

October 22, 2010

### Lunch at La Provence

I had several nice messages from people in response to my blog about the MSY luncheon at La Provence (sixteen at last count). A couple of people said they were never based in MSY, but they recognized some of the names, and please put them on my mailing list. I really wasn't thinking about writing anything else, but the number of emails I received started me thinking about the uniqueness of not only MSY, the crew base, but New Orleans, the city, as well as a few other things.

In my 50,000 words of "memories", I have described my going to MSY for two weeks TDY as a newly minted S/O, and not leaving for almost nine years. I had been living in Atlanta for the preceding year, and flying for a London-based paper company. At age 23, I had already had enough living experience to consider myself to be very sophisticated. After all, I already had short stints in colleges in Mars Hill, NC, Johnson City, TN, and Columbus, OH under my belt. I had sold cars in Columbus and West Palm Beach, and worked as a DJ at WGGG, the "voice" of Gainesville, FL. I was rather "full of myself".

The paper company executives had taken me to restaurants in Montreal and Quebec City that had items written in English that I wasn't even familiar with, so you can imagine the confusion that ensued when I was confronted by one that was French only. I found out the hard way that if you tried to fake it, you would be eating some animal parts that you wouldn't even want to look at.

In the Atlanta of 1959, my favorite restaurant was the Rib Room in the basement of the Dinkler Plaza Hotel. They probably had things other than roast prime rib on the menu, but I don't recall ever trying anything else. Of course, if you were into southern fried cooking (like I was brought up on), there was Harts on Peachtree Road in Buckhead, Mammy's Shanty downtown, and Aunt Fanny's Cabin in Marietta. Most people would probably have rated Harts as Atlanta's best. Fan and Bills came along about that time, but they quickly got the reputation of being the headquarters of "ladies of the evening".

The New Orleans of 1959 was pure magic to a big dumb kid from the mountains of North Carolina with a new job with the very best airline in the world. Walking through the French Quarter made one feel like he was in some far away foreign country. The architecture was unlike anything I had seen in Mars Hill or Columbus or Atlanta. Even the name, the Vieux Carre fueled images of exotic delights. There were bars like Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop, and the Old Absinthe House, restaurants with French sounding names like Antoine's, and Galatoire's, and Arnaud's. I was dazzled by, and still am by the sheer number of things on Galatoire's menu, and the fact that Oysters Rockefeller was a secret recipe known only to Antoine's, and Remoulade only to

Arnaud's. Unfortunately, I already had an American Express card, and I soon found that I could charge more than I could pay. I long ago lost track of how many times Bill Jeter bailed me out.

It took friends visiting from Atlanta, who had followed the Dawgs to a few Sugar Bowls, to introduce me to a dozen on the half shell. I could not imagine putting those slimy things in my mouth, but after a six pack at the Pearl, I loaded one up with Tabasco, and it was love at first bite. The love has been lasting for Tabasco as well as the oysters. And in spite of the oil in the Gulf, I'm still eating them. Speaking of Tabasco, I have only known one Tabasco addict. One of the swamp's unforgettable characters, Tom Brandon was a super nice guy, a fine traveling companion, and he never left home without it. He had a bottle in his flight kit which he sprinkled liberally on any meal he had in the cockpit. He didn't trust restaurants on layovers to have it in stock, so he always brought his own. Tom was a big eater, and he was skinny. I always thought the hot sauce must have created a higher metabolism rate, or maybe it just sort of ate his innards up.

For a fun loving single guy, the difference in living in New Orleans and Atlanta was about as different as going to a county fair or Disney World. In the early sixties, I was a junior DC-8 copilot, and the junior trip was a layover in the Atlantan Hotel. Freddy Dykes and Bud Carmichael were junior 8 captains. Freddy was at the end of the 46 bunch, and Bud was the first hire in 48. They were not far apart in seniority because Fred was C&S, and Bud was Delta. I flew the Atlanta trip with the two of them more than any other captains. I have said before that the best thing about being based in Atlanta was not having to layover in Atlanta. Remember all those wonderful nights on Virginia Avenue? Downtown may have been slightly better because there were still two first run movie theatres there. Joan was with me on one layover, and we saw The Sound Of Music ... exciting.

