threaten the crew and issue his demand in a heavy Slavic accent:

"JOO VILL FLY THEES AIGHRPLEN TO ALBANIA OR I VILL BLOW OUT YUR BRAIN!!!"

Of course, crash dummies enunciate poorly, not having mouths as such, so the above ultimatum comes out sounding more like "mmm-hmm, hmm mm", etc. and is easily lost in the drone and roar of the engines. Not a hint of it will show in the telemetry data. The crash dummy hijacker's sudden sprint to the front of the cabin would naturally yield a blip from one of the accelerometers glued to his skull, and a chart recorder needle in the telemetry van would twitch unexpectedly. But it's probably just a little noise in the circuitry (he did say Albania!).

Very well. Why Albania? Might as well get this out of the way here before we get any deeper into the story. A little-known fact about Albania is that fully half its Politburo consists of crash dummies, and the other half has been dead since 1965. Nowhere else in the world is Stalin, for example, still alive, even though he's dead. Tiny Albania- a stinking geopolitical dingleball glued by a tenacious pubic hair to the asshole of eastern Europe, which the toilet paper of time has failed to dislodge- tiny Albania is actually ruled by crash dummies. Their whole country has been racing towards a head-on collision with reality for decades, gathering greater momentum and renewed resolve with each passing year, with each Communist Party congress.

Yes, my friends, ALBANIA IS CALLING THE CRASH DUMMIES HOME!

This is the heavily-accented English language service of Radio Tirana International, the Voice Of Albania. Stay tuned to 2995 kilohertz for our daily public opinion program, "Tirana Tirade", followed by a poorly-mixed phonograph recording of selected socialist symphonic pieces by the Albanian All-Volunteer Radio Orchestra with Crash Dummskic conducting. Don't fail to miss it!

Who knows? An unexpected hijacker might be sufficiently shocking to rouse the flight crew from their stoic

fugue this morning, but as we imagine the hijacker ranting his muffled demands we can equally well imagine what happens after a chance glance out the windshield: both he and the flight crew promptly shit a ten-pound crash dummy brick, for the plane is unambiguously headed straight for a hillside less than a mile away. In response, the pilot starts thinking that Albania no longer sounds like such a bad idea under the circumstances, and he begins tugging frantically at the yoke- which, being under remote control, will not budge. The hillside looms larger but he can't reach the throttles because his taped gloves will not release the yoke. In growing panic he braces his heels on the yoke and pulls viciously back. Suddenly he breaks free, but his gloves have torn loose not from the yoke, but from his sleeves: Look, ma- no hands! The plane flies on, guided now by an invisible ghost pilot whose gloved hands move the yoke just so to maintain the correct course and altitude.

The crash dummy pilot pummels the instrument panel glare shield with his handless stumps as the hijacker and the rest of the flight crew look on in helpless horror. Back in the telemetry van, the engineers in their white lab coats notice some buffeting of the controls as the plane approaches the hillside, but it's probably just some turbulence right there where the rail ends.

Flight #2995 is cleared to land. As the slow-motion movie camera motors spool up to speed, all sounds fade out and time inside and outside the plane now grinds down to a grainy, black-and-white crawl. We watch the propellers turn as slowly as they did at startup and see their tips swing around smoothly to engage the rocky slope. The blade tips on all four engines curl back as if made of taffy and then suddenly the blades shear off at the hub and sail lazily off in all directions. The nose of the plane plows into the dirt, crumpling into a growing ball of wadded-up aluminum. Seams split and metal panels burst free of their rivets and fly off sideways to vanish into the swelling gout of sand, pebbles and desert dirt that now engulfs the doomed plane.

Inside the cabin, the evil doctor's mad desire is fulfilled as dozens and dozens of comatose crash dummies suddenly come alive at the same instant and bow to the camera in perfect unison, kowtowing to the god of deceleration. The unlucky ones with weak seat belt buckles break free and arc gracefully forward towards the front of the cabin.

In profile we now see a phalanx of crash dummies obligingly pitch forward to strike their wood and plaster foreheads into seat backs and tray tables with awful force, then bounce back briefly and by some quirk of their construction and the movements of the plane they all turn towards the camera on cue to reveal grotesquely shattered heads. Their skull-bounces thus spent, they pitch forward once again and a domino avalanche of crash dummies, belted securely into seats broken loose from their experimental mountings, sweeps forward through the cabin, seat row collapsing into seat row. A multi-decker crash dummy-and-seat-back club sandwich forms up and is skewered messily by a tasseled toothpick in the form of an errant propeller blade that was thrown clean through the fuselage wall. Shredded upholstery flutters like lettuce. Hold the mustard!

