

# Horizons

## A 10-minute play by David K. Farkas

*Dedicated to Richard Russell, RIP*

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### **Characters:**

Major roles are indicated in boldface.

**Jeff Ruston:** A Horizon Airlines ground crew employee who has stolen an airliner.

**Sander Arneson:** FAA Operations Chief for Sea–Tac Airport.

**Shirley Esposito:** Sea–Tac Airport Duty Officer.

Valerie: Jeff's former wife (voice only).

**Red Dog 1 Pilot:** Male, distinctive voice.

**Red Dog 2 Pilot:** Male, distinctive voice.

**Apparitional Child:** Girl or boy.

People in Space Needle.

### **Suggested minimal casting:**

Jeff Ruston

Sea–Tac Chief/Man in Space Needle

Sea–Tac Officer/Woman in Space Needle

Valerie/Child

Red Dog 1/Red Dog 2/Man in Space Needle

JEFF RUSTON, upstage, sits in a chair that represents the cockpit of an airliner. At a table or large desk Sea–Tac OPERATIONS CHIEF (Sander Arneson) and the Sea–Tac DUTY OFFICER (Shirley Esposito) are looking at the same computer monitor with a keyboard and mouse. On the desk is a mic on a stand, but it's not initially being used. The OFFICER has a headphone that covers one ear and also has a small microphone. The OFFICER periodically receives information through the headphone and speaks softly or in pantomime into the mic. There is a chair at the periphery of the stage for the actor who plays the two McChord Field pilots, designated RED DOG 1 and RED

DOG 2. As this actor switches roles, he not only changes voices but shifts in his chair to emphasize that two pilots are being depicted.

**CHIEF:** What happened?

**OFFICER:** A guy stole an airliner. He's up there right now. It's a Horizon Embraer 175. He's all alone in the plane. No crew. No passengers.

The OFFICER points to the screen. We see JEFF flying the plane in a carefree manner and looking out of his windshield on both sides.

**CHIEF:** What!? Fuck! Who? How did he do it? Why did he do it? Is he some kind of terrorist? Does he want money? Just a lunatic?

**OFFICER:** His name is Jeffrey Ruston. He's a fueler for Horizon. Somehow he learned enough to fly the plane and waited for his moment.

**CHIEF:** A fueler? How could something like this happen?

**OFFICER:** He was occasionally assigned to the turn-around team, so he had access to the cockpit.

The OFFICER attends to her headphones and says a few words, probably in pantomime. Then she turns back to the CHIEF.

**OFFICER:** Colonel Prescott scrambled two F-15s from McChord. Won't take them long to get up here. And we're trying to establish radio contact with Ruston.

**CHIEF:** We need to know why he's up there and what he wants. (*Directs the OFFICER'S attention to the monitor.*) He's just doing a wide circle around Puget Sound.

**OFFICER:** Maybe he knows how to land an aircraft. Maybe he's planning to land it.

**CHIEF:** It's for sure he's never landed one of *these* before. We need to find someone who's talked civilians down. Or has some training. At least we can direct him so he crashes on a runway not over a bunch of houses.

**OFFICER:** If he listens to us. I'll ask the Tower to get to work on that. There's probably someone in the Tower with that kind of training right now. But we also need someone who knows the Embraer 175 cockpit.

**CHIEF:** Be good if we could find out how much fuel is in that plane.

The OFFICER focuses for a while on what she hears through her headphones and perhaps says a phrase or two into the mic.

**OFFICER:** We're getting our radio link to Ruston. We also have a radio link with the pilots.

**RED DOG 1:** This is Red Dog 1, out of McChord. Come in Sea-Tac Control. You have operational authority, so tell us what you want. We're National Guard, but we know what we're doing.

**OFFICER:** OK, Red Dog 1. Do you have a visual?

**RED DOG 1:** Affirmative.

**RED DOG 2:** This is Red Dog 2. Also affirmative.

**OFFICER:** You are armed?

**RED DOG 1:** We have sidewinder missiles. We can bring him down quickly if we need to.

**OFFICER:** Roger that. Can you see Jeff Ruston, the guy inside? Try to get a good look at him. Don't spook him, but maneuver for a good look.

