

# ***CLONE THOUGHTS FROM ABROAD...***

By SCOTT WELLER

***“Hello, and welcome to Virgin Atlantic flight VS015 to New York. Our flight time is five hours, forty five minutes, and the in-flight entertainment will begin shortly. We have a full selection of duty free goods, and- for all those STAR WARS fans on board- we have some items you may be interested in...”***

It's Monday. The time is two o'clock in the afternoon. We've taken off, bound for New York, and I'm getting used to being in the air again. The movies haven't yet started, so I'm clutching a STAR WARS novel in one hand and a Bacardi and Coke in the other. I am relaxed. I am chilled. Less than six hours to go and we arrive in the Big Apple- the land of dreams and opportunities. Of pungent hotdogs, bright lights, amazing noise and the roar of the crowd as the Mets destroy any opposition (would you guess they were my favourite Baseball team?? Go Mets Go!!).

The plane is jammed packed. My mind is attuned. That feeling is here, even before the Supervising Stewardess made her announcement. That indefinable “buzz” that tells me that there are STAR WARS fans on this plane. Lots of STAR WARS fans!! There are some to my right - a couple of guys who know that they are on a pilgrimage to the Force- whilst, to my left, a hip looking surf dude type, reading the junior STAR WARS EPISODE II novelisation, whilst his girlfriend looks towards him in despair, trying to break his concentration and have him return to a world of normality. The look in her eyes says it all: “if he talks about Obi Wan Kenobi... again!” There are loads of other fans in the next cabin too. I'll never make it into the first class area without being pounced on, but methinks the pilots and cabin crew are STAR WARS fans too!!

I put my book down, but not my drink (I like my Bacardi and Coke waayy too much!!) to skim the duty free magazine. It's nice to see some STAR WARS stuff in there, but none of it is really to my taste- it's also pretty expensive. I next withdraw the in flight magazine from the fishnet rack in front of me. That has STAR WARS in it too- a feature talking about how the new films going to be better than the last one (Sigh!! Here we go, more PHANTOM MENACE bashing!!). As I clear the bile from my throat at the thought of reading more negative criticism, the film channels start. After trying to remember where on Earth the socket is, I plug myself in, taking a last look at the passengers around me. *Yeah, tons of fans on this flight.* It's nice to know I'm not the only one, and that I'll be in good company when we land.

ATTACK OF THE CLONES debuts in American cinemas at twelve am on Wednesday night. T minus- two days to go.

***“We're gonna see STAR WARS. Right, buddy!***

I'm having a flashback-like in all those bad TV movies. It's the voice of my good friend, Gerry- a film buff, and STAR WARS fan, happily married, with three terrific kids!!! I've known him for ten great years- I represented and did business with him in the film and television industry. Between boring old work, we would have many transatlantic calls talking film, film, film and STAR WARS. Both of us had waited a long time for George Lucas creative genius to return to cinemas. He sends me the STAR WARS INSIDER (so difficult to get in the UK - I know, we're not supposed to have it-that's the idea- but it's such a good read!!) in a big bundle every so often. He's got the films, he's got some of the memorabilia, and he gets his kids loads of toys (I envy young Max his Rebel Blockade Runner toy figure holder). Gerry's office is amazing- he's a shrewd, talented businessman, and his office reflects that, but it's also packed with great stuff, from baseball hats to very yummy SPIDERMAN chocolates.

