

Short story: Ballantrae and the Empty Plane.

Roger Ballantrae, a once-famous novelist, ex-spy and general all-around adventurer, gets caught up in a mystery: how is a plane arriving in Heathrow missing its crew and cargo?

Commander Thompson of New Scotland Yard did a double-take when he looked across the British Airways lounge overlooking the runway. He'd set himself and a number of his officers up there so that he could see the plane approaching, after which they'd make their way down to a waiting Airport Police car and to the plane as it halted at its unloading apron.

From there a heavily-armed convoy was waiting for the cargo. All €750 million worth.

That was the official position. The truth was that he'd used the lounge before, on official business, and reckoned he'd get a quick plate of scrambled eggs and toast if they'd got there early.

He was just finishing his breakfast when he'd seen the other man.

He nudged the younger officer to his right, gestured with his head.

The young man, DS Trevor, looked, eyes searching, then looked back non-plussed.

"What am I looking at?"

Thompson rolled his eyes.

"For fuck's sake. The very well-dressed chap reading the paper. Is that who I think it is?"

The Trevor looked again.

"Is that Alan Rickman?"

"For fuck's sake. Alan Rickman is dead. That's Roger Ballantrae."

Looking back at the man, in his very tasty suit and silk tie and shoes that looked like the cow they came from had given his written consent, he saw the man's point. He did have a resemblance to Alan Rickman, with the hawkish nose and slightly long hair and the hooded eyes and cruel mouth. Although that seventies moustache did soften the face.

He looked like a 1970s playboy. Which is what he essentially was.

"Who's that when he's at home?"

"Christ, do you not read anything? Roger Ballantrae? The Hitler Objective? Platform Echo? The Berlin Imperative? They were all huge novels in the 1980s and 1990s. He was the Alistair MacLean of his day. Sold millions of books. And then there's Flight 407?"

Trevor's blank face showed he still needed help.

"In the late 1980s a plane carrying the Israeli prime minister to Los Angeles disappeared. The search turned up the crash site. Ballantrae figured out it was a hoax, and the PM had been kidnapped. The plane had been hijacked and a substitute plane crashed to give the terrorists time to escape. Would take hours to determine it wasn't the real plane. Thanks to him the PM was rescued before he could be got out of the US. He solved a few mysteries like that back then. The media used to treat him like a cross between James Bond and Sherlock Holmes. Then he retired in the 1990s."

"Never heard of him."

Thompson shook his head, and looked back to see Ballantrae grimacing in his direction. The writer folded his paper, stood up and strolled over. He stuck a hand out.

"I want to say Inspector Johnson?"

"Commander Thompson, Mr Ballantrae. It's been a while."

Ballantrae smiled broadly, and shook the other man's hand.

"When did I last see you, dear chap? That business with the ghost in the Ministry of Defence?"

The policeman nodded.

"That must be about twenty years ago," he replied.

Ballantrae rolled his eyes.

"Don't remind me. I got my bus pass in the post last year. You're looking well. These your chaps? On duty?"

Thompson nodded out at the runway.

“Escort duty. Three-quarters of a billion in some sort of super-duper new chip. Long are the days when they’d be trying to steal bullion.”

“All that thieving is done online these days. And probably legal too.”

“What are you up to?” Thompson asked.

“Enjoying one’s retirement. Flying over to Paris with...” he paused to search the lounge, eyes stopping at a statuesque brunette in a figure-hugging dress perusing the food near the lounge’s kitchen area.

“My niece. Nina. Nina the niece. My sister’s girl. She’s doing some PA stuff for me in the summer break. Very sharp.”

Trevor nodded at Thompson.

“Ah, our flight is in. Good to see you, Ballantrae.”

“And you inspec...commander. If you’re ever in Cornwall do give me a shout.”

The policeman nodded, shook Ballantrae’s hand, and they exited the lounge. Nina, munching on a breadroll, walked over to where he was standing, by the huge windows looking out over the runway.

“Who was that, uncle Rog?”

“A policeman I knew. Back in the day.”

