



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SARDINE RUN SPOTTER PILOT FOR AFRICAN WATERSPORTS

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It is 5 am and I can hear the waves breaking gently on the shore as I lay in my bed in a fisherman's hut 300 meters from the beach. The skippers and dive masters are still snoring but it is time for me to go to work. This is probably one of the first "fisherman's huts" built in the Mbotyi area where we operate during the GREAT ANNUAL SARDINE MIGRATION. It is a "no frills" abode. The wind is whistling through the roof rafters of the old hut as I trudge out the back door to have a wake-up shower. The shower is an outdoor facility located in the normally windward side of the house between two outside walls. Picture this :A 150 litre rubber garbage can is suspended between two rafters approximately 2 meters above your head .A normal garden hose extends downwards from the base of the garbage can , and attached at the end of the hose is a plastic 2 litre Coca Cola bottle drilled full of 2mm holes in it's base to make up the shower head. . The fisherman's hut security guard named Leanord , dutifully fills the garbage can with hot water from the "donkey". A donkey is an old 200 litre oil drum filled with water and heated by a wood fire beneath it .Shower done , I head across the dirt road to Mbotyi River Lodge. The lodge is situated on the mouth of the Mbotyi river with direct access to the beach. All the African Watersports clients stay at the lodge during the Sardine run .The clients are met every morning by boss man Walter for a breakfast before they head down to the beach to launch for a day on the ocean. My function in this whole Sardine run is to find the sardine shoals (from the air), and then direct the African Watersports skippers with their clients onto them. I grab a lunch pack and head up to the airfield which is a half hour away and situated in the Magwa tea plantation. My microlight aircraft has to be securely tied down as it remains at the Magwa tea plantation exposed to the elements overnight and whenever I am not airborne . Being unattended and exposed could give some locals who are prone to mischief some ideas , so I do a more than thorough pre-flight inspection by spotlight in the dark. Every nut, bolt, cable etc is checked meticulously as I am not particularly keen on a swim in the ocean as there have been a few reports of Great White sharks spotted in the area. After the pre-flight inspection is complete , I jump into my vehicle and drive up and down the runway to chase away the cattle left on the airfield overnight by the local herd boys. Time to get the wheels off the ground !

My name is Larry Eschner ( nickname SPARROW) (Capt Jack Sparrow), and I am privileged to be employed as a spotter pilot during the annual sardine run along the beautiful South African ,Transkei Wild Coast. I start up my trusty Rotax 912 motor and sit listening to the smooth purr of the engine as she slowly warms up to operating temperature. Take off is at 6:40 am, first light , and because the meteorological forecast is for pre frontal South Westerly winds, I turn south into the wind towards Port St Johns. Met is correct with their forecast as my ground speed is not much above 50 km/h (normal speed is 80km/h). It is however very smooth as I am flying approximately 5 km offshore and not in the rotors caused by the land breeze. 45 minutes into the flight and my radio crackles into life. "SPARROW , SPARROW come in for VALDEZ" The radio signal is crisp and clear and the skippers are eager to hear if there is any action happening. "Morning VALDEZ, it is a bit chillies out here so no showing off with your Speedo today, okay?" "Put a sock in it SPARROW, you wish you could show off like me" is Walters reply. Walter(VALDEZ) is the

owner/operator and chief skipper of the African Watersports dive boats that I “spot” for ,and there is always light banter on the radio which make the long days bearable. “I am just coming abeam Port St Johns, 1000 ft ASL and 5 km seawards. There is a super pod of dolphins moving north along the same line and they should be off Mboyti within the next hour.” “Shot Sparrow , we should be launching within the next thirty minutes, keep me posted.” “Will do, chat later,” I reply as I scan the water ahead of me. All the African Watersport boats are named after ship wrecks and this is to try and maintain a sense of nautical ambiance during the sardine run. Passing the Port st Johns river mouth, i am thrown about violently by the cold wind being channelled through the gorges out to sea. Fifteen minutes later and I am into calm air again and close to Umgazi river bungalows which is my southerly turn around point. I can see what looks like rain further out to my left and turning seawards I step on the accelerator , initiating a climb through to 1500ft above sea level. Another 5 minutes flying and I am now flying 13 km offshore. It is a very vulnerable feeling so far out to sea, and I am glad that I have filled the trike’s wings with pool noodles . If things should go pear shaped (engine failure) , and I am forced to land in the sea, i will hopefully not drown and maybe able to recover my beloved aircraft.

