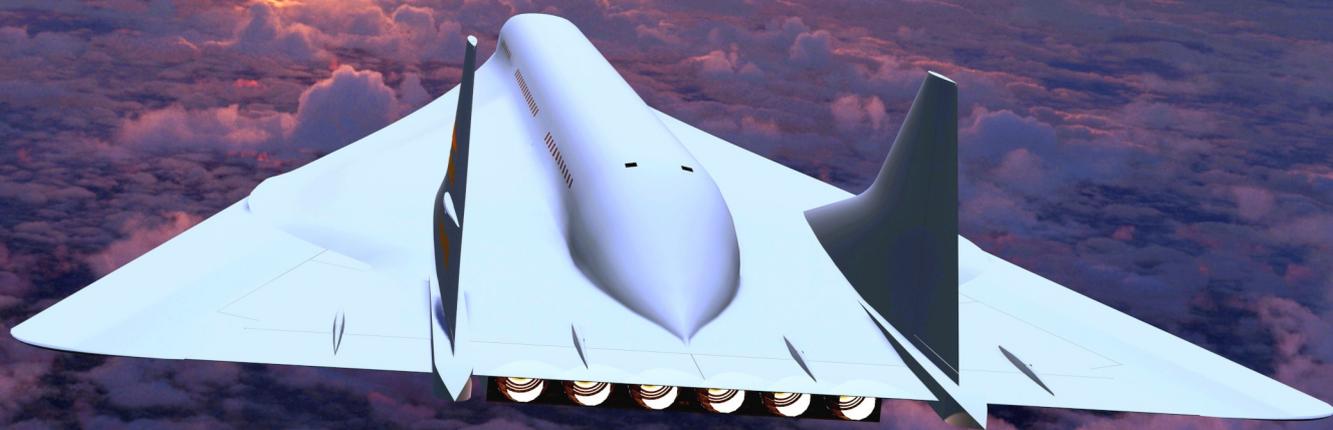


MONDIALE

STAR CHASER



DEVIL'S CUPID



AN AMAZING AEROSPACE SHORT STORY
BY RUPERT W BROWN

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“Amazing Aerospace” is a project where Rupert reimagines aircraft of the past and imagines what the future holds for human space exploration. These short stories (the burning line series) are to illustrate how people interacted with and will interact with these airships, aeroplanes and space craft. This story focusses on the Mondiale Starchaser, a hypersonic swing wing passenger aircraft, active from 1970 to 2000.

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DEVIL'S CUPID

There are things more dangerous than Uranium in the deep places of the Earth. A menace that should have been left undisturbed in its rock tomb. But men came seeking riches. They dug too deep, too greedily and released the monster. A monster not red in tooth and claw but a creature of the shadow world – invisible, invincible, deadly. A bringer of madness, mayhem and death, an ancient spirit buried in the rocks for millennia, now released to wreak havoc again.

My name is Christie Bowman. I am, was, the science reporter for a national newspaper in Australia in 1980. Most of us who were around then look back at that time with fondness. We were living with and enjoying new freedoms. There was money. The future looked bright for many people. But the situation could have been very different. There was an incident, for want of a better word, that largely went unreported. Certainly everything I wrote about it was watered down and buried in the middle of the paper. We in Australia, and the world for that matter, got lucky. We dodged a bullet and it gave us a warning about worse to come. That worse was HIV but at least the scientists, thanks in part to this monster, had developed tools and the beginnings of techniques to deal with it. The monster was a virus. It had a technical name but we just knew it as Devil's Cupid. It made you crave love, then it killed you.

There was a mine in northern Victoria. On the surface it wasn't anything special. In fact it was more prospecting than mining. The company behind it was looking for unusual minerals. Victoria has a long history of gold mining. This was all about the 'new gold' minerals. Today we call them 'rare earths'. Thankfully the mine site was small – a few hundred people – and isolated, in a remote valley with only one serviceable road in and out. The peculiar thing about the operation was that the company went deep into the earth very quickly. They had some theory that these heavy, rare minerals would be found a long way underground and that they would be co-located with uranium for some reason. Some idea that they would all be in a layer in the crust based on the way the actual planet had formed from star dust. To be honest I'd never heard of that before, or since for that matter. Whatever, they were looking for the radiation from the normal decay of uranium as their guide to the minerals.