The Ship Ahoy restaurant was around the corner from the hotel. Bill Kretsos was the owner. He had been in the US for a long time, but he still had his Greek accent. He was a lovely guy, and Freddy, and I formed a friendship with him, and we would call him the day before our trips, and tell him what we wanted for dinner. Fred was a steak Diane guy. He was about as nice as any captain in the base, but after having a few one night he was recounting something that some unknown copilot had done that had displeased him in the past. We must have been on more than a 24 hour layover, because I had also had a few, and I asked him if my copiloting skills satisfied him. It took him more than one word, or even one sentence to give me a qualified yes. I never made the mistake of asking that question of any captain again, no matter how close a friend he was.

I was in MSY for eight plus years, and ATL for a little less than twenty-eight, but when I think of the unforgettable characters, MSY is way ahead. Our culture was more C&S than Delta, and the whole town, as well as the Delta station was more Creole/Cajun/Italian/French/ Dixie/American than just American/Dixie. In lots of ways, we were like an independent airline.

Retired pilot Rick Bauer was one of the aforementioned sixteen. I am pretty sure his mail was complimentary. He said he enjoyed my writings, and he could tell from reading them that I had mellowed since he flew with that a\_\_ h\_\_ on the 767. That is not exactly the way Rick said it, he is more genteel than that, but that is my interpretation. I certainly needed to mellow.

Without going into a lot of detail, Katrina was a turning point. God uses different grades of sandpaper to hone his own closer to what He wants us to be. We lost our Mississippi house to the flood. It was a full year in rebuilding. Meanwhile some major business things went south as they have for millions in the US. I am not as rich as I once was. After being in great health my whole life, I have had seven surgeries, all on the head and neck for melanomas, a stopped-up carotid artery (probably caused by radiation therapy), and plastic reconstructive in the last year and a half, and I am getting over my recent case of Shingles. Meanwhile, a bunch of grandchildren, old age, and just normal maturing in my Christian faith has had to have some good effect.

Grandchildren are not diplomatic. I was putting my shirt on the other day, and 4 year old Phoebe walked in. She said; "PaPa, you have spots on your back." Joan (MomMom to the kids) was listening to our conversation as I explained aging spots, moles, freckles, barnacles, etc. that are all products of old age. When I finished, Phoebe said; "Well MomMom, you must be old too, because you have spots." One of my golf buddies said his 5 year old granddaughter was sitting on his lap, and she asked him why his teeth were yellow, and his breath was bad. Their honesty helps us to mellow.

The good news is that we still had the Atlanta condo (still do) while we rebuilt in Mississippi. We have found that we don't need to be as rich as we used to be. My health prognosis is good. We are blessed with a great family, and we are secure in our faith. Life is good. We count our blessings daily.

Retired flight attendant Janice Barfield was also one of the sixteen. She said she retired in April of this year, and asked if I remembered her. Of course I remember her. She was sort of the same to the stewardesses as Joe Ivey was to the pilots. Like Joe, she was an outspoken Christian when most on the airline kept their faith "private" if they had any. Janice said she had seen a Gene Hall introduce Dr. Paul Walker, the retired pastor of Mount Paran Church of God as the guest preacher at Church of the Apostles

on the internet, and was that me. I didn't think I had changed much since I last saw her, maybe 30 years or so ago. Of course, the surgeons have eliminated my hair, and I still have a patch on my scalp, but yes that was me. The service was last Sunday, October 17; Joan said it was the best service she has ever been to.

It would be easy to lapse into spiritual pride about Apostles. There were more than 2,000 people there Sunday. Dana Blackwood sang In The Presence of Jehovah before the sermon. If you were listening to the radio in the fifties on Sunday morning, you probably remember the Blackwood Brothers Gospel Quartet. Dana is the next generation, and he is a soloist at Apostles. Dr. Walker decided to not preach the sermon that he had prepared, but just tell us what God had meant in his life. I have never seen so many tears in a church service. The service is an hour and a half, but his message was only about 25 minutes. You can move the video ahead, thru the music to Dana's song, and I introduce Walker next. I am a big ham who enjoys speaking (surprise), but for some reason I was very nervous while making the intro.

Once again, I have no intentions of boring you anymore with my memories, but of course someone, or two, or three ... may send me emails, and ....