There is a whole lot of bait balls that have formed and I mark the position with my Garmin GPS. Although our boats don’t venture to far south of Port St Johns, I normally fly up to, and past Umgazi river bungalows marking activity that I come across. I am then able to plot the progress of the sardine shoals as they move north, which will save huge amounts of flying time in the days to come. From the beginning of June through to the middle of July is the prime sardine fever season for this stretch of coastline.

My radio crackles to life, “Sparrow , come in for Valdez “ I acknowledge and Valdez asks for a update. “Ok Valdez , got some action just starting up south of Port St Johns ,about 13 km’s offshore looking really promising.” “Do you think we should head down there ? “ is Valdez’s reply. I push the transmit button on the two way radio and reply:“ There is also some action off Manteku about 4 km mark , maybe try that first “ “Shot , will do “ says Valdez.

Turning back north I decide to land at Port St Johns for a leg stretch and a cup of coffee. The south-wester is 16 knots and makes landing on top of the mountain decidedly unpleasant. This is a old military runway and is in very good condition , only problem is cattle on the runway !A couple of low level passes scares the cattle off and I make a safe landing. A quick cup of coffee to warm up and I am I get airborne again. The first 10 minutes of the flight keeps my heart racing as I battle through the rotors and head back out to sea. I can see what looks like an oil slick on the ocean about 6 km seawards , and slowly turn in that direction. At the same time I notice the gannets on the same heading. Gannets are large black and white sea birds with yellow heads , long pointed wings , and pointed bills. With a wingspan of up to two meters , they are powerful fliers and use their strength to plunge from heights of up to 30 meters into the ocean. From this height they reach speeds of up 100 km/h (62mph) and plunge down to depths of 15 meters . They now actively swim and hunt their prey . As an aerial predator they , are phenomenal and my best guidance tool! The second dive boat is named OCEANOS and driven by Digger , a experienced skipper and divemaster. ”OCEANOS , come in for SPARROW” I call on the radio. “Sparrow this is OCEANOS go ahead” “ OCEANOS , there is a good bait ball forming off Dome bluff “

All the skippers and dive masters want in on the action and the radio does not stop as every one wants a definite heading for the bait ball. “OK, four bait balls out here with

loads of gannets , dolphins a few cape fur seals and a Brides whale.” “Shot Sparrow, put me on the money!” is Diggers response. I can see a couple of boats abeam of Manteku but don't know which one is OCEANOS . “Digger, do a donught.” is my reply. I see the wake of his boat as he spins in a circle. “OCEANOS , keep turning and I will tell you when to straighten out.” As soon as his bow is pointed in the right direction I tell him to maintain that heading for approximately seven kilometres.

VALDEZ picks up a heading off Digger's boat and starts racing towards the bait ball. As soon as they are onto the action, I continue with my northerly heading. Twenty minutes later and the radio crackles to life again. It is VALDEZ , “Thanks ,” he says, they are onto some heavy action on those baitballs.

