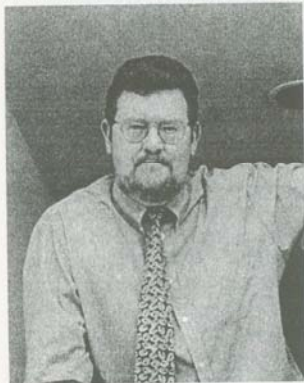


KERRY SWIFT, recently won the Siemens Business Writer of the Year Award and the Transnet Award for transport journalism for his work in *FleetWatch* magazine. The citation for the Transnet Award said he had "lifted transport writing into a new dimension". *Review* asked him to send an example of the work he has been doing and to explain what is so different. This is his response.



KERRY SWIFT

The New Dimension

WORKING ON THE TRIED and trusted premise that the best stories are always personal testimonies, I have looked for fresh feature angles

by approaching issues from the perspective of people who are most intimately involved.

Hijacking — the scourge of the transport industry — was a case in point. I wanted to find a fresh way of addressing what journalistically is rapidly becoming an over-visited issue.

Searching through old newspaper cuttings, I found the perfect subject — a helicopter pilot named John Vinagre who had been shot down during an aerial anti-hijack chase over Tembisa the previous year and who has made a business out of hunting hijacked vehicles. Potentially it had all the elements I needed to build a story, but the problem with John Vinagre was that he had steadfastly refused interviews on the grounds that media exposure might make him and his family a target of the crime syndicates that mastermind vehicle crime in South Africa.

However, the climate had changed. Hijacking had become a central part of Vinagre's life. He was outraged by the escalating levels of vehicle crime and the apparent inability of anyone, least of all the state, to stop it. He believed he had an answer to hijacking and he wanted to break his silence to publicise it. These two factors were enough to convince



BLOODHOUND in the sky

(abridged version)

BY KERRY SWIFT

It's 6.30am on April 5, 1994 and South Africa is waking to the prospect of a general election that will either usher in a new democratic future or plunge the country into a debilitating civil war.

Like most South Africans, John Vinagre and his wife Antonieta are concerned about the outcome. They are discussing the upcoming election as they drive to work and take the turnoff into the Rand Airport outside Germiston. They park their grey Nissan Patrol in the covered carpark outside the hangars belonging to Capital Air where John is managing director and Antonieta his capable assistant.

As John opens the security gate to Capital Air's reception area, the phone is already ringing. Antonieta glances at her watch. It is 6.45am. The call, from Bokomo Bakeries' headquarters in Clayville, north east of Johannesburg is to report that one of the company's 8-ton Hinos has been hijacked in the Tembisa area. Bokomo, which is one of his clients, wants John to mount an immediate search for the hijacked vehicle.

Just a normal day at Capital Air muses John wryly as he prepares for another aerial pursuit in the crisp Highveld dawn...

At age 49 and with 18 000 flying hours to his name, John Vinagre is one of South Africa's most experienced chopper pilots. Yet this nuggety Portuguese immigrant, who fled his native Mozambique in 1975 when Frelimo nationalised the family business in Lourenco Marques taking 14 helicopters along with it, is no ordinary flyboy. He also has a fair share of diesel mixed with the avgas coursing through those veins. Indeed, John has come a long way with the road transport industry, so much so that he has made it his professional home.

We meet in the early morning in his neat offices attached to Capital Air hangars at Germiston's Rand Airport. On the walls are the inevitable posters of helicopters in various locations, including a montage of photographs from the popular television series "Skatterjag", featuring Scot Scott, Melanie Walker and John Vinagre who flew the aerial treasure hunt for almost a decade.

It's 7.30am and Vinagre has just flown in. He's a bit stiff and remote at first. Like most operational pilots, he's a man of few words. Perhaps it's also because this is the first interview he has ever done with the media.

The reticence is not so much a question of modesty, it's just that he's in a line of work that shuns publicity. Media exposure could mean retaliation from the crime syndicates proliferating in Gauteng and John Vinagre is nothing if not a careful man.