So they went deep, and kept going deeper. More like a bore hole with platforms, than a fully fledged mine. They found uranium, yellow cake they call it after processing. And then they found things like yttrium and terbium. Yttrium, used to make special garnets for lasers, and in alloys – all crazy stuff. How the scientists work out all these things is just mind-blowing. Those discoveries gave the company the confirmation they needed to keep going. Their plan was to map these deposits down to a certain depth, then stop and create a plan to build out the mine

once they better understood the geology of the site. Good plan, but then they hit what a miner described as the 'black layer'. The black layer wasn't big. At most it was two metres thick. But it was very different. It was like a coal seam. If not coal, then some kind of fossilised organic matter. They looked at it, analysed it, but then ignored it on the basis it was an yttrium free zone. What they could have done at that point - who knows? But all the evidence points to the 'black layer' as being the source of the monster. It turns out there are things far more dangerous than uranium in the deep places of the earth.

Mine sites are generally alcohol free places for good reason. The last thing you want is pissed people going underground and blowing the buggery out of things with kilos of explosives. Not a good plan. But because this wasn't a full production mine, the rules were a bit more relaxed. People lived on site in a purpose built village, rather than fly-in fly-out. They worked a standard five day week. There was a geology analysis lab. There was also a bar that opened on Friday and Saturday nights. It wasn't just men. Some miners brought their wives to the camp. Women worked in the kitchen and in the geology lab and as maintenance technicians.

Given the mix of healthy young people, there would always be a background level of sexual activity, of every kind. People are amazing in that sense, in working out every weird way to have sex with each other. Three local cowgirls from the valley neighbouring the mine site had developed a nice off farm income stream for a few hours activity at the weekends. You know how it is. A couple of weeks after the black layer discovery, people were gathering for Friday night drinks. The work was hard with long days. Everybody was glad the weekend had arrived. The atmosphere was good, and the party went off. But there was one strange pattern of behaviour that night.

Teresa drove one of the huge front loaders they used to move the spoil around. As it came up from the mine, she would move it to the pile for processing and analysis, and then move tailings to the huge heap that was being built further down the valley. She had a reputation for enjoying a drink and a laugh, but nobody would have described her as being overtly sexual, or even looking for that kind of thing. As far as anybody knew she wasn't romantically involved with anybody, but that Friday night she really went on the pull. She was propositioning anybody in a pair of trousers, and that included a lot of the women whose boyfriends were standing right next to them. She was unsuccessful till she came across Tiny Miney. Tiny of course, was not at all tiny. He was a man mountain, well over six feet tall with a chest that was probably six feet around. He was a quiet soul who got on with his work, never looking to draw attention to himself. When he encountered Teresa in her revved up state, something clicked. Whatever she was promising he decided he wanted some of it. They went off to her hut and

kept the whole camp entertained with a cacophony of grunts, squeals and cries of release. They were at it again the next morning before exhaustion got the better of them.

The camp assumed it was a one off. That Teresa, for whatever reason, had just felt super horny and Tiny had been there to oblige her. No. They didn't stop. It got worse. Teresa and Tiny were hitting on anybody they came across, and through curiosity getting the better of them, a couple of the other miners jumped on the Teresa bandwagon. They in turn seemed to get super horny. The situation was getting out of control. The camp supervisor read them the riot act at a town hall meeting, but that only seemed to make things worse and came close to degenerating into an orgy. It would have been funny except that the work at the mine began to be seriously impacted and then Teresa died, followed closely by Tiny.

Any death at a mine site automatically triggers an investigation. Police and the Coroners Office got involved. From the outset the deaths were puzzling. The bodies looked perfect, with no visible external marks. They sent samples away for detailed analyses. All the while the strange behaviour continued. There was another death, and then another. A medical emergency was declared, the Police were forced to intervene and basically put everybody into solitary confinement. With most of the camp residents now as horny as hell you can imagine how hard that was to achieve. They were dishing out sedatives like candy.

