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## Memories

by retired pilot, **Gene Hall**

This one was hard. I am calling this the abridged version because I cut it in half today, and the grandkids will probably get the whole works. I can talk about the 1967 training crash without getting emotional, but typing with two fingers leaves too much time for thinking. There was a lot of personal relationship stuff that may be interesting to family, but not to others, so I have cut it.

### **HISTORY 8 (abridged)**

In March of 1967, life was good. Joan and I had been married for three years, and she had just informed me that she was one month pregnant.

When we married, we didn't keep it a secret and Joan resigned from her job in the Eastern Stewardess Department, however one of her best girl friends had just left the secretary (they had not yet been designated "executive assistants", just as stewardesses were not yet flight attendants) position open in Eastern Maintenance and she got the job. Her boss was **Lou Millard**.

The reason I am telling you about anything to do with Eastern is because it is laying the ground work to tell about one of my many pranks. For a couple of years in '65 and '66, we had a great time. No children yet, passes on two airlines, American's Bob Crandall had not yet invented the frequent flyer program, so it was always first class with champagne. Eastern had daily service to Mexico City and we frequently spent weekends there in the Maria Isabela Hotel. It was the nicest hotel in the city and is still operating as a Sheraton. The hotel dining room featured "The Maria Isabela Violins", a group of six or eight or ten, I don't remember how many, but they were good and very romantic.

We were there one weekend when Lou and his wife, Georgia, were also there, but they had gone down a day earlier than us. They didn't know we had arrived, but I had told him that I would call him as soon as we checked in. I innocently picked up the phone to call Lou to tell him to meet us in the bar. While I was waiting for the operator to ring his room, my evil streak suddenly showed up. I never know when it is going to happen.

Telephone conversation:

Lou; "Hello."

Me, in my best Mexican accent; "Halo Seenyor Meeyard, these Capitan PePe Gonzales, Meheco Citee Policia. You en mucho trouble Seenyor Meeyard."

Lou with hand over phone to wife; "Georgia, it's the police, he says I am in trouble."

Me; "Seenyor Meeyard, you come to lobby pronto."

Lou; "Yes sir!!!"

Lou, as he is hanging up the phone; "Honey this is serious...."

As he stepped out of the elevator ("de-elevatoreo"), I was waiting and, with panic in his voice, he told me he was in trouble with the police. I said; "I know, Seenyor Meeyard, I am Capitan PePe Gonzales, You in mucho trouble."

It has always made me so happy when people are really, genuinely glad to see me.

That's digressing from Delta, but it is fun for me to remember how I stuck it to some of my old friends. One of them told me that he; "Knew that it was not easy being **Gene Hall**, but it was easier than being **Gene Hall's friend**." One, who puts it out, must be prepared to take it and I have taken almost as much as I have given.

Golf was featured in this period with **Watson, Morton, Plummer, Bourn, Koch**, and others. **Jimmy Harkness** had played a lot with me when I was single, but he slacked off Joan and I played bridge with him and his wife, but very little golf after we married. Jimmy was probably the best golfer in the base until **Joe Bourn** showed up.

Speaking of **Joe Bourn**, the two of us were driving on the causeway after a game with Morton at Covington Country Club one day. We were doing about 60 MPH and the left front wheel came off of his Chevrolet. He saw it in his rear view mirror as it bounced over the causeway railing and, I suppose, it is still at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain. We were there for awhile before the wrecker came for us.

By the time March 67 rolled around, I was a full time 440 captain and was scheduled for DC-6/7 training. We had decided that we would move to Atlanta after the baby was born. We had never been to Europe and it seemed like a good time. We had not told anyone that Joan was pregnant except **Bill Jeter**. Bill and I celebrated with a few beers a couple of days before our trip. When men are that age, they tend to feel immortal. It never occurred to me that I would never see him again.

We were in the Lisbon Ritz Hotel the last night of the two weeks in Europe. It was Wednesday, March 29, 1967. We turned in about 2300 local time and Joan fell asleep almost immediately, but I couldn't sleep. I was troubled and uneasy and I couldn't figure out why. Things were going well, we were debt free, I was about to be a father, I wasn't ever going to fly copilot again and we were moving to Atlanta. My two weeks of TDY had stretched into eight years in a city that I had fallen instantly in love with and now we had decided to raise our kids in Atlanta. I had a strange sense of foreboding. There was something wrong. I gave up trying to sleep and went downstairs to an all night bar, stayed there and brooded till after 0300. We were probably checking out of the hotel around 0643, which was 0043 in New Orleans.

