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Memories

by retired pilot, Gene Hall

HISTORY 7

In thirty six years on the line, I saw and/or heard some hilarious things. We had some very creative individuals serving with us. The funniest thing on a flight that I was a part of happened on a DC-9 from FLL to LGA about 1970. I can't remember my copilot's name and I hope someone will recognize him and send me his name. I thought he favored the actor, Tony Randall.

It was just after dark and we were a few miles off shore south of JAX. The weather was perfect and there was a lull in cockpit conversation. I still had pretty good peripheral vision in those days and I became aware that he was leaning forward, sitting very still and staring at me. I turned toward him and he had donned a Frankenstein monster mask. It was awful looking with real looking blood on it. I chuckled and told him how much better he looked with the mask on.

Up to this point, it was a moderately funny joke. It doesn't take much to entertain pilots and we should have gone on to something else, but I had one of my bright ideas. We had a good view of Jacksonville and I said; "I will call back to the flight attendants and tell them we are over Disney World and there is a great view of the Magic Kingdom. I will tell whoever answers to come up and see the view. When she comes in, she will stand behind my seat to look out, you put the mask on while she is looking out the window." He thought that was a fun idea and one of the girls came up and I showed her Jacksonville, but described it as Disney. We thought that we might get a reaction from her like you would get by walking up behind someone and saying "boo".

Boy oh boy, did we ever "misunderestimate"! Our "strategy" was flawed! She did her best to act interested. She was sure that she could see the geodesic dome at Epcot. When she had seen enough, she asked if it was okay if she smoked before she went back. Of course, I said yes and she turned around between the two of us and lit her cigarette lighter. The lights were down low and Frankenstein was no more than eighteen inches from her face. As she put the lighter up to her cigarette, the effect was like lighting a candle, and Frankenstein came into full focus. She dropped the still lit lighter on the radio pedestal and let out the loudest, most blood curdling scream I had ever heard, and turned to vacate the cockpit.

She is screaming as loud as she can, only pausing to breathe, and she bangs into the cockpit door. In her absolute state of panic, she forgets that the DC-9 door folds inward from the passenger cabin to the cockpit. To exit the cockpit, you do not push the door, but instead you must pull the door. I am yelling; "Honey it's a joke, it's a joke," but she isn't listening, her only interest is in separating herself from that awful monster. After body slamming the door three or four times and not being able to decockpit (that word makes as much sense as deplane), she sees me as the next best refuge and her last hope for survival. She grabs me around the neck in a choke hold and continues to scream, now about an inch from my ear. By this time the phone is ding, ding, dinging, because her screams and the door slams have been heard by the passengers as far back as the front of the coach cabin.

Her adrenaline flow is at one hundred percent and I am having a hard time extricating myself from her choke hold without hurting her. Now the copilot has the mask off and the lights turned up. He is able to answer the phone, and reassure the cabin that everything is okay, just the sound effects from a prank, and; "Yes, we will explain what's going on to the customers." She sees him in the full light, notices immediately that he looks slightly less menacing without the mask, and gradually relaxes her hold on my neck.

She was a great sport. It took two chain-smoked cigarettes to reduce her heart rate to normal. She pushed rather than pulled the door to go back with the sane people. At this point, I'm trying to figure out what I am going to say to the passengers, but my thought process was being interrupted by thinking about what I should say in my letter to the Snake (**Director of Flight Ops, Captain Snake Smith**). I told the passengers something to the effect that a silly joke had gone awry and the First Officer would share the joke with everyone after we landed in New York. He was resplendent as he stood in the door in full uniform, including mask, and thanked them for choosing Delta as they "deplaned". The passengers thought it was funny. Snake never heard about it, so I never explained on paper till now.

Unexpected outcomes of pranks can make them more fun, sometimes even for the target. I was the captain on a DC-8 turnaround, ATL-CHS. It was tagged onto the end of a longer trip and we had a cabin crew change in Atlanta. All of our female F/A's were lovely, but even by Delta standards, we had one on this trip who stood out. On a scale of one to ten, she was about a twelve. As good as she looked, her personality was even better, probably a thirteen using the same scale. She was vivacious and, to use an old southern term, "full of herself".

We were still in the old terminal in Charleston and the stretched 8 seemed almost as big as the building as it sat on the ramp, directly in front of Ops. The "mongoose trick" would show up around the airline every couple of years in hope that someone would come along who hadn't been tricked by it. Without going into a lot of detail, it would be in a small wooden crate with a heavy wire screen on front that looked like a container that an animal would be shipped in. There would be warning labels explaining that the mongoose inside the box was being shipped to some zoo and it was not only the fastest animal in the world, but was also extremely dangerous.