It's at this point one of the scientists in the analysis laboratory made a crucial intervention. She, they – she insisted on being referred to as they, and this was years before the idea of pronouns even became a thing. They had studied viruses in a previous life. They were convinced the cause of the problem was a virus, but they'd never come across a virus that changed a person's behaviour in such a marked way. It reminded them of the zombie-ant fungus, but a fungus? Was that possible? They reckoned they had been able to see a virus like structure using the mine site's microscopes. They want to remain anonymous so I'll simply refer to them as 'the Scientist'. The Scientist could isolate it but they didn't have the equipment to go much further, certainly they had nothing to indicate why the virus was benign one minute and then deadly the next. There was another strange feature. Because of the link to Teresa and the work she had been doing, they suspected this thing had survived dormant for millennia in the black layer, but when it was isolated from a human host it survived about twenty four hours and then just fell apart – literally self-destructed. How was that working? Was it some weird relationship with Uranium's radiation?

About this time a brilliant scientist called Fred Sanger was working at the Medical Research Council in Cambridge, England. He had developed the first DNA sequencing method. The

Scientist had spoken to Fred about the possibility of looking at their virus, and he said he would have a go, although he was nervous about dealing with deadly pathogens. The problem was how to get a sample from Victoria to Cambridge in under twenty four hours. Well, there was only one way.

Have you ever seen a Mondiale Starchaser out in the open? They don't fly any more, more's the pity. I got to see one once, and I got to fly. At the time it was the most extreme and aggressive looking passenger plane produced by the Cerulean Aircraft Factories. It looks like nothing else on Earth. It was long, sharp and brilliant white. Its fuselage blended seamlessly into the mounts of its graceful and razor thin swing wings. It had six turbojets, each with reheat. In addition to those engines, its design employed compression thrust that allowed it to fly comfortably at Mach 5, at over 80,000 feet for hours on end without reheat. But you don't need hours. With Mondiale, you can cross the globe in an afternoon, and that's why we needed it. I'll never forget that flight on Mondiale.

To this day I don't know how I swung it. One minute I was filing my regular reports on the mine situation to the Editor, the next I was in a car with the Scientist making a mad dash to Melbourne Airport with a police escort, and a frozen vial of a deadly unknown virus sitting in the boot. We were waved through security, which never happens at Melbourne, and took our seats in the aft Superclub cabin. The cabin was small, the seats quite narrow but comfortable, all soft leather. The point is that, no matter where you're going, Mondiale is so fast you're never sitting for long. I took a glass of champagne, the Scientist just water. Take off was mind blowing. The acceleration pushed us hard back into our seats, the aircraft pointed its nose to the sky and we were away. I can't remember how long it was, just a few minutes, not sure, but then we felt a vibration as the wings rotated back into their swept position, there was a bump as we passed through mach one and then soared to 80,000 feet and mach 5. Through the window was the blackness of space and clearly visible the curvature of the Earth. It was truly awe inspiring. I didn't speak for the best part of an hour.

The Scientist had not been thrilled that I was coming with them. Up to this point in the journey they had said the bare minimum to me. Things changed when the meal service came round. It was obvious they liked their big reds. They got stuck in to the Craiglee Shiraz, and we were able to start talking. I got the sense that she was quite relieved to be able to tell somebody their story. I think they lived a rather solitary life. This was due in part to the fact that they hated being touched, handled, even as a baby. They had never got the idea that there were different sexes and why that was even important. It wasn't important to them. When they were little it hadn't mattered. They could wear what they want. As they got older it became more

complicated, more difficult. Their mother had tried to push them in one direction. Their gut feeling pushed them in another. Then came the doctors, and endless consultations, endless analyses, and finally the labels: androgynous, asexual. This seemed to be a huge problem for everybody apart from them. They really didn't care. They were just living their life. All the worry and concern was a pain that was getting in the way. But their 'condition' had just proved fundamental in allowing them to fight a monster. They didn't know what 'horny' was, and they would never have responded to anybody 'coming on to them'. That personality trait had kept them safe in the early days of the virus outbreak.

The designers of Mondiale foresaw the need to provide facilities for a certain type of client – those that relish the thought of, and are willing to pay to join the 20 km Club. To this end, at the very rear of a Mondiale, was the Heaven Suite. This luxurious and private cabin could be booked for periods of fifty minutes to allow couples to engage in whatever activities they feel appropriate at an altitude of 20 km. What goes on the Heaven Suite is the preserve of its occupants. But the whole plane gets to experience the theatre of a couple leaving their seats and walking to the back of the plane, and then returning again, some time later. It is the stuff of society legend. And legend has it that some people, travelling alone, book the Heaven Suite just to see who they can pick up on the walk to the back of the plane. Often they are spoilt for choice. The Scientist just hated the idea of the Heaven Suite. As a very glamorous and immaculate older woman lead her young male partner to the back of the plane, they physically recoiled from them as they passed.