“SPARROW, come in for Tiger One ” “Good morning Tiger One , go ahead”, I reply. Grant has a professional camera man on board and he wants exclusivity on a bait ball without other divers in the water who might interfere with his filming.” Anything close to launch for me ?” “, I am coming up to Waterfall Bluff and there is some good action going on.” “Roger that mate, I am on my way.” is Grants reply. With all boats happy, I decide to land at Grovener for a quick break and to stretch my legs again. I open my lunch pack and find the same boring sandwiches, a chocolate and liqui fruit as every other day. Going to have a chat with the lodge chef tonight, maybe he can be a bit more creative. But the lunch does hit the spot, and I am soon airborne again, still heading north towards Mkambati nature reserve. As I reach the Mkambati reserve border I notice something in the air about 4 km inland and head in that direction following the gorge that guides the .....river down to the sea. I am amazed to find a whole lot of cape griffin vultures circling over a precipice on the edge of the gorge , and looking down I see a whole lot more feeding on the carcass of a antelope . WOW what a bonus ! Turning in a circle of hot rising air above the feeing birds and flying wing tip to wing tip with these masters of the sky is absolutely amazing! Regrefully I am running low on fuel and reluctantly turn on a heading back to the airfield.

The locals have set fire to the dry fields to encourage new growth for their Nguni cattle and the smoke gives me a good indication of wind speed and direction. Heading back into the wind , I call up Valdez and advise that I am going back to the airfield to top up with fuel .

While I am refuelling my cell phone rings. It is Walter, and he tells me that there are divers missing out to sea off Port St Johns. They are from a different dive charter to ours, but everyone stands together in a emergency like this. Airborne again, Walter calls me on the radio and reminds me of the Great White shark attack that took half of a bodyguard's torso away earlier this year off the river mouth of Port St Johns. He also gives me the area that the divers were lost in, and I head in that direction with the aircrafts control bar tucked into my tummy.

This is a real emergency, and I am flying into a strong south westerly with an ETE of 40 min to the location that has been given to me. I am half way there when Walter calls me on the radio again. “ Ok bud , don't worry, they have been found, you can carry on with our boats.”

There has been silence on the radio from our boats while Walter has been relaying info that he has gotten via cell phone from down south. The skippers and divemasters come onto the radio with shouts of joy that the missing divers have been found.

Although from an opposition dive charter, the dangers of diving on these baitballs, in sometimes strong currents, creates an unspoken camaraderie and bond amongst all the dive operators. All the boats have had the most amazing action with , dolphins , gannets , sharks , whales , predatory fish and up to seven sailfish on the sardine baitballs !! The clients have exhausted their air and are feeling hungry from all the action and excitement.

It is 1pm and the boats are starting to head back to the Mboyti river lodge, our base of operation. VALDEZ wants their boat load of passengers to go for a flight this afternoon and I tell Rafael, the divemaster, that they must try be at the airfield by 3pm latest. Each pax is taken for a 15 minute flight, and as the sun is setting, I land with the last client.

After the passengers leave to go back to the lodge, I do a post flight inspection on my aircraft before tying it down and heading into Lusikisiki on a fuel run for the next day. It is long after dark when I get back to the lodge for dinner and an ice cold refreshment. As I walk into the pub, there is a tremendous amount of excitement as skippers, divemasters and clients all share their day's experiences. The clients have had a good meal and the "war stories" of the days action are being related . Video footage is shown on the TV screen and the music is starting to get all the divers into party mood. Walter leans back against the bar with a satisfied look on his face, pleased that all clients are happy.

The dive masters and skippers are also pleased after a long and successful day on the ocean. A happy client means good tips when the clients are finished with the sardine run diving tour and go home.

Most of the clients are from Europe and this is a mind blowing experience they will never forget. Unfortunately the majority of the action on the sardine run takes place off shore so it is not visible to the person standing on the beach or hilltop looking out to sea. It is amazing to see the super pods of dolphin, up to 5000 strong following and feeding off the billions of sardines as they move north with the cold Aghullus current.

I crawl off to bed after supper, exhausted after nearly seven hours in the air today. It is quiet realistic for a spotter pilot to fly in excess of 100 hours during the sardine run. Tiring, but immensely gratifying to be part of the "GREATEST MIGRATION ON EARTH"

Tomorrow will bring on a whole new day of adventure !!

Good night

Capt Jack Sparrow.