

Book Review – The Flight of the Phoenix **A novel by Elleston Trevor**

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI



As I write this, the outside temperature is in single digits, there is snow on the ground, and a layer of ice below. This is a good time for a warm weather book. So I hit the local library and pick up a book that I have had on my list for a long time – one that will definitely take me out of the cold and into the warm – a book of the Sahara Desert in the 1950s. And as I am reading, I am thinking that perhaps the snow

and cold is not that bad after all.

The story concerns a pilot and his navigator, transporting a group of fourteen oil roughnecks and other assorted hangers-on from their oil-drilling camp near Jebel somewhere in the Sahara. Somewhere over El Tallab in the Koufra Oasis, the navigator, Moran, checks his position. He was

“looking down at the spread of the central desert. There were no toys lying scattered there now, and no weed-like tufts of palm. The afternoon sun cast shadows across the scimitar-curving dunes, and pools of dark light swam on the eastward lees of the plateaus. It was lunar landscape, dead and unknowable. Down there you would find not a leaf, not a grass blade, not a footprint of any living thing. The plane’s shadow haunted a dead world.”

And unknown to each man on that plane, that dead world will become their world. They are struck by a sand storm, and the story begins.

They are brought down in the desert in an unknown area, and after three days, sucking on a pint of water each per day, they begin to realize that no one is going to come looking for them.

Harris tells them that he is walking out. “How far to the nearest Oasis?” he asks. The maps come out. *“Moran showed them Marada, a small water point inhabited solely by Africans. ‘A hundred and sixty from here. Say, London to Sheffield’”*. Moran asks Harris, “Have you done any hiking in the desert? *“On exercise, that sort of thing . . . ten miles or so. Full pack of course”* . Harris is not to be dissuaded. Moran reminds him of Joe Vickers, who died walking in the desert a mile from camp. *“I remember Joe. What killed him?” ‘The desert’, Moran said.”*

While the others try to prepare themselves for the plane that might fly over, Stringer, who describes himself as an aircraft designer, quietly tells the captain, *“I’ve been examining this plane. We’ve got all we need here to build a new one*

and fly it out.” And how long will that take? A month? And we have water enough for ten days? Go figure.

Trevor tells the story of the men who survived and the men who did not; the men who would give up, the men who would not. He tells a story of the desert, day after day relentless in its heat and lack of water and lack of shade. And the nights where the temperatures plummet. He tells of the sandstorms, that come on relentlessly. He tells of the men, slowly dying from the heat, lack of water, lack of food. And he tells of one man with a vision and a relentless passion for work.

“Flight of the Phoenix” was turned into a movie in 1965 and starred Jimmy Stewart, Peter Finch, and Richard Attenborough. The movie was remade in 2004 with Dennis Quaid and Mirando Otto added to include a female character. It is not nearly as well crafted as the 1965 version, and I believe that the 1965 version does not impart the hardship of the desert nearly as effectively as the book.

Whether you have seen the movie and know the story or not, this book will keep you warm (and thirsty) on a cold winter’s night. Enjoy

Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order

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And here are more favorites: www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com/books/books.html