



An Island Disaster

The sad news was travelling round Lassa like wildfire. Willie MacDonald, a much loved local worthy, had just passed away. He had died peacefully in his sleep.

Willie had been a great friend of Iain Donaldson MP, whose daughter Jane had returned to the island of Lassa a few years ago. Jane was now an MSP at the Scottish Parliament.

Willie had also been a long-time friend of Bill MacPherson who used to own the hotel in Achnacreggan. The hotel was now called the Lassa Hotel and was owned and managed by Ellie MacPherson who took over the hotel on the death of her own father a few years before.

Willie's wife Mairi survived him though she had been in ill health for the last year or so.

Four days later Jane McKechnie MSP was in Committee Room B at the Scottish Parliament building in Holyrood, Edinburgh, and was chairing a meeting of the Renewable Energy Committee which was attended by representatives of the leading Scottish businesses in that market together with some from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Enterprise and other industry bodies.

She glanced briefly at her watch while someone from Scottish Renewables was presenting some up-to-date information on the prospects for offshore floating

turbines. It was eleven o'clock and she was mindful of First Minister's Questions at midday.

This was the last day of the parliamentary term before it broke up for the summer recess and Jane was going to meet her husband after FMQs. David McKechnie was in town on business and they planned to leave Edinburgh as quickly as they could to drive to Oban where they would stay for the night before taking the morning ferry to Lassa. Jane was bitterly disappointed that they couldn't make it back in time for the funeral of her father's great friend Willie MacDonald but planned to attend the "wake" in the Lassa Hotel later.

"This is a passenger information message. Flight number VA197 to Vancouver has been delayed. Passengers are advised that boarding is now expected to commence at 13.50...."

It was the next day and Heathrow airport was busier than normal this fine summer day, and flights were being delayed as a result. The terminals were crowded and there were large queues at all the food outlets. Thousands of people were sitting on bags and cases thereby obstructing passageways causing anger and frustration.

Incoming flights were being turned around as quickly as possible and this was the case with LA197 just arrived from Vancouver. The crew and cleaners, efficient as always, were making sure the cabin was clean and tidy before the next travellers embarked.

The plane was being fuelled and all the required safety checks were being undertaken with the normal attention to detail. The Vancouver Air flight was being prepared with the normal efficiency.

Bang on the amended time the boarding of the flight was called, much to the relief of the travellers who were hot, tired, and keen to get on board into their allocated seats.

Captain Pritchard was going through his final checks with others of the cabin crew and all was in order. Some time had been made up. The flight was only twenty minutes late.

It was a lovely clear day as the plane took off providing beautiful views of the English countryside. The route was to take them north up the west of the UK, then over Iceland, Greenland and the northern areas of Canada before descending to land at Vancouver.

Helen Donaldson, Jane's stepmother, was looking after Jane's children Iain and Fiona, while their mother and father were both on the mainland on business.

Helen was well used to this and she loved the children like they were her own. Today, they were harder to control than normal, however, as they were both greatly excited at the forthcoming school holidays. They were also shortly to be going on holiday with their parents to Mexico. Helen just smiled ruefully as the children ran around the house and garden in the fine late June sun.

Holyrood was in holiday mode and there was much jocularly in the questions that were being put to the First Minister, Ann Morris. It had been a difficult session with relationships between Holyrood and Westminster being particularly strained. The First Minister had also been under attack from the opposition parties for the entire session and she was now looking forward to her annual break that she always took with her husband in the highlands of Scotland.

She had some parliamentary business to wrap up the next day like many of the MSPs but would then be clear to leave for the north.

It was Jane Donaldson, in fact, who asked the last question that day, an easy one for her party leader to answer. Following that the FM wished the MSPs, the party leaders and the presiding officer and his team a very happy summer break. All then made their way from the chamber with some going to the usual vestibule to answer questions from the assembled media and press.

Jane and David came down the hill into Oban and turned in to the main shopping road before reaching the open vista of the promenade. Jane always loved it here and they arrived just in time to see the Mull ferry leave its ro-ro facility at the pier. It was full of visitors headed for Craignure. The ferry from the Outer Isles was just entering Oban bay round the point of the island of Kerrera.

“Why don’t we eat at that fish restaurant on the pier tonight?” Jane asked.

They stopped at their hotel just off the “front” at Oban and found a parking space, albeit with some difficulty due to the holidaying numbers in the town.

Later, when they were waiting on their meal at the restaurant and as they looked out into Oban bay, David asked his wife why she seemed troubled.

“I just wish we could have made it to the funeral service tomorrow. Willie was a close friend of my dad’s but he was also a weel-kent face on the island.”

Her husband smiled.

“A bit of a grouch at times though,” he said, and his wife nodded her head and smiled in agreement.

“But,” she continued, “This is one of those times when you can’t help feeling that things will never be the same again.”

Jane and David had also come to be close to the old couple, visiting them frequently in their small croft-house on the edge of the village of Stobbay.

“I hope Mairi will be alright,” David added after a short pause during which their main courses had arrived.

“Mmm, yes I hope so too,” Jane nodded in agreement.

The next morning, flight LA197 had just passed across the border from England into Scotland. Young Jim Allardyce was sitting beside his mother and father looking out of the window. The view was excellent and he could make out the Galloway coast and the small town of Stranraer below them as they made their way north. His mother, who sat in middle of the row of three leaned forward to point out the Antrim coast on Ireland and the island of Arran that was just coming into view.

“I think we’ll come to Scotland next time,” Mandy Allardyce said to her husband George, as she turned to face him. “It’s been a few years now since we’ve been there. It looks glorious below.”

Just at that time Captain Pritchard took a lunch box of a few sandwiches and a drink of Diet Pepsi from a stewardess who had just entered the cockpit. The plane was on auto and everything was looking fine. Allan Faulds his co-pilot was keeping an eye on things.

“It’s a great view down there,” he sighed, as he gazed down on the myriad of islands large and small ahead of them.

He suddenly cut his comments short as he looked at the bright red flashing controls in alarm.

“What’s that!?”

The MV Isle of Lassa was approaching its destination. It was now twenty minutes out from the island. Jane and David were on the communal deck at the aft of the ferry and Jane couldn’t but smile when she heard some children excitedly pointing out a small pod of dolphins that were playing around the ferry. It brought back memories of a few years previous to this when she first came to the island with young Iain and Fiona, her children from her first marriage.

A distant roaring sound started to take the attention of those on deck and many turned now to see a large airliner flying surprisingly low, and approaching the ferry from behind. A few people were looking quizzical but this soon turned to anxiety as the plane continued to lose height.

“ALLAN, HELP ME WITH THESE CONTROLS!!” the captain shouted to his co-pilot. I need to keep her up till we can see somewhere to land.

His co-pilot needed no second order as he grabbed the set of controls in front of him to help the captain.

“That’s the islands of Lassa and Culla ahead!” Allan shouted, “But I don’t think there’s sufficient flat land there for us to try to land.”

They were flying over the top of a ferry that was making its way to Achnacreggan. They could only hear some faint sounds through the locked security door of panic and screaming behind them in the body of the plane but had to leave the preparation of the pending crash landing to cabin crew. They knew that brace instructions would be being broadcast. That, however, was not their concern.

“It’ll have to be the sea, then!! We’ll make for the sound there between the two islands. At least we’ll be close to the land there.”

Captain Pritchard realised that this manoeuvre would be difficult and they would also have to bank hard to avoid coming down in the small town of Achnacreggan itself.

Shortly he was banking hard again but to the left this time. There was no pulling back now. They would be down in seconds.

OH CHRIST, WHAT’S THAT??”