“When you were Scooby Dooing about the place?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

“That Scooby Dooing helped sell a lot of books, I’ll have you know.”

They watched a large Fed Ex cargo jet touchdown with a screech and a tuft of smoke as it hit the runway. It showed down and began taxiing towards the waiting area out of view.

They both turned away from the window to return to their seats and bags when someone shouted.

The noise level in the lounge rose sharply, and both turned to see people rise from their seats and rush to the windows. Looking across the apron they could see thick black smoke from behind the buildings. After a few minutes, witnessing fire engines and other rescue vehicles, lights flashing as they sped across the concrete towards the fire, Ballantrae looked at his watch.

“Our flight will be cancelled. We may as well go home, come back tomorrow.”

They exited the lounge, leaving the airside of the airport and were making their way to Ballantrae’s gleaming white 1970 Citroen DS when his phone rang.

“Ballantrae? Thompson. Are you still in the airport?” the voice asked.

“Of course, we were just leaving.”

“I might need your help with something. Something bizarre. I’ll get someone to meet you at arrivals.”

“Oh, go on,” the writer said, and hung up.

“The commander has asked for my help. Something bizarre, he says. Bizarre!”

Nina smiled.

“Here we go. Scooby Doo again.”

They walked back into the main airport building, and found DS Trevor waiting for them. He introduced himself, and looked at Nina.

“I’m sorry, Mr Ballantrae, but the young lady can’t come. I’m only instructed to bring you in.”

Ballantrae grabbed Nina’s arm.

“But she’s my carer! What if I have, you know, one of my falls?”

Nina snorted out a laugh. The DS looked on with a withering stare of disbelief. Ballantrae did a wobble.

“Oh for God’s sake!” Trevor said, and led them both out to a waiting Airport police vehicle whilst Nina shot her uncle a “behave!” look as he stifled a laugh.

The police car sped through the perimeter and towards the cargo handling area, turning a corner and revealing the scene. The plane, a Fed Ex Boeing 747 had crashed clear into one of the docking arms, glass and steel shattered and twisted. Three fire units were damping down an engine which was black from flames and was still smoking. A large number of heavily-armed Metropolitan Police counter-terrorist officers surrounded the scene.

The police car stopped at the bottom of a stairs which had been placed beside the main door of the plane. Ballantrae recognised the commander at the top of the steps, who gestured for them to join him.

They got out of the car and followed up the steps and into the plane.

The plane's interior comprised of a small section of seating which then opened up through a door into the large cargo area of the aircraft. Both looked empty. Ballantrae spun on his heel, looking into the cockpit through the open door where airport technicians were checking instruments.

He looked at the senior police man, who nodded.

"Bloody thing is empty. No crew. No guards. No chips."

Ballantrae eyes lit up.

"They've been robbed right out from under your proverbials!"

"If you could sound a little less delighted..." Thompson said.

"What's the tick-tock?" the novelist said to the police officer.

The DS looked at his superior.

"The tick-tock! The chronology? Don't they still teach that at Hendon? First thing to establish?

Chronology of events?" Ballantrae asked, as he looked around the flight deck.

"What would you know about Hendon?" the DS said.

"Flight landed approximately fifteen minutes ago. Normal landing, tower in touch. Flight is directed, as planned, to this area which has been secured by us. Thirty officers, all armed, all waiting for the plane. It comes around the corner (he points at a large hangar through the flight deck window) when its engine starts billowing smoke and flame. The tower can't raise the plane, and it slowly comes towards us and then crashes into the building. The fire rescue people force us back until they extinguish the fire, then we have to jemmy open the door."

"Fifteen minutes ago? You're sure?" Ballantrae barked, spinning on his heel.

The commander nodded.

"How long has that door been open?" He pointed at the open door leading to the steps.

The commander shrugged.

"Two, three minutes."

Ballantrae leapt forward, pushing the DS out of the way and went through the door, looking across the apron. He could see a lone fireman walking away from the plane.

"The firemen went in first?"

"Of course, standard procedure."

He spun, looking through the various uniforms in the plane.

"Hey! You!" He pointed at a fireman.