When THE PHANTOM MENACE came out, I confessed to Gerry that I had been bitten by the bug of having to see the next film at an American venue (I loved the TATOOINE OR BUST TV documentary- the buzz and the excitement of the STAR WARS fans in the States was so intense- when US STAR WARS love something they really love something- in England, the excitement is just as strong but we're always so reserved- I remember getting up to clap at the theatre once (seeing Diana Rigg give an amazing performance in MEDEA). I felt like a leper- I was the only out of my seat applauding her. Perhaps it's the American genes in me- or even Midi Chlolrians)). Fortunately, Gerry had the same inklings in his bones for EPISODE II as well. However, we both knew, exciting though the thought was, we didn't want to go to the one minute past twelve in the morning show of the Wednesday (understandably, Gerry's a family man. Also, those tickets would probably have been gone within seventy seconds of their release!!), but we'd definitely do the first proper day. Gerry made the ticket booking, I got the flights/ hotel arranged (sooner rather than later. I remembered the huge amount of STAR WARS fans who went to New York last time. Kipping out in the cold light of DUNKIN DONOTS didn't appeal to me somehow!!). Ready for action, the three months would come and go with incredible speed.



### *Holidays are coming, holidays are coming...*

We've agreed to go to the first afternoon show, twelve pm, at the best venue you could possibly see the movie: the ZIEGFELD theatre, in the heart of New York. Gerry tells me that the cinema has a tremendous reputation for sound and picture (the screen is apparently mega big), combined with a real twenties and thirties style interior and comfy seating. On that first day- with three thousand STAR WARS fans eagerly awaiting the clash of lightsabers, it should hopefully be an overwhelming experience. The cinema has played host to some amazing film premieres over the years, so they should know how to handle a crowd. Heck, RETURN OF THE JEDI has played there (remember all those famous pics of the crowds outside it in 1983). As if fate had played a part in all this, the ZIEGFELD is the only choice.

### *"It looks fantastic, doesn't it"*

I was talking to the guy behind me on the plane, his girlfriend wasn't that impressed, she now had that look in her eyes that said "I've put up with his obsession for so long now- I hope I don't have to kill him on this holiday!"

The people in the next cabin were excited, their ear muffs on, watching the plentiful amount of films on offer by VIRGIN, enthusiastically eating the plastic plates of food coming round by the cabin crew (and yes, they were eating them!!- the food on VIRGIN apparently ain't bad)- and at least they give you a blanket if you're cold- BRITISH AIRWAYS would rather see you become a frozen popsicle before they'd offer to help (in fact, I don't think that there are any STAR WARS fans in BRITISH AIRWAYS cabin crews – they look a bit too up their own proverbial for that!!!).

If I look close enough, I'm sure I'll find someone within this plane wearing a STAR WARS t-shirt!! There has to be one!!

### *"Scott Weller?? Never heard of him!!"*

We've arrived. I know this because everyone's ears have popped on the plane and the poor little three year old, who was seated to my right, has only now just stopped crying. Everyone's in good spirits. Not even the huge downpour of rain, making the sky incredibly grey and miserable, can dampen our holiday hearts. It takes hours to clear the airport, the crowd of disembarking passengers, the important security checks, are tedious, but they have to be done. Fortunately, to keep people's consciousness from slipping into oblivion, there are TV monitors in the arrivals areas. ATTACK OF THE CLONES trailers are showing on CNN every ten minutes or so. This helps a great deal- an hour and fifteen minutes passes by relatively easy. If someone in customs and passport control asks me what I'm doing in New York, I really wanna tell them that I'm going to see STAR WARS, but I think they'd lock me up and throw away the key. "Scott Weller? Never heard of him!!" I think they already know that a lot of the people on this flight are for STAR WARS. "Just here for a holiday," I say, beaming, as I get into the armored truck- sorry, coach- to my hotel.

We unceasingly plough through the rain and traffic, like an AT-AT on its way to a power generator. The driver's radio is on, the local station plugging ATTACK OF THE CLONES like there's no tomorrow.

Eight hours in and I'm in STAR WARS heaven....

### *It's still raining.....*

New York is now in the second of two days of heavy rain. Its half past six in the mid evening, and the hail is well and truly piercing Times Square. Sun, please come out. It's the first day of my holiday!!!