Inside the box was not a mongoose, but a small piece of fake fur. The box was rigged with a top that had a very strong spring that could be remotely triggered while someone was bending over to see the mongoose. When that top suddenly opened and that fur flew out, there was always a reaction of some kind, even from the bravest, if they were a first timer. Well, CHS Ops had a "mongoose" this day in the middle of the floor of the cargo/baggage area, which adjoined operations, and our little "twelve" out on the airplane was a first timer. I went out and asked her if she had ever seen a mongoose, she hadn't. I explained that there was one inside that was being shipped to the Bronx Zoo and it was worth seeing. She was enthusiastic as she went to operations with me. The first and second officers, as well as the ops guys acted like they were involved in other things as she bent over to see the mongoose. When they sprung the top and that "mongoose" leaped out, it was so sudden that it startled me and she let out a yell which made the trick totally satisfactory, but it was only when she instantly peed on the concrete floor that it became part of permanent Delta lore.

Her self esteem was so strong, in a healthy way, that she didn't even seem overly embarrassed. She laughed as hard as anyone there and we were all laughing pretty hard.

I promised that I wouldn't tell anymore flatulence stories, but indulge me just once more. I was deadheading on a 727 and there was another captain who was junior to me also deadheading. We were both in uniform. The only empty seat in the cabin was in the middle, near a crying infant. I elected to take the jump seat and he sat in the back.

After we arrived in Atlanta, he told me how he had embarrassed himself. He thought he could lean up on one cheek and sneak one out, and if anyone even noticed, they wouldn't know who was responsible. He miscalculated badly. He said it was so bad that he felt like he was surrounded by a brown haze. There was a heavysset lady sitting next to him and she said something that sounded like "lawsey, lawsey, this is terrible". He said to me; "I was so embarrassed that I blurted out a confession, I said Ma'am, I am terribly sorry, I am the one who did that." She said; "That's okay, Honey, I knowed it was you when I saw your body tilt."

Tuero wouldn't have tilted, he wouldn't have been embarrassed, he wouldn't have confessed and he would have successfully blamed it on whoever he had chosen before the occurrence. Man, he was good!

People do funny things, when you confine them for long periods, and serve them alcohol. **Ciancy** was a United Flight Engineer Instructor at Denver, who gave us some practical

training on dealing with the inebriated. I used his method with 100 % success. If a passenger had already had too much before he boarded, I would start a conversation by calling him by name and telling him that he had consumed too much. I would confess that there were times when I had over consumed. I wanted to take him to his destination if he would promise me that he wouldn't order any more on the flight and would behave, etc. In thirty six years, I only had a couple argue by telling me they weren't drinking too much. I had them removed immediately. We let the ones who didn't argue and who promised good behavior stay on, and everyone I did that for kept their word. Clancy's method was to get them to identify with you and make them know that you really wanted to justify keeping them on the flight. The "mean" drunks will argue, and the "good" drunks will not.

He had a similar method for dealing with unruly in-flight drunks. Walk to their seat and ask them if they see that town out the window. They think it's nice that the pilot is giving them a private sightseeing tour. When they say yes, tell them it is any town (make up a name if you are lost) that's along the route and, if they don't shape up immediately, we will land there and the police will meet you.

I had a chance to prove that method on a 727 between ORD and FLL one Friday night. The before start check list had been run. It was about 2030 and I was about half asleep as the last passengers were boarding. I heard a little commotion at the main entrance door and the engineer laughed and said; "My wife would kill me if I said that to her." Before he could finish, the nose gear told us we were cleared to start. We all forgot the incident and blasted off for FLL. About an hour south, one of the F/A's from tourist cabin comes into the cockpit. The F/O is driving and, once again, I am about half asleep. She is talking with the S/O and I become aware that she is crying. Now I turn the lights up, and hear "the rest of the story" about what the S/O was laughing about as we were interrupted by the start up clearance.

As a newlywed couple boarded, the bride stumbled and the groom called her a two word name that is so bad that I won't even put blanks down for it. If they hadn't been last on the airplane and I had been told what happened, I would have had them removed, because they were both loaded and they were obviously a couple of hippies. There were two seats left, one in each cabin. The groom had 1- A, and the bride was in a middle seat, two or three rows deep in coach.

