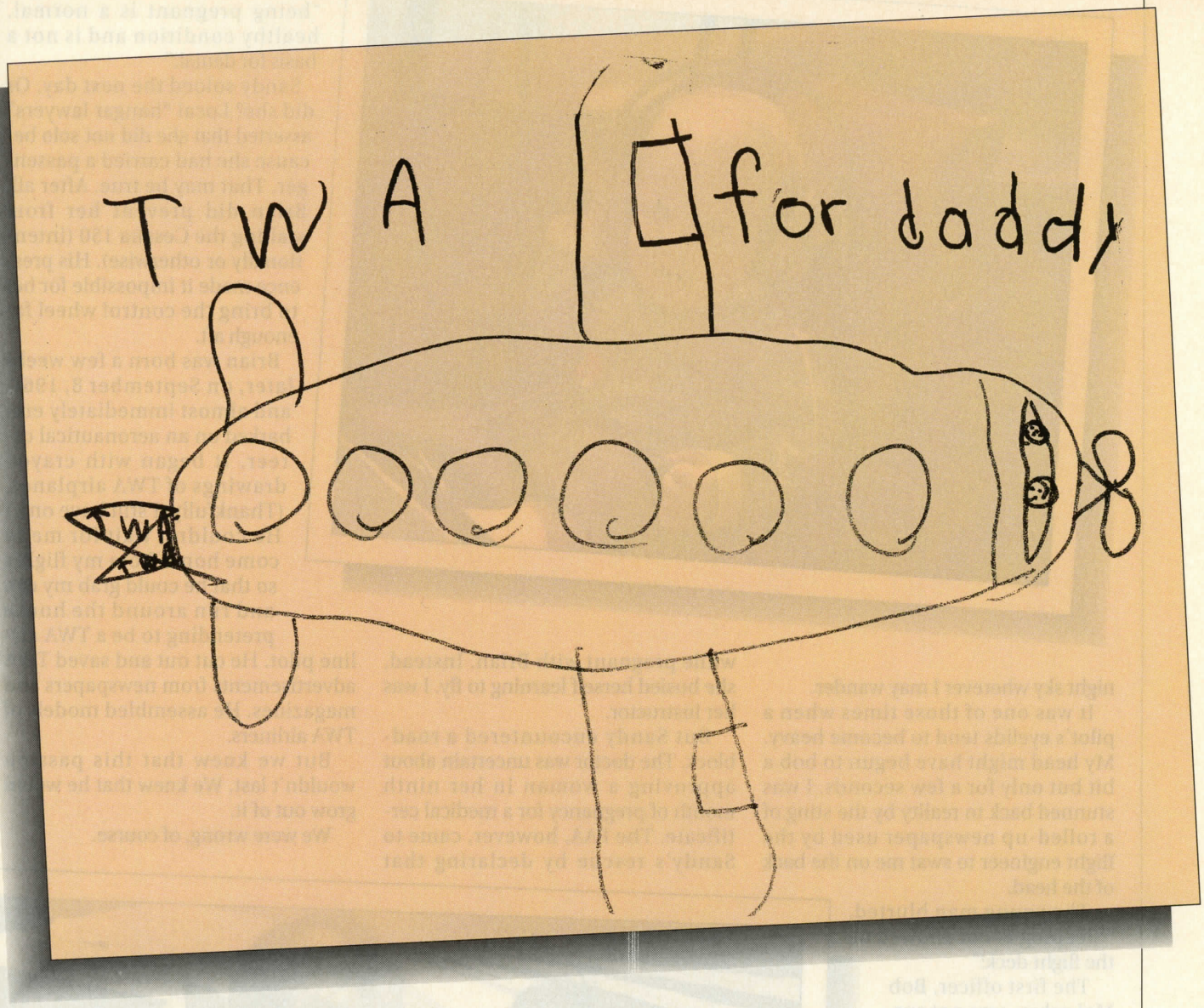

A NIGHT OF PASSAGE

Like father, like son

BY BARRY SCHIFF

I don't know what time it was, but I will never forget the date: August 27, 1991. We were flying on the back side of the clock over the middle of the North Atlantic at Flight Level 370, enroute from New York to Berlin, Germany. • The radios of our Lockheed 1011 were silent. It was one of those peaceful moments when the mind begins to drift. I recall staring out the left cockpit window, gazing at those comforting pinpoints of light dotting the celestial dome. They are my compatriots of the

night sky wherever I may wander.

It was one of those times when a pilot's eyelids tend to become heavy. My head might have begun to bob a bit but only for a few seconds. I was stunned back to reality by the sting of a rolled-up newspaper used by the flight engineer to swat me on the back of the head.

The young man blurted, "Sleeping is not allowed on the flight deck!"

The first officer, Bob McLoskey, was not surprised by such disrespectful and mutinous behavior. That is because the engineer was my son, Brian. This was our first flight as crewmembers on the same TWA flight.

Brian had come a long way since I had taught him to fly in the family Citabria. And no father could have been prouder. It brought a tear to the eye, a tear that I was careful to hide.