It was Vinagre, flying for Lombard's Transport, who developed the highly successful aerial deterrence against fuel theft back in the early eighties. Subsequently, as operational managing director of Capital Air flying choppers out of Rand Airport, he has become South Africa's ace aerial anti-hijacker — the top-gun bloodhound in the sky for numerous fleet operators who regularly fall victim to the highwaymen feeding like leeches off the nation's truckers.

It is a mark of the man that his experience of the crime wave washing over South Africa's trucking lanes has made him more determined than ever to make a difference. "We either beat this thing back or it will destroy us," he says and he means it.

Like Henry V facing overwhelming odds on the green fields of France, this is one enormously determined guy. Indeed, John Vinagre has turned his job into a one-man crusade against hijacking and he wields his aerial sword with the resolve of a latter-day St George confronting the dragon. Having lost his business in Mozambique to a rapacious state, he is not about to sit back and watch other people lose theirs to a theft of a different nature.

...John Vinagre's mind is already in overdrive. Mentally he lists his options and decides to mount the aerial pursuit from Bokomo's Clayville premises which lie on the north-east fringe of Tembisa, the black township complex where John reckons the hijacked truck has been taken.

him to go public with his story. There is always an element of timing and luck with memorable stories.

My approach was to plan two entirely separate stories. The first would be the normal run-of-the-mill piece one might routinely write for the trade press — a few sparks but mainly product-focused and formulaic. The second would be a flashback story recreating the events leading up to and including the incident in which Vinagre was shot down in his pursuit helicopter the previous year.

The challenge was two-fold: how to marry these two stories with their different time frames and tempos, and second, how to craft the flashback story in such a way that readers would get a feeling of what it was really like for John Vinagre on the day his aircraft was shot out of the sky.

I wrote the two stories separately as planned so that each would have consistency and a logical flow. The first was reasonably straight forward, although I wrote it so that it could break to accommodate the second story as a series of flashback inserts at set stations through the piece.

The second — the flashback story — was far more challenging. For starters, my subject was reticent and self-effacing which made the interview difficult. Because this story demanded so much inner detail, I literally had to dig out the information piece by painstaking piece. It was as difficult for the subject as it was for me.

Technically, the flashback story was also difficult to write. My intention was to shift point of view through the story so that the piece would start and end with an omniscient narrator but move through various points of view as the action unfolded. I wanted the climax of the story to be pure stream of consciousness. In short, I wanted to climb inside Vinagre's head so readers would experience what he felt and thought when his chopper went down.

Use of such fictional techniques was developed by a small group of talented feature writers in the United States in the late sixties with much success, although critics believe these methods open the door to journalistic licence. They are, of course, entirely right. In my case, however, I patiently went over every detail of the flashback story with Vinagre after I completed it to ensure its authenticity and that the outer and inner dialogue were accurate.

The flashback story had to be written with the first story in mind. I knew where the various stations in the first story were and I had to write the second so that it would comfortably arrive and break at those stations. I also wrote it so that as each part of the flashback story unfolded, it would end leaving the reader hanging in mid-air — hopefully anxious to return to the action. I was trying to replicate the old thriller writing formula where the action moves along on different levels and the writer shifts from one to the other at the most tantalising moments.

My greatest constraint in all this, however,

was time. On the one hand I had only four hours interviewing time with the subject, while on the other, the deadline for the story left me just two days to complete the job. The writing took the best part of both.

Overall, I think the piece works. The story opens in flashback mode — signalled for the reader by the use of italics — and ends with an omniscient narrator editorialising about crime — a bit over the top perhaps, but worthy sentiments nonetheless.

With more time it might have been possible to write a great piece, but as the Americans have discovered, this approach to feature writing takes weeks, not days. This piece, excluding travelling time, took 24 hours to research and write.

What working journalist in this country has the luxury of 24 hours for a story, let alone a few weeks? What publication in the country would suitably reward that investment of creative time? The only thing that really motivates writers to experiment with technique and walk the extra few miles in South Africa is the odd trinket and bauble. Why thank you Siemens and thank you too Dr Anton Moolman.

KERRY SWIFT is marketing director of Fox Publishing (Pty) Ltd, a corporate publishing house in Johannesburg, and external examiner in Corporate Communications for the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.