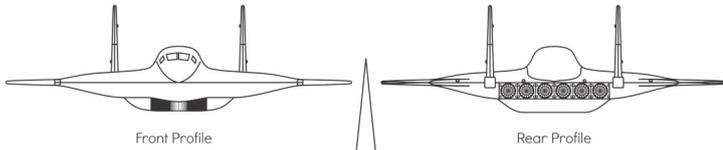
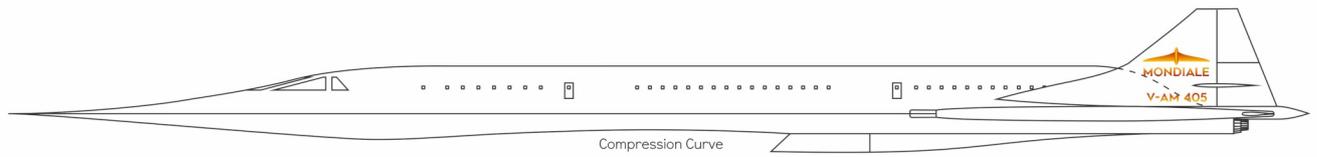
The meal was superb. I was so enjoying the excitement and drama of the whole thing I didn't realise the best act was yet to come. The pilot calmly announced we would be dropping out of mach speed and down to about 30,000 feet to rendezvous with a Cerulean VC10 tanker from Vancouver over the North Pacific. The transition was so smooth. There was another bump as we dropped below mach one, and that vibration again as the wings swept forward, Then a sight that made me gasp. Out of the window there appeared a second Mondiale, a magnificent white dart, and ahead of it a VC10 with a refuelling drogue deployed. Gradually the two came together, then the Mondiale engaged the drogue. Joined, they flew on for several minutes, the VC10 flying at its top speed. The Mondiale disengaged then, with an almost imperceptible wave of its wings, it turned away heading south towards Melbourne. I watched it go but the red glow from the reheat of its engines was only visible for a few seconds as it climbed back up to 20 km. The Scientist had been watching the drama with me. "Wow" was all they said, all that needed to be said.

They told me something of the plan when they got the sample to Cambridge. They hoped that any kind of DNA analysis might give them a clue as to how they could make or do something to combat the virus. This was long before we knew how to modify genes, and decades before things like mRNA vaccines, but I guess anything they could learn was of value. The last I saw of the Scientist was at Heathrow. We went through passport control and they were whisked away by a security detail, I guess straight to Cambridge. I never saw them again, but the rumours were that they did get a good look at the Devil's Cupid virus, although there wasn't much they could do in terms of finding a vaccine. After their analysis it did its old trick and just fell apart, but at least MRC had some decent images and data. They stayed working at MRC, and played some significant role in combatting the AIDS/HIV virus. I think about her, they, sometimes. A person alone, but hopefully content within themselves. I like to think they had a good life, whatever that looked like. They deserved it.

