

Lasting Memories of a Bad Flight

Rome, New York is not much like its namesake half a world away. We had flown into Syracuse and driven up over icy roads to Rome where we would meet the inimitable Boeing rep, Murray Sokolov. The streets of Rome were a maze with walls of snow and ice, five feet high and rising on either side. It was the second time in my travels while employed as an engineer at the Boeing Aerospace Company that I had come to what was at the time the coldest place in the lower forty-eight, both at thirty degrees below zero; I didn't enjoy either of those experiences. Murray insisted we dine at his friend's Italian restaurant to talk business. That business involved how we would proceed the next day to the Electronic Systems Division (ESD) of the Air Force at Griffiss Airforce Base to meet with a Colonel whom we hoped would provide funding for continued research on our patented Transition Machine parallel computer.

The next day proceeded as scheduled, much as had our earlier stops at Control Data Corporation and Digital Electronics Corporation, where we seemed to have impressed our hosts with our advances in parallel computing without convincing them to reach into their deep pockets. As we walked out to the car in the driving snow after our latest disappointment, Murray convinced Tom Nicolino, the boss, that we should fly out of the local Oneida County Airport rather than drive all the way back to Syracuse to catch our scheduled flight on to Boston. Murray would handle the rent-a-car problem.

So Murray dropped us off at the one-story building through which windows we saw our connection bounce to a stop and watched as exhilarated passengers fled the plane like rats fleeing a sinking ship or victims escaping a kidnapping. A cold wind burst through the doors with them. Then I watched the pilot deplane and come toward the building like a World War II B-17 pilot with his fleece lined bomber jacket. Coming through the door he said "C'mon, I think we can make it before the weather changes if we hurry." My thinking was that maybe we should head back to Syracuse in spite of the icy roads, but I didn't own voting stock in this enterprise. So those few of us who had been waiting walked out into the blizzard with snow coming down at a 45-degree angle impairing our vision as we climbed the steps into the parked Frontier Airlines sewer pipe airplane. I took the next to the last folding seat on the right; Tom took the seat against the back wall right behind me. Mark was opposite him on the left and in front of him was a beautiful young stewardess (as they were called before they aged and became 'flight attendants'); she was dead heading to Boston to join another crew she said. Between her and me was a deep trench that constituted the aisle the length of the plane. There were at most a half dozen other passengers, all up a few seats from where we sat.

It was bumpy from the time the engines started purring on the runway, with bumps turning into rabbit hops as we got airborne. I proceeded immediately deriding Tom for buying into this arrangement as possibly a bad idea and my comments continued in a downward spiral. To keep from bouncing around, I had my right elbow and palm forced into the porthole window, my left arm wrapped around the empty seat in front of me, and my left foot securely pushing on the opposite wall of the trench beneath Barbie. With the lurching it was like watching your son wrestle, straining your own biceps to support the wish of pinning the opponent. I couldn't see anything out the window -- everything was white -- but I knew the horizon, wherever it was, was not retaining a horizontal status. It was at about this point that our new acquaintance had informed us of her affiliation with Frontier Airlines, attempting to soothe our misery with the

comment that, "These are the best pilots that Frontier has." There was just a curtain between the cockpit and cabin, and they had chosen to leave it open so that I could see the pilot's shoulder and flight panel in front of him. As I watched him, I was hoping that he and Barbie didn't just have a thing going and that he was better at flying this contraption than at predicting the weather.

After a while when I was hoping that Boston was just around the next corner the pilot picked up his mike and announced that we would be hitting some rough weather in about fifteen minutes. Are you kidding? What in the hell was this we were experiencing? Well, he was right, so maybe he could predict the weather. Someone's tennis racket flew from the front of the cabin to strike the back wall between Tom and Mark, and I saw the flight panel flash solid red -- the entire damned panel -- but then my view was obscured with the pilot turning completely around in his seat to close the curtain. My God! Is that what you're supposed to do when a flight panel suddenly turns red? I was having a hard time keeping my one arm locked in the window, the other around the seat in front of me, and my foot secure beneath our attendant; it was a real chore. I don't think Mark said a word the entire flight, but Tom was laughing nervously with optimistic managerial comments about how we must be almost there, etc. and I was attacking his ardor with, "Tom, this is your last flight." It was at about this point that Barbie interjected disparagingly, "This is the worst flight I have ever been on!" What? She flies all the time, and this is it? Here was Miss Cheerio confirming our worst nightmare. It would not have surprised me to have heard that she had altered her career choice after that flight. The situation reminded me of the irritating comments the Boeing Commercial engineers come out with whenever anyone worries about their 'number coming up' with an airline crash: "Nonsense!" they would say. "The statistics are such that you could fly every day for 30,000 years before your number comes up." Oh yeah? I don't think they could have convinced Barbie that she hadn't drawn the winning ticket -- or me either for that matter.

But at some point, the whiteness outside the windows was replaced by scattered lights, obscured to be sure, but one could see them. It took a minute to realize that they were ships, sometimes seen through the top of the window at about thirty degrees and then gradually with the pilot and my effort we would force them ever so slowly back to level. I commented to Tom something about the flying ships to which he laughed his nervous laugh, stating with faked cheeriness that we would soon be landing, to which I asked which wing he thought would touch down first. I wasn't kidding; we seemed to be fluttering downward like a bird with wings flapping at plus and minus fifteen degrees. But a strange thing happened: As the spaced green and white lights of the runway appeared, the lurches suddenly eased, and we touched down as smoothly as any flight I've ever been on. There was applause throughout the cabin and as we deplaned, the pilot stood by the cockpit door accepting our congratulations. I grabbed his hand and thanked him for saving my life for which comment I was later derided by Tom in a staff meeting.

The next day we made our pitch to the president of the MITRE corporation; it went well despite one smug MIT grad choosing to dispute our claims of security features for our Transition Machine.

A bad flight is an experience you never forget -- if you survive. I sometimes wonder whatever happened to our personal stewardess and whether the pilots were as scared to death as their

passengers were or were they just having fun playing around at scaring the bejesus out of all of us.