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Upper Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

From hero to zero

In January 2008, hours after saving his plane from crashing at Heathrow Airport, flight captain Peter Burkill was being praised as a hero. Only days later, when reports appeared in the press accusing him of freezing at the controls, he became a villain. How did this extraordinary transformation come about?

Peter Burkill was the pilot on flight 38 from Hong Kong and ultimately responsible for the lives of its 152 passengers. But 35 seconds from landing, two of the plane’s engines failed. With the plane losing height fast, Burkill let his co-pilot John Coward take the controls while he himself adjusted the wing flaps to help the plane reach the runway. It was a risky decision, but it worked. The plane just missed some houses and landed heavily on the grass just short of the runway. After skidding for a few hundred metres, it miraculously came to a stop without turning over. The passengers escaped without serious injury. As far as Burkill was concerned, he had done what any captain would have done and the rest was luck.

However, this was not the version of events that began to circulate among BA’s staff in the following days. Whether they just liked to gossip or felt Burkill was incompetent, word went around that rather than taking control of the plane, he had frozen. Worse than that, it was reported that he had failed to issue a mayday call and had not evacuated the passengers correctly.

Some newspapers, sensing a chance to sell more copies, picked up the story, claiming that John Coward was the real hero. They published details of Burkill’s colourful past, painting a picture of a well-paid pilot, who had lived the life of a playboy, but – when it mattered – had let down his crew and passengers. Worse still for Burkill, it wasn’t even his word against theirs. British Airways banned him from speaking about the events until the full investigation by Air Accidents Investigations Branch (AAIB) was complete.

Overnight Burkill’s life changed. Before the accident, he had had everything: a great job, a beautiful home, a loving family and the respect of his colleagues. Now he felt betrayed and desperate. The stress put enormous pressure on his family. In the weeks that followed, he spent more time at home helping his wife, Maria, to look after their young children. But he became depressed. He begged the company to issue a statement to clear his name, but they refused, clearly anxious not to receive bad publicity in case the official investigation found Burkill guilty of a mistake. Even when they published their own internal report in May 2008, which cleared him of any wrongdoing, it was only read by the senior management. No word of it reached his close colleagues and rumours circulated that crew members were afraid to fly with him. He wrote to BA’s chief executive asking for help, but got no reply.

The official AAIB report, the result of a completely independent enquiry, was finally published in February 2009. It concluded that ice had formed in the fuel system during the approach to Heathrow, cutting the fuel supply to the engines. The actions of the crew had saved the lives of all on board, it said, in particular Captain Burkill’s split-second decision to reduce the flap setting.

The pilots and thirteen cabin crew were awarded the British Airways Safety Medal and the story of Peter Burkill the hero once again made the headlines. But the damage had been done. In August 2009, Peter Burkill took voluntary redundancy from the company he had served for 25 years. He began applying for jobs with other airlines, but he was not invited to a single interview.

So did his critics win? No. Burkill himself had the last word. BA said that he was and always had been welcome in the company and in September 2010 invited him to come back and fly Boeing 777s for them. Burkhill accepted their invitation.

mayday call (n) /ˌmeɪdeɪ ˈkɔːl/ a call for help in an emergency

runway (n) /ˈrʌnweɪ/ the part of an airport where planes land and take off

skid (v) /skɪd/ (of a car, bicycle, plane, etc.) to slide without any control

voluntary redundancy (n) /ˌvɒləntri rɪˈdʌndənsi/ to agree to leave your job in

exchange for payment of money

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