I have my groceries, I've eaten, I bought head ache pills for the suddenly- hitting- my- brain- with- a- hammer jetlag!! The hotel is lovely, right in the middle of Times Square. The VIRGIN MEGASTORE is nearby- I've already been in there- tons of STAR WARS stuff but nothing I don't already have. FAO SCHWARZ is next on my travel destinations, a toy shop not unlike HAMLEYS in London, which has an amazing floor of STAR WARS material (I even met a STAR WARS fan named Scott in there, a couple of days later. It was eerie- he looked similar to me, but American. A very pleasant guy, he showed me where all the best stuff was located, where I could get the increasingly hard to find Anakin Skywalker in Jedi outfit figure, and Count Dooku. Being a New Yorker, and seeing that I was a tourist, he knew all the best places to eat in the city. He was seeing ATTACK the following weekend- and he couldn't wait). As I continued my exploration of the toy floor, a huge screen was showing PHANTOM MENACE- and I soon realized that the only way to see this film is on the biggest screen you can get!!

Next stop.. TOYS R US, located in the heart of Times Square. The figures were cheaper here, that's for sure, and their display area was first class. Avoiding the spectacular animatronic Tyrannosaurus Rex from JURASSIC PARK, I entered an amazing selection of toys, from both trilogies, though Episode II obviously was the most predominant, whilst watched by full size costume mock ups of Clonetroopers and Jango Fett. Despite parading a bag from FOA SCHWARZ in front of their eyes, the staff on hand were all too keen to sell STAR WARS to me, and they did a very good job. Totally happy was I, as Yoda might say, though I would become demoralized an amazingly quick six minutes later. Buying all the stuff I wanted, the lady cashier looked at me thinking- "I hope you're getting these things for your kids, because this is a helluva lot for a fully grown adult!!" She was putting the tabs through one at a time now, bagging them up. "Are you going to see STAR WARS?" I inquired, deciding to strike up a conversation. WRONG MOVE BUDDY!! "Looks good," I continued. Her lack of enthusiasm reply was short, like bullets piercing my skull- "Don't like it. Not bothered. I'm more interested in SPIDERMAN!!"



I trundled out of the store, slightly depressed...

**“NO, ANAKIN. NO!!”**

I'm back in the hotel room, security really is tight here- the United States Vice President is going to be staying here on Thursday- I've never seen a reception area so busy and so packed with people. I've also seen some celebrities around- Marsha Mason walked in and out of the hotel, and I saw that Goran Visijnic (the Slavik George Clooney replacement from ER) walking the street with a mystery lady.

My love of New York continues. This is actually my second visit, and I know where I am and where I'm going now. I love the buildings, I love the look of modern and old time history mixed together. I love the EMPIRE STATE BUILDING, and THE STATUE OF NEW YORK. I love the fact that the city's open all day and all night. There's no BS with New Yorkers- what you see is what you get. Overpriced the place may be at times, but you get a feeling inside you that you know you are somewhere important, somewhere vibrant. If I had a past life I'm probably an American.

Back in my room, a pleasant mix of cream walls and tiles, I'm relaxing after several hours of walking. The TV is on, STAR WARS trailers are coming thick and fast. From the shower, I hear Obi-Wan Kenobi worriedly shouting to Anakin, followed by the sound of laser fire.

Not much longer now.....

*“In case you're not aware, and have lived on another planet for the last week, STAR WARS is out tomorrow!!”*

It's now Wednesday night. One day to go. I'm meeting Gerry late afternoon for a drive/ tour of the city- he's going to show me his New York. We're going to look at the shops, at Wall Street, we're going to pay our respects to the World Trade Center victims (a truly moving experience), and, finally, have dinner at the pier, before driving back to his home to see his family (Gerry and Julie, his slightly underwhelmed by my arrival wife, have very kindly gotten their spare room ready for me. Julie, working in a hospital, can probably see in my eyes the signs that I am probably insane!!!).

It's late when we get back, nearly twelve. Gerry's house is beautiful, his family are marvelous and his cats are delightfully eccentric. In six hours time, we're getting up, dropping the kids off to their neighbors for school, then it's off to Manhattan, to find some parking, get a good breakfast, and then enter the madness that is.. the line for STAR WARS EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES...