He sprints out to the Bell Jet Ranger, registration ZS HWU, straps himself into the chopper and starts the rotors.

In the back of his mind is a nagging concern that contrary to normal procedures in all anti-hijack flights, this time he has no weapons on board. Putting the thought aside, he completes a rapid pre-flight check and radios the tower.

"Rand tower, this is Hotel, Whisky, Uniform. Hijack response."

"Clear for takeoff Hotel, Whisky, Uniform," comes the immediate reply — air traffic control at Rand has long got used to the urgent scramble calls from Capital Air. "Call in on Jan Smuts once you're airborne," says the voice through the ether adding sardonically "and happy hunting!"

John eases the Jet Ranger gently off the helipad, drops the nose towards the adjoining road and heads out over Germiston Lake at speed. He notices blurred images of early morning rowers through the mist rising off the lake below, and watches a flock of wild ducks dash for the safety of a reed bed as the chopper cuts through the clear Highveld air. There'll always be a hunter, and the hunted will always be running. Climbing to 1000ft, this aerial predator resets the radio frequency and calls in Jan Smuts Airport...

The story of Capital Air's success really goes back to 1979 when John Vinagre persuaded a number of fleet operators in the Wadeville area around Germiston to pool resources and underwrite aerial surveillance flights along the main freight arteries leading from Johannesburg to the coast.

At that time, operators plying those

routes were experiencing a rash of fuel theft from their trucks and suspected their drivers were siphoning fuel off the rigs and selling it along the road. Vinagre was commissioned to check it out.

In reality, the drivers were responsible for the fuel losses, but not in the way fleet operators suspected. Drivers were stopping along the road to pick up prostitutes parading their ample buttock decoy in stretch pants for passing truckers. Bimbos on board, truckers would drive to the nearby township and sow their wild oats.

Most of the highway hookers, however, were in league with petty thieves and while they and their driver Johns were flailing about in *flagrante delicto*, indulging their baser instincts behind closed doors in the townships, their trucks were being deflowered in a different way. As the old saying goes, nothing for nothing in this life.

"They were mainly after diesel but occasionally they stole from the load as well," says Vinagre. "In most cases, however, the drivers continued on their way without knowing they had been robbed."

To combat these losses, he came up with the simple idea of aerial monitoring of drivers along the main trucking routes. As he puts it: "The idea was to check on trucks at random by landing the choppers on the side of the road and flagging down drivers as they went past."

"These on-the-road checks meant we could inspect trucks for fuel and load tampering at will. Drivers were never

sure when we would drop from the sky and check out their rigs. At first I took the transport managers along so the drivers knew it was kosher, but after a while I did it alone.

"The drivers soon got to know me and the mere sight of me or the chopper were sufficient to keep the trucks rolling and the drivers' pants on. Shortly after these patrols started, the pilferage stopped because the drivers knew someone was watching them. It was so effective as a deterrent that we were able to stop the patrols altogether."

...At 7.05am, ZS HWU lands at Bokomo headquarters in Clayville and collects three company men who join John Vinagre in the hunt for the hijacked Hino. Frederick Miles is Bokomo's financial manager, Otto Weinreibe is from vehicle support, and Kobus Carstens is the company's transport manager.

With the rotors still turning, Otto and Kobus climb into the back seats and strap in while Fred climbs into the co-pilot's seat. Five minutes later, ZS HWU is airborne. Banking steeply to starboard over Midrand which spreads like an industrial rash across the Highveld, the chopper heads south for Tembisa township, its electronic receiver scanning for audio signals from a hidden transmitter on board the hijacked Hino.

John Vinagre contacts Jan Smuts tower requesting clearance for an aerial search of the Tembisa area and Gwen, their traffic controller on duty at Smuts that morning, instructs him to stay below 6 300ft and clear of Zero3 left, the international airfield's main runway.

The chopper is on a flight path that will

take it directly over Tembisa at 1 000ft at a ground speed of 120km/h. The four men can communicate with each other but besides John's greeting and a few desultory remarks, there is no time for small talk. Otto Weinreibe repeats the Hino's registration number over the intercom and the four men settle into silence as the chopper starts its first sweep over Tembisa.