**RED DOG 2:** I can see him. He's just flying that plane. He's certainly conscious and alert. If there's anyone else in the cockpit, I can't see them.

**OFFICER:** *(To CHIEF.)* We have a radio link to Ruston. Want to talk to him?

**CHIEF:** Yes, and patch Ruston to the McChord pilots. But they only get to listen. *(Touches the switch on the table mic and begins to speak.)* Hello, Jeff. This is Sea-Tac Control. How you doin' up there?

**JEFF:** Please do not address me as "Jeff." Or, Jeffrey Ruston. I am "Sky Commander Ruston."

The CHIEF and OFFICER look at each other and do a double-take.

**JEFF:** And this is Horizon Air Flight 0000. The four zeros are sort of the numerical equivalent of infinity. Got it? I work for Horizon Airlines, so . . . *(Chuckling.)* this is a Horizon flight—although I admit it's not on any schedule.

**CHIEF:** OK. OK, Commander Ruston.

**JEFF:** You left something out.

**CHIEF:** OK, Sky Commander Ruston.

**JEFF:** That's right. Thank you.

The CHIEF mutes the table mic and turns to the OFFICER.

**CHIEF:** Tell the F-15s to stay close but out of the way. Tell them to report anything that they can see happening in that cockpit.

**CHIEF:** *(Now addressing JEFF.)* Sky Commander Ruston, may I ask why you stole . . . I mean . . . took command of . . . the plane?

**JEFF:** Beautiful day today. Great morning to be in the air. Usually I'm looking out the window—I always get a window seat—and just *hope* the pilot brings the plane around so that I can see Rainier or Mount Saint Helens. Today, it's all up to me. I'm looking right out the front, and I can turn the plane any way I want. Hey, Sea-Tac Control, what's your name?

**CHIEF:** I'm Sander Arneson. I'm FAA Operations Chief for Sea-Tac. I also have Shirley Esposito with me. She's Duty Officer. We have operational jurisdiction from the NORAD Western Defense Sector in Portland. Colonel Adam Prescott is Commander of the 142<sup>nd</sup> Air National Guard Fighter Wing at McChord. He and his staff are monitoring everything we say.

**JEFF:** Are you pilots?

**CHIEF:** Yes, I was military. Transports. Shirley does stunt flying in her spare time—at airshows and stuff.

**JEFF:** Very cool.

**CHIEF:** Sky Commander Ruston, can you tell me why you did this? There are easier ways to get a good look at Rainier.

**JEFF:** To tell you the truth, I can't really tell you. I do a lot of things where I can't say why. I'm a bit of a screw-up. A lot of a screw up. That's why I'm 32 years old and working on the ground crew.

**CHIEF:** Nothing wrong with working as a fueler.

**JEFF:** I'd hoped for better. I went to college. I expected to do better than working my butt off for minimum wage, half the time in the rain. There were other things I expected and didn't get. Well, I guess my ground crew days are over. I certainly achieved that much today.

**CHIEF:** We'd like to talk you down. I bet you're good enough to land that airliner. We're getting someone right now who knows all the controls on that Embraer. You know, thus far, nobody has been hurt. No one needs to get hurt. I won't say you're not in trouble, but you're not in big trouble. Let's keep it that way—OK?

**JEFF:** That's not exactly my plan.

**OFFICER:** *(Mutes the table mic and talks to CHIEF.)* We have his ex-wife patched in from Maple Valley. She says she can help talk him into landing the plane.

**CHIEF:** OK, let's try it.

The OFFICER presses some keys on the keyboard.

**CHIEF:** *(To JEFF.)* We have . . . Valerie, your ex, on the line. She wants to talk to you.

**JEFF:** She does? Well, OK.

**VALERIE:** Hey Jeff, why don't you drop that plane into the ocean? Or burn yourself up in the mouth of a volcano?

The OFFICER and CHIEF are slow to grasp what is happening, and, when they do, they look at each other with dismay.

