

February 2, 2011

Salt Peters

I had just missed the 4:20 PM, ATL- GPT. I picked up a Bloody Mary from the B concourse Sky Club bar, and took a seat along the wall. I had turned on my laptop to check the next flight when it dawned on me that I had left my car not in Gulfport, but in the Mobile employee parking lot, and I was relieved to have missed the flight, since it's about seventy-five miles between the two airports. It's only twenty-five miles from our house in Ocean Springs to the Gulfport airport, and it's fifty miles to Mobile, but retirees can park in the employee parking lot at MOB. The cheapest GPT parking is nine dollars per day. In addition, GPT has the latest full body scanner. When they aren't busy – most of the time – they want everyone to go through it, or accept a complete pat down. That's two good reasons to drive the extra miles. Those crew members who flew to Gatwick will remember the security female who only picked attractive blond flight attendants for the pat down. I remember her breathlessly telling one particularly attractive blond what a "wonderful bra" she was wearing.

I have had an incredible amount of radiation for medical purposes during the last two years, and that is just one of the reasons I am an opt-out of the body scanner. The TSA agents seem to be nicer and more friendly than ever, but I have been patted three of the last four times I have originated in GPT. I doubt if the agents who have explored parts of my body never before touched by a male other than a doctor enjoyed the process any more than I, but the whole thing is a charade. Since the scanning started, I have been through LGA, DUB, CDG, JNB, YYZ, ATL, MOB, some more than once, and never been asked to go through the scanner, except GPT.

But back to the Sky Club. I was having computer trouble – surprise – as I was trying to get into the Delta net to list on the 5:40 to MOB. I was only slightly irritated when this guy asked if the seat next to me was taken. It wasn't, and then he asked what the procedure was to sign into the internet. I was hoping to get my travel arrangements completed before starting a conversation, but he was likeable, and I decided to talk with him before listing. As it turned out, it didn't matter because the flight was overbooked, and I left on the 7:40.

We started talking about the "joys" of modern travel, and he said that he had been traveling a lot, both domestically and internationally. I asked him if he had gone through the global entry process, and he hadn't heard of it. I explained that it enabled one to skip the US Immigration line when entering the US, and how to go to <http://www.globalentry.gov/>, and apply. He thanked me, and said; "You sound like a professional traveler." "Well, I hurtled my body through inner space at subsonic speeds for thirty six years for Delta Air Lines, have been the part owner of two travel agencies, and still have the wanderlust, so if not a professional, I am a well-trained amateur."

His name is Salt Peters. Salt is not his real given name, but it is what one would expect the midshipmen at the Naval Academy would hang on a pleb named Peters. It stuck,

and followed him through his time as a Marine fighter pilot. His call sign, as he flew A-4's and Harriers was "Saltpeter". We talked about our wanderings for a while before he told me that he was a FedEx first officer. He had been a 727 captain, but was enjoying a much nicer lifestyle since the 727's had been retired. He had retired from the military and hired on with FedEx at age forty-four, and he had been with them for ten years.

From talking with him, I got the impression that FedEx pilots deadhead about as much as they fly, and he was telling me how much better Delta was now than a few years ago. He was particularly impressed with one crew. He was having a beer in an airport bar, waiting to get on the Delta to Atlanta, and there was a young fellow in civilian clothes, but a marine haircut having a beer a couple of stools away. He struck up a conversation, and found that he was a marine corporal on his way home from Afghanistan to North Carolina to get married. He had three weeks off, and then he was going back to Afghanistan. Salt paid for both their beers, and boarded the flight through the sky priority line. He told the flight attendant the marine's story as he boarded, and told her he wanted to pay for any drinks he ordered. The flight attendant said; "We can do better than that." When the captain made his PA, after the usual flight information and welcome, he said; "Ladies and gentlemen, we are honored to have a celebrity on board today. Marine Corporal ... whatever his name was ... is on his way home from Afghanistan today to marry his fiancé, he has a three-week furlough, and then he will be returning to Afghanistan to protect our freedom. Corporal, please stand so we can give you a round of applause, and then kindly move into the first-class cabin, and take a seat for our flight to Atlanta.

There are times when my eyes water. It's a malady that doesn't seem to improve, and for some reason, my eyes were watering so much as he finished the story, that I was embarrassed. Salt has the same physical problem, and his eyes were watering as much as mine.

The two hours that we spent hangar flying passed very quickly. I let him read the letter of tribute that I wrote about John Pott, and he gave me his email address so I could send him some of the blogs. I never did get his given name, but he told me his first name was taken for email, and his UNC English major daughter wouldn't let him use Salt. He came up with "dangpeters". Salt and Dang both fit him.

Have lots of good ones, Salt!