His moment of opportunity finally at hand, a faintly smiling crash dummy hijacker without a seat belt sails serenely by through dark cabin air thickened into molasses by the mad rush of film through the camera. Trailing a bundle of cables, he cartwheels gracefully after snagging a shoulder on the mangled remains of a seat back and continues his determined rush forward, now upside down, his fireproof jumpsuit torn back and away from his neck to reveal a glimpse of black satin strap and a triangle of lace just before he exits the scene. Now on film, these inexplicable tidbits will later intrigue the hell out of the engineer in charge of that particular crash dummy, and cause him to suspect whichever of his co-workers has the most oddball sense of humor. That crash dummy's goal- the cockpit- is now coming at him at a bit less than three hundred miles per hour in a haze of crash dummy dust mixed with hanks of upholstery and flight crew hats. Cockpit, crew and hijacker are now footnotes at the end of a very hastily-written final chapter in the history of this particular Starliner.

Outside, a swelling cloud of debris and desert detritus tops the hill and comes rolling down to engulf the camera in a minestrone soup of airborne aluminum shards and dirt that dims the sun. Aircraft fragments fly

through the slow air as a Pratt & Whitney R-3350 engine somersaults by, flailing pistons and cylinder heads tumbled into junk, bound for nowhere in particular. Flight #2995 has vanished into a now-enormous cloud of dust and stones, out of which a lumpy rain of rocks, gear struts, magnetos and tray tables is falling.

The high-speed cameras are now out of film and so time returns to its normal, full-color march, and with the end of the silent footage we can now faintly hear the whoops and yahoos emanating from a group of engineers in white lab coats and binoculars standing next to a bunch of telemetry vans and Ford Galaxie 500 sedans way out on the alkali flats. Was the experiment a success? You may rely on it, if the responses of the engineers is any indication. They now go to work on the hillside with tape measures and Instamatic cameras and duffel bags, sipping an occasional Fresca diet soda against the broiling heat. After some days of this, the duffel bags are full, the Fresca is gone, and they are sunburned and data-happy. They pack up their metal bits, their film, their note pads, their yards of recorder paper bearing crash dummy brain wave vibes squiggled on them in red and blue ink, and their deposit bottles, pack it all away into their Ford Galaxie 500 sedans and drive back to the office to sift all the answers out of the trash. All the answers are now in their hands, and they got them all out of that plane at once. They better have; they certainly cannot toss aside their tattered Playboy magazines and shake up the oracle one more time for one more answer because the oracle is gone. Written on each tiny piece of it, on each inch of paper tape, on every frame of 16mm black and white film, is an answer. The trick, as usual, is in knowing how to read them, since they do not appear in white italic letters on a dark blue background in plain though cryptic English or even Albanian, for that matter. But that's OK, they're grownups. They can figure it out.

On their way back to their offices, the engineers in white lab coats pull the caravan off the road and park their Ford Galaxie 500 sedans in front of a roadhouse for a couple of victory beers and a game or two of pool. Rather than challenge the Air Force test pilots who frequent the place, they prefer to play (and drink) against each other. In their first round of pool, it is their elder compatriot, a big Boris Karloff look-alike of a mathematical physicist, who finds himself behind the 8-ball. He fled from central Europe just as the iron curtain was coming down a few years back and still hasn't quite made a home for himself here.

The layout suggests no clean shots and in his chagrin, he chalks his pool cue and recalls an earlier time and place, when the beer he drank tasted of more than weak water, when the games he played for entertainment made some sort of rudimentary sense to him. A time when the questions he had to answer could be expressed in equations that could be solved in closed form right there on the blackboard to yield exact answers, without any need for cop-out by successive approximation or messy experiment. A place where the mountains were covered thickly enough with green trees and grass that you couldn't see their rib bones and where Mother Nature did not furnish landscape features as conducive to grownup silliness as dry lake beds and where he was in the company of other scientists- real scientists, not just a bunch of aerospace engineers from Pasa-fucking-dena dressed as scientists who didn't understand his speech or his oddball sense of humor.

And in the moment before he decides on a chancy bank shot he recalls the Lockheed L-1649A Starliner which had been his baby for the last year, a worn-out and obsolete but still graceful and sophisticated airliner over which he had slaved for months in that dry dusty damn desert. He remembers it in that last instant when the rail came to an end and the plane was untethered and in full unfettered flight for that one final second before all his hard work and preparation slammed into the hillside and exploded into a million tiny answers. He would like to have hijacked that plane himself, bribed the pilot with a fine cigar and some plum brandy perhaps, and flown it not into sudden oblivion for the entertainment of a bunch of engineers in scientists' clothing but to his homeland, on the Adriatic.

END OF PART ONE

PART 2: JIMMY HOFFA AND THE SHROUD OF ELVIS

I originally wrote this in 1989-90, when Ronald Reagan and Michael Jackson were both still alive. Now they are dead and in addition to that, the iron curtain collapsed into a pile of rust, the communist government of Albania blew up and dried away, and all the Wartburg cars of this world have been melted down into the grade of steel reinforcing rod that get used in places where the real thing is too expensive. These changes have left my original plot (and I use that term of art advisedly in this context) in tatters, so what follows is a rash attempt to revise it into relevance. Like the amplifiers and bass guitars that I build, I am not going to know how this story will sound until I'm finished with it, and if it sounds lousy I'll have to take it apart and fix it until it either doesn't, or it becomes too broken to salvage. Wish me luck, I'm gonna need it...

More to come later...