

Part 1: good news, bad news at the international conference

BY PETER CACKETT

One of my favourite comic strips from my childhood was *Good News, Bad News* which ran in *Jackpot* comic from 1979–1982. In this strip, the story for the main character would be described in a series of alternating 'Good News' and 'Bad News' events. Paying homage to this comic strip, I bring to you one of my trips to an international scientific conference.



Good news

Study leave approved, check. Out of office email turned on, check. Am I off overseas to collect an abundance of CPD points for my appraisal? Check. I can't lose, can I? Earlier on in the year I also managed to persuade a keen medical student to carry out an audit on my unit and it has been accepted as a poster presentation. I just have to make sure that I don't lose the poster somewhere enroute, which has been known to happen before on at least a couple of occasions (e.g. railway station, overhead cabin compartment).

Bad news

I arrive at Edinburgh Airport for the red eye connecting flight down to London. Well, in reality I actually drive to the off-site super cheap long-stay parking about a 10-minute shuttle bus drive from the airport, which is located on a distinctly dodgy looking industrial estate. As I hand my keys over to be parked, I immediately question whether the cost saving from this car park compensates for the fear that the car will be far from intact on my return.

There is already a long queue of irritable passengers jostling to enter security. As I try to walk through the admissions gate, the QR code for the boarding pass on my phone predictably will not scan, and there are a few audible sighs from behind me until a member of staff facilitates my



entry. I then shuffle slowly forwards as the long line advances through security to the x-ray machines. Alan Whicker, the famous travel journalist, never had to contend with this back in the day, I think to myself [1]. "Progress," I mutter under my breath to no-one in particular.

Good news

There are several activities in life which create feelings of guilt in the innocent, including walking past a policeman and a job planning meeting with the clinical director. Another is the body scanner in security and the trepidation that it might go off. However, there is a small victory in the whole security process and the buzzer doesn't sound as I pass through so I don't have to be subjected to a further frisking.

Bad news

In my zombie-like state I realise that I have forgotten to take the laptop from my bag

at the same time as I watch my bag predictably disappear down the far chute to undergo an extra search. I wait behind a succession of people despondently watching as their bottles of water, shampoo, nail scissors, etc. are dropped in the bin by an overzealous attendant.

Good news

Result! Although it is only 5:30am, with great delight I notice that the whisky tasting station is manned in the duty free shop. I explain to the server that I have always wanted to try the Balvenie 15-year-old single malt, which unbelievably by chance is on display in front of him. I murmur approval as the alcohol rapidly enters my bloodstream and takes the edge off the stressful start to the day. The acceptability of alcohol at the airport first thing in the morning is confirmed as I wander past the Wetherspoons, which is more mobbed

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with pint-wielding patrons than Princes Street during Hogmanay.

Bad news

I arrive at Heathrow Terminal 5 and manage to locate my friend and travelling companion, Tariq, in the departure lounge. However, he excitedly informs me that he has been upgraded to first class for the flight to the USA when he checked in earlier that day. I'm in cattle class and I definitely won't be able to enjoy the long-haul flight knowing he is living it up in first.

Good news

He goes on to tell me that there is a British Airways customer service desk nearby where I can enquire about being upgraded as well. He also says that everyone is being upgraded so it is a dead cert that I will be. I hurry along to the counter and queue for an attendant, straightening my collar and jacket and tidying my hair, trying to look presentable, if that's possible after a 3:00am start.

Bad news

When it's my turn, I confidently walk up to the counter. I explain to them that my friend has been upgraded to first class and ask if they could maybe do the same for me so that I can sit with him. The lady looks at me with slight disdain and replies that of course she would be happy to do so if I pay the required upgrade fee of £1500. I politely decline and walk back over to Tariq who is by now in fits of laughter that I even made such a lame attempt at an upgrade.

Good news

Reassuringly, no one else was present to witness my humiliation, although I am sure it is a story that will be narrated in the future [2].