As I sat on the TWA flight to New York, the feeling of unease seemed to get worse. The Beatles were at the height of their popularity and they were featured on the aircraft audio system. "Yesterday" was a big hit and I heard it several times; "Yesterday, all my troubles seem so far away" was haunting. The feeling of something being wrong wouldn't go away.

We cleared immigration at JFK and I went to the nearest pay phone. I normally would have called crew scheduling, but I called the management office at Elmwood Plantation Apartments, because I knew if there was something terribly wrong, they could ease me into it and I wouldn't get the full force at once. The manager answered the phone and I told her we had been in Europe for two weeks. I hadn't had any US news and I was wondering if anything was going on. She said; "I am sure that you know about the Delta DC-8 training flight crashing into the Hilton Inn last night."

I think **Marlin Bounds** answered the crew sched phone. I didn't say hello, I just asked; "Was **Bill Jeter** on the DC-8 last night?" "Yes Gene, he was." I asked; "Who else?" He answered; "**Bud Watson, Jim Morton, George Piazza, Dave Posey**, and the FAA Inspector **Jim Snow**."

Bill was not qualified on the DC-8. He was a DC-9 instructor and was just going along for the ride, because it was going to only be a couple of approaches and, then, the whole crowd would have a few beers together. The flight lifted off runway 28 at 0043 (0643 Lisbon time).

We were very fortunate that we didn't lose more airplanes and people, while we were learning that swept wing jets were more different than the straight wing propeller airplanes than we thought.

I have nothing else to say about the accident. If you want to read the accident report, the website is: <http://www.airdisaster.com/reports/ntsb/AAR67-AG.pdf>

I have pretty good recall for an old guy, but the next several weeks are almost a blank for me. The Company changed Joan's pass to positive space and gave me the jump seat to New Orleans. The next day, I was on the phone ordering flowers for six funerals and I lost it before I finished giving the florist the details of the first one, Joan had to take the phone and finish. The funerals for Bud and Jim were on the same day, I think. Jim in Covington and Bud in New Orleans. I was a pall bearer in both of those and then the next day in

Arkansas for Bill.

Airline flying has become so routine, that we sometimes forget that crashes were frequent if not routine in the 1950's and 1960's. I want to get the sad stuff out of the way and then go back to the fun stories.

In 1968, I was commuting to Chicago to fly the DC-9. I ran into Delta Pilot **Mike Blondeau** several times and he suggested that I call his brother, Gene. **Gene Blondeau** was a United 727 Captain, who was also commuting to Chicago. I told Mike I would call Gene a couple of times, but I didn't. I ran into Mike in ORD Ops one day, and he said; "Come over here to the phone, we are going to call my brother right now." Well, we did and I became the third roommate in his crash pad that day. Gene was a French Huguenot from Baton Rouge. He sounded like he had never been north of Houma, Louisiana in his life and he was one of the most delightful men that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. I felt like we had been lifelong friends after about our second beer or it may have been the second six pack. We were simpatico! I looked forward to going to Chicago to hang out with Gene. I was leaving on a trip one day and he said; "I hate you". I knew he wasn't serious, but I went along, and asked him how he could possibly hate a nice guy like me. He said; "We hate all you Delta Pilots. Me; "Why, Gene?" "Because you are going out on a trip and you aren't afraid of anyone. You don't worry about company snoops checking to see if you are drinking on layover, you aren't afraid of the FAA or anything else. I hate you." We laughed and both agreed that he was right. Delta Pilots were in a very special position.

I was at the poker table with **Rox, Cooper,** and **Miller** in Tom's house at Harbor Town in Hilton Head, in January '69, when I got the news that Gene was deadheading on the 727 that lost one engine and three generators and crashed into the ocean eleven miles west of LAX. That was a month after my first roommate in Chicago was sitting on the jump seat of the North Central CV-580 that crashed into the Braniff hangar at ORD.

I played a lot of golf and poker and had a lot of fun with pilots for the rest of my career, but I never got as close to pilots anymore as I was to those guys.