**JEFF:** You always were a dumb one. There's no volcano like that for thousands of miles.

**VALERIE:** OK. Maybe just crash into the Space Needle. If you can find it. Probably that will be one more of your failures.

**CHIEF:** Cut her! Cut her off, for God's sake!

The OFFICER hurriedly presses keys on the keyboard.

**JEFF:** OK, Babe, maybe I'll do just that. This will be in honor of you, Val. In honor of our five years together.

**CHIEF:** What? Fuck!

**OFFICER:** *(Pointing to the screen.)* He's turning.

**CHIEF:** Jeff, Sky Commander Ruston, what are you doing?

**JEFF:** Oh, I don't know . . . I just might topple the Space Needle. For the record, this was Val's idea. Quite a woman!

**CHIEF:** We can't permit that. We'll shoot you out of the sky.

**JEFF:** Oh, yeah? You need to think twice about that. Twelve tons of wreckage and aviation fuel falling over Seattle? I don't think so. Space Needle, here I come!

**OFFICER:** Sander, I don't think he really means it. He was pretty friendly until he heard from that woman.

**CHIEF:** *(Muting the table mic.)* Ruston has issued a terrorist threat. This is an order I need to give. *(Now flicking a switch on the table mic so as to address the pilots.)* McChord pilots, this is Sander Arneson,

FAA Operations Chief for Sea—Tac with direct authorization from NORAD Western Defense Sector and Colonel Prescott. Your orders are to shoot down the Embraer 175 you are tracking if you can get him over water or any kind of clear area.

**RED DOG 1:** We copy. We understand. If we get our chance, we'll do it.

**RED DOG 2:** But it doesn't seem likely that he'll pass over any open area. He's headed straight for the Space Needle.

**JEFF:** Well those folks in the restaurant are gonna see something really special today. Way more exciting than the Blue Angels.

The CHIEF and OFFICER watch their monitor in helpless fear as they track the flight of the plane toward the Space Needle. The actor who is providing the voices of RED DOG 1 and RED DOG 2 quickly takes up a waiter's tray and perhaps an apron and moves from the periphery of the stage to join the CHIEF and OFFICER, who have become patrons at the Space Needle restaurant. The CHILD may join them. Everyone is fixed in horror as they see the airliner approach and, finally, they scream all in terror, with the waiter dropping his tray. As the airline suddenly gains altitude and passes over them, they gradually regain some degree of composure.

**JEFF:** *(Laughing.)* Ha! Ha! Why would I want to kill a bunch of innocent people? Just to make Val happy? Ridiculous. No way. I'm heading off into the horizon. This is a Horizon airplane, so I'm taking it to the horizon. To my destiny. My fucked up destiny. Hey, Sampson, whatever your name is. Tell your pilots not to feel guilty if they have to shoot me down. They follow orders, I understand that. I shoulda been better at following orders.

**CHIEF:** No need for things to get that dire, Jeff. Just keep cool.

**JEFF:** *(Chuckling.)* Sampson, if I get shot down, I won't even blame you.

**CHIEF:** *(To OFFICER.)* He's still a clear and present danger to hundreds or thousands of people. *(To PILOTS.)* When you get him over open water, take your shot.

**OFFICER:** He's heading due north. If he holds steady, you can get him off Mukilteo.

**RED DOG 1:** Roger that. We'll follow him north.

**RED DOG 2:** Damn, I never expected to do anything like this.

*(Beat.)*

**JEFF:** Hey, Sampson. I have a great view of Mt. Baker.

**CHIEF:** I bet you have.

**JEFF:** It's just a great morning, I think I'm gonna take a little stroll out on the wing.

**CHIEF:** Sky Commander Ruston, with all due respect, that's impossible.

**JEFF:** You have no idea what's possible in the last half hour of your life.

JEFF steps out of the chair that has represented the cockpit and walks gingerly downstage, peering downward from the forward and trailing edge of the imaginary wing.

**JEFF:** Just amazing. I feel so free. I'm gonna do a little jig right on the wing.

JEFF dances but is careful about the edges.