"How bad was the engine fire?"

The fireman shrugged.

"It wasn't. Some sort of flammable gel. All flame and smoke, but didn't have anything to do with the engine."

"Was the cabin smoky?"

The fireman nodded.

"Yes! We don't know why yet. But it was black with smoke. Probably the same gel in a container somewhere in the cabin."

"Nina!" Ballantrae shouted, racing down the steps. The niece rolled her eyes, smiled at the commander, and barrelled down the steps after him. A policeman, standing casually by the steps, was stunned to have the novelist grab his machine gun from his hands.

"I need this, old chap, will bring it back! Drive Nina, drive!" He shouted, jumping into a parked aircraft tractor. She jumped into the driver seat, and gunned the engine.

"Ballantrae!" The commander roared, as he hit the tarmac himself.

"Follow me! And bring your men!" Ballantrae shouted, before bellowing at his niece to drive, pointing towards the hangar.

"What's going on, uncle Roger?"

“The fire was a distraction. To buy time to get the chips off the plane without police interference.”

“But the plane is surrounded by armed police!” she said.

“Get close to this fucker!” Ballantrae shouted over the engine noise, at the back of the fireman slowly jogging towards the hangar.

“Hey sunshine!” Ballantrae shouted, leaning out of the side of the tractor with the machine gun. The man turned, saw the gun, and pulled a pistol from his firefighter jacket pocket. Nina swerved the tractor, giving the man a belt with the side of the tractor and he went flying, dropping the pistol. Ballantrae laughed.

“Good girl!” he looked back to watch one of the siren blaring Airport Police cars screeching beside the man, armed police leaping from their cars to cover him.

“Who was he anyway?” Nina asked.

“Someone had to drive the plane into the building to keep the police and airport authorities distracted. He hid in the smoke, in his firefighting gear, and then got out of the plane in the confusion.”

“I still don’t understand...”

The tractor turned the corner to see a huge hanger with a Fed Ex plane in the centre of it. A pilot was supervising a forklift loading a large palletted container onto a truck.

He shouted on seeing Ballantrae, and a number of men in airport coveralls pulled out machine guns.

“Oh shit, we’ve wandered into Die Hard 2!” Nina said, flooring the accelerator behind a trailer covered with baggage. Another tractor lurched in front of her, so she spun the wheel, turning the tractor around the baggage trailer and into the hangar towards the men. She then handbraked it to a halt just in front of them.

Ballantrae was off, machine gun at the ready.

“Don’t even try it if you don’t want your heads air conditioned!”

The police cars skidded into the hangar, counter-terrorist police leaping out and overpowering the men in overalls.

“Well, that was all a bit Scooby Doo!” Nina said.

The commander was inspecting the pallet.

“They were about to put new labels on it, and drive it out the front gate,” Ballantrae said.

“Can you please explain to me...” the commander asked.

“If it weren’t for those pesky kids...” Nina said.

“Quiet, you,” Ballantrae said, and pointed at the tail of the plane.

“This is the real plane. Ridiculously simple. They had a near identical plane waiting, engine running with our rogue fireman ready to drive it. Set a fake fire on it and sent it around the corner. You saw a plane that looked pretty much as you expected, except it was on fire. Whilst you guys are fighting the fire, they’re stripping the real plane here.”

“But the crew, the security guys,” the commander said, then saw the pilot being led away.

“Ah. Gassed the rest of the crew?”

Ballantrae shrugged, and pointed at the steps.

“Something like that, I’d say. Anyway...mystery solved.”

“All very simple, really. Almost disappointing,” the policeman said.

“It always is. Right, I’m going back to my retirement. A pleasure, commander.”

He shook hands with the policeman.

“You’ve gone viral already,” Nina said, holding up her phone. The BBC were running footage of him hanging from the side of the tractor with a machine gun. The strapline read “Famous novelist stops €750m airport heist.”

They then ran a picture of him from the mid 1980s looking very Don Johnson.

“The state of that!” Nina said.

Overhead, a BBC News drone filmed them.

Jason O’Mahony © June 2017 @jasonomahony