**“I've heard it's the best one yet!!”**

Nine o'clock. Gerry and I have had a good diner experience. I have been consuming vast amounts of toast and cereal, two cups of tea and a glass of milk, whilst Gerry's had a good fry-up. The papers have loads of STAR WARS in them. The reviews are very mixed, but all agree it's a visually spectacular treat. Hell, who cares about the critics, the only STAR WARS film they liked was EMPIRE, and that was only because it was so downbeat (I love the movie but it is downbeat!!). Critics only like films where people are miserable, living in dark places, or die-probably mirroring the life of a lot of actual film critics!! If a movie's fun, like A NEW HOPE, forget it...

We get to the ZIEGFELD at nine twenty five am, to find it....

Deserted.

I can't believe it. Where are the fans, the Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader look-a-likes clashing with plastic lightsabers, the kids spurring Yoda like words of wisdom, people praying on their knees that they've got tickets to the new STAR WARS film? Where are the Stormtroopers, the news crews bitching about how sad we all are? Where are all the people wearing STAR WARS T-shirts? I'm being distinctive today- I'm wearing an OFFICIAL STAR WARS UK FAN CLUB t-shirt. I'm in the mood to see STAR WARS like you wouldn't believe, and I think Gerry's a little embarrassed by me (if you're reading this, Gerry, I'm sorry about that!!). Please tell me this isn't a nightmare. Please tell me that people don't think the film sucks before they've even seen it!!! Please tell me that our faith in George and his team hasn't wavered. PLEASE DON'T LET US BE THE ONLY ONES IN LINE!!!



We slowly, cautiously moved down the street a little further. Upon further investigation, there was a small group in line, and we do mean small, but we were near the front. We got chatting to an older New York lady, she looked like she was on her way to work and was checking out the buzz. You knew she was a New Yorker- she had that real great tough and gravelly Barbra Streisand-y voice that a lot of them have (she almost put Darth Vader to shame with it!!). She didn't look like a STAR WARS fan, but she was- telling us that she'd heard it was the best one yet, and that she was planning to see it three times or more. Then she walked away. I don't think we ever saw her again!!

Ten minutes passed, there were more people getting in line, some American, some German, followed by some more Americans. Then, twenty minutes later, more people. People were walking past us- some non STAR WARS fans, as well as people going to and from work, all looking at us with either pleasure, oddness, a wish to be there themselves, or with major league disdain (it was great to see actress Lindsey Crouse walk

past us- she seemed to enjoy seeing the crowds- I like to think she's a STAR WARS fan too!!). The people continued to walk past, but I was now talking to Gerry too much to notice. Gerry's now on the phone, making sure his family's okay- young Max is a little unwell today, which is a worry, and I hope he's alright. We carry on talking about all kinds of stuff: England, movies, food, politics, travel, STAR WARS, more STAR WARS, what we're expecting from EPISODES II and III.

An hour passes. I have been sitting on the floor for half an hour (the rain went yesterday, replaced by three days of stunningly beautiful weather)- it is boiling hot- a perfect May day for seeing a great movie. As I look back, I'm stunned- the crowd behind me is unbelievable. It has now gone all the way down the street, done a turning by the local bank, and is going further. *What was it on the news that they reckoned was going to happen? Twelve million Americans were going to skip work today to see the film.* From my vantage point, it looked like they were all coming here!!



My dreams had come to fruition. There were news crews interviewing people to find out why STAR WARS was so popular, with one of the lady news presenters dressed up like Princess Leia, from A NEW HOPE, and she looked rather cute. There were more film cameras and vans turning up, taxi drivers were getting irate, lots more people were coming out to have a look at all the STAR WARS fans, there were Stormtroopers on patrol, and a Darth Vader lurking about. There were kids, of all ages, with lightsabers (its always great to see tons of kids at STAR WARS films- it gives me hope that the legacy of STAR WARS will continue to be preserved long after my generation has gone). Finally, the STAR WARS t-shirt wearers had arrived in force - worn by people of all ages, nationalities and sizes.