**OFFICER:** McChord interceptors, do you have a visual? What do you see?

**RED DOG 2:** Nothing. The plane is still heading north on a steady course.

**OFFICER:** Roger that, Red Dog 2. (To CHIEF.) Well, he's definitely nuts. But he's not acting hostile.

**CHIEF:** He issued a terrorist threat and nearly carried it out.

Suddenly the CHILD appears on the wing with JEFF.

**JEFF:** Who are you?

**CHILD:** I'm the child you might still have. From the happy marriage you might still have. I want you to be my father. I want you to land the plane.

**JEFF:** What kind of marriage am I gonna have? How you planning to be born? If I land the plane—that is, if they let me land the plane—there are two F-15s tracking me—I'm going to jail, probably forever.

**CHILD:** No. It might not be a long sentence. At the trial, you get an expert witness to say you were taking the wrong meds. After you've served some time, a psychiatrist certifies that your mental health issues are resolved. Agree to wear an ankle bracelet and stay 10 miles away from any airport.

**JEFF:** You're a child. How can you be talking like this?

**CHILD:** I'm not a real child. I'm coming out of your brain. So I don't have to talk like a real child.

**JEFF:** I suppose not.

**RED DOG 1:** He's northeast of Paine Field, about to reach open water. We'll have our shot in about 90 seconds. We await further orders.

**CHILD:** Part of you really wants to live. Part of you knows you're not really standing on the wing of an airliner flying 400 miles per hour. Part of you—maybe a big part—thinks there's hope, even after a jail sentence. That part of you created me, is creating me right now. That's the reason you're gonna try to land this plane. You know you can land this plane.

**JEFF:** Yes, I can land the plane.

**CHILD:** Take my hand. Take me back into the cockpit. After that, I'm gonna disappear. But if you do the right things, I promise to come back to you as your real child. Will you kick a soccer ball with me? Will you love me? Will you love my mother? Maybe I'll have a brother and a sister. Will you do your best to make me happen?

**JEFF:** I promise. I prom-ise. I know what I want now. Let's go back to the cockpit.

JEFF walks the CHILD very affectionately back into the cockpit, where the CHILD exits and JEFF, taking his seat, resumes flying the plane.

**JEFF:** Sea—Tac control. Talk me down. This was all a mistake. There's more than one kind of horizon, and I just got a peek at a horizon that I can believe in. I think I can settle myself. It won't be easy, but I'm ready for self-discipline.

**OFFICER:** Do we understand you want to land the plane and that you'll let us talk you down?

**JEFF:** That's right. That's what I want.

**CHIEF:** (To OFFICER.) We can't take a chance with this guy. He's still a psycho flying twelve tons of metal and fuel. He made a terrorist threat and nearly carried it out. At any moment he could change his mind

and kill a lot of people. It's too bad. Seems like an OK guy. But he's going down. Not much left to that 90 seconds.

**OFFICER:** McChord pilots. Hold off! Hold off for now.

**CHIEF:** What are you doing? I give the orders here. You know that . . . I can't take a chance with this guy . . .

**RED DOG 1:** This is Red Dog 1. We're awaiting further orders.

**OFFICER:** No, wait. We can land him at Whidbey Naval Air Station. Bring him around from the northwest. He'll come in with nothing but water below him. We'll have the F-15s right over him. Almost no risk.

**RED DOG 1:** This is Red Dog 1. Repeat. We're awaiting further orders.

**CHIEF:** If this goes bad, my career is over . . . But . . . OK, I'll do it.

**OFFICER:** Jeff, we're gonna guide you in. But it won't be Sea—Tac. You're gonna land at Whidbey Island Naval Air Station. Because you buzzed the Space Needle, we can't fully trust you. Any crazy idea, any divergence from our instructions, and you're an instant gonner.

**JEFF:** I'm good with that. Thank you.

**OFFICER:** McChord pilots, you copy this?

**RED DOG 1:** Yes, we copy. It works on our end.

**OFFICER:** OK, Jeff, you ready to come home?

***The End***