The smoke from thousands of wood and coal fires in Tembisa and the neighbouring Ivory Park squatter camp still lingers like fine mist over the township as ZS HWU begins its search.

They fly an east-west grid across the township without success. As is normal procedure, a half hour into the search, John radios his wife back at Capital Air on their private frequency giving his location and reporting no sightings.

Switching back to the Smuts frequency, he alters course to begin north-south sweeps across the township.

On the third try they spot the missing Hino parked among the houses below. The cab has been tilted and about 12 people are milling around the truck. Other figures climb from the cab as John takes his aircraft into a tight turn above the vehicle.

From virtual silence, the cockpit is suddenly awash with noise. Everyone is talking at once with Otto shouting as he sees a couple of kids stoning his truck and breaking the windows.

*"They're running," says a voice over the intercom as the hijackers take off and sprint towards the nearby houses. "The bastards are splitting up. watch where the f***ers go." Now it's all expletives and adrenalin as the chopper circles the truck a second time and the occupants feel the rush of the hunt.*



That's when John Vinagre hears the gunshots. They resonate ominously through the static of his headset — abnormal sounds in the enveloping yet familiar clamour of the chase. Instinct tells him the chopper's under fire but his mind rejects it. There's no fear. He's measuring the whole thing in his head. Then he feels a very distinct power loss.

Practised hands instinctively throw the aircraft into a steep dive away from the scene as he tries to evade further ground fire.

"I don't believe it... they're shooting at us..." he shouts into the headset. It's like an afterthought because he knows the chopper's going down. That's when the first twinges of fear claw at his chest.

Time bends and distorts. Seconds become minutes as he nurses the crippled ship on. He becomes aware of the growing pressure of someone's feet pushing against the back of his seat... he levels the chopper out but the engine fails.

Five kilometers to the north west in the Smuts tower, the air traffic controller named Gwen watches ZS HWU disappear off her radar screen.

Around 1986, the pattern of heavy vehicle crime changed, and for the first time trucks began to go missing. "Initially they were only after the tyres, batteries and fuel and invariably we would find the vehicle with its load intact simply by flying over the townships. In most cases, the rigs were abandoned. At that time only about 10 per cent of stolen trucks had their loads tampered with. It was still very unsophisticated crime," says Vinagre.

But it didn't stay that way for long. Around 1989 the pattern changed once more. "It was as if someone had flicked a switch. One moment we were finding stolen trucks abandoned in the townships as usual, the next they were nowhere to be found. We spent hours in the air without seeing any trace of

them. Something had changed radically in the pattern of truck thefts and the criminals were winning once again."

Once more it was John Vinagre who dreamed up a suitable response. It occurred to him that the Department of Nature Conservation had been successfully using a game tracking system developed by Professor Gerard van Urk at Potchefstroom University. The system was operated by attaching electronic transmitting devices to the animals which could then be tracked from the air.

"The system had been operated since 1975 but it only had a range of 5km which was clearly insufficient for our purposes. So I approached Professor van Urk for help. Not only was he incredibly enthusiastic but over the next few months he developed a number of systems which we put to the test. In all, we put in 30 hours of aerial trials before settling for the system we now use," says Vinagre.

That system, registered under the name Helitrace, consists of a small electronic transmitter attached somewhere to the truck which emits an audio signal. Each transmitter makes use of a different frequency which can be tracked from the air over a radius of 80kms in the built-up PWV (Gauteng) area and 120 kms in open areas. This allows the helicopter search ship a reasonable degree of latitude to lock onto a hijacked vehicle and to follow at a suitable distance.

Once the vehicle is located from the air, the pursuit chopper calls in the SAPS Hijack Reaction Unit in Isando or Soweto, whose task it is to recover the vehicle and make arrests on the ground. Alternately, a private reaction company such as XPS is called in to try to recover the vehicle.

...I can get it down, thinks John Vinagre as he autorotates the crippled chopper towards an open patch of ground nestled between the tightly concentrated match box houses of Tembisa. He doesn't really have much choice — live powerlines to the north and west block his escape.

