

Sentimental Journey

by Barry Schiff

I advanced the thrust levers of the Boeing 757-200 and a pair of flaming Niagaras propelled TWA Flight 347 along Runway 30L at St. Louis with 76,400 pounds of enthusiastic thrust. This was not the beginning of an ordinary flight; it was the beginning of the end of my career with TWA. In two days, I would be 60 years old.

By federal mandate, I would be an ancient pelican, an airman too old to continue life on the flight deck of an airliner.

Irrespective of being forced out of the left seat, good fortune smiled at me during my last flight. It was Father's Day, June 21, 1998, and no father could have received a finer gift. My son, Brian, was seated to my right. He had begun his career with TWA in 1989. Having him follow in my footsteps and being my first officer during this final flight was so much more meaningful than ribbon-wrapped ties that somehow never get worn. It was an affirmation that he approves of who I am and what I have done with my life. No father could ask for more.



In the passenger cabin was another son, Paul, who works for Jeppesen and recently earned his commercial pilot certificate. Seated nearby was eight-week-old Brett, Brian's son and my first grandchild, who was making his first flight as I was making my last. He was nattily dressed in a miniaturized pilot's uniform complete with shoulder boards, wings, a tie, and a photo I.D badge, which were artfully handcrafted by Brian's wife, Lynn. Such lineage suggests that there will always be a Schiff on a seniority list somewhere.

Also in the cabin were my friends Glen Beattie, Erik Bernstein, Mick and Mary Ann Jennings, Bruce Kaufman, and Doug and Sue Ritter, who had purchased tickets to share in the celebration.

We reached our assigned cruising altitude of 35,000 feet 21 minutes after liftoff. I relinquished control of the airplane to Brian, took a deep breath, and gazed out the left cockpit window. Not much below seems to have changed during the past 34 years. The small towns and farms of central Missouri still dot the rolling terrain as far as the eye can see.



Aviation, however, has changed since I was

hired by TWA in 1964 to fly the right seat of a Lockheed Constellation:

- In those days, the captain was an absolute dictator; there was no crew-resource management, and what he said was law even if it led to carnage.
- During my first checkout in a jet (the Boeing 707), there was no 250-knot speed limit below 10,000 feet, which made the experience all the more thrilling at low altitude (especially when maneuvering to avoid general aviation traffic).
- Kerosene cost only ten cents per gallon. Fuel burn was of little or no consequence, so we flew across continents and oceans at high speed with three or four engines. Airline survival today depends on efficiency, which is why twin-engine airplanes cruising more slowly are the rule rather than the exception.
- Economics and advanced technology did away with the flight engineer, although I remain convinced that removing the third crewmember from the cockpit was not in the best interest of safety.
- During the early years of my career, stewardesses passed out chewing gum and small packets of cigarettes with every meal.
- There was no sterile-cockpit rule, and pilots were allowed to talk to one another when below 10,000 feet. Not only is this now banned, but airliners are also equipped with cockpit voice recorders that can snitch on a violator. (When the CVR was introduced, we were convinced that the chief pilot had a receiver in his office with which to monitor cockpit conversations as they occurred.)
- Pilots used to walk through the cabin during flight to socialize with their passengers or assuage their fear of flight. Current regulations forbid a pilot to leave the flight deck except in response to a "physiological necessity."
- We were allowed to invite passengers to the cockpit during flight. (My favorite visitor was John Wayne.) Today, the FAA bans this courtesy on U.S. air carriers. Foreign airlines are not so restricted.
- There used to be good-natured kidding between pilots and "stewardesses." The same thing today can result in a sexual harassment suit.
- The cockpit used to be a club for white men only although not by design. Thankfully, the flight deck door is now open to increasingly more women and minorities.

Although I concede that most of these changes are beneficial, I cannot allow this opportunity to pass without commenting on the intrusive security screening to which crewmembers are now subjected when reporting for duty. Although such humiliation while in uniform might pacify the public and the FAA, there isn't a pilot I know who couldn't smuggle arms aboard his aircraft if he were so inclined.

Another significant change involves passenger attitude. When I first walked in public while in uniform, I could see heads turning in my direction and sense respect for my profession. It made me feel proud. That is when taking an airline flight was an

adventure. But as the magic carpet began to evolve into an airborne conveyer belt, passengers began to view airline pilots more like bus drivers.

My reverie was interrupted when Brian advised that ATC had approved our request for Flight Level 180, the lowest we could fly without encountering uncontrolled traffic. The sun was low on this, the longest day of the year, and I wanted to use this last opportunity to share some of my favorite sights with our passengers.

We passed Shiprock (near Four Corners, the only place where four states come together at a common point). We then made S-turns over Monument Valley where giant monoliths cast shadows as long as our contrails. Finally we arrived over the Grand Canyon, the grandest sight of all. The floor of the canyon was already dark, but the west-facing walls were ablaze with shades of red, orange, and yellow as they basked in the last remnants of a spectacular sunset. It was my sunset, too, the last time that I would be allowed to fly a Canyon Tour in command of a TWA airplane.