Bad news

Tariq's upgraded ticket allows him access to the British Airways Business Lounge and I have to watch as he disappears into a world of peace and untold luxuries. The Pret has too long a queue so I settle on a disappointing meal deal from WHSmith, complete with insipid sandwiches which are so awful that really, they should be paying me to eat them. The only highlight is the Innocent smoothie being included in the relative, for an airport, bargain price.

Good news

The departure of the flight has been announced and Tariq is forced to leave his sumptuous enclave. As we gather by the gate, one of the agents announces over the public address system, "Please could the following passengers make themselves

known to a member of staff?" and goes on to read out half a dozen names. Yes! Get in! My name is included in the list! The upgrade I wished for must be about to happen and I confidently hurry past the other waiting passengers up to the desk.

Bad news

"Hello," I say expectantly, "you called out my name?" The man looks at me and with a well-rehearsed customer service smile, replies, "Yes, Sir, you have been earmarked for extra security checks." I then proceed to follow him down a staircase where two other burly security employees search and swab every part of me and my cabin bag.

Good news

The flight passes without event and I just about manage to suppress any thoughts about what is going on in first class. Tariq is definitely not having a party with Bono and Sting on the upper deck and quaffing vintage champagne. There is also minimal turbulence, so I don't have to expend any extra mental energy trying to keep the plane flying.

Bad news

There is a long queue at border control. The familiar feelings of guilt come over me as I approach the immigration officer. Will my passport be flagged as an international criminal wanted by Interplod [3]? I hand my passport over and the interrogation begins. Why am I visiting the US? Where am I staying and how long for? If I am an eye doctor, what do I think of refractive surgery? With this question I am not sure if he is trying to catch me out like Colombo or if he is in fact interested. I am just glad he doesn't ask me what is in the poster tube as in my tired state I may be tempted to say what a colleague apparently once said many years ago on a visit to the US (prior to 9/11, I hasten to add) which was, "A bazooka!" They were much more forgiving back then and let him in.

Good news

The sniffer dog at the baggage reclaim carousel happily walks past my cabin bag. The fear that it will be interested in the half-eaten bag of roast beef Monster Munch from my meal deal resulting in my baggage being searched is not realised.

Bad news

We arrive at the hotel in the evening but I am so tired that I decide to go to bed early to get a good night's sleep. However, my brain clearly has other ideas and the jet lag means I wake up on the

hour every hour throughout the night. Damn you, circadian rhythms. I arrive at the conference the following morning far from invigorated.

To be continued...

And there we have to leave it on bad news. However, just like some of the best stories, such as *Back to the Future* (1985), this one will continue [4]. Rest assured; the keenly anticipated sequel will arrive through your letter box in the next edition of *Eye News*. At the end of *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly is concerned that there isn't enough road for the DeLorean time machine to reach the required 88mph and travel to 2015. 'Doc' Emmett Brown lowers his sunglasses and reassures him, "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads!" In part two, despite being way beyond 2015, we will unfortunately need roads to get to the conference centre, and also have to stand in a long queue at registration to collect a meeting badge. It's a rollercoaster of fun, fun, fun in the next instalment, but will our protagonist's story end on a high?

References

1. A top travel tip from Alan Whicker: "The one phrase imperative to know in any foreign language is: My friend will pay."
2. The story of my failed upgrade attempt has indeed been told on at least a couple of occasions, much to everyone's amusement.
3. 'Interplod' famously being Arthur Daley's (*Minder*, 1979–1994) name for Interpol, the international criminal police organisation.
4. For the Barry Norman film buffs, the 'To Be Continued...' slogan that everyone remembers flashing on the screen at the end of *Back to the Future* was not actually there for the original theatrical release, as it was always meant to be a standalone film. However, following its massive success, there was enormous pressure on the writer and director, Robert Zemeckis, to make a sequel. When the home video release came out in 1986, the sequel was well in the pipeline, and to promote it Universal Pictures insisted on adding the final 'To Be Continued...' slogan to the VHS copies. Maybe *Good News*, *Bad News* will be a similarly successful franchise...

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