There's just enough space to put it down if I can get there on time... His thoughts are interrupted by a woman and child who set off across the open patch, oblivious to the approach of the crippled chopper.

Aborting his descent, he drags the chopper off its crash path and tries to lift it over the fast-approaching toy homes below. There's not enough speed or altitude and the chopper whistles into the ground between two houses, one of the rotor blades snapping as the aircraft comes to rest on its nose against one of the houses, its tail rotors torn off by the impact as it hits the wall.

Dust mushrooms upwards, a red-brown cloak engulfing the aircraft. With it comes a sickening fear. Fire... all he can think of is being engulfed in a blanket of orange flame as the rich and intoxicating smell of avgas fills the cockpit.

Fred Miles is already going into shock as John helps him get clear of the crippled aircraft. The two passengers in the back are already clear and watching from the nearby road. Fred falls to his knees dragging John down with him. A woman is screaming at them. "Look what you've done to my house," but there's a far more menacing sound — gunshots!

Glancing up, John sees Otto and Kobus running towards some nearby houses pursued by a mob. Seeing John and Fred on the ground, however, the mob veers back towards the crash site... They are shouting and there is only murder in their eyes...

John Vinagre has had considerable success with his aerial bloodhound business which now has 1 100 transmitters installed in various fleets, but he points out that there is still a great deal of reluctance among fleet operators to invest in preventative hijack measures.

"We're losing the battle against hijacking by default and, of course, the hijackers are becoming more sophisticated," he says. "What's needed is a concerted effort on all fronts. But, in the short term, I believe the answer to hijacking lies in turning back the clock and recreating the system we ran for Lombard's Transport. The solution lies in restarting regular aerial patrols along the main trucking routes. That is the only effective deterrent.

"The road transport industry should get together to subsidise day and night aerial patrols of the nation's highways. These spot checks would have the same deterrent effect on hijackings that they had against theft in the early eighties because most hijackings are unquestionably still the result of driver collusion. "Drivers should know there are eyes in the skies watching them."

Vinagre reckons around R40 000 a month would cover the costs of regular helicopter patrols of the Durban and Cape Town routes in and out of Johannesburg — the main playgrounds of organised hijackers.

Taken across the industry, R40 000 is a small change, particularly when you realise that hijackings are costing the industry around R11 million a month in replacement costs alone, with hidden costs estimated at between R30 and R40 million a month.

"The only solution to hijacking is for all the players in the trucking industry to combine resources and tackle this scourge together. The current ad hoc response by individual operators acting alone against organised crime is a waste of time," says Vinagre.

... The mob reaches the two unarmed and defenceless men before either has a chance to think of escape. John Vinagre is still bending over his supine colleague when they are attacked. He is stabbed in the back and dragged to one side as the mob begins to beat and kick Fred Miles, now lying in a foetal position on the ground. They take his watch and scream: "Where are your guns, where is your money?" They kick him senseless as John tries to protect himself from the mindless wrath of the mob.

Otto and Kobus have reached the houses and run between them until they find a woman at an open door. They beg her for protection and she immediately takes control, taking them in and ushering the two terrified men into her bedroom. They climb under her bed and await their fate — breathless and fearful. Their lives are now entirely in the hands of a black stranger as groups of enraged youths scatter through the houses baying for the blood of the two white men...

...Just as John Vinagre is about to give up hope, a white Cressida backs out of a nearby householder's garage and drives slowly towards the mob which parts as it approaches. There are two men in the car — the driver and a passenger in the back who opens his door and shouts for the two white men to climb in. Despite being in shock and badly beaten, Fred Miles drags himself into the passenger seat while John clammers into the back before the mob is fully aware of what is happening. The car immediately races away...

All four of the men shot down in ZS HWU over Tembisa that morning escaped with their lives. But for the courageous intervention of three black strangers, they would not have made it, that much is abundantly clear.

As for the hijackers, it took Rudie van Olst of the East Rand Murder and Robbery Squad eight months to track them down, but for John Vinagre the hunt goes on...