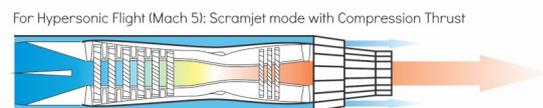
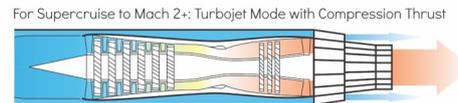
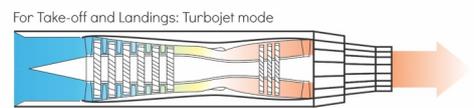
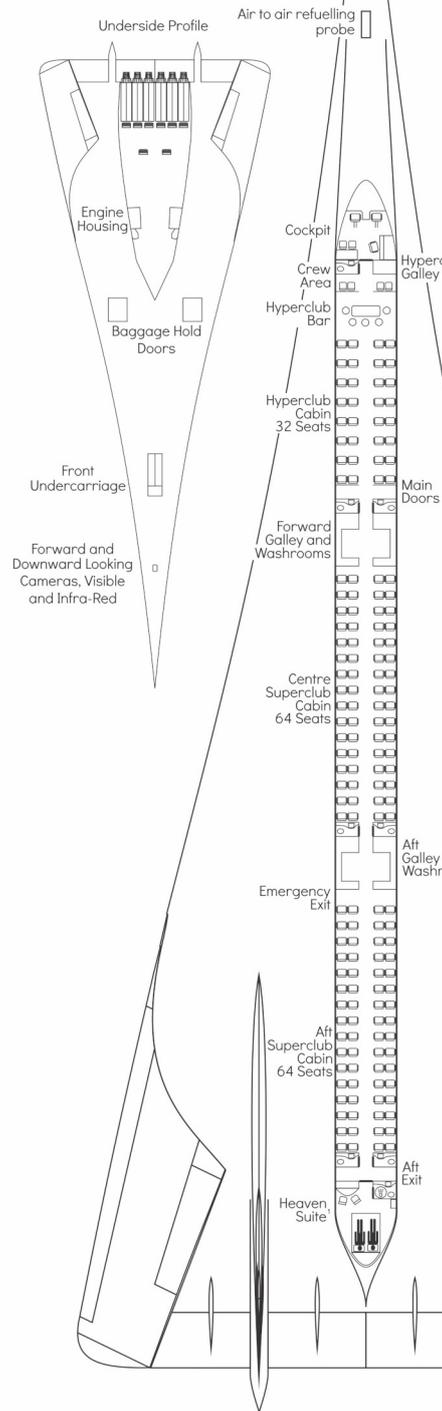
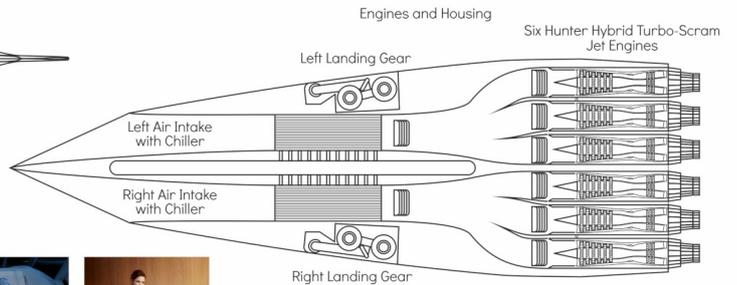
Thankfully the Devil's Cupid virus did not spread beyond the mine site. Tragically, most of the original workers died. Those that survived became the subject of intense interest as to how they were able to resist the monster. The mine shaft was sealed and a concrete tomb placed over the excavated 'black layer' matter. To this day that valley is sealed off. My newspaper didn't pay for Mondiale on the return trip. That would have been pushing my luck. A 747 had to suffice. It was a good flight but I will always have that memory of Mondiale cutting a burning line between Melbourne and London in a battle to defeat the monster.