We returned to FL350 for the short remainder of our journey to Los Angeles, which provided more time for reflection.

People always ask about emergencies. I have been fortunate and never had so much as an engine failure, although I did shut down a few engines for precautionary reasons (each time in VFR conditions and near a suitable airport). Messrs. Pratt, Whitney, Rolls, and Royce have been kind to me. I also have had a variety of mechanical difficulties, but none were threatening.

Most of my problems have been the same as those experienced by others who ply the airways for a living: weather. I have had my share of confrontations with blizzards, thunderstorms, wind shear, icy runways, and the like. My most effective weapon in combating such powerful adversaries was the encouragement provided by TWA for its pilots to exercise command authority and divert to an alternate when this appeared to be the wisest course of action. Every pilot-in-command--whether flying a Boeing or a Beech--has the same weapon of discretion in his arsenal, but some fail to use it.

I have been blessed with a remarkably fine career and have enough wonderful memories to fill a book. Many of these are from when I was in TWA's International Division and flew around the world once a month: 10 days of adventure and excitement followed by 20 days at home. Such highlights included flying an on-pylon around the Sphinx while on base leg to Cairo, being cleared (via HF radio) for an approach to Bombay while more than a 1,000 miles away (because the tower would be closed upon our arrival), and making approaches to Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport. This required aiming for an illuminated checkerboard on a hill and getting as close to it as one dared before turning sharply onto short final. Nor will I ever forget my first Cat IIIb landing at



Paris where the ceiling was zero and the visibility was less than the length of our fuselage. The best memories, however, involve the people of TWA, and I will miss them the most.

Airline life also has sour notes. For 34 years, my family never knew for which holidays I would be home and for which I would not; making plans more than a month ahead of time was always a gamble. When on reserve, I never knew whether that phone waking me in the middle of the night was a wrong number or Operations calling to tell me that TWA needed my presence more than my children did at a birthday party or graduation ceremony.

Nor will I ever forget the three days enveloping Christmas of 1971 during which I spent the holidays staring at the walls of a cold motel near O'Hare in Chicago. A winter storm had disrupted my schedule and intermittently knocked out electrical service. My Christmas meals were lonely and served by Denny's, the only open restaurant within walking distance.

My final flight was highlighted by the comments of well-wishing controllers, faceless friends who helped to keep me out of harm's way for more than 34 years. Eavesdropping pilots also added notes of levity and poignancy to the occasion.

While approaching Los Angeles, I reminded myself that this flight probably would be judged by its landing. Such is the way passengers grade pilots.

Unfortunately, every pilot makes an occasional landing that registers on the Richter Scale, and I am no exception. I learned long ago, however, that one must maintain a sense of humor about such things. After a bad landing, I would apologize to my passengers for the abrupt arrival and add "that this was one of my better landings." If that didn't relieve anxiety in the cabin, then perhaps the comment of one flight attendant did: "Ladies and gentlemen, Captain Schiff has requested that you keep your seat belts fastened until the airplane--or what's left of it--comes to a stop at the gate."

There was an outbreak of applause following touchdown, not so much because of my landing. Our passengers probably were releasing nervous energy after realizing that they had survived a flight commanded by a 60-year-old captain.

While taxiing toward the gate, I found myself riding the brakes and moving progressively more slowly, as if wanting to prolong my career even if by only a minute. Brian looked in my direction; he knew what I was doing; he knew what I was thinking.

I could not help thinking about how it was of no consequence that I had never scratched a TWA airplane or passenger; it did not matter how much experience I had accrued during 26,000 hours in the air. I was being set aside only because I was about to celebrate a birthday that had been arbitrarily chosen by the FAA to be an airline pilot's last. Someday, I hope, there will be a more equitable way to determine when an airline

pilot's career should end. The FAA's age-60 rule is one of the few remaining bastions of legalized age discrimination.

Earlier that day, when departing Los Angeles for St. Louis, ground control had cleared us to Runway 25R, which is a considerable distance from our gate. Brian noted my dismay at having to taxi so far and tried to obtain a clearance for nearby Runway 24L, our usual departure runway. No luck; we were to taxi for miles to the distant runway or not taxi at all.

While grumbling and responding to the Taxi Checklist, I did not notice the fire trucks pulling alongside our wingtips. But I did notice the torrents of water arcing above and from each side of the airplane, a form of salute sometimes accorded retiring airline captains. I then understood why we had been told that "flow control" necessitated such circuitous taxi routing. I was grateful and honored. But I could only wonder what my passengers had thought as fire trucks began to spray the airplane. I quickly explained over the P.A. what had happened before anyone might think that our airplane was on fire.



That had been almost 12 hours earlier.

After coming to a stop at the gate, I set the parking brake, shut down the engines, and responded to the Secure-Cockpit Checklist for the last time.

A gate agent entered the cockpit with a wheelchair that had been requested for me by one of my "friends." It was tempting.

Where, I wondered, had those 34 years gone?