Brian's addiction to flying apparently was born before he was. This is because his mother, Sandy, was not content to sit at home knitting booties while pregnant with Brian. Instead, she busied herself learning to fly. I was her instructor.

But Sandy encountered a roadblock. The doctor was uncertain about approving a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy for a medical certificate. The FAA, however, came to Sandy's rescue by declaring that "being pregnant is a normal, healthy condition and is not a basis for denial."

Sandy soloed the next day. Or did she? Local "hangar lawyers" asserted that she did not solo because she had carried a passenger. That may be true. After all, Brian did prevent her from stalling the Cessna 150 (intentionally or otherwise). His presence made it impossible for her to bring the control wheel far enough aft.

Brian was born a few weeks later, on September 8, 1967, and almost immediately embarked on an aeronautical career. It began with crayon drawings of TWA airplanes. (Thankfully, I still have one.) He couldn't wait for me to come home from my flights so that he could grab my cap and run around the house pretending to be a TWA airline pilot. He cut out and saved TWA advertisements from newspapers and magazines. He assembled models of TWA airliners.

But we knew that this passion wouldn't last. We knew that he would grow out of it.

We were wrong, of course.

On that flight to Berlin, I occasionally found myself looking back at Brian. He would be hunched over his small table making fuel calculations or entering engine data in the aircraft log or reading a company bulletin.

He turned around once and caught me looking his way. I pretended to be checking something on his panel, but he knew better. And I knew that he knew. We smiled at each other. Without saying a word, I was telling him, Son, I am proud of who you are, what you have accomplished, and where you are going. Brian's smile said thanks for helping me get here. These were thumbs-up smiles filled with love and mutual respect.

This was the passing of the baton, a highlight of my career, of my life.

I turned away, misty eyed. It was a time to reflect upon my own beginnings in aviation.

My first exposure to flying occurred 13 years after I was born. My parents shipped me from Los Angeles to spend the summer with my grandparents in New Jersey. And so it was that a North American Airlines' DC–6 whisked me in the dead of night from Burbank to Wichita to Midway to La Guardia. It was my first flight ever.

During the journey, I kept staring at the left wing. There it was, this huge metal thing that seemed like the outstretched arm of some giant predator. Noisy, too. And blue fire streaked from the engines bolted onto its leading edge. And those big wings didn't move. They didn't seem to do anything. No flapping, no nothing. I couldn't understand how they managed to keep the beast in the air.

Curiosity drew me to the library in that little New Jersey town (partly because there was little else to do except throw eggs at the chickens running around my grandmother's backyard). There, I encountered those words now so familiar: Bernoulli. Venturi. Airfoil. Camber. It was so beautiful, so elegant. The wing did so much work—without really doing anything.

After returning home, I headed straight for the local airport, a place called Clover Field, now known as Santa Monica Municipal Airport. I desperately wanted a ride in one of those little airplanes. Any one would do. I wanted to look at the wing in flight with the smug awareness of what it was doing. I wanted to visualize the air caressing the curvaceous upper surface.

Not knowing better, I stood at the edge of a taxiway and tried to hitch a ride. Really. Thumb out. A pleading look on my face. A begging look.

I got kicked off the airport three

times before I learned how to hitch a ride without being caught. My first was in a Bonanza, an original one with a small engine. There was a painting of a glass of beer and a shot of whiskey on the side of the fuselage. That was because the owner of the Bonanza, Ed Grant, was in the business of making boilers. The whiskey and the beer together made a boilermaker.

The flight was infectious, addictive. I knew immediately that I would become a flier. It was to become the most passionate and compelling aspiration of my life. It was Ed Grant's passion, too, but it killed him. *Boilermaker*'s engine caught fire one day, and he couldn't get it down in time.

My first aviation job came within months of my Bonanza flight. It involved painting the men's room at Bell Air Service, a local flight school. The toilet there faced a wall that was uncomfortably close to your knees when you sat down. It was almost claustrophobic. But it was the perfect reading distance. So I glued a poster containing airport regulations to that wall so that everyone who sat there—having nothing better to do—would learn the local rules. This was my first attempt at instructing, and it apparently went over pretty well. Somebody did the same thing in the ladies' room.

My TWA career began in 1964 as a first officer flying Lockheed Constellations. Those were exciting times. It was when people went to an airport hoping to witness a Connie or a DC–7 crank up, belch smoke, and come to life. It was when people dressed up for an airline flight. Flying was an adventure, not a bus ride.

TWA hired Brian in 1989, a quarter-century later, as a flight engineer on a Boeing 727. His career will not be the same as mine; times have changed. But it still will be rewarding and gratifying, as mine has been. His first flight as captain of a jetliner will be as memorable as when he first soloed our Citabria on his sixteenth birthday. His first command flight to the other side of the world will be as cherished a memory as his first solo cross country up the coast to Santa Barbara, California.

He, like me, will continue to be awed by a world of experiences and sensations about which ordinary people can only dream. That lofty perspective forms the bond that unites all airmen, especially when they are father and son. □