

Sometime in 2012

Airlines – Contagious?

Things had not been going so well on Delta for the last two or three years before my retirement in 1995. Deregulation, the economy, and other events including management that was not as good as it had been - just my opinion - had caught up with us, and I was ready for retirement. I didn't fly at all during the last six weeks before my birthday, and I was sure I had cut the emotional cord to the widget and flying. Atlanta transitioned from being our first home to being our second, and most of our flying as passengers was between Gulfport and Atlanta. I was still in business, and since Delta had mostly 50 seat airplanes on the route, and AirTran was using Boeing 717's, I quickly attained platinum status on AirTran. I hardly ever used a Delta pass, and when I was asked if I missed flying, my answer was an emphatic no.

Then Delta went through the bankruptcy. Even though we retired pilots took a beating, I found myself hoping that US Air would be unsuccessful in acquiring Delta. I chalked that up to my desire to see the company keep the headquarters in Atlanta. I told myself that I had no emotional attachment to flying, and certainly none to Delta Air Lines. It was not the airline I had known, and I knew no one in management.

About the time I retired from business, the Biloxi casinos stopped subsidizing AirTran and they pulled out of GPT. I started non-revving again. The employees that I came in contact with in flight and on the ground were not happy. Pay had been cut, and the pride that we old timers had felt was not evident for obvious reasons.

I told myself that I was glad that I was retired, and even more glad that my late, younger brother Don and I had talked my two nephews out of their desire to follow their dad and uncle into airline flying.

Don and Lorin did a great job of raising men. Don did the man thing with the hunting, fishing, flying, etc. I have often said that Josh and Matt became Eagle Scouts because Don loved sleeping under the stars, on frozen ground more than they did. Lorin did the nurturing, taught which fork and spoon to use first, and how to be gentlemen long before they became officers.

It was natural that they wanted to follow their dad. Don had followed me into flying – American - and both boys soloed as soon as they were of legal age. They had grown up during the "Golden Years", watched their dad fly SEA-NRT (Tokyo) roundtrips, and have lots of time off for family activities. They also enjoyed a nice boat, and a Beech Bonanza that they both learned to fly in. They were regulars in a good church; Life was good.

Josh enrolled in Arizona State University, and Matt followed a year later. It was apparent that they were both interested in being airline pilots, and Don and I started trying to convince them that the best days for airline pilots had passed. Their dad and

uncle had just been lucky to be born at the right time. We thought we had them convinced. Matt didn't do a lot of flying at ASU. He worked as a waiter most of the time during his four years, and even though Josh was a flight instructor at Sky Harbor, I thought they were cured of the flying bug, and they would probably be real professionals – US Senators, college professors, CEO's of fortune 500 companies, or maybe one of them might even be President of the US.

In spite of our best efforts, it didn't work. Before Josh graduated, he told his mom and dad that he still had the itch, and he would scratch it in the Navy, rather than on an airline. He was in officer's candidate school in Pensacola one week after graduation. And monkey see, monkey do – Matt was there a year later.

Josh finished at the top – uncles are allowed to brag - of every class in training, and flew the F-18 off the Kitty Hawk, and then off the George Washington after the Kitty Hawk was de-commissioned. Matt didn't pass the eye test, and became a flight officer, serving as a navigator, mission commander, and weapons and tactics Instructor on the P-3C. His appetite was probably whetted for driving airplanes just as mine was, as I was serving my time in the engineer's seat. He had Lasik surgery and became eligible for pilot training, and even though he had continued flying light airplanes, he had decided he didn't want to make the Navy his career. The additional time commitment required if he accepted Navy flight training would just about make not staying in until retirement impractical.

Both of them earned MBA's in their spare time, and I was happy that they were well positioned in or out of the Navy. I was surprised when I learned that Matt was getting out, and even more surprised that Josh was also, and they both were going to apply with the airlines. Matt was out first because even though he joined a year later than Josh, his commitment was less because he didn't go to pilot training. Josh will be pushing worn out F-18's around the sky for a few more months. Now, he is training to deploy. In his words, "Currently, I am at Naval Individual Augmentee Combat Training in Fort Jackson outside of Columbia South Carolina. This is a 19 day course put on by the Army to train sailors who are going in theater. It is taught by a number of very patient Army drill sergeants. It is a full immersion course in everything we need to know before we go to the desert. We are living in an open squad bay and eating in a chow hall there is no room service or bell hop. Today I was issued my M-4 carbine and a 9mm Beretta. We are going to shoot 750 rounds in the next 3 weeks where a Army recruit shoots 500 rounds in 10 weeks. We are getting a course in first aid, heavy weapons, convoy operations and rules of engagement. I am here with a bunch of lawyers, nurses and reservists who are all deploying to the Middle East to support the Army. My case is a little different with the Air Force but they put me through the training anyways and take the weapons away when I walk out the gate. It is very civilized and I equate it to rich kid's summer camp. Some think of it as outward bound."