The front cabin F/A had a thick skin, because the groom had already burned a hole, with a cigarette in the pants of the guy sitting next to him, and his smell and language was so bad that the passenger volunteered (actually insisted) on trading seats with the bride in coach so he could escape. When the bride came to the front, she and the groom engaged in a screaming, cursing argument. The first class F/A was still serving and ignoring them, but it was so bad that a coach F/A was crying and relaying the situation to us.

I went to the cabin and talked with the passenger in 1-D. I apologized that I had not been back earlier, because I had just been informed of what was going on. I asked him how bad it was and he said; "Captain, it's the worst I have ever witnessed. We have moved all the women to the last row of the cabin and surrounded this couple with men. I commute on this flight every Friday and, I always fly coach, but I decided to treat myself this week. I am going back to coach next week.

I turned and spoke to the groom, and he responded; "What the _____ do you want. We were probably over Kentucky or Tennessee, but I told him the town on the right was Birmingham. I told him about how the police there hated hippies and, if he even attempted to communicate with a F/A or another passenger, I would land there and turn him over to Bull Connor. I told him he was going to jail, and it was up to him to choose between Birmingham and Fort Lauderdale. They were quiet for the rest of the trip and they were arrested in Fort Lauderdale, but not held overnight. The company refunded their return fare and banned them from flying Delta. Security called me, a week later, and told me that they had tried to buy a Delta ticket back to Chicago.

The New Orleans Agents told the story about boarding a flight to Atlanta in the old days, before jetways, and a drunk showed up who could barely walk. Rather than trying to reason with him, they took him to a layover airplane that was parked next to the Atlanta flight. They finished boarding the Atlanta flight and, after it departed, they went out and found the drunk asleep. They shook him awake, and said; "Atlanta". He staggered off the airplane, out the front of the terminal and hailed a taxi. As far as we know, he is still in New Orleans and thinks it's Atlanta.

We had a lot of pilots who could see humor in just about any situation. After all these years, I think of guys who were fast with a quip, and **Sam Bass, Aubrey Hair, Ray Pedersen, Cecil Durant, Stan Jurgelsky, Harry Hope, Hubert Lipscombe, and Fritz Clark** are just a few who immediately come to mind. Fritz was departing from the old terminal building, which was on the north side of ATL, one day. He was going out to runway 27 and Eastern was already on the parallel taxiway. Fritz keyed his microphone and said; "Eastern hold it there and follow Delta." We were very competitive and Eastern was hacked, as they stopped abruptly, and followed Fritz to the runway. They naturally assumed that the radio instructions came from the tower until the tower told them that they hadn't made that last transmission.

My all time favorite funny story involved a Boston Ticket Agent, shortly after we had started using computer generated boarding cards and before smoking was banned on aircraft. This is the funniest story and the best put down by a lightning fast thinking Delta employee to a smart-aleck that I heard of in my Delta career. This has an obscene word in it twice. It is a canonical transitive verb having to do with intercourse. I will not put the first letter down, only a blank.

I get bigger laughs telling this story than from any other of my old airline tales. It was during Christmas Season, as I pulled into the gate in Boston. We were changing cabin crews and the Boston girls were standing in the jetway. They were laughing so hard, that they were red faced. They almost looked hysterical. I was curious, but had to wait for a full 767 to unload. They had collected themselves when they boarded, and all of them came to the cockpit to tell us why they were laughing.

The Delta concourse in Boston dead ends at a connecting ticket counter. It was a very busy time and customers were lined up in front of a lone agent. There were at least fifteen or twenty people, including my cabin crew within ear shot, as he was helping a man who was going to Montreal.

Agent; "Smoking, or no smoking, sir?"

Smart Aleck; "The only time I smoke is when I _____!"

Agent; "Yes sir, and will you be _____ on the flight to Montreal today?"

The Ticket agent never changed expression, there was no pause, and he asked the question as routinely as if he was asking if he had any bags to check.

The girls said that the suspended animation seemed like an eternity. It was so silent and still, that it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the building. When the shock subsided, people started laughing to the extent that several slid down the wall, and sat down. The laughter was contagious. As more people came upon the scene, they wanted to know what was so funny. So the story was told, and retold for several minutes. Even Smart Aleck began to laugh. He said he would not need to smoke that day and Agent only smiled as he handed him his computer generated boarding pass and wished him a good flight.

I have often thought of putdowns that were that clever.....about a day too late.

Wow, I am wordy! I just noticed that I have used 3122 words to tell these few stories, and I have a bunch more to tell. Next time I am going to talk about the saddest time of my life. **Jeter, Watson, Morton, Posey, Piazza** and **Snow** and the DC-8.