Being in this crowd is a really great feeling.

One hour to go and the doors will open.

**“BEGUN THIS CLONE WAR HAS!!”**

Ten minutes. It seems like forever. The audience wants to get in there, to get their first seats as soon as possible. More passers by, someone has shouted out from a car that we're all sad. Princess Leia has decided to return to her news crew van. The sun is still hot. Gerry is relaxed and is taking it all so calmly. I just want to dive into that cinema!!!

Finally, the wait is over. The doors are opened and a bored cinema staff let the people in, though we're obviously not allowed to rush in, we're entering in batches, of which we're the third or fourth batch. At first, we're all calm and orderly as we walk to the doors. The moment we're beyond them: sheer, unadulterated pandemonium, as the foyer becomes a madhouse of popcorn throwing, blurs of motion and screaming and shouting- it's as if a platoon of Gremlins had suddenly arrived. People are running, yelling with enthusiasm to get the best seats. One older lady behind me is moaning that someone had almost knocked her down in a bid to get to the seats- poor woman, her hatred of the entire STAR WARS saga has begun with that one moment, when her foot got hurt (and its a hatred that's probably here to stay, too!!).

Gerry and I think we have a chance at the best seats- but, like the Germans, who are always at the best area of the pool two hours before anybody else, there are four people already there. In fact, we didn't even see these guys in the line. Perhaps they have Force like powers of persuasion!! We decide to sit in the same row, relaxed and ready...

Remember the scene in THE BEGINNING DVD documentary, at the premiere of EPISODE I in San Francisco? Well... that was pretty much what it was like at the ZIEGFELD, without the huge amount of multi coloured lightsabers. To re-use George Lucas favourite phrase, it was “faster, more intense”.

The lights dimmed, the atmosphere was electric. The first two trailers of summer blockbuster madness came on screen. MEN IN BLACK II looked funny, MINORITY REPORT looked superb. Then came the MATRIX RELOADED, and the audience, myself included, went nuts over it. That was the ultimate warm up. The lights came up again, the audience hungry for EPISODE II. Finally, the lights came down again, that familiar TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX logo appeared (a STAR WARS film just wouldn't be the same without it), followed by that golden shiny LUCASFILM insignia (did they steal See-Threepio's colour scheme for that!!). Then, at long last, the credits: A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR WAY....



The audience exploded into cheers as the logo went into the distance. From that moment on, we were all putty in George's hands. We were tense for the Coruscant air chase, we felt we were helping Obi Wan solve the mystery of Kamino, we all went *WHAT!!* when Amidala spurned Anakin's first kiss (and us hot blooded guys all went *oohh* when we saw her in that black outfit!!). We loved the fight between Obi Wan and Jango. But the best time in the audience was when Anakin, and Obi Wan, fought Dooku. When an injured Obi Wan threw the lightsaber to Anakin, and the young Jedi went against Dooku with two lightsabers, the audience cheered for Anakin so much I thought we were all gonna get out of our seats- everyone wanted him to kick Dooku's butt!! The majority of the audience stayed stunned when Anakin lost his hand. Finally, theirs and my jaw almost dropped for the Yoda/ Dooku clash- film history will never be the same again after that one!!

As the final credits rolled following the silent wedding sequence, we all left the cinemas salivating from what we saw. We wanted EPISODE III put on straight away. I think Gerry liked the film- though his enthusiasm was more reserved than mine- he's far more normal and straight forward than I am.

As we left the cinema, and the bright sunlight and high temperatures hit us, we looked at the three thirty crowd outside and ahead of us. I swear it was even bigger and longer than the twelve o'clock one. Not only did the line go round the block, it went round the next corner as well.

