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Memories

by retired pilot, Gene Hall

History 3

Back to 1961; I was in my second year, and it was time for a change. A second officer bid opened in HOU, and I took it. As wild as MSY was, only HOU was referred to as "The Zoo". It didn't take long to find out why. I had an inkling that the Delta culture and the C&S culture differed significantly. Spending six months in Houston confirmed it. I often wondered who **Ted Johnson** angered enough to get him transferred from being the Atlanta Chief Pilot to being the Houston Zoo Keeper. I came in off a DC-6 trip one day just in time to hear Ted speak the name of a captain who was suspected of being gay to a small group of pilots. Of course, in 1961 queer was the normal name used, and this particular pilot's nickname (only behind his back, of course) was Sweets. Ted was in the process of giving a lecture on the lack of respect for authority and proper decorum among the pilots in the base. The co-pilot with me only heard Ted say the suspected pilot's name, and he interrupted Ted by saying; "Ted what trouble is Sweets in now?" I thought Captain Johnson was going to burst a blood vessel. He stammered something like that's what I mean, there is no respect around here as he retreated to his office. I don't know whether Sweets was gay or not. He was verry refined.

Two incidents happened to me during those six months that I will never forget. I flew a Detroit roach coach most of the time. We were scheduled into HOU about 5:00 AM. Our landing minimums were 200 feet ceiling and ½ mile visibility. Houston had lots of foggy mornings and we would go to Galveston and wait for the weather to improve. We had been there for a couple of hours one morning and the weather improved enough for us to be dispatched to Hobby. All three of us were well below maximum efficiency as we started the ILS to the airport. The weather was still at minimums and the captain had the ILS nailed or so it seemed. I was in the middle seat as we arrived at minimums and I was looking for the runway. I saw the ground, but no approach lights. Even in the state of lethargy that I was in after being up all night, adrenalin is helping with alertness. Alarm bells were going off because we should have been over the approach lights by this time. Suddenly high tension power lines were directly in front of us. I yelled and firewalled all four throttles. We pulled up over the lines and went around. We made another approach and landed.

At the terminal, the three of us sat in the cockpit and discussed the incident. The captain's ILS receiver had lost its signal, but the warning flags for both the localizer and glide slope stayed hidden. His instrument looked like we were lined up on the runway and making a perfect decent on the glide slope. What we were actually doing was making an uncontrolled decent in the general direction of the airport. We very nearly lost the airplane. When we walked through the cabin to get off, the stewardesses and passenger were already off, except for a non-rev Delta Mechanic. He was still seated and almost looked like he was in a state of shock. As we walked by him, he said; "You guys are power line jumpers."

I went home that morning feeling pretty good about myself. I hated being a second officer, rarely getting to take off and land the airplane, but I had made a real contribution from the middle seat in a moment of extreme peril.

I had just dozed off when my phone rang. It was the captain who had obviously "had a few" after he got home. He started by telling me what a good job I had done by reacting so quickly in a bad situation, but he then proceeded to tell me that it was out of order for the flight engineer to, in effect, take over the airplane. Until that point, I thought he was one of the rational ones.

The other incident happened in the apartment complex where I was living. I had taken a pretty girl, who also lived there, out to dinner a couple of times. I was told by another pretty girl, who I would liked to have taken out to dinner, that she would kill me if I ever dated her girl friend again. Somehow, I believed her, and that was about the time I started longing for home. It was good that some MSY bids were open at that time. Like MSY, most of the HOU Captains were great to fly with, but there were exceptions.

After returning to MSY, I rented a house in Metairie from a New Orleans architect named Henry McGrew. Henry had been a Marine Aviator and was going to Mexico on a sabbatical. The house was perfect for a fun loving bachelor. Henry had designed and built the house for him and his wife. As I recall, the total expenses, including a maid a couple of days a week and swimming pool service, amounted to about the same as my pay check. No problem, I restarted the poker game and added a quarter slot machine. The slot machine covered the house expense. I had most of the same players from the old game and we tried to play one night each week. There were always girls around to fix the snacks and open the beer.

After about six months there, a co-pilot slot opened in MEM and I spent the winter of '61 and '62 there. Memphis was a CV-440 base, no flight engineers, no more a plumber. Best of all, all the MEM Captains were great to fly with. After a few months in Memphis, I was senior enough to get a co-pilot bid in MSY.

At one point, I flew night coaches for nine straight months. It was perfect for my New Orleans lifestyle, 46 to ORD and 47 back. I remember flying one month with **Bud Carmichael**, when it was so cold in the cockpit that we poured some coffee on the floor in flight and it froze. We both had fur caps and wore long johns, flight boots (I thought they were dashing) and our top coats and gloves in flight. I don't remember a high temperature in Chicago above ten degrees that month. It was so cold and windy that the plate glass window in the hotel lobby blew out one night when we were there.

Not only could I now hold a first officer bid, but I had met my future wife, who was a stewardess supervisor for Eastern. I thought she was the most

gorgeous woman that I had ever seen (even prettier than my eighth grade history teacher). I fell in love the first time I saw her, but it clearly was not mutual. I was rather confident about my ability to attract the opposite sex and Joan acted like she didn't even remember meeting me when I called her for a date. She was clearly not impressed when I tried to explain how popular I was. I told her how tall and handsome I was and that she must not remember me or she would want to go out with me. Fortunately for our children, grandchildren and future generations, Eastern went on one of their regular strikes and she didn't have a paycheck for a while. I was spending the summer living in a boathouse on Lake Pontchartrain and running around the lake in my Higgins speed boat. She knew she could get a free lunch and dinner if she spent the afternoon water skiing with me. A few days later, I invited her to the Grand Isle Tarpon Rodeo by describing my friend's 65 foot boat skippered by a professional captain. She assumed that the others on the boat would be married couples. They weren't and the trip was most unsuccessful from my view point. I planned to put her on the morning bus to New Orleans, but by the time I woke up, we were about 25 miles off shore.

We were the "Playboy" generation. That magazine had a tremendous effect on shallow young men like me. The Playboy Clubs and Bunnies were big then. I remember sitting in the New Orleans Club late one evening. I was having a drink with the manager and he told me that "the two best looking broads in New Orleans are two Eastern Stews, one of them is that skinny supervisor with the big boobs." When I told him that we were dating, he didn't believe me. He said, "She wouldn't give you the time of day."

Our relationship was rocky. We would be getting along very well, until I would go on a two or three day trip. While I was gone, Eastern Stews, who knew me or my reputation, would semi convince her that she shouldn't be wasting her time with me. There would frequently be a stressful discussion when I returned. Of course, my charm and charisma would eventually win.

Joan was very concerned that her mother and father would be very disappointed in her marrying a rake like me. Her mom was a nurse and her dad was a physician. He had trained as a radiologist at the University of Michigan. They were very conservative teetotalers, as were my Southern Baptist mom and dad. We married in December 1963 in a small church wedding with only our immediate families and Bill Jeter present.

It was four days before Christmas and junior birdman Hall was paying the price for his F/O slot. The honeymoon would have to wait till after Christmas. The wedding was in Tampa and I had the jump seat and Joan had a pass on a National Electra TPA-MSY. I sat in the lounge at the rear of the plane with her, it was bumpy and I got airsick. I had one other episode of airsickness a few years later on a flight with **Rox, Miller** and **Cooper**, but more about that later.

Tales of **Tuero** next!