

Obituary

JOHN EDWARD GILES KERSHAW died in a flying accident on Jones Ice Shelf, Antarctica, on 5 March 1990. He was born in India on 27 August 1948, and at an early age became intent on a flying career. Failing to pass an RAF pilot's medical because of his eyesight, he obtained civil licences and built up flying time as an instructor and company pilot. He joined the British Antarctic Survey to fly Twin Otter aircraft in 1974, and in the course of the next 15 years became the most accomplished pilot in Antarctic aviation history. Uniquely among polar pilots, he was equally at home in the highly structured world of airline flying. He served with Britannia Airways as captain of Boeing 737 aircraft, and at the time of his death was on leave from Cathay Pacific, where he flew as first officer on a Boeing 747.

Giles Kershaw's love of uncrowded skies developed during his first Antarctic season and never abated. His phenomenal powers of concentration first became evident in early 1975, when he flew 214 hours in six weeks, much of it at a height of only 10 m over the ice sheet in order to get the best results from radio-echo sounding. That record has not been matched since by any single-pilot aircraft over Antarctica. In his third season he flew across the continent to work with the US Antarctic Program on the Ross Ice Shelf, where he gained a reputation for uncanny dead reckoning in featureless terrain. In his fourth season he led a mercy flight across the Weddell Sea to take an Argentine casualty from Belgrano station to Marambio.

He left BAS in 1979 to join the Transglobe Expedition. In the following two seasons he provided constant support for the Antarctic crossing party, using a single Twin Otter without any other aircraft to fall back on in case of trouble. Criticized at the time for possibly risking government research activities if he ever sought assistance, he turned the tables by saving the lives of three members of the South African government expedition who had strayed from their station without suitable equipment or experience. The Antarctic part of the expedition ended with an epic 14-hour non-stop flight from McMurdo station to Dunedin.

When not flying in the Antarctic, Giles flew in Greenland and made many landings on Arctic Ocean pack ice using the Tri Turbo, a modified DC-3 fitted with three turboprop engines. So impressed was he with the performance of this hybrid machine that he flew it to the Antarctic in 1984, carrying a group of climbers to Vinson Massif, the highest mountain in Antarctica. Years later he climbed the mountain himself.

When the Tri Turbo was no longer available he continued to take climbers into the Ellsworth Mountains with Twin Otters under the banner of Adventure Network International, a company set up for the purpose. The flying arm of the company became Antarctic Airways (now

Antarctic Air), the world's first commercial Antarctic airline. Frustrated by the short range of the Twin Otter in relation to the 3000 km distance between South America and the mountain area, he hit on the idea of using conventional transport aircraft on wheels to fly direct from Chile to a patch of snow-free blue ice at Patriot Hills in the Heritage Range. In spite of concerted official opposition, he arranged in 1987 for a DC-4 to fly in to prove the concept. This it did. The distances were such that each take-off from Punta Arenas had to carry not only a useful load but also return fuel to allow for 24 hours in the air. A DC-6 replaced the DC-4 for the 1989–90 season; in all, 39 flights have now been made to the icefield at latitude 80°S. It was his intention to use jet aircraft in due course and there is no doubt that someone will do it.

As pilot of the Footsteps of Scott expedition in January 1986, he saved the expedition's Cessna 185 aircraft by taking off from an ice floe shortly before their ship *Southern Quest* sank after being holed by ice. A year later he flew a Twin Otter from South America across Antarctica to Cape Evans to bring home the last three members of the expedition.

In December 1988 he flew with Dick Smith in a Twin Otter from Hobart to Casey, thence via McMurdo, South Pole, Patriot Hills, and Marsh station to Punta Arenas. He later returned the aircraft to its home in Australia via Canada, the North Pole, the USSR, and Beijing. Nobody but Giles would have chosen a route like that.

For his polar exploits he was awarded the Polar Medal and the Sword of Honour of the Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators. Always an innovator, he questioned the conventional and acted with the courage of his convictions; for this reason he was sometimes at odds with the government-run aviation establishment. His independence of spirit was such that officialdom sometimes regarded him as a threat to their authority. But in the last few weeks of his life, the earlier opposition to landing wheeled aircraft on unprepared inland icefields gave way to emulation. In January 1990 an LC-130 belonging to the US National Science Foundation made a successful wheel landing on Mill Glacier, a tributary of the Beardmore.

Kershaw showed that the Twin Otter, an aircraft designed for a range of 800 km, could in competent hands fly more than 3000 km. But records were not his interest; all he ever sought was to make the best use of an aircraft. Those who flew with him became aware that each flight was the product of meticulous planning and constant awareness of changing options. His prodigious skill in handling aircraft was matched by great personal charm and unfeigned modesty. Polar aviation has lost a pilot who became a legend in his lifetime.

Charles Swithinbank