Well, old interfering uncle went to work again. I wrote a well thought out, comprehensive letter – too long – giving them all the reasons to avoid the airlines. Short excerpt follows:

.....” Your dad and I both had the flying bug, and I understand your desire to continue flying on the airlines. I’m not going to try to talk you into changing your minds, because Don and I tried that before you went in the navy. I do want to give you some history, and my perspective of the awful economic situation our country is in. This is not advice, but only some things for you to ponder.

As I write this, Joan and I are on a Delta 777 over the South Atlantic, about three hours from landing in Johannesburg. It is a sixteen hour flight with two flight crews. Both captains came back and chatted with me before takeoff from Atlanta, and I was able to get some current info on pay and working conditions. Things ain’t what they used to be! Don and I were born at the perfect time for flying careers. We hit the glory days of the airlines.

The peak for pilots was probably 1972 & 73. The Wall Street Journal ran a front page, center column on Delta 747 domestic captains breaking the \$100,000 barrier in 72. It would take near \$1,000,000 today to equal the buying power of \$100,000 in 1972....”

If I am anything, I am consistent. Notice, I told them I wouldn’t try to talk them into changing their minds, and then I tried to talk them into changing their minds. I also told them I was not giving them advice, and then I gave them advice.

I went on to tell them how inferior their life style would be in comparison to how it was during their growing up years. Josh has acquired a wife and two kids, and even though Matt is still single, I thought the high cost of educating kids, etc. would make a big impression.

Then, one of the retired widget pilots sent a copy to me of a John Lehman written article that was published in the September 2011 issue of the U.S. Naval Institute. Lehman was the 65th Secretary of the Navy, and a member of the 9/11 Commission, and his article is about how political correctness is destroying naval aviation. I started to understand why they were getting out. The link below is to his article.

<http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2011-09/naval-aviation-culture-dead>

I was aware that Matt had started interviewing with airlines, and last week he was hired by Cathay Pacific. He reports to Australia next month for six months of training, and then he will be based in Hong Kong. When I received the news, I had to admit that I was just a little envious.

I may not have been any more successful in convincing myself of the awfulness of the industry than I was in convincing my nephews. Something good has happened during the last couple of years at Delta. From what I read in the press, and observe in airports, and on airplanes, this guy Richard must be doing a better job than anyone since Dave. We have been doing lots of pass riding lately, and the improvement in flight attendant attitude is very noticeable. Plus, Delta is on the right side of the on-time rankings,

satisfaction surveys, etc. Remember when we were first on all the good lists? I have watched the flight attendant flash dance on YouTube, and they seem like a pretty happy group.

So, Josh and Matt, I've said a zillion times that I wouldn't do it again in today's world. But if that's true why am I a little envious of you? And, why have I finally admitted to myself that even though I took a hosing in the bankruptcy, I still cheer for Delta doing well?

It must be in the blood.

Speaking of the blood, I am working on some blogs now that will be too controversial for Mark's PCN. If you happen to be reading this on the PCN, and you have any interest in reading my views on religion and politics, send your e mail address to me.

Before Christ came into my life at age 41, I was as big a sinner as Paul. Lots of you can corroborate that. During the ensuing years, we have had incredible answers to prayer – not always the answer I wanted – and I am trying to remember enough to leave a prayer record for our grandchildren. I am writing down as much as I can remember, and I plan on being as “crazy” as Tim Tebow for the rest of my life.

I am still dealing with this Melanoma issue. I have had yet another tumor on my scalp since number 9 surgery. We attacked this one with radiation, rather than surgery. It seems to have been successful. I have a rather large hole – near 3 inches in diameter – in my skull. The plan is to repair it with artificial bone, and I may still have some chemo in my future. I am feeling great, and – Lord willing – will be playing golf in the JAX area next week.