The End – 2,990 words

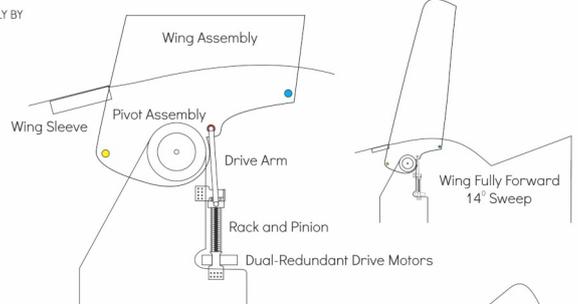
MONDIALE STARCHASER



V-AM 405



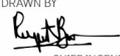
Swing-Wing Mechanism



Aircraft Configuration with Wings Fully Forward, Flaps and Slats Deployed

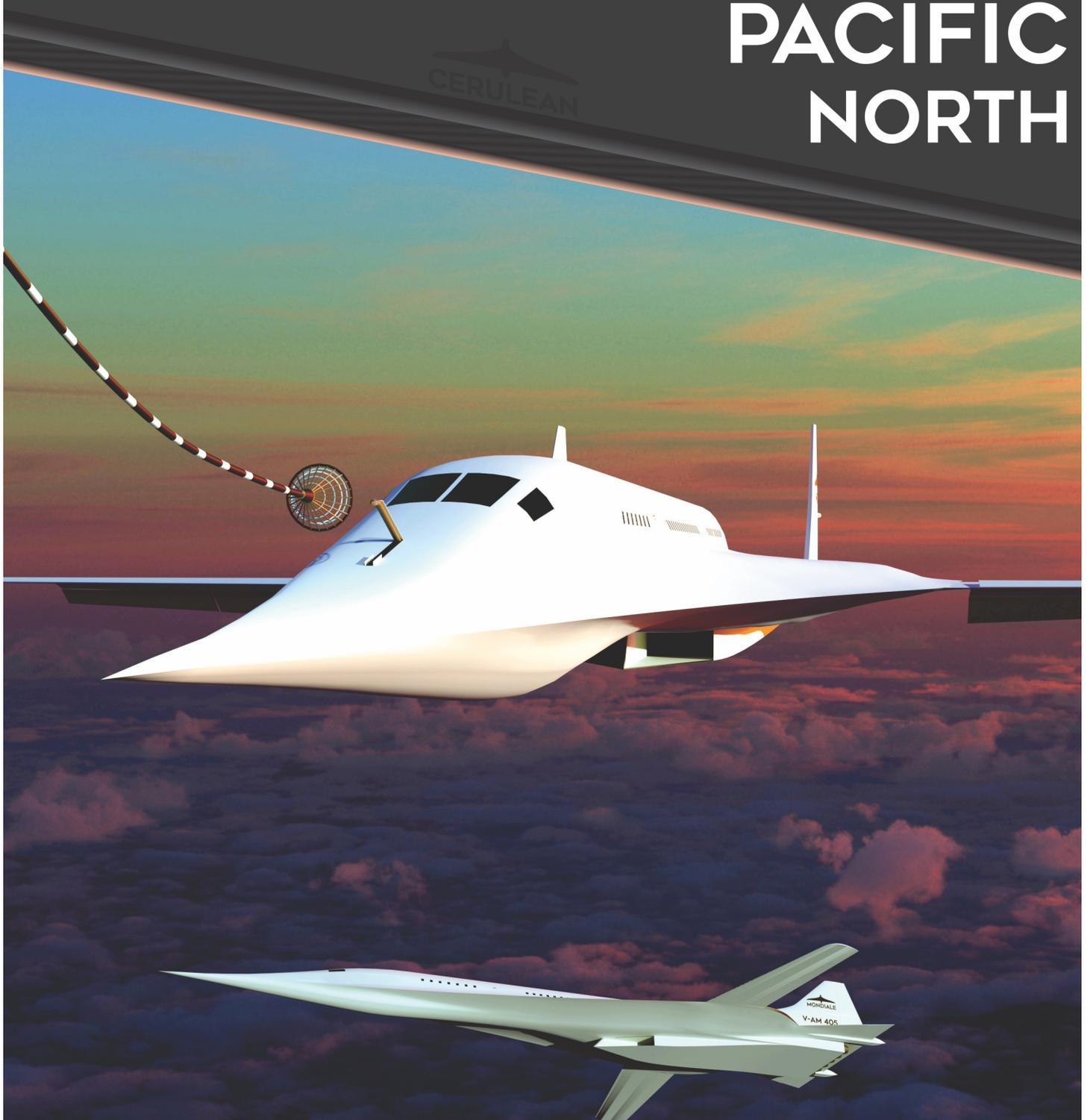


1: Unofficial "Clubroom" of the Mach 5, 20KM High Club

DRAWN BY 		
CHIEF ENGINEER		
NAME: MONDIAL STARCHASER V-AM 405		
CLASS: MONDIAL	TYPE: HYPERSONIC JETLINER	
CERTIFICATION: DAY/NIGHT, ALL WEATHER, HYPERSONIC TO MACH 5 <small>Rev. 1.0 405/20-11-2023</small>		
PASSENGERS: 32 HYPERCLUB - 110CM SEAT PITCH 128 SUPERCLUB - 90CM SEAT PITCH 160 TOTAL		
CREW: 14		
LENGTH: 91.8M	INTERNAL CABIN WIDTH: 3.4M	
WINGSPAN: 32.5M - 66.4M	EMPTY WEIGHT: 146 TONNES	

RENDEZVOUS

PACIFIC NORTH



HIGH OVER THE NORTH PACIFIC, TWO MONDIALE RENDEZVOUS TO REFUEL FROM A CERULEAN VC10 TANKER.
ONE TURNS AWAY TO CROSS THE NORTH POLE ON ITS WAY TO LONDON.
ONE HEADS SOUTH TO CROSS THE EQUATOR ON ITS WAY TO MELBOURNE.
SIX HOURS TO FLY THE WORLD IN LUXURY - THERE IS ONLY ONE MONDIALE.