I was so over awed by the film, and the audience reaction to it, that I couldn't help but shout out to the people in the line, waiting for hours, that the wait really was worth it. My eyes were swelling up with tears of happiness. After the average reaction to THE PHANTOM MENACE, I was so glad that people had turned up in such huge amounts. I hope that, for the majority of them, ATTACK OF THE CLONES lived up to their expectations. It certainly did for me, and was a day I would never forget.

My sincerest thanks to Gerry and his family for putting up with my lunacy.

As Gerry and I parted company- he had to go and pick up his children- we turned the corner and walked into a very cool looking Kiefer Sutherland, getting out of his car and going into a nearby hotel for a TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX press party, announcing their fall TV season to the media. With Gerry departed, I picked up a camera and took loads of pictures of the unceasing crowd (some of which are printed in this feature). I then bought a couple of t-shirts- I was still on cloud nine- and returned to the hotel for a short time, to come down from it all.

I packed for tomorrow's departure- and then, feeling content beyond words, stayed out in Times Square for the rest of the evening. I sneaked back to the ZIEGFELD later and those crowds were still there. Later, I checked out the WARNERS MULTIPLEX cinema round the corner- three of the five performances of ATTACK being sold out. The people were out in force, and ready for nearly two and a half hours of stirring adventure!!

It was a great feeling to know that the Force was back... and back good!!

The next day, the trailers continued for the film on TV, the pre recorded interviews of the actors plugging the film were shown, the notices, though continuing to be mixed, didn't, fortunately, seem to phase the film's success that weekend. The crowds continued to flock. With worldwide response like this, EPISODE III was guaranteed- the completion of the STAR WARS saga.

I was ready to go now, yet five days had gone so quickly. And I had loved every minute of it.

But the story doesn't end there. Boarding the plane home, there was a very tall gentleman in front of me, wearing a baseball cap, with a big bushy grey/white beard. And he looked very familiar.. Could it be THE PHANTOM MENACE's film editor- Paul Martin Smith. I thought I was dreaming. I had to take a chance and talk to him. "Excuse me.. are you Charles Martin Smith!"

I couldn't believe it. I had frozen up and couldn't remember his full name!!

He looked at me as if I was mad (this keeps happening to me!!). His facial expression said "Oh no, I've been rumbled. A STAR WARS fanatic. "Danger, Will Robinson, danger!""

He replied: "No, he's an actor. I'm Paul Martin Smith."

No longer gob-smacked, I regained my composure and told him how much I enjoyed PHANTOM (I know... I'm a rare breed, almost extinct. One of the few who loved every tremendously enjoyable minute of it). He thanked me and asked if I'd seen ATTACK- he'd heard it was good. I said I had and that it was- that Ben Burtt had done a very good job in his absence. Asking him what he was doing on his trip to London, he said that he was working on a new science fiction movie. To this day, I don't know what that movie is, but I wished him success. Now on board the plane, greeted by the sweet smiling stewardess, I went to the cramped economy seating (why is it that the seats on a plane always seem to shrink on the return flight!!), whilst he departed to the very comfy seats in first class. Lucky devil!!!

The flight was fine and fast, the movies good, the food edible once again. I had come to New York in rain, I had come back to England in rain. Never mind. In my heart, though, everything was still sunny, and I was looking forward to seeing my family, and dog, again.

Back home at ten o'clock in the morning, I watched all the STAR WARS stuff on television that morning of the film's simultaneous release in England. Reaction to the film in the UK was, interestingly, better than in the States. Sadly, in my absence, the majority of the film star's had attended the movies gala premiere in London, whilst I had been in New York. Ah well... if I could've cloned myself and been in two places, I would have. At the end of the day, however, it's the film, above all else, that matters.

Explosive action, great pacing, solid acting, a nicely played romance, superb effects, Christopher Lee, Samuel Jackson, Yoda kicking butt!!!

Yep, life would be pretty boring without